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Indians, Alcohol, and the Roads to Taos and Santa Fe
By 1821, the year Missouri was admitted to the Union as the twenty-fourth state, overland roads had already been established from Missouri across Mexico-claimed territory to Taos and Santa Fe. Along these routes during the next quarter century an alcohol trade thrived among Indians and whites despite federal prohibitions. This book recounts how and to what effect the alcohol trade was plied in this distant and remote region during an important period of westward U.S. expansion.

European efforts at colonization of the Western Hemisphere beginning at the end of the fifteen century led to dispossession, sickness, and premature death for Indians in North, Central, and South America. Some affected “natives” (so called by many past and contemporary historians and anthropologists) were befriended by the invaders at the outset. Some were vaccinated for smallpox, others were provided material assistance against starvation, and
many were even assimilated into the mainstream of American culture. On balance, however, most American Indians were impacted in the worst way as a result of encounters with Euro-American colonizers (or, some will say, invaders) and, after more than four centuries, have continued to suffer debilitation and population decline. Historians of the subject document many shameful events, leading to a consensus that the European invasion precipitated a genuine tragedy in the Western Hemisphere. This book offers details within a specific context—alcohol and its impact on Indians along the frontier trails threading through the so-called Indian Country between Missouri and Mexico—as well as new insights into how and why things went so dreadfully wrong.

There is no lack of studies on this topic. According to a U.S. National Park Service report from 1990, more than 800 books and articles had already been published on the subject of the Santa Fe Trail, a number that has increased markedly since. Having written two books on Indian exploitation and decline in the trans-Missouri West, I decided to broaden my understanding of the opening of U.S. commerce to New Mexico in 1821 and thereafter. Specifically, I began studying how it came to pass that distilled alcohol—designated illegal under penalty of federal fines and imprisonment as a trade item for Indian peoples where the Taos and Santa Fe roads threaded westward—was in fact easily obtainable by so many resident and transient Indians.

In my first book on this topic, White Man’s Wicked Water: The Alcohol Trade and Prohibition in Indian Country, 1802–1892 (1996), I focused on the duplicity and negative aspects of a hard-drinking white culture that passed legislation prohibiting Indians from
procuring alcohol in any form while ignoring similar standards for itself. In my second book dealing with the topic, *The Rise and Fall of Indian Country, 1825–1855* (2007), I looked in depth at the actual place where the new standards were to be applied, as well as the legal and economic problems resulting from the government’s failure to enforce the Indian Trade and Intercourse statutes passed by the U.S. Congress in 1790, 1793, 1796, 1799, 1802, and 1834 regulating commerce between Native Americans and non-Indians.

This book journeys farther by examining the alcohol trade in Indian Country after 1834, when commercial relations between the United States and Mexico were expanding after being inaugurated by William Becknell of central Missouri in 1821. Becknell and his supporters conveyed goods across an immense landscape inhabited by thousands of equestrian hunters who, in response to an increasing demand for processed bison robes and related products (which they harvested for their own needs or for bartering with other Indians at regional fairs), were induced by non-Indian traders to exchange such commodities for corn- and wheat-based alcohol produced in western Missouri and northern Mexico distilleries. Soon thereafter these Indians became embroiled in a market economy fashioned and driven by a small but resolute cadre of entrepreneurs from Missouri, Mexico, and the upper Arkansas Valley. Eventually a much larger crowd of small-time traders joined the business of Indian alcohol and, with very few variations, emulated the tactics of the more affluent operators who preceded them.

There were more than a few Indians in the trans-Missouri West who themselves became successful alcohol traders, simply because they were legally immune from the Indian prohibition legislation dating back to the first Jefferson administration. Some of the more successful traders operated under the business model of
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St. Louis entrepreneur William Bent, who initially went west for the chance to hit it big in the highly competitive Rocky Mountain fur trade but in the early 1820s eventually took advantage of the overland traffic to Taos and Santa Fe. His affection for and marriage (probably in 1837) to Owl Woman, daughter of the Southern Cheyenne leader White Thunder, was from all accounts genuine. But their union nonetheless provided Bent legal immunity to trade with Southern Cheyennes as he saw fit—including the exchange of raw alcohol for processed bison robes.

This book does not dissect Indians’ drinking practices and the resulting problems. It studies how the distribution of illicit alcohol to Indians west of Missouri figured heavily in the failure of a significant aspect of federal government Indian policy: prohibition. Whatever else may have been the Indians’ plight, alcoholism in the trans-Missouri West at that time was primarily a learned behavior, exacerbated by increasingly troubled relationships among people with little experience with alcohol and non-Indians who were veteran and often intemperate users. And an important corollary of this learned behavior is the repudiation of any notion that innate deficiencies as human beings lead Indians to excessive and abusive consumption.

