

**Wolves and Whiskey:  
Economy, Ecology, and Predation in the Whoop-up Country**

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*If we could have done any wolfing, I should probably have made a couple of hundred dollars at that, but we have only got a few baits out close around and only caught 3 wolves yet. The country is not civilized enough for putting a prize on their scalps; but the skin is worth \$2.00 here and probably more in the states. For that matter, a man has to live pretty much like a wolf, if he is in the business.*  
 -Peter Koch, 1870<sup>1</sup>

“Living like a wolf” embodied the behavior necessary for successful enterprise in the late-nineteenth-century Canadian-American plains. Blackfoot, wolfers, and whiskey traders all prowled the hunting grounds of the Whoop-up country in search of human and animal prey.<sup>2</sup> Peter Koch was a young man from northern Louisiana who lacked the heart for these endeavors. Recently emigrated from Denmark, he arrived in the Whoop-up country in the fall of 1869, eager to earn a quick fortune and return home to his fiancée. In his letters home, Koch lamented the cold weather and bad food, but mostly he bemoaned his financial woes. Still broke after laboring for months as a “woodhawk,” chopping steamboat fuel along the Missouri River, he complained that “the only ones [who] made anything last winter, were those trading whiskey to the Indians. There is money in that business,” he stated, “but it is one I don’t want anything to do with, even if I don’t make a cent.”<sup>3</sup> Despite these complaints, Koch stayed in Montana and eventually found his calling as a banker in the farm and ranch community of Bozeman, where cautious

<sup>1</sup> Peter Koch to his uncle, January 21, 1870 in “Letters from the Musselshell, 1869-1870,” ed. Carl B. Cone, *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (1946): 313-337; 322.

<sup>2</sup> The name “Whoop-up country” allegedly sprang from a message sent by the whiskey traders John Healy and Alfred Hamilton to their Fort Benton outfitter, Thomas Power, in the spring of 1870. Describing their success in swindling the Blackfoot with watered-down liquor, they exclaimed, “we’re just whoopin’-up on ‘em.” Bentonites quickly nicknamed the post that Healy and Hamilton constructed near present-day Lethbridge, Alberta as “Fort Whoop-up.” Before long, “Whoop-up country” described the landscape between Fort Benton and Calgary, an evocative name expressive of the region’s violent reputation.

I will use the specific tribal names Piegan, Siksika and Blood in reference to particular Blackfoot tribes, and use Blackfoot to encompass the Blackfoot people generally. In other literature, *Blackfoot* sometimes refers only to the Siksika, and *Blackfeet* means the South Piegans living in Montana’s Blackfeet Nation.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Koch to his uncle, June 2, 1870 in “Letters from the Musselshell, 1869-1870,” ed. Cone, 329.

agriculturalists loathed wolves as a threat to production, rather than celebrating them as a means of production. Three hundred miles north, however, most of Koch's human neighbors did not share his repugnance for employing the perceived wolf-like traits of violence, treachery and wastefulness in their quests for profit.

Exploring the history of this predatory economy collapses the boundary between human and animal production, revealing a compelling explanation of socio-environmental conflict in the nineteenth-century North American West. Predatory economies exist when one organism transfers or expropriates economic value from another organism through coercion or violence. Organizing these economies as related, but distinct modes of predation helps to evaluate the consequences of economic and ecological change. Two interrelated modes of predation—the whiskey trade and wolfing—heightened connections between the Whoop-up country's animal and human populations, and tempered the national and racial ideologies pitting Canadians against Americans and whites against the Blackfoot by subordinating social labor within violent systems of resource extraction. Whiskey, as a newly introduced lubricant to the bison robe trade, accelerated the extermination of the northern bison herd, impoverishing the Blackfoot by destroying their subsistence base. However, the Blackfoot's value as a labor resource for powerful Fort Benton merchants postponed Blackfoot confinement by generating hostility between federal and territorial authorities. Animals also adapted to changes in human economy. Local wolf populations flourished on an abundance of skinned bison carrion, in turn increasing human competition over diminished game by bringing white wolfers into close proximity with Blackfoot hunters. The ensuing violence complicated racial and national unity in the Whoop-up country; white traders defended their Blackfoot laborers against white encroachment, and the Blackfoot battled old plains allies to expand their hunting territory. By heightening tensions over the exploitation and protection of fluctuating prey resources, the Whoop-up country's ecological

transformations exacerbated its human conflicts.

Between 1865 and 1875, the Whoop-up country's predatory economies of whiskey and wolf skins assaulted the region's web of human and animal economy and ecology. Straddling the insignificant nineteenth-century boundary between Montana Territory and southern Canada, the Whoop-up country demarcated a transnational zone of coincident animal and human exploitation. Just beyond sight of the Northern Rockies, this hilly, high-prairie landscape began where navigable rivers ended. Seated on the relaxed rooftop of the North American Plains, half its meager moisture drained to the Hudson Bay and the other half to the Gulf of Mexico. This second continental divide functioned like the international boundary that it more or less followed. Its series of shallow ridges held water hostage, but breathing things slid across with ease. These living creatures—bison, wolves, and people—were tempting prey for new global economies, and by 1880 the Whoop-up country had paid much of its living wealth as tribute to industrial conquest.

By the late 1860s, new technologies and cultural sensibilities had transformed the fur trade into an industrial enterprise. In the Whoop-up country, exploitation occurred through both subtle and blatant stages of predatory behavior shrouded by industrial markets and facilitated by industrial technologies.<sup>4</sup> Extracting economic value from the plains required new technologies that involved more than the mere physical removal of commodified nature. Like mining the

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<sup>4</sup> William Cronon's depiction of Chicago's meteoric consumption of its nineteenth-century resource hinterland has greatly influenced my conceptualization of industry in western North America. See William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991). Fort Benton's eastward connections with Chicago by river and rail played an important role in the Whoop-up country's 1870s economic acceleration. However, the industrial core-periphery relationship between Chicago and Fort Benton repeated on a regional scale through the local subordination of labor and resources to Fort Benton. This observation draws on other research evaluating the industrial character of the "interior colonial west," particularly two recent histories of nineteenth-century California by David Igler, *Industrial Cowboys: Miller & Lux and the Transformation of the Far West, 1850-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) and Andrew Isenberg, *Mining California: An Ecological History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005). Bill Wyckoff and Carl Abbott also discuss the geographic relationships between local economies, government, and the west's urban spaces in ways that have influenced my understanding of Fort Benton. See Carl Abbott, *The Metropolitan Frontier* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1993), and William Wyckoff, *Creating Colorado* (New Haven: Yale University Press).

nearby gold country, turning out furs required chemical exchanges that affected social and ecological networks in unexpected ways.<sup>5</sup> Whiskey and strychnine provided the alchemy for industrial fur production. Whiskey lubricated trade among Blackfoot hunters, processors, and Fort Benton merchants, helping to bring half a million bison robes to market in fifteen years. Strychnine-laced bison carcasses also enabled a toxic harvest of more than thirty thousand gray wolf pelts during the same period. New transportation technologies like the mountain steamboat and the railroad created distant international markets that increased demand for Whoop-up country furs and alienated distant consumers from fur production's negative effects on local ecological and social relationships.<sup>6</sup>

