



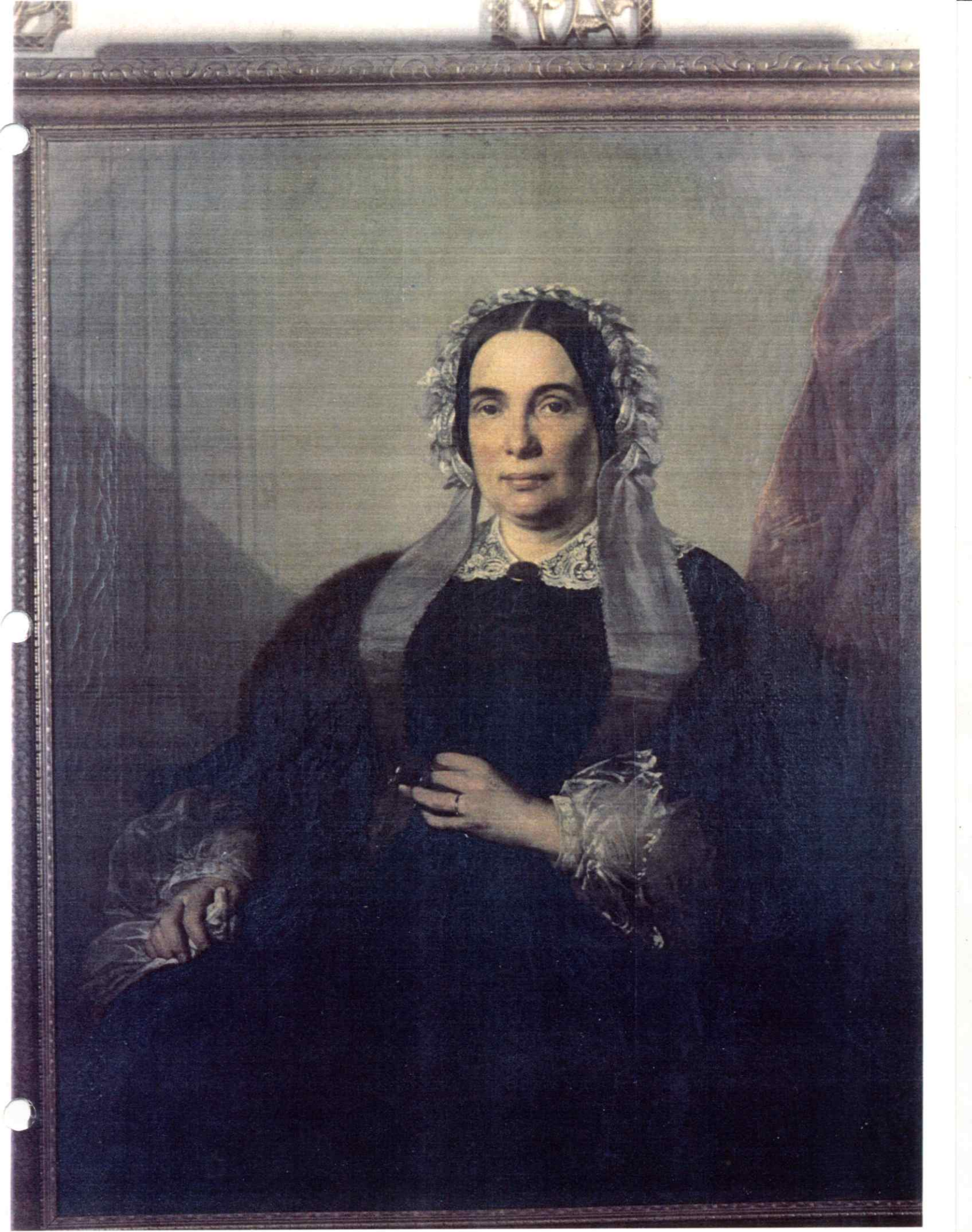
RAMSAY

BY

JOHN JOSEPH CROOKS







## Introduction

On a wall in my house hangs a framed picture of a painting of one of my ancestors, Ramsay Crooks. The original painting, I found out sometime after hanging the picture, probably stands as tall as I am, and is in the <sup>Milwaukee,</sup> Wisconsin Historical Society, having been donated by my great aunt, Marie Crooks Just. A photograph of this painting appears on page 49 of The Overland Diary of Wilson Price Hunt, and it is a copy of this which adorns the title page of this paper. But who was this Ramsay Crooks? It has taken me most of my life to find out.