The establishment of several overland routes between Missouri and New Mexico in 1821 was followed by the federal government’s decision to survey one of them as a national road four years later, followed by the passage in 1834 of a federal law that more explicitly detailed the legal boundaries of the Indian Country. My core argument is that these events led to an increasingly unstable dynamic whereby the Osage, Kansa, Southern Cheyenne and Arapahoe,
Kiowa, and Comanche peoples, as well as several emigrant tribes east of the Mississippi whose reservations abutted or were near the overland roads, entered into an expansive and destructive trade for alcohol.

Involving huge commercial profits for the non-Indian traders by the mid-1840s, such trade would require Indians to exchange processed bison robes, government annuities, and other goods and interests for Missouri corn whiskey and Mexico wheat alcohol. One Shawnee headman would tell federal officials in 1834 that he and his people “knew the whiskey was bad.” That same year the leader of another tribe whose reservation abutted the overland road to New Mexico admitted that whiskey was indeed “harmful” for his people. But, he countered, “it was the whites who first gave us whiskey [and] we did not once love it. The white man said it was good and our young men took to it. . . . We have no law and it is a difficult thing to stop. But we know it is a bad thing.” Such statements are representative of Indian sources who in the literature are greatly outnumbered by non-Indian sources; this is further complicated by the complexity of Indian identity.

One case in point is William Bent. In 1859—still claiming his own Southern Cheyenne Indianness through marriage—Bent was appointed federal Indian Agent for the Upper Arkansas Agency. From Bent’s Fort, an important facility on the road, he denounced the very kind of trade he and partners had engaged in two decades earlier. Certain questions arise: Did reports of Bent’s activities in the 1830s come from Indians, whites, or others? What were the sources of reports in 1859? Should Bent himself be viewed as Indian or non-Indian? These questions are important to interpreting the historical record.
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For many Indians, if not most, who lived along or near the overland roads, the white traders’ promise of good times under the new dispensation was a disaster for native culture that in some ways continues into the modern era. Tribal involvement in the trade for alcohol led to internal family and band factionalism, child and female exploitation, social dysfunction and lethargy, malnutrition, and premature death. Contrary to the promises of Senator Thomas Hart Benton and his supporters in Missouri, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere—that national roads connecting Missouri with New Mexico would usher in an era of progress and prosperity for the Indians living in the so-called “intervening” Indian Country (Benton’s term)—a tragically different series of events ensued. Under the federal Indian alcohol code formally introduced during the early Jefferson presidential administration and tightened up in 1847 to require large fines and incarceration for up to two years for convicted offenders, any such trade was illegal from the start. How and why the federal government—with few exceptions—failed to police and take into custody known malefactors, thereby undermining its announced program for tribal improvement, are important ancillary parts of this study. Here is less a revisionist study than one designed to fill a void in the literature regarding the overland Indian trade. It suggests also that the illegal trade in Benton’s “cleared” region (i.e., between Missouri and northern New Mexico) during the second quarter of the nineteenth century may have been as important, if not more so, than the legal commerce moving between the mouth of the Kansas River and the Mexican markets far to the southwest.

In less than a half century after 1821 most Indians designated by Benton for economic and social improvement in the upper Arkansas country had been moved to the Indian territory in Okla-
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homa, hundreds of miles from the wagon roads to New Mexico. By then, again with support from Benton, the roads through Indian Country were rendered obsolete by a federal land-grant program subsidizing transcontinental railroad construction from the lower Mississippi Valley to the Pacific Coast, along hundreds of miles tracking the former wagon roads to Taos and Santa Fe. Not surprisingly, the deadly dealing of alcohol moved to other places—this time to Oklahoma and elsewhere.

Documentary evidence regarding the actual number of Indian people who died from alcohol consumption during the second quarter of the nineteenth century is not easy to come by. That being said, some reports of federal Indian Office officials based in or near Indian Country are more helpful and objective than often biased traveler accounts and so-called frontier newspapers. Important examples of reasonably careful reporting are those of Superintendent of Indian Affairs David D. Mitchell in the early 1840s. In 1841 he determined that at least 20 Indians residing west of Missouri had died of chronic alcohol consumption during the prior twelve months; the following year he reported that in his jurisdiction, which included most of the region traversed by the roads to Taos and Santa Fe, some 500 Indian males had died of alcohol or alcohol-related diseases in less than a year.3