Using new technology to overcome "natural" obstacles did not lessen the significance of non-human nature to human production; the two remained closely connected. The introduction of whiskey as a popular trading commodity accelerated the slaughter of bison, and in turn, altered the Whoop-up country's existing predator ecology. The vast availability of bison carcasses, shot and skinned where they fell, amplified plains wolf populations while habituating the predators to human kills. Wolfers took advantage of these developments, deploying thousands of poisoned carcasses across the plains, killing dozens of wolves per carcass. In an astounding example of nature's unpredictable resiliency, however, this trapping pressure did not drive the plains wolf to extinction. Although individual animals faced gruesome deaths, the species survived and even thrived in this fatal environment. Only after the 1880s, when livestock justified fifty years of

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<sup>5</sup> These "exchanges" refer to the smelters, mercury flumes and tailings piles that characterized much of the late-nineteenth-century mining landscape in Montana and elsewhere. Intriguing descriptions of these features (and their lasting effects) exist in Richard Francaviglia, "Mining and Landscape Transformation," in *The American Environment*, ed. Lary Dilsaver and Craig Colten (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1992), Isenberg, *Mining California: An Ecological History*, and Ellen Wohl, *Virtual Rivers: Lessons from Mountain Rivers of the Colorado Front Range* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> These estimates of trade volume come from the exhaustive research of Joel Overholser, *Fort Benton: World's Innermost Port* (Fort Benton: River and Plains Society, 1987), 31-32.

massively funded pogroms did federal agents finally destroy the last wolves in Montana.<sup>7</sup> In Alberta, Canadian authorities never accomplished the feat.

The combined ecological and economic effects of these predations weighed heavily on social inequality and conflict. Wolfers struggled with the Blackfoot, who rightly regarded wolfing as an intrusion and despoliation of their threatened hunting grounds. In contrast, whiskey traders generally held amiable relations with the Blackfoot, with whom they traded modern weaponry in addition to liquor. When the Blackfoot bore repeating rifles against encroaching white settlers, and whiskey traders openly resisted federal Indian law, imperatives to preserve access to human and animal prey reoriented racial and national loyalties into economic ones. Because of its connected predatory modes of production, the Whoop-up country comprised an amalgamated landscape of both cooperation and hatred that encompassed race, nation, and species.

### Modes of Predation

Most historians have explained the Whoop-up country's violence as a characteristic of national settlement and frontier lawlessness. Their histories support national creation-myths that remain regionally prevalent in Montana and southwest Canada to the present-day.<sup>8</sup> For

<sup>7</sup> Overholser, *Fort Benton*, 353 provides an account of this final kill. Also, Hank Fischer, *Wolf Wars: The Remarkable inside Story of the Restoration of Wolves to Yellowstone* (Helena: Falcon Press, 1995) provides a quick and insightful synopsis of wolf eradication in Montana.

<sup>8</sup> Peter S. Morris, "Regional Ideas and the Montana-Alberta Borderlands," *Geographical Review* 89, no. 4 (1999) analyzes the geographies of boosterism and commercial advertising north and south of the forty-ninth parallel, concluding that Montana and Alberta's consumer cultures perpetuate divergent historical myths regarding the Canadian and U.S. Wests. Morris claims that Albertans conceive their high prairie province as the warm, temperate "Chinook country," while Montanans continue to characterize the "Whoop-up country" as a harsh and lawless land. Hugh Dempsey's otherwise excellent work tends to extirpate Canadians of any guilt in the plundering of the plains. His latest account of the whiskey trade, while exhaustively researched and informative, again argues that American whiskey traders were monolithically terrible and that the Northwest Mounted Police (NWMP) rescued western Canada in Hugh A. Dempsey, *Firewater: The Impact of the Whisky Trade on the Blackfoot Nation* (Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 2002). Andrew Graybill's comparison of the NWMP and the Texas Rangers provides a more even-handed interpretation of the Mounties' imperial agenda. See Andrew Graybill, "Instruments of Incorporation: Rangers, Mounties and the North American Frontier, 1875-1910" (Princeton University, 2003). On the American side, Paul Sharp's classic study also presents readers with a double-narrative of two opposing national expansions.

Americans, this myth holds a distorted Turnerian spin. White adventurers hustled whiskey, evaded marshals and fought Indians, opening the land to free enterprise, democratic settlement and improvement. Explaining that violence often marked this process of settlement due to a handful of colorful individuals, and not from complicated social negotiations or struggles for power, these historians have ignored the impact of unexpected ecological change or the pressures wrought by industrialization on the Whoop-up country. In Canada, the tale constitutes an opposite myth, that of the Northwest Mounted Police and their establishment of law and order. These heroic figures, according to one historian, kept "a stiff upper-lip," and labored under a "duty to carry the flag of Empire and Queen into the Wilderness." That one full tenth of the force deserted in the first mile of their 900-mile march across the plains was cause for celebration; "the Mounted Police were glad to weed out the weaklings before the trek was underway."<sup>9</sup> Despite these popular images, in terms of their economies, social coercion and violence, U.S. and Canadian histories in the Whoop-up country share more similarities than differences.<sup>10</sup>

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Illustrated with rowdy line-art drawings by Charlie Russell, Sharp's interpretation does much to entrench the idea of an American rough-and-tumble frontier west. See Paul F. Sharp, *Whoop-up Country: The Canadian American West, 1865-1885* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955). However, during Sharp's noteworthy career, he also implored historians to "avoid the unfortunate tendency in western American history of emphasizing the sensational, the transitory, the erratic and the pathological." See Paul F. Sharp, "The Northern Great Plains: A Study in Canadian-American Regionalism," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 39, no. 1 (1952), 61-76; 76. Given the Whoop-up country's name, its abundant liquor, its menagerie of animal furs, and its diseases, Sharp's directive is impossible to follow.

Not to be forgotten is Wallace Stegner, who wrote a history of this borderland region earlier and more eloquently than most, and in a way that masterfully (and unfortunately) hardened the ill-conceived myths of Canadian restraint and American ruthlessness. See Wallace Stegner, *Wolf Willow* (New York: Penguin, 1955).

<sup>9</sup> Hugh A. Dempsey, "The "Thin Red Line" In the Canadian West," *American West* 7, no. 1 (1970), 24-30; 24 and 26.

<sup>10</sup> In contrast to the older histories, recent work on the Whoop-up country has evaluated its transnational character. Two archaeologists have studied the material remains and transportation networks of the whiskey trade and explored its role in the creation of an international market for mass-produced goods. See Annalies Corbin, *The Life and Times of the Steamboat Red Cloud, or, How Merchants, Mounties and the Missouri Transformed the West* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006), and Margaret A. Kennedy, *The Whiskey Trade of the Northwestern Plains: A Multidisciplinary Study* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1997). Historians have started to look comparatively at the gender and racial dimensions of nation-building in the Whoop-up country in Beth LaDow, *The Medicine Line: Life and Death on a North American Borderland* (New York: Routledge, 2001), and Sheila McManus, *Line Which Separates: Race, Gender and the Making of the Alberta-Montana Borderlands* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005).