When I was nine years old I was reading a school library book on the fur trade, the name of which I have forgotten, and I came across the name "Ramsay Crooks". Because his last name is the same as mine, I asked my father if he were some sort of relation. He told me that Ramsay Crooks was a great, great grandfather of mine, but that was about all. A short time after that some members of the Astor family of England came to Oregon to partake in some kind of celebration in Astoria. When they arrived at the Portland airport my then twelve year old cousin, whose name is Joseph Ramsay Crooks, Jr., had his picture taken for The Oregonian with a boy of about the same age, whose name was given as John Jacob Astor (what number I do not know). The newspaper pointed out that there was a historical significance to this meeting, but I didn't understand it at that time. On a field trip to Salem to visit the Capitol when I was in the eighth grade, one of my classmates told me that the name of a "Crooks" was in the State Senate, and after much searching, I found the name "Ramsay Crooks" high in the stone on the right side of the chamber. I did a little research and found out that this Ramsay Crooks had been associated with the original John Jacob Astor, and also had something to do with early Oregon history. During my sophomore year at Portland State, I was assigned to do a term paper on John Jacob Astor, and in researching it, I found out a little more about my ancestor;

that he had been involved in the founding of Astoria, that he had worked for Astor as his field manager, and that later he became President of the American Fur Company. But still my knowledge of Ramsay Crooks remained sketchy.

This paper is a fulfillment of the course requirements for History of the Pacific Northwest. But it is also a chance for me to get to know my "roots", so to speak, and to finally discover Ramsay Crooks, a man whose shadow, David Lavender writes, "touched nearly every person, red and white, in the wilderness half of the United States by the time he was forty-five years old."<sup>1</sup> I now present Ramsay.

Ramsay

Ramsay Crooks was born on January 2, 1787, in the town of Greenock, Scotland. Greenock is on the Firth of Clyde in the northwest section of Scotland, about one hour out of Glásgow. It is a beautiful little town, this author having visited it in 1975, and to this day there are still Crooks living in Greenock. Ramsay was one of some nineteen children of William Crooks, and was a product of William's second marriage. His mother was Margaret Ramsay, after whom he was named, and Ramsay was probably one of the youngest, if not the youngest son. The name "Crooks" might have originally been "Crock" or "Crocker", and the family was alleged to have been somehow related to the Royal House of Stuart.

David Lavender writes that Ramsay's father was a shoemaker, yet goes on to say that "young Crooks must have received a sound common-school education in Scotland, or he could not have handled the letter writing and commercial arithmetic which his early work in Montreal demanded."<sup>2</sup> This is impossible, for if one goes on to examine the situation in Scotland at that time, there is no way that a shoemaker with all those children could have possibly educated a son to that degree. And a younger son like Ramsay would have no doubt been apprenticed off at an early age. Mr. Lavender, when doing research on his book, never contacted any member of the Crooks family, for if he would have he would have known that family records indicate that William Crooks was a surveyor, and was responsible in part or in whole for laying out the New Town half of Edinburgh in the late eighteenth century. Being a prominent surveyor, William Crooks certainly could have given his son a sound education, and besides that, Margaret Ramsay was reportedly an educated woman in her own right--probably not the type to marry a shoemaker.

Before Ramsay was into his teens his father had died, and in 1803, at the age of sixteen, he emigrated to Canada with his mother and a sister. His mother

and sister settled in Niagara, Canada, where two of his older brothers had settled, but Ramsay soon moved to Montreal. There his good education came in handy, for he was hired as a clerk by the firm of Maitland, Garden, and Auldjo. This company outfitted fur trading parties headed for Michilimackinac Island on the Great Lakes where Lake Huron meets Lake Michigan, which was the headquarters of all the fur trading business around the Great Lakes area. Ramsay's job in Montreal consisted of the following:

"Mostly he was inside an office, bent over a slope-topped desk, copying his employers' business correspondence into big gray letter books. In preparation for the annual fall rush of ordering he climbed short ladders beside long wooden shelves and took inventory of hawk bells, awls, black-silk handkerchiefs, and bolts of gaudily printed calico."<sup>3</sup>

It was there that young Ramsay attracted the attention of George Gillespie. Gillespie was Sir Alexander Mackenzie's representative on Michilimackinac Island, after Mackenzie had left the North West Company to form the rival XY Company. When the XY Company ended its rivalry with the North West Company in 1804, Gillespie joined up with Robert Dickson and his new company. Gillespie figured that Dickson would want a capable clerk, one with certain talents.

"What talents? Hindsight suggests several: physical stamina, unusual perseverance, adaptability, charm, leadership, loyalty, aggressiveness. It is impossible to say which, if any, of these traits struck Gillespie most forcefully. Perhaps he was won primarily by the lad's good nature and faithfulness in doing small tasks totally devoid of that Homeric glitter now associated with the words 'fur trade' and 'mountain man.'"<sup>4</sup>

By 1805 Ramsay was on Michilimackinac Island, either having gone with Gillespie, or by finding his own way there on one of the supply boats. In the summer of that year Dickson's company was formally launched. Ramsay was assigned to one James Aird, a Scot who had come to Michilimackinac as early as 1779, and Aird, in turn, was given the command of the trade along the Missouri River. It is interesting to note that "only a dozen years later Aird would be



working for Crooks."<sup>5</sup> By September of 1805, Ramsay was in St. Louis ready to start his duties up the Missouri River. However, "Aird's clerks would not be likely to risk the law by entering the river without licenses."<sup>6</sup> To obtain a license to operate on that newly American river, Ramsay had to swear "an oath of fidelity to the United States and of abjuration to all other Powers."<sup>7</sup> It was here that Ramsay Crooks became a lifelong American citizen "technically if not yet emotionally."<sup>8</sup> It was also in St. Louis that Ramsay met a young store owner from New Jersey, Wilson Price Hunt. Hunt was a partner in Hunt and Hankinson's, the largest store in St. Louis, and Ramsay, no doubt, bought most of his supplies there.

Ramsay Crooks and another clerk in Mr. Aird's employ, James Reed, were given the responsibility of running supply boats up the Missouri River to the Platte and beyond, trading with fur trappers along the way, and also with some Indians. It was on the Missouri River at a place called La Charette in the present-day state of Missouri that Reed and Crooks had quite a pleasant surprise. On September 20, 1806, as recorded in the journals of Lewis and Clark by Clark:

"Soon after we reached the little French village of La Charette, which we saluted with a discharge of four guns and three hearty cheers. We landed and were received with kindness by the inhabitants, as well as by some traders from Canada (two young Scotchmen in the employ of Mr. Aird), who were going to traffic with the Osages and Ottoes. They were all equally surprised and pleased at our arrival, for they had long since abandoned all hopes of ever seeing us return.

These Canadians have boats for the navigation of the Missouri, which seem better calculated for the purpose than those in any other form."<sup>9</sup>

Clark later recorded the name of James Reed, but as Lavender points out: "in the confusion and excitement of the greetings, Clark evidently missed the name of Mr. Aird's clerk, although in time he would learn it well enough. For almost certainly Reed's companion was Ramsay Crooks."<sup>10</sup> Lavender continues:



"The occasion demanded celebration. The captains paid a villager eight dollars for two gallons of whisky, 'an imposition,' Clark growled. Crooks and Reed were more generous. 'Those two young Scotch gentlemen furnished us with Beef flower and some pork for our men, and gave us a very agreeable supper. As it was like to rain, we accepted of a bed in one of their tents.'"

Ramsay not only met Lewis and Clark on the Missouri, but he also met and formed a partnership with Robert McClellan. McClellan ran a trading house near the earthen town of the Maha Indians roughly one hundred miles up the Missouri from the present-day city of Omaha, Nebraska. Robert Dickson and Company was on the verge of going broke, so nineteen year old Ramsay Crooks formed this partnership with McClellan and another man, Joseph Miller, as a kind of insurance policy for further involvement in the fur trade. It was while a partner that Ramsay was led to John Jacob Astor.

John Jacob Astor had been building his fur empire since he made his first trip up the Hudson River in 1785. In 1808 he received a charter from the New York legislature to form the American Fur Company, which was to act as a paper parent to his other ventures for its first ten years or so of existence. Astor's dream was to acquire a monopoly of the fur trade in the United States, and to extend a string of fur trading posts all along the trail of Lewis and Clark, with a port city at the mouth of the Columbia River, which would then enable him to ship his furs to the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii) and to the Orient beyond. He approached Wilson Price Hunt and gave him the responsibility of the overland expedition. Also recruited early were Alexander McKay, Donald McKenzie, and Duncan McDougal from the North West Company, and two other Canadians, David Stuart and his nephew Robert Stuart. Meanwhile, two ships, the Tonquin and the Beaver were sent around the tip of South America with orders to stop at the Sandwich Islands, and then proceed to Fort Astoria on the Columbia. A third ship, the Lark, was sent later, but was shipwrecked before it reached the

Sandwich Islands. Hunt put together a band of some thirty Canadians then

"had a real stroke of luck in the accession to his ranks of a young Scotch-American named Ramsay Crooks. ...Crooks was destined to become one of the leaders of the fur trade, and a rich and distinguished merchant. His first service to his new employers was to point out the insufficiency of their force of thirty men. He was recently returned from an expedition to the headwaters of the Missouri, where he had experienced the hostility of the Sioux and the Blackfeet, the two most dreaded tribes in that area. Any small expedition must arouse the cupidity of these fearless raiders, he asserted, and urged the recruitment of the brigade to a strength of sixty."<sup>12</sup>

Hunt and the others accepted Ramsay's advice, and soon the partnership of Robert McClellan and Company was dissolved. McClellan and Miller were brought into the scheme at the insistence of Ramsay Crooks. In June of 1809 the Pacific Fur Company was born, under an agreement consisting of thirty articles. Astor was to manage all business of the company. He was to advance all necessary funds not to exceed \$400,000, and also was to bear all losses for the first five years. One hundred shares were issued. Astor controlled fifty of them, while an additional fifteen were held for the use of the company. This gave Astor full control. The Pacific Fur Company was to have a lifespan of twenty years, and Astor retained the right to make his shares over to the American Fur Company. After the first five years of operation, all profits and losses were to be apportioned among the shareholders. The rest of the shares were split as follows: "of the thirty-five remaining shares, McKay, McKenzie, McDougal, David Stuart, Hunt and Crooks received five each, and McClellan and Miller each got two and one-half shares."<sup>13</sup>

"By July 18, 1811, Donald McKenzie, Ramsay Crooks, Joseph Miller, Robert McClellan, John Reed, and I Wilson Price Hunt, in company with fifty-six men, a woman, and two children had traveled up the Missouri River from St. Louis to the village of the Aricaras. We left there with eighty-two horses packing commodities, munitions, food, and animal traps. Everyone walked except the company partners and the woman, a squaw. We took a southwesterly route and came to the banks of the

Ramparre, a little river that flows into the Missouri below the Aricaras' village."<sup>14</sup>

Thus opens Wilson Price Hunt's account of the overland expedition. On their way up the Missouri to the particular point mentioned by Hunt, they came across an interesting old man.