The ecological connections between the northwest plains' various modes of animal and human economic production offer a different, more critical explanation of the Whoop-up country's social confrontations than U.S. and Canadian historians have yet developed. Evaluating this region's bloody economies of fur and flesh as interrelated modes of predation helps reveal the broad contours of the Whoop-up country's socio-ecological landscape. A mode of predation is an economy that arranges social and ecological factors to facilitate the expropriation of value from one biological organism to another in a destructive, consuming, and often wasteful manner.<sup>11</sup> Several modes of predation interacted in the Whoop-up country and generated social conflict. Wolfing and whiskey trading are two interrelated modes of predation discussed in this essay, but others also represented significant economic engines in the Canadian-American West. Horse and livestock theft, military and scientific campaigns, and, of course, fraudulent government contracts,<sup>12</sup> might also fit classification as modes of predation.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Although modes of predation build on the Marxian notion that various arrangements of social labor have different environmental relationships, modes of predation do not represent strict structural categories. Unlike modes of production, modes of *predation* correspond with particular industries and their actual deployment of resources, capital, and labor within a dynamic ecological network. Focused on historical specificity, modes of predation are not useful as an abstract taxonomy and carry no implied teleology.

<sup>12</sup> John Kenneth Galbraith, "The Predator State: Enron, Tyco, Worldcom... And the US Government?," *Mother Jones*, May/June 2006, recently broached the subject of "predator states" in this article, arguing that in 2006, the U.S. government is a predatory beast that allies itself with an ever-smaller class of wealthy pseudo-criminals who manipulate politics and the legal system to extract money from the public domain. Although Galbraith's focus on bewildering federal spending and corporate embezzlement concords imprecisely with the nineteenth-century fur trade, his predator metaphor resonates with the Whoop-up country's history of violence and exploitation. Galbraith applies a "predator-prey" ecological model to explain economic cycles, but he fails to analyze the actual ecology underpinning human production. In the Whoop-up country, "over-predation" did lead to an abrupt economic crash, but only through interconnected ecological disruptions and human conflicts.

In another recent work, Michael Robinson also evaluates the predatory characteristics of twentieth-century U.S. government in Michael Robinson, *Predatory Bureaucracy: The Extermination of Wolves and the Transformation of the West* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Environmental historians, intentionally or not, have already started using predatory models to explore historical biological spaces. For instance, in his discussion of disease as the "ecological nexus of animal and human communities," Gregg Mitman writes that "humans were but one species in a web of economic and sociological relationships structured around predator-prey and host-parasite relationships." See Gregg Mitman, "In Search of Health: Landscape and Disease in American Environmental History," *Environmental History* 10, no. 2 (2006). Mitman relates the interdisciplinary scientific research of disease ecologists studying African trypanosomiasis as a predecessor of historians' current interest in a hybrid history of animals and humans. Also connected to this disease is Robert Campbell's unpublished research on the ecology of trypanosomiasis and its relationship to East Africa's nineteenth-century slave and ivory trades. Considering that milieu of violent animal and human exchanges sparked my conception of predatory economy in the Whoop-up country. See Robert Campbell, "Tuskers, Traders, and Trypanosomes: The Ecology of the Victorian Parlor," *American Society for Environmental History Conference*

Rather than subordinating labor through wages or through the confiscation of means of production—as in capitalist modes of production—modes of predation instead subordinate human and animal production through coercion. These processes are sometimes explicitly violent and physical, as in poisoning of wolves or the murder of human beings, but they are also often silently exploitative, as in creditors charging excessive debt interest, or traders preying on intoxicated clients. In the late-nineteenth century, economist Thorstein Veblen theorized that “the aggressive assertion of force and sagacity is not to be accounted as productive labour, but rather as an acquisition of substance by seizure.”<sup>14</sup> In making this distinction, Veblen struck upon an important paradox; predation necessitates protection. Within a predatory economy, to exploit a prey’s labor, predators not only work to seize substance, but they must also preserve their prey’s access to the tools and resources of productive labor. This dynamic paradox bore responsibility for the complicated social relationships that humans and animals developed in the Whoop-up country.

In this manner, modes of predation represent a useful analytical interface to the Whoop-up country’s economies and ecologies because of the violent and consumptive way the industrialized fur trade affected the region’s animal environment in the 1860s and 1870s. Modes of predation, linked together through networks of related animal and human production, reveal many of the unintended consequences of human-human, human-animal, animal-human and animal-animal predations.

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(Providence, Rhode Island: 2003). In another recent work, Jon Coleman suggests that the long history of conflict between Euro-Americans and wolves grew from an accumulation of negative cultural representations founded on wolves’ status as competing predators: “In the course of becoming the most dominant predator on the continent, Euro-Americans often conceived of themselves as prey.” See Jon T. Coleman, *Vicious: Wolves and Men in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 10. More closely related to the Whoop-up country, Andrew Isenberg compares plains Indians to wolves: “In order to survive, [Indians] needed to adjust their resource use to the ecological order of the Great Plains. Like wolves and other predators, however, they were not always frugal in their use of the bison.” See Andrew Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 80-81. I believe that besides Indians, whites—wolfers, whiskey traders, merchants and even consumers—can be included in this predatory equation.

<sup>14</sup> Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1899), 14.

However, relating animal and human histories in this way can be problematic if it degenerates into reductionism or racist discourse. It is not my intention to reduce human behavior to genetic or instinctual determinations, neither do I intend to cast certain human activities in the Whoop-up country as more “animal-like” than others. Although Peter Koch meant to denigrate wolfers with his description of “living like a wolf,” other voices in the Great Plains celebrated animal-like behavior. Throughout the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, eugenicists and racist anthropologists used animal comparisons to accuse non-Europeans of savagery, but for many Native American tribes, wolves held positive traits. One of my goals is to transcend the Eurocentric maxim that animal traits necessarily symbolize backwardness.

Likewise, loosely using the term “predator” to collapse the supposed distance between human and animal production can level a presumptuous moral judgment upon non-human predators. Clearly, wolves did not “seize substance” from bison with the same motivations as whiskey traders swindling the Blackfoot. Nevertheless, because humans and animals in the Whoop-up country faced many of the same ecological disruptions, selectively studying how they adapted differently and similarly, and how those adaptations reverberated through environmental and economic networks is a useful way to view the close relationship between social conflicts and living landscapes.<sup>15</sup> To this end, however, I am concerned with the conceptual benefit of the predator metaphor, not its literal application. Blending nature and social economy is essential for understanding the intriguing ecological roots of human conflict in the Whoop-up country, and modes of predation offer an evocative image of the northwest plains’ transformation into an outdoor abattoir.

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<sup>15</sup> I agree with Dan Flores, who explains his perspective as follows: “Paul Shepard put it in one of his last books, ‘By disdaining the beast in us, we grow away from the world instead of into it.’ That line stands as an evocative summary of much of the history of the American West.” Dan Flores, *The Natural West: Environmental History in the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 74.