"On the afternoon of the third day, January 17th 1811, the boats touched at Charette, one of the old villages founded by the original French colonists. Here they met with Daniel Boone, the renowned patriarch of Kentucky, who had kept in the advance of civilization, and on the borders of the wilderness, still leading a hunter's life, though now in his eighty-fifth year."<sup>15</sup>

The next day they met with John Colter, who had been with Lewis and Clark, and who "had many particulars to give them concerning the Blackfeet Indians."<sup>16</sup> According to Gabriel Franchere, after the party left the village of the Aricaras,

"wishing to avoid a meeting with the Blackfoot Indians, a warlike and ferocious tribe who killed every stranger who fell into their hands, they followed a southerly course until they reached the fortieth degree of latitude. Then they turned again toward the northwest and came upon an old fort, or trading post, on the banks of a little river. They learned later that this post, which was then abandoned, had been built by an American trader named Andrew Henry. Our gentlemen had no doubt that this river would take them to the Columbia, and they constructed canoes to make the descent."<sup>17</sup>

They had reached the Snake River, which they called the Mad River, by October of 1811. By the time that they reached the present day town of Milner, Idaho, Ramsay's canoe overturned, and one man was drowned. This discouraged any further river travel, and a man was sent back to Henry's fort for horses. Twenty-seven days later they reached what is now the town of Homedale, Idaho, but Ramsay, a man in his group named John Day, and another man, a French-Canadian, became seriously ill. The party backtracked downstream to about the present-day town of Huntington, Oregon, and there Hunt abandoned Crooks, Day, and the other man, who were too sick to move. Hunt had decided to push on across the Blue Mountains to the Columbia before winter set in. By midwinter, Ramsay

and the others were well enough to travel, and they followed Hunt's route into the Blue Mountains. There they lived off beaver, roots, insects, and whatever else they could find to eat. The French-Canadian collapsed and was left with some peaceful Indians. "Day and Crooks struggled on to the Columbia, reaching what is now Umatilla in mid-April."<sup>18</sup> Shortly after this they ran into trouble. The two were intercepted by hostile Indians, beaten, stripped, and left to die. They recovered, however, and started hiking down the Columbia toward Astoria. They sighted a flotilla of canoes commanded by Robert Stuart, which was bound from Fort Okanogan to Astoria, and they were picked up. Ramsay Crooks and John Day arrived at the mouth of the Columbia on May 11, 1812.

The Astoria enterprise was to end in failure, for the Tonquin met with difficulties at the mouth of the Columbia, and was later blown up off Vancouver Island. The Beaver was more successful, but to no avail. The United States found itself at war with Great Britain, and in 1814 Astoria was sold to the British and renamed Fort George. Ramsay Crooks and Robert McClellan, however, had given up their partnerships the year before, and had left for St. Louis with Robert Stuart, who was assigned to take reports to John Jacob Astor. On the way back

"their course led them to the Green River and through South Pass to the North Platte River, the route subsequently followed by mountain men and immigrant settlers. Although Andrew Henry's trappers had probably crossed South Pass, Stuart's party was the first of record to use this now famous gateway to the Oregon country."<sup>19</sup>

Years later, in 1856, John C. Fremont, while running for the Presidency, would claim that he had discovered the South Pass. History, however, has proven him wrong.

"Although Crooks had resigned and had returned with Stuart, Astor did not leave him idle. He sent Crooks out to the Great Lakes region. A number of independent traders on both sides of the line owed



Astor money, and Crooks was to collect the debts in furs. Crooks also was to buy Canadian furs whenever he could arrange with collectors to co-operate with him...<sup>20</sup>

In 1811 Astor had made an agreement with the Michilimackinac Company of Montreal, which operated the fur trade around the Great Lakes area, to go in 50-50 with him in a new venture, the South West Company. Under the South West Company Astor had most of the fur trade east of the Mississippi and south of the Canadian border in his pocket, and by 1817 Astor had bought out all other partners in this enterprise. Had the Pacific Fur Company been successful, Astor would have virtually had his monopoly of American fur interests by 1817. He would get that later, however. All other names were dropped, and the American Fur Company came into its own as a real company, not just a paper parent. On March 17, 1817, Astor

"offered Ramsay Crooks a position as one of the 'two agents to conduct hereafter said business [the fur trade] at Montreal, New York, Michilimackinac, and at all other places, who are to give their whole time and attention to said business, and not to trade for account of themselves or any other person whatsoever.'"<sup>21</sup>