The Whiskey-Trade Mode of Predation: Liquor, Capital, and Layered Extraction

The Whoop-up country's whiskey trade represented a mode of predation founded on three layers. The base layer comprised the Blackfoot, who hunted and processed bison robes. Next, white middlemen traders "hunted" for these robes with whiskey, the Whoop-up country's most popular trade item. Finally, Fort Benton merchants grew rich financing these traders with usurious contracts. Apart from the slaughter of bison, this layered mode of predation did not directly employ violence to achieve its objective. Rather, it exploited ecology and both Blackfoot and white social labor to establish extractive predator-prey relationships that transferred, almost entirely, the costs of bison robe production from wealthy white merchants to middle-class traders and ultimately the Blackfoot. These transferred costs were significant. The unbalanced terms of this trade reoriented Blackfoot labor towards market production, accelerating an unsustainable kill of bison that destroyed traditional Blackfoot subsistence and impoverished the tribe.<sup>16</sup> Benton's predatory economy of whiskey and bison robes operated in similar ways to the late-nineteenth-century meat industry.<sup>17</sup> Like the meatpacking elite of Chicago, Benton's merchant class harnessed the natural wealth of its northern hinterland for industrial demand through layers of intermediary labor and technology that hid environmental and social costs from alienated consumers. Unsurprisingly, contemporary Bentonites referred to their city as the "Chicago of the Plains."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> This argument resembles Richard White's narrative of Choctaw and Pawnee relationships with expanding market economies in Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees and Navajos* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983). It also follows Isenberg's and Flores's arguments that market hunting hastened the destruction of the bison, but that Native American nineteenth-century subsistence hunting was also probably unsustainable. In the Whoop-up country, killing bison for the market rested almost exclusively in the hands of the Blackfoot; white hunters played a miniscule role in the extermination of the northern herds compared with the more familiar history of the southern and central plains. See Dan Flores, "Bison Ecology and Bison Diplomacy: The Southern Plains from 1800-1850," in *A Sense of the American West*, ed. James Sherow (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison*.

<sup>17</sup> The chapter, "Annihilating Space: Meat," in Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* offers a provocative glimpse of this industry's significance and widening geography in the late-nineteenth century.

<sup>18</sup> Fort Benton *Record*, December 15, 1876, cited in Sharp, *Whoop-up Country: The Canadian American West, 1865-1885*, 157.

Operating as the steamboat hub in the 1860s and 1870s for the whole of the prairies north to Edmonton and also the gold country near Helena to the south, Fort Benton merchants amassed large amounts of capital consigning gold and furs downriver, and used some of these earnings to finance smaller-scale traders. Contracts usually amounted to over 10,000 dollars worth of goods, and provided plenty of incentives for traders to sell their inventory quickly and profitably. An agreement struck between Thomas C. Power & Co. and Joseph H. McKnight, for instance, specified a ten percent advance on all loaned goods, with additional ten percent interest payments on all unpaid principle over 8,000 dollars.<sup>19</sup> A 15,000 dollar loan would force McKnight to generate at least an eleven percent profit over the three-month long winter robe trade season just to cover his financing obligations to T.C. Power. If he had an unsuccessful season and had to wait until the following winter to sell his inventory, McKnight might face a hurdle of over fifteen percent. In addition to the cost of credit, McKnight would have to pay for the construction and daily operation of his trading post, for insurance, and also for the wagon freightage to and from Fort Benton. Construction costs for his post might range as high as half the value of loaned goods. In 1872, for instance, John Healy, proprietor of Fort Whoop-up, insured his stock animals alone for eight-thousand dollars at a 2.5 percent premium.<sup>20</sup> Freight costs depended on distance and weight, but might cost around forty percent of the value of bulky goods. In the spring of 1873, after being reprimanded for selling whiskey to soldiers, McKnight switched to beer and shipped 400 gallons from Helena to his post at Fort Shaw costing him 200 dollars and eighty dollars for freight charges.<sup>21</sup> All things considered, McKnight probably faced expenditures in the range of ninety to 110 percent of his inventory's value. Traders operating farther north in Canada might pay double these costs.

<sup>19</sup> Agreement between Thomas C. Power and Joseph H. McKnight, in *T.C. Power & Co. Papers*, Box 273, Helena, Montana Historical Society (hereafter cited as MHS).

<sup>20</sup> Dempsey, *Firewater: The Impact of the Whisky Trade on the Blackfoot Nation*, 92.

<sup>21</sup> Kessler and Miller Brewery Invoices, in *J.H. McKnight & Co. Papers*, Box 2, MHS.

Under these financial circumstances, stocking whiskey proved to be an attractive option for small traders. Because it was lightweight, readily available in Fort Benton, and popular with the Blackfoot, whiskey was by far the most profitable trade commodity on the northwest plains. A proliferation of mass-produced whiskey brands existed in the United States by the 1860s, but for the robe trade, whiskey traders generally selected the cheapest varieties available. J.H. McKnight sold average eastern whiskey to troops at Fort Shaw for around one to two dollars a fifth-gallon bottle, but a fifth of "trade whiskey" could be had for eighty cents or cheaper if bought in large quantities.<sup>22</sup> Once shipped north and watered down, trade whiskey was less than twice the cost of beer, but still three or four times as potent. In most cases, Blackfoot who traveled to the post with robes could exchange them one-to-one for bottles of whiskey.<sup>23</sup> Four-hundred gallons of whiskey, then, might be traded for two-thousand robes. With the best bison robes in Fort Benton selling downriver for six to eight dollars, the potential profit margin for such an exchange was enormous, perhaps as high as 900 percent.<sup>24</sup>

However, trafficking whiskey to the Blackfoot was a dangerous, illegal scheme, and the small traders, not their financiers, bore almost all of the risk. In 1855, the first treaty negotiated between the U.S. government and the Confederated Blackfoot tribes established most of Montana east of the Rockies and north of the Missouri River as the Blackfoot's sovereign space. U.S. Indian law dating back to 1832 banned the sale of alcohol to Native Americans and restricted the possession of alcohol on reservation lands. Obviously, whiskey traders ignored these laws, but at great peril. If caught by marshals or the army with whiskey on reservation lands, Fort Benton's small-scale traders faced confiscation of their goods, fines, and imprisonment.

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<sup>22</sup> United States Army to Joseph H. McKnight, in *J.H. McKnight & Co. Papers*, Box 4, MHS.

<sup>23</sup> Dempsey, *Firewater: The Impact of the Whisky Trade on the Blackfoot Nation*. 54

<sup>24</sup> Agreement between I.G. Baker and T.C. Power, in *T.C. Power Papers*, Box 273, MHS.

Moreover, simply locating an effective trading spot could be impossible. Realizing the predatory characteristics of their business, many whiskey traders referred to Blackfoot territory as their “happy hunting ground.”<sup>25</sup> Traders followed the Blackfoot much as the Blackfoot followed the bison. Some years, the traders simply failed to connect with their quarry. In 1871, Charles Rowe and Fred Kanouse built three different trading posts trying to keep up with the Blackfoot, returning to Fort Benton with only \$700 worth of robes. This situation was not ideal, but things were often worse. Four years earlier, Rowe had been trading with a Piegan band of Blackfoot in the Sweetgrass Hills when a Crow raiding party attacked, scattering the Piegans and leaving Rowe “stripped of grub.” He returned alive to Fort Benton shortly after, but with only one wolf skin to show for his aborted winter effort.<sup>26</sup> On the whole, small traders were probably lucky to break even once every few seasons, and the imagined profits from whiskey trading proved elusive. In 1876, after seven years of owning and running Fort Whoop-up, even John Healy faced ruin, explaining to Martin Maginnis, “I am a total wreck financially... My relations with T.C. Power in the shipment of robes to Canada has resulted disastrously to me, for the reason that T.C. has gone into the swindling business as it pays better.”<sup>27</sup> The whiskey traders did not grow rich from this predatory economy, it was the merchants financing them. This capitalist mechanism represented one industrial characteristic of the whiskey and robe trade; profits flowed upward.

Besides financing small traders, T.C. Power and I.G. Baker, the two Fort Benton merchants commanding the Whoop-up country’s modes of predation, also reinvested their capital in transportation and shop infrastructures. These men sought to geographically integrate their

<sup>25</sup> *Helena Daily Herald*, February 12, 1872, cited in Dempsey, *Firewater*, 2.

<sup>26</sup> Summary of Charles Rowe Stories, “*Wolves*,” *Overholser Vertical File*, Fort Benton, Montana Agricultural Museum (hereafter cited as MAM).

<sup>27</sup> John J. Healy to Martin Maginnis, August 4, 1876, *Maginnis Papers*, MHS. Cited in Sharp, *Whoop-up Country: The Canadian American West, 1865-1885*, 115.

The inebriating effects of whiskey created relatively little hardship and grief for the Blackfoot. Rather, the cumulative ecological and social effects of the whiskey trade itself wreaked havoc. Although drunken spats and alcohol poisoning undoubtedly killed some men and women, disease and the destruction of subsistence dwarfed these episodes in importance. Industrialization in the Whoop-up country did not allow whiskey traders, the Blackfoot, or Benton merchants to transcend nature. Instead, the effects of increased pressure on bison populations reoriented ecological connections in ways that spurred social conflict.

Decreased bison resources increased warfare between the Blackfoot and other northern plains tribes. Starting with the Cree in the 1850s, the Blackfoot began warring mercilessly with their neighbors and former allies over bison resources. By the early 1870s, the Blackfoot had beaten back the Cree and the Assiniboine in the north, opening further hunting ground towards the east. Part of their success was due to their close connection with Whoop-up country traders, who in addition to whiskey also traded repeating rifles and cartridges to their Blackfoot allies. In 1870, two bands of Blackfoot camped near Fort Whoop-up routed 600 Cree and Assiniboine warriors, killing hundreds of them with a steady barrage of half-inch wide bullets.<sup>30</sup> In this way, the whiskey-trade years marked a brief expansion of Blackfoot territory in the early 1870s. Toward the southeast, the Blackfoot battled their longtime Crow enemies, but without the same success. The formidable Crow, serving alongside the U.S. Army against the Sioux, easily held the Blackfoot at bay. As Dan Flores has suggested in his study of the southern plains, increased warfare over hunting territory probably provided respite to over-hunted bison populations when “buffer zones” of unexploited animals developed in embattled regions.<sup>31</sup> The Cypress Hills, on the eastern edge of the Whoop-up country, likely constituted one such region. After becoming

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and Oscar Lewis, *The Effects of White Contact Upon Blackfoot Culture with Special Reference to the Role of the Fur Trade* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1942), 38-40, 50.

<sup>30</sup> Hugh Dempsey, *A Blackfoot Winter Count* (Calgary: The Glenbow Foundation, 1965), 15.

<sup>31</sup> Flores, “Bison Ecology and Bison Diplomacy,” 73.

the demilitarized center of the Blackfoot and Cree Wars of the 1850s and 1860s, these remote hills grew increasing interest from traders in the 1870s, probably because of their large reserve of animals. In 1879, Blackfoot hunters fled their reservation and destroyed the penultimate remnants of the northern bison herd in the Judith Basin, a broad plain long marking the frontier between the Blackfoot and Crow.<sup>32</sup> Shifting zones of warfare followed, created, and destroyed zones of bison recovery.

Disease also represented a terrible ecological consequence of the whiskey trade. Increased encounters with greater numbers of whites and a transformed disease ecology among bison intensified pandemics among the Blackfoot. By 1877, smallpox had likely reduced Blackfoot populations by around sixty-nine percent. Warfare also reduced male populations, increasing the ratio of women to men and the number of wives available to hunters for skinning bison robes. These joyless unions not only subordinated and exploited female labor, but the labor itself probably checked any population recovery that could have occurred. By the 1850s, horses and livestock had likely transmitted brucellosis to the northwest bison herds.<sup>33</sup> Undiagnosed until the early-twentieth century, this Old World bacterial disease causes fetal abortion in over forty-three percent of pregnant women who have not developed immunity. Transmitted to humans through the inhalation of bacteria from infected animal tissue, Blackfoot women probably contracted the disease during their daily gutting, skinning and fleshing of bison robes.<sup>34</sup> The prolific contagion is also transmitted sexually. Although clearly overshadowed by the devastation of smallpox, brucellosis was a daily source of misery on the plains that western historians have largely overlooked.

The whiskey-trade mode of predation thus destroyed the bison, but also opened new

<sup>32</sup> Dempsey, *A Blackfoot Winter Count*, 17.

<sup>33</sup> Flores, "Bison Ecology and Bison Diplomacy," 77.

<sup>34</sup> Yousuf Khan, Manuel Mah, and Ziad Memish, "Brucellosis in Pregnant Women," *Clinical Infectious Diseases* 32, 1172-1177.

ecological niches for predators and parasites. Likewise, in the human world, the trade's economic benefits fell unevenly. In transferring wealth from bison to Fort Benton merchants, risk, ruin, and death reverberated back down the line affecting whiskey traders and the Blackfoot. While the Blackfoot bore the brunt of these disasters, the whiskey trade also afforded the Blackfoot a brief expansionary moment as clear military victors over the Cree and Assiniboine. By harnessing whiskey and capital, Fort Benton merchants intensified the Whoop-up country's fur trade and expanded its geographic scope. The whiskey-trade mode of predation rested upon the layered extraction of animal and human labor through violence and coercion.

#### Wolfing Mode of Predation: Ecological Change and Human Conflict

One mode of predation's execution could complement the success of another. With the Whoop-up country's bison herds left slaughtered and skinned on the plains, wolves proliferated. Their abundance laid the foundation for "wolfing," a method of poisoning wolves by baiting carcasses with strychnine. After spreading these baits over a wide swath of prairie, wolfers rode out to collect their kill every few days, sometimes returning with dozens of dead wolves. Once back at their base, usually a crude shack on a river bottom built to accommodate two to four men, the wolfers performed the gory labor of gutting and skinning. Compared with the small whiskey traders, wolfers could earn surprisingly good money for their efforts after selling the pelts downriver in Fort Benton, although major risks also accompanied their endeavor. As in the robe trade, however, the main profitability of wolf pelts rested in their freight and distribution within an international market system, and T.C. Power and I.G. Baker were the primary beneficiaries. Unlike the whiskey enterprise, though, the profound devastation wrought by wolfers did not lead to a local spirit of mutualism between these bands of white men and the Blackfoot. On the contrary, cyclical bouts of violence erupted between these two factions, greatly complicating

local politics and bringing the whiskey trade to an abrupt end.

In 1870, approximately 22,500 wolves and 450,000 bison thrived in the Whoop-up country.<sup>35</sup> However, the immense bison slaughter provided an unprecedented food source for wolves. With access to good nutrition, female wolves can breed a year earlier and mother twice as many pups.<sup>36</sup> Wolves' remarkable numbers and their adaptability impressed human observers throughout the 1870s. Learning to follow the sound of gunfire, wolves surrounded hunters and waited for their opportunity to scavenge fresh meat. In the late 1870s, Dan McGowan reported that he had "never seen gray wolves so numerous as now. When we are skinning and cutting up the buffalo they form a circle around us and wait impatiently. As we move away," he continued, "they rush in to fight over the offal. Many wild fights are witnessed but ammunition is scarce and we refrain from shooting."<sup>37</sup> Under these circumstances, wolves became easy prey for trappers.