The other agent was Robert Stuart. "In addition to annual salaries...\$2,000 for Crooks and \$1,500 for Stuart...each of them was to receive the profits on five shares 'out of the hundred shares in said business.' All their expenses while they were 'absent on business of the company' were to be paid by Astor."<sup>22</sup> This contract was for three years, and Ramsay, along with Stuart, agreed to the terms. Crooks and Stuart had full command of field operations, and "Crooks held the highest rank, next to that of Astor himself."<sup>23</sup>

It was also in 1817 that Ramsay Crooks's daughter was born. Ramsay, like many men of the wilderness, had had relations with a Chippewa girl, about whom nothing is known. Perhaps he married her, perhaps he didn't, but in any event "he remained attached to the daughter born to him on Drummond's Island May 30,

1817. He gave the child his name, educated her, visited her, introduced her to his eventual white wife."<sup>24</sup> "Crooks's daughter [who he named Hester] became the wife of a well-known missionary to the Chippewa, William T. Boutwell, who in conjunction with [Henry R.] Schoolcraft gave Lake Itasca [source of the Mississippi River] its name."<sup>25</sup>

During the years 1817-1834 Ramsay Crooks was to act as John Jacob Astor's right hand man. In those seventeen years Ramsay must have conducted thousands of personal and business deals on behalf of the American Fur Company, and they are obviously far too numerous to mention here. Some, however, are worthy of note. Even before Crooks had concluded his new working agreement with Astor in March of 1817, he had been in St. Louis "probably late in the summer of 1816, and certainly without Astor's orders."<sup>26</sup> His reason for being there was to come to some sort of understanding with the traders who worked the Missouri River area, so that the American Fur Company could gain an advantage. Charles Gratiot, one of the traders, wrote to Astor: "the difficulties he [Crooks] meet with where [sic] almost insurmountable, but his indefatigable activity conquered most every difficulties [sic]."<sup>27</sup> Ramsay made agreements with two of the largest trading firms of the area, Cabanne and Company, and Berthold and Chouteau.

"It provided that Astor was to furnish these companies with trade-goods and was to deal with no other company or trader in that area. Presumably they were also bound to trade exclusively with Astor so long as his prices were fair, and there seems to have been a tacit understanding that Astor would not himself send outfits to the Missouri so long as he was furnishing these St. Louis traders with goods."<sup>28</sup>

Another issue of interest was the granting of licenses to foreigners. The War Department had issued orders that foreigners were not to be granted licenses to operate within the territory of the United States. This was aimed at keeping the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company trappers out of the United States, as well as numerous independent groups who employed non-Americans. Of

course, the American Fur Company had inherited many fur traders from the Michilimackinac Company, which had been based in Montreal, and regularly employed others whose origins were north of the border. Astor used his influence in Washington, and George Graham, acting Secretary of War, wrote to Governor Lewis Cass of Michigan Territory requesting him to "afford to him Astor and his agents, every facility in your power consistent with the laws and regulations."<sup>29</sup> Cass, who had long been an acquaintance of Ramsay's and who had been in touch with him on this issue, wrote to W. H. Puthuff, the Indian agent:

"From a correspondence, which Mr. Crooks has submitted to me, it is the intention of the Government that Mr. Crooks as the agent of Mr. Astor should have the selection of such persons to enter the Indian Country and conduct the business as he may require. To such persons therefore as Mr. Crooks may designate you will please grant licenses.... On mature reflection upon the subject I would recommend that as few licenses as may be consistent with those regulations be granted, rather reducing than exceeding the number."<sup>30</sup>

According to Kenneth W. Porter, "Cass could hardly have found a more obvious way of saying to Puthuff, 'Give Crooks all the licenses he may need or desire, but when that has been done, the fewer you grant to others, the better.'"<sup>31</sup>

One problem that Ramsay Crooks was to face unsuccessfully was the practice of trading alcohol to the Indians for furs. Liquor had been in use in the old Northwest Territory for more than a hundred years before the American Fur Company had entered the scene. Congress had passed laws against the practice, one in 1815 which "forbade the setting up of a still in the Indian country under the pain of a fine of \$5,000,"<sup>32</sup> but the laws were impossible to enforce, and the trading of liquor flourished. With it came "the horrors, the crimes, the terrible debauchery and suffering"<sup>33</sup> that can go with alcohol, for "there was no such thing as a moderate drinker among the Indians. They were either

teetotalers or sots."<sup>34</sup> Astor, himself, was against the practice, and felt that he had no need for whisky as long as the other traders didn't traffic in it. But when they did, there was no way that he could compete. "Crooks and Stuart bluntly informed Astor that unless the American Fur Company was permitted to use alcohol in the trade without restraint, it could not hope to compete successfully with either the Hudson's Bay Company or the independent traders who dispensed it to the Indians."<sup>35</sup> Ramsay, however, made some attempts to halt the practice.