Not only did the slaughter of bison increase wolf reproduction rates, but through their annual kills, wolfers also reduced the Malthusian pressures that might otherwise face huge wolf populations. Recent studies throughout Canada and the United States have concluded that wolf reproduction rates reach easily into the range of 200 to 400 percent following extensive population die-offs, and that wolf populations can sustain annual human-caused mortality rates

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<sup>35</sup> Because of complicated ecology and poor historical sources, estimating these populations is difficult. In his study of the entire North American plains, Isenberg estimates that 1.5 million wolves attended approximately 30 million bison during the early-nineteenth century peak bison population. See Isenberg, *Destruction of the Bison*, 27. In 1887, William Hornaday estimated that the 1870 bison population north of the Platte River ranged around 1.5 million animals. See William Hornaday, *The Extirmination of the American Bison, with a sketch of its discovery and life history* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1887), 504. Given this figure and the proportions stated by Isenberg, the number of plains wolves north of the Platte in 1870 might have been something like 75,000. Working backwards from Overholser's record of robe shipments from 1870 to 1882, and Flores's conservative estimate of a three percent net annual bison increase on the Southern plains, an 1870 bison population figure for the Whoop-up country comes in just shy of a reasonable 450,000. See Flores, "Bison Ecology and Bison Diplomacy," 74 and Overholser, *Fort Benton*, 31-32. Applying Isenberg's bison/wolf ratio, I develop a baseline 1870 figure for wolves in the Whoop-up country at 22,500.

<sup>36</sup> Fischer, *Wolf Wars*, 14.

<sup>37</sup> Dan McGowan, *Animals of the Canadian Rockies* (Dodd, Mead & Co., 1936), 28. Cited in Stanley Young, *The Wolves of North America* (New York: Dover Publications, 1944), 116.

anywhere from thirty-five to around seventy-four percent.<sup>38</sup> Thus, the combined ecological effects of increased bison mortality *and* wolf mortality surged wolf populations to incredible levels. Even if wolfers managed to completely wipe out a local range of wolves, in-migration and increased reproductive rates would quickly reestablish the population. Extrapolating from a conservative estimate from T.C. Power & Co. shipping files, between 1871 and 1875 wolfers killed around 34,000 wolves in the Whoop-up country.<sup>39</sup> This level of mortality would have been easily sustained by wolf populations, but also probably high enough to stimulate increased reproduction. Wolfing, then, did not serve to control predator populations, but instead increased wolf numbers and contributed to the demographic nightmare facing the bison. At a species level, bison lost and wolves won from human predation in the Whoop-up country. Just as the whiskey-trade mode of predation increased the wolfing mode's success, human predations of wolves brought more brutal wolf predations of bison and accelerated the creature's destruction. In this way, the success of animal and human economies in the Whoop-up country were closely linked.

Wolfers engaged in this pursuit seasonally, venturing onto the plains later in the winter when Blackfoot hunting parties had thinned.<sup>40</sup> Rather than formally aligning themselves with Fort Benton merchants and open trading enterprises funded by borrowed capital, they chose to work independently, often staying on the river through the summer and selling wolf pelts upriver to Fort Benton on passing steamboats.<sup>41</sup> In the spring and fall, many wolfers preyed on wood instead of wolves. These so-called "woodhawks" chopped and sold cords of fuel to the passing

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<sup>38</sup> Todd K. Fuller, L. David Mech, and Jean Fitts Cochrane, "Wolf Population Dynamics," in *Wolves: Behavior, Ecology and Conservation* eds. L. David Mech and Luigi Boitani (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 182-185.

<sup>39</sup> Bills of Lading for Steamers, 1869-1876, *T.C. Power & Co. Papers*, Box 289, MHS.

<sup>40</sup> Koch writes about this in Peter Koch to his uncle, September 9, 1870 in Cone, "Letters from the Musselshell, 1869-1870," 335.

<sup>41</sup> An interesting account of the local distribution of wolf pelts exists in James Schultz's semi-fictional story, "The Eagle Creek Wolfers." James Willard Schultz, *Many Strange Characters: Montana Frontier Tales*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982).

steamboats as well, searching up and downriver for stranded skippers willing to pay exorbitant amounts to get their boats moving again.

Stereotyped as dumb and uneducated by historians, and generally reviled as poor and uneducated men by the northern plains' merchants and ranchers, a surprising number of Montana's early bourgeoisie actually got started by killing wolves as recent immigrants. Wolfers could, and often did make modest sums of money that they could later parlay into other enterprises. In 1867, Charlie Rowe reported that some friends who wolfed near the Milk River "got hides worth \$2,000 or \$3,000 in few months and did not work hard or steady."<sup>42</sup> Oscar Brackett's telling reminiscence depicts the transitory and offhand flavor of wolfing. "I got tired of Cutting Wood," he complained,

So I and Archey McMurdy [and] Bill Hook took our Poneys, packed them with supplies & started up Sunday Crick. We was going to make our fortune poisning Wolves... We did not get many Wolves about a hundred big ones. The two Johnson & one Jackson with two others got fifteen hundred Wolves that winter, they took big Circles and put out lots of poison, Wolves at that time went in big Bands & followed the Buffalo up. It was common thing to poison 40 or 50 at one bate. We got 34 All at one time... I stade at the Cabbain until the river broke up. McMurday & Hook went up the River have never seen them since.<sup>43</sup>

If the other wolfing party came away with 1,500 pelts, they could probably sell their winter's labor for at least 3,000 dollars, or 600 dollars per person. As for Brackett, he probably made less than seventy dollars that winter. In comparison, George Clendinnen paid Peter Koch seventy-five dollars a month to take charge of his trading post on the fork of the Missouri and Musselshell. Most wolfers achieved mixed financial results. Like the Blackfoot, the fruit of their predation often disappeared into whiskey. Koch wrote his uncle explaining that in winter, Musselshell was the "dullest of dull places, where nothing at all is going on. Everybody has

<sup>42</sup> Summary of Charles Rowe Stories, "Wolves," *Overholser Vertical File*, MAM.

<sup>43</sup> *Oscar H. Brackett Reminiscence*, pages 0B4-0B5, MHS.

gone out wolfing.” He also observed that “there are very few men here that save anything. All the summer they do little or nothing besides drinking whiskey and gambling and when winter comes, they are generally in debt so deeply for whiskey and provisions, that it takes half the winter to get clear of that.”<sup>44</sup>

In addition to whiskey, wolfers consumed strychnine in great quantities, sprinkling its deadly granules on their bait’s tongue, sliced-apart rump, and spilled entrails. This chemical, isolated and concentrated into a mass-produced, granular form, wreaked absolute death on the plains and laid waste to life in such a manner that outraged the Blackfoot. While many plains tribes recognized that their reliance and predatory relationship with bison seemed similar to that of wolves, and often held the animals in high esteem, wolves could also threaten Blackfoot production. To the west of the Whoop-up country, Ross Cox reported that the lands of the Flathead tribe were “much infested by wolves, which destroy the foals, they cannot rear horses in such numbers as the Nez Perces, from whom they are obliged to purchase them annually.”<sup>45</sup> It was not simply the wanton destruction of wolves that enraged the Blackfoot, but rather the wider swath of death and destruction that wolf baits spread across their hunting ground. Strychnine-laced baits killed wolves, but also immense numbers of other plains scavengers, including coyotes, foxes, birds and domesticated dogs. The death of countless dogs particularly irritated the Blackfoot. Furthermore, the spastic, toxic vomit these poor creatures heaped upon the earth during their final moments poisoned grass and killed horses and bison.<sup>46</sup>

The hostility that developed between wolfers and Blackfoot led to increasingly brutal episodes of violence. Blackfoot routinely attacked and killed small groups of wolfers, who trespassed on their hunting ground. Occasionally, wolfers took the upper hand in these

<sup>44</sup> Peter Koch in “Letters from the Musselshell,” ed. Cone, 322, 327, 316.

<sup>45</sup> Ross Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River* (London, 1831), 183. Cited in Young, *The Wolves of North America*, 17.

<sup>46</sup> Flores, “Bison Ecology and Bison Diplomacy,” 78.

engagements, but more often the Blackfoot outnumbered and, armed with the latest repeating rifles, usually outgunned the wolfers. In 1872, Thomas Hardwick, a former Confederate soldier and prolific murderer in the Whoop-up country, led a group of 16 wolfers near the Sweetgrass Hills. When approached by a band of peaceful Assiniboine, Hardwick and his followers suddenly opened fire, killing four of them. The next spring, while bringing pelts to Fort Benton, a Blackfoot raiding party surprised Hardwick's group and stole their horses. Chasing the thieves around the plains with no success, Hardwick's frustrated group attacked Assiniboines again, this time surprising a band camped outside a whiskey trading post in the Cypress Hills run by a well-know trader Abel Farwell. Farwell and his Crow wife tried to prevent the slaughter, but barely escaped murder themselves. The wolfers killed over 30 people and demolished the camp.

Animosity also flared between the wolfers and the whiskey traders, who were the source of the Blackfoot's powerful weaponry. Prior to the Cypress Hills massacre, a wolver named John Evans put together a posse to deliver an ultimatum to John Healy at Fort Whoop-up, demanding that he stop trading guns and ammunition to the Blackfoot. Healy discovered the scheme in advance and greeted Evans' arrival with a loaded cannon.<sup>47</sup> Clearly, a spirit of cooperation failed to develop between whites in the Whoop-up country who engaged in these different modes of predation. While the whiskey trade laid the ecological foundation for wolfing's success, the wolver and trader's social desires did not equate. In contrast to the whiskey traders, wolfers assaulted ecology directly, extracting value through the application of strychnine that killed wolves and other creatures indiscriminately. Responding to this environmental threat, the Blackfoot defended their game and hunting territory by killing wolfers. Likewise, whiskey traders sought to protect the Blackfoot as their prey resource, generating internecine conflict with wolfers from the bloody wreckage of white-native disagreements.

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<sup>47</sup> Sharp, *Whoop-up Country*, 52.

### Predators and Protectors

Before dawn on January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1870, Major Eugene Baker ordered his infantry detachment to pull their tents on the Marias River and occupy firing positions on a bluff a few miles away. Below them, next to a large frozen bend about seventy miles above the Missouri slept a winter camp of 200 South Piegans led by Heavy Runner, carrying US Indian Agency papers confirming their ally status with the army “peacekeepers.” Several days earlier, a dome of arctic air migrated south, situating itself against the front range of the Northern Rockies and spreading east across the high snow-clad prairie. On that clear morning of the 23<sup>rd</sup>, Baker’s troops measured temperatures around –35 degrees Fahrenheit. Dying of smallpox, starving, and afflicted by extreme cold, Heavy Runner’s camp must have been miserable. The troops suffered as well, most of them nursing frostbite from two weeks of exhausting overland travel in the dead of winter. Baker and his main force had marched all the way from Fort Ellis near Bozeman, over 300 miles to the south. Impatience, frustration, and the whiskey dulling the cruel morning chill traditionally explained the ensuing tragedy.

According to eye-witness accounts, a local whiskey trader named Joe Kipp tried to intervene and stop the “battle” before it started.<sup>48</sup> He yelled out to Heavy Runner while pleading with Baker to realize he had targeted a friendly camp. But as soon as the Piegan chief emerged from his lodge, an unknown soldier shot him down. Within seconds, a sheet of gunfire tore apart the camp, killing 173 people.

Beset with boredom, incorrigible officers, cold winters, and easy access to alcohol, U.S. Army soldiers in the Whoop-up country drank themselves into a stupor. Charged with maintaining the peace by prosecuting liquor violations, many soldiers themselves drank heavily,

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 149.

including officers. Surgical records from Fort Shaw indicate that in the winter of 1869-1870, soldiers reported "unfit for duty" averaged from six to twelve percent each week. Since other categories existed for illness and injury, it is reasonable to assume a substantial number of troops were consistently drunk or hung-over. Several explicit entries in the casualty listings reference liquor as a factor in death. In one instance, "Private Patrick Stanton, 13<sup>th</sup> Infantry," the surgeon recorded, "was found dead March 4<sup>th</sup>, 1870 some three miles above the Post. He had wandered off the evening before while intoxicated and perished from exposure."<sup>49</sup> Some accounts of the Marias Massacre even accused Major Baker of being drunk when he gave the order to fire upon Heavy Runner's camp. While this allegation was never proven, several years later Baker lost his command and faced a court martial after losing a fight to the Sioux on the Upper Yellowstone. During this confrontation, nicknamed the "Battle of Poker Flats," the Sioux surprised and routed Baker's force while the commanding officers sat in a tent drinking and playing cards. Baker died shortly after of liver cirrhosis. Clearly, the physical effects of overindulgence were not limited to the Blackfoot; whites also drank themselves to death.

Evidence from military and business records indicate that whiskey traders struck a brisk business with troops. In 1871, the commanding colonel at Fort Shaw demanded that nearby trader Joseph McKnight stop selling liquor to the soldiers. The text of the reprimand dictated that McKnight stop selling "larger quantities than by the drink, to be taken at the bar, except upon written permission of the Post Commander."<sup>50</sup> A pragmatist, McKnight switched to beer in order to satisfy this directive and still satiate the soldiers. In the interim, however, he continued to sell bottles of whiskey in private transactions to both soldiers and officers who forged special dispensation permits. McKnight kept these amusing slips of paper, probably to cover his tracks

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<sup>49</sup> Surgeon's Field Book. *Fort Shaw Surgeon's Office Records*, SC 1407, MHS.

<sup>50</sup> *J.H. McKnight & Co.*, Box 4, Folder 2, MHS.

in case of another reprimand, and a number of them survive in his business books.