"On March 2, 1819, Ramsay Crooks, continuing his efforts to bar liquor from the Indian country, wrote to John C. Calhoun, the secretary of War, suggesting that the regulation against bringing liquor into the Indian country should be extended to include the Mississippi River region as well as the Lakes."<sup>36</sup>

And

"Crooks also persuaded George Boyd, Indian Agent at Michilimackinac, to grant William Morrison, the American Fur Company trader, authority to 'destroy all spiritous liquors...introduced within the American limits in the neighborhood of the Fond du Lac and Red Lake settlements.' This order was aimed at foreign traders as well as American rivals."<sup>37</sup>

However, Ramsay wrote to Astor:

"Liquor secretly introduced has hurt our trade. If government agents will not stop it, although the proof of guilt is easy, I sincerely hope the opportunity will not be lost of punishing such miscreants. If the Government permits the sale of this pernicious liquid we can have no hesitation of availing ourselves of the privilege although we are convinced its total prohibition would benefit both the Country at large and the natives who are its victims. But to succeed in the trade when our opponents set the law at defiance and we implicitly follow its dictates is wholly impossible."<sup>38</sup>

The American Fur Company had to compete, and if it was to gain the monopoly that Astor wanted, it had to outdo the others. "All reticence on the part of Astor to engage in supplying liquor to the Indians vanished, and by 1822 the



American Fur Company became the largest supplier of all."<sup>39</sup> Some 5,000 to 8,000 gallons of Astor liquor passed through Michilimackinac alone each season.

A large gain for the American Fur Company which Ramsay had a major role in was the elimination of the government factory system. The United States Government had, in effect, been in the fur trading business since the end of the previous century.

"The government factory plan of supplying the Indians with essential white man's goods, begun in 1796, had in it the germ of a good system. Jefferson in his message of January 18, 1803, commended the government trading houses then existing, and urged Congress to continue the system to 'undersell private traders... drive them from the competition, and...rid ourselves of a description of men who are constantly endeavoring to excite, in the Indian mind, suspicions, fears, and irritations, towards us.'"<sup>40</sup>

The system was supposed to be good for the Indians, keeping private traders from cheating them (and trading them liquor for furs), and these factories also were to try to Christianize the Indians, to some degree. This system clearly ate into the potential profits of all the private fur trading companies, such as the American Fur Company, and Ramsay Crooks was determined to get rid of it. Secretary of War John C. Calhoun, at Ramsay's urging, sent a Congregationalist minister, Reverend Jedidiah Morse (father of Samuel F. B. Morse, inventor of the telegraph) on a tour of those government outposts to report back on their usefulness. Morse, having been influenced by private traders all along his journey as well as seeing with his own eyes the general incompetence of the government employees (even then!), came back with unfavorable reports. Crooks was ready to move.

"Thomas Hart Benton was elected to the Senate by Missouri in 1820. Astor promptly put him on his payroll. It was not an accident that Crooks and Benton were quartered in the same Washington hotel during the winter of 1820-21.

Together they mapped out the fight to be made during the next Congress, always keeping in touch with Astor in Europe."<sup>41</sup>

Early in 1822 Benton introduced a bill calling for the complete abolishment of the Government houses. During the debate

"most of the material Benton presented to the Senate came from Ramsay Crooks. The Government was accused of selling goods bought for the Indian trade to soldiers and private white citizens, even to competing traders, in violation of the law. The superintendent of the Indian trade was charged with ignoring the statutes which required that furs from Government factories be sold at public auction. They were sold instead, Benton declared, by private contracts at less than market prices."<sup>42</sup>

Benton's bill passed the Senate on May 2nd, and it passed the House of Representatives two days later. On May 6, 1822, President James Monroe signed it into law.

"The measure provided that the President should take over all the properties of the factories 'to be used to extinguish the treaty obligations on the part of the United States to keep up trading houses with the Indians, payment of annuities due or to become due to the Indian tribes and for customary presents to individuals in amity with the United States.' The Indian trade was to be carried on by private traders licensed by the Federal Government."<sup>43</sup>

The doors of the government factories closed one by one, as the American Fur Company, one by one, picked up their business. The distinguished fur trade historian, Hiram Martin Chittenden wrote:

"Thus ended in failure a system fraught with possibilities of great good to the Indian—a system, which, if followed out as it should have been, would have led the Indian to his new destiny by easy stages and would have averted the long and bloody wars, the corruption and bad faith, which have gained for a hundred years of our dealings with the Indians the unenviable distinction of a Century of Dishonor."<sup>44</sup>

"Ramsay Crooks, chief factor of the American Fur Company, rejoiced over the extinction in 1822 of 'the pious monster'"<sup>45</sup>

Ramsay wasn't on hand, however, when Benton's bill was passed. He was in Paris, France, reporting to Astor on this matter and other things. He was also negotiating a new contract for himself and Robert Stuart, their old three year contracts having expired on March 16, 1821.

"In less than a week he and Astor had come to terms. Crooks obtained a new agreement that was to last five years, a sizable increase in salary, and the privilege of enjoying the profits...or suffering the losses...on twenty of the American Fur Company's one hundred shares instead of the five originally set aside for him.