Evidence like these slips might be important to keep track of, since the year before McKnight's arrival, the fort's commanding officer arrested Walter Cooper, a trader who the colonel caught trucking kegs of whiskey right outside the Fort. Colonel Reeve confiscated Cooper's horses, wagon and whiskey, and imprisoned him overnight in Fort Shaw's jail. Fortunately for Cooper, Benton whiskey interests ran the law in the Whoop-up country. As one Army officer lamented, "there is a community of interest among the capitalists here that enables them to combine and have most things their own way in many respects."<sup>51</sup> During Cooper's trial, the county prosecutor failed to show up on Colonel Reeve's behalf, and the jury refused to indict Cooper on any charges. Cooper's attorneys immediately fired back with a personal lawsuit against Reeve, and also a suit against the US Army for wrongful imprisonment.<sup>52</sup>

Local suspicion and hostility towards federal authorities flared in many other ways as well. The majority of Bentonites had emigrated from the southern and border states during the Civil War. Many were Democrats, some were deserted soldiers, and most opposed the authoritarian and militaristic policies established by eastern governments in the 1860s and 1870s to control western settlement and Indian affairs.<sup>53</sup> It was not surprising, then, that Fort Benton's participants shunned external government authority and traded whiskey freely. Hostile anti-authoritarianism in the Whoop-up country played itself out in interesting ways. As early as 1867, tensions between the Blackfoot and Sun River ranchers had convinced Acting Governor George Meagher to organize a militia. Coming from the mining and ranch land of southern Montana

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<sup>51</sup> Senate Executive Document No. 8, 41<sup>st</sup> Congress, 3<sup>rd</sup> Session, "Army Posts, Dept. of Dakota," 7, Serial 1440. In Sharp, *Whoop-up Country*, 218.

<sup>52</sup> Executive Document 57, "Ex-Colonel J.V.D. Reeve," ed. 2<sup>nd</sup> Session 42<sup>nd</sup> Congress (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1872). Like Peter Koch, in the early 1870s Cooper left the Whoop-up country and settled in Bozeman, opening a store. Today, Cooper Park sits at the corner of Eighth Avenue and Koch Street.

<sup>53</sup> Stanley R. Davison and Dale Tash, "Confederate Backwash in Montana Territory," in Michael P. Malone and Richard Roeder, ed., *The Montana Past: An Anthology* (Missoula: University of Montana Press, 1969), 111-120.

Territory, Meagher probably did not expect the hostile greeting he received at Fort Benton. In July, shortly after arriving to pick up a shipment of rifles and ammunition sent upriver by steamboat, Meagher mysteriously drowned.<sup>54</sup>

Earlier that year, tension mounted between Fort Benton's merchants and the US government after soldiers seized one of I.G. Baker's wagon-trains moving whiskey across the Blackfoot Reservation. The US Secretary of Interior chided Baker, informing him that "the laws...are undoubtedly in force within the territory in which the Indian title has not been extinguished." Baker boldly responded: "if Hon. Secy. Of the Interior believed [this], he has been derelict in duty, in not driving the thirty thousand settlers of Montana from the homes they are unlawfully holding on Indian lands."<sup>55</sup> At first glance, this is an odd statement coming from a wealthy entrepreneur in the late-nineteenth-century West. However, the success of Baker's merchant operation rested on the Blackfoot's ability to utilize huge expanses of the northwest plains to hunt bison. Baker opposed federal presence in the Whoop-up country not only because it prosecuted his illegal trade, but because it also threatened to remove Blackfoot labor, a crucial element of his layered predatory enterprise.

In this manner, antagonism between Fort Benton merchants and the US government worked to postpone white settlement and preserve Blackfoot hunting space. While the Blackfoot fought off white and Indian intruders on their game range, I.G. Baker and T.C. Power battled expansionist federal agents in local and national courts. Unlike elsewhere in the west, local white business in the Whoop-up country was not complicit with government attempts at Indian removal. However, these merchants clearly acted out of self-interest; they labored to protect their means of production, not to save a people. A shrewder businessman than Baker, T.C.

<sup>54</sup> John Lepley, *Blackfoot Fur Trade on the Upper Missouri* (Missoula: Pictorial Histories Publishing Company, 2004), 246.

<sup>55</sup> Michael Foley, *An Historical Analysis of the Administration of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation by the United States, 1855-1950's* (Indian Claims Commission; Docket Number 279-D), 23-24.

Power aligned himself with the Republican party after realizing the potential profits in government contracts. Taking advantage of corrupt Indian Affairs agents, Power artfully convinced the local Blackfoot Agent to pay off personal debts with the Tribe's undistributed annuity goods. Power loaned these goods out to small traders, who exchanged them to their rightful owners for bison robes.<sup>56</sup>

This situation did not last. By 1870, federal authorities suppressed the whiskey trade in Montana and began confining the Blackfoot to ever-smaller reservation spaces through a series of new treaties. In response to increased federal patrols south of the forty-ninth parallel, the whiskey traders simply moved north to Canada in the winter of 1870. The trade boomed for the next four years. Beyond reach of the US government, traders and the Blackfoot operated with impunity in the absence of an organized Canadian legal presence. In 1874, however, the arrival of the Northwest Mounted Police (NWMP) precipitated an abrupt end to the illegal trade. Fearing an organized military force of nearly a thousand troops, most whiskey traders simply packed their belongings and fled. Sensing a new opportunity to make money from a federal authority, Power (and Baker along with him this time) redirected efforts to supply the new NWMP post at Fort McLeod. Almost immediately, overpriced flour and bacon replaced whiskey in the wagons rumbling north along the Whoop-up trail. Within three years, Canada's Treaty Seven confined the Siksika, Bloods and Piegans to reservations, where they nearly starved on meager rations of beef and oats raised on their former hunting grounds. This so-called "Canadian trade" proved to be more lucrative than whiskey ever was. Until the arrival of the Canadian Pacific in 1888, even Alberta's mail traveled south to Fort Benton before heading east.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 19-20; Lepley, *Blackfoot Fur Trade on the Upper Missouri*, 246.

encroachment.

Human transformations in production directly affected animal ecology. Abundant carrion and high levels of mortality fueled and stimulated wolf reproduction, creating an unprecedented opportunity for fur exploitation. These ecological effects reverberated across the Whoop-up country's human and non-human economies, sowing conflict based on competing predator-prey relationships rather than racial or national factors. Eventually, the extermination of the bison and the arrival of potent federal law enforcement north and south of the international border removed the ecological system underpinning these modes of predation, prompting a change of business strategies for the Whoop-up country's human predators.

Wallace Stegner captured the temporary character of the Whoop-up country's whiskey and wolf economies in a succinct eulogy: "The first fur-trading post in the Cypress Hills lasted only a few months. Its going, like its coming, was commemorated with mass murder, and its monuments did not survive its business life by more than a half hour."<sup>58</sup> Predatory economies, however, did not disappear in the Whoop-up country. Not all wildlife on the plains succumbed to extermination. Feasting wolf populations flourished within the Whoop-up country's fatal perimeter, adapting to changing human economies of predation better than most humans. Eventually, people in the Whoop-up country targeted wolves as a nuisance species, but they remained an evocative symbol of the intimate link between human and animal production. Exploring that connection provides an intriguing look at social encounter in the North American West.

<sup>58</sup> Wallace Stegner, *Wolf Willow* (New York: Penguin, 1955), 71. A Blackfoot war party slaughtered 60 Cree in the vicinity of the post shortly before it was built. Within minutes of the main force leaving the base the following spring, a group of Blackfeet burned it to the ground, killing 9 Assiniboine workers left behind.