To Crooks's credit he did not think only of his own welfare while he was with Astor in Europe. He also took up the matter of Stuart's salary, with the result that he obtained for Stuart a \$1,000 raise and the profit of seven and a half shares of stock."<sup>46</sup>

He did not stay long in Europe, however, for soon he "was hurrying to St. Louis as stage manager of another great Astor drama...the invasion of the West by the American Fur Company. He had orders from Astor in his pocket."<sup>47</sup>

The establishment of the Western Department of the American Fur Company was an enterprise which would encompass most of Ramsay's energies during the next twelve years of his life. The Great Lakes area of the company, which Ramsay had commanded and which was now called the Northern Department, was put under the direction of Robert Stuart. After arriving in St. Louis in 1822, Ramsay found that the job ahead of him was not going to be an easy one. There were a number of good size fur companies operating up the Missouri River and into the interior of the west, plus countless smaller ones as well as many independent traders. The Missouri Fur Company and the Columbia Fur Company were two of Ramsay's stiffest competitors, and it was to take years before he had them under control, so to speak. Another competitor, Berthold and Chouteau, had already contracted with the American Fur Company; Pierre Chouteau, Jr., even having expressed an interest in buying into the American Fur Company. Chouteau was the grandson of Auguste Chouteau, one of the founders of St. Louis, and he was a member of one of that

city's most prominent families. Ramsay took into the partnership of the Western Department from 1823-1827 the firms of Stone, Bostwick and Company, and Munson and Barnard. It was at this time that the Western Department came upon the idea of having yearly rendezvous to collect furs, instead of having permanent trading posts throughout the wilderness. There were only three established American Fur Company posts in the Missouri River wilderness, "on the Riviere au Jacques, one at the Forks of the Cheyenne, and another at the confluence of the Cheyenne and the Missouri."<sup>48</sup>

Another firm in the fierce Missouri River competition was Bernard Pratte and Company. This was a solid, fast growing, and prosperous company, which would prove to play a major role in Ramsay's task. Pratte had married a daughter of Sylvester Labadie, a partner in the Missouri Fur Company, and Labadie's wife was Pelagie Chouteau. Pratte's daughter, Emelie, was therefore a cousin of Pierre Chouteau, Jr., and, incidently, she was also a cousin of Captain William Clark of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. She and Ramsay had met in 1823 when she was eighteen and he thirty-six.

"There was every indication that Crooks was deeply enamored of Miss Emelie, and that her choice of a swain was dictated only by her heart.

It was not a misfortune, however...and certainly not for Astor...that through his marriage Crooks would become a member of the old, distinguished and influential Chouteau-Pratte clan. In St. Louis, Crooks couldn't have done better."<sup>49</sup>

Ramsay Crooks and Emelie Pratte were married on March 10, 1825, and after house-hunting in New York City

"her true honeymoon journey began in August. Proudly Crooks took her up the Hudson, through the nearly completed Erie Canal, past Niagara Falls, and aboard the busy little steamer that carried them to emerald Michilimackinac, dreaming in its crystal water. ...Quite conceivably Crooks introduced her on this trip to her half-red stepdaughter, whom he had named Hester."<sup>50</sup>

Ramsay and Emelie were, over the course of their thirty-four year marriage, to



have eight children. One of their sons, William Crooks, great grandfather of this author, attended West Point, and served as a <sup>brevet General</sup> ~~Colonel~~ (Union side) during the Civil War. Later he became the chief engineer, <sup>general manager,</sup> and vice president of the Great Northern Railroad. Old Engine No. 1 of that railroad, the "William Crooks", was named for him, and it can be seen today on display in <sup>Duluth</sup> ~~St. Paul~~, Minnesota. He served in both houses of the Minnesota State Legislature, and the town of Crookston, Minnesota, is named for him. William Crooks ended his years in Portland, Oregon, in 1907 as assistant to the President of the Oregon Railway and Navigation Company.

The years 1827-1834 were to see a reorganization of the Western Department, for Astor wanted Stone, Bostwick and Company, and Munson and Barnard out of the partnership. They were bought out. From its inception in 1823 the Western Department had been meeting with only limited success, and Ramsay was getting discouraged. Soon the reorganization was completed. Ramsay's father-in-law's firm, Bernard Pratte and Company, took over the Western Department, and then another one of Astor's largest competitors was eliminated when "on July 6, 1827, Crooks triumphantly wrote Astor that the Columbia Fur Company had been absorbed by the Western Department."<sup>51</sup> This group came into the American Fur Company and was known as the Upper Missouri Outfit. With it came Kenneth McKenzie, William Laidlaw, and Daniel Lamont.

It was about this time that Ramsay's contract came up for renewal.

"Stuart and Crooks were not as amenable as they had been on similar occasions in the past. They made it clear that they were disgruntled by the way in which their respective departments, from which they were obliged to take their profits, were milked by what they felt to be excessive expenses, commissions and charges levied by Astor.

Nevertheless, Astor succeeded in bringing Stuart to terms with a salary of \$2,500 a year, and 15 per cent of the net profits of the Northern Department. Crooks was harder to deal with, and at one time he blurted to a friend: 'If Mr. Astor maintains the ground he took with me five days ago, we will part as sure as the sun shines on the poor as well as the rich.'

...Neither he nor Astor divulged the terms of their

agreement. Crooks obviously had been satisfied enough to sign his new contract, but it was noted that his attitude toward Astor thereafter was somewhat colored by antagonism."<sup>52</sup>

Later, when profits in the Western Department were not as high as Astor might have wanted, he raged against Bernard Pratte in three successive letters to Crooks. Astor either forgot or was unconcerned about the fact that Ramsay was married to Pratte's daughter. Crooks responded.

"The pride and clannishness of the typical Highlander, to whom ties of kinship, if only by marriage, were of greater strength than any commercial bonds, rose in him, and he delivered a stinging rebuke to Astor. 'I cannot close this letter,' Crooks wrote, 'without adverting to your remarks on the conduct of Mr. Pratte, and must be permitted to say that whatever reason you may have to find fault with him as relates the sale of his beaver..., I do think you might have recollected he is my father-in-law and not have forced the subject upon me in all of your last three letters.'"<sup>53</sup>

The reorganized Western Department was to prove more successful than before, and they operated freely west of the Mississippi with only one real competitor, the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. By 1833 John Jacob Astor wanted to retire, and was ready to sell the American Fur Company. This was a good time to sell, for April 1833 marked the expiration of the American Fur Company's original charter from the New York State Legislature. "Crooks raised \$100,000 himself and found associates who would put up another \$200,000."<sup>54</sup>

"In 1834 Astor sold out his interest in the Western Department to Pratte, Chouteau and Company, which had succeeded Bernard Pratte and Company, and disposed of the Northern Department to a group headed by Ramsay Crooks, which was allowed to retain the Company's distinctive title."<sup>55</sup>

Robert Stuart was left out of Ramsay's American Fur Company. "Why he was left out is unknown. Perhaps he was asked to buy a share of the Michilimackinac Department and lacked the necessary capital."<sup>56</sup> But Gabriel Franchere was included. "When Astor sold his American Fur Company in 1834, Crooks, who then became president of the newly formed company, asked Franchere to take over the

management of a key agency at Sault Ste Marie."<sup>57</sup>

Why had Astor decided to sell "this child of his creation,"<sup>58</sup> the American Fur Company?

"He was sixty-nine years old, unwell, and afflicted by the aches of a painful fall. ... An unshakable fur-myth says that Astor at last reached his decision shortly after arriving in Paris that summer [1832] and seeing a silk topper. According to the yarn, the horrid sight made him realize the beaver hat was doomed and led him to dump his holdings onto Crooks and associates. This of course is nonsense.

True, beaver prices were dropping. In August 1832 he wrote Chouteau from Paris, "I very much fear Beaver will not sell well very soon unless very fine, it appears they make hats of silk in place of Beaver."<sup>59</sup>

In any event, in the summer of 1835 Ramsay was at Michilimackinac, after giving up the presidency of the Mohawk Railroad, which had been one of his side interests, and he was bursting with plans. With the completion of the Erie Canal, freight rates to New York were considerably reduced, and Ramsay figured that he could make a profit on muskrat skins, although they were at rock-bottom prices. He also entered another business venture:

"The Erie Canal had brought settlers to many points of the Lakes, and Crooks believed he could sell them Superior's famous trout and whitefish. He built schooners and established fisheries, but mismanagement by local people, untrained to the job, kept the business from meeting his expectations."<sup>60</sup>

In Europe the Russian army had adopted the use of raccoon headgear for winter, and this made for an almost suicidal competition. Ramsay's "deadliest fight was with the totally unscrupulous Ewing brothers in the Wabash country."<sup>61</sup> Toward the later part of the 1830's, the American Fur Company was exporting nearly 600,000 small skins yearly, but beaver, which had been the backbone of the fur trade, encountered falling prices. "Beaver prices at Philadelphia sagged from a high \$6 a pound in 1831 to \$2.62 in 1843."<sup>62</sup> The American Fur Company survived the depression of 1837-38, but the struggle with the Ewings forced Ramsay to

continually cut prices. Indians were no longer using the fur trade as their main concern, and many small farmers were now raising animals for fur. Also, many areas were becoming trapped out. The days of the mighty fur trade were quickly becoming numbered. On September 10, 1842,

"the American Fur Company, lords once of the western wilderness, suspended payments. Its debts amounted to \$300,000. In triumph one of the Ewings crowed: 'The Great American Fur Company... has exploded. Disappeared, overwhelmed with the most miserable bankruptcy...They have met their just desert.'

It was not quite so bad as that. By long, careful, adroit maneuvering Crooks paid off every cent."<sup>63</sup>

In 1845 Ramsay Crooks opened a small commission house in New York City where he lived, dealing in animal pelts of all kinds. At the time of his marriage he had purchased a two story brick house on Garden Street, two doors from Broadway. Here he was to spend the rest of his days. He became a trustee in the Astor library, and guided his friend and neighbor, Washington Irving, in the writing of Astoria. Ramsay "lived very quietly. His principal pleasure was meeting friends from the wilderness and talking over old times."<sup>64</sup> It was probably during this time that he became a charter member of the famous Manhattan Club of New York City as well as many learned societies. The last time history heard from Ramsay Crooks was during the Presidential election of 1856, when, as has been previously recorded in this paper, John C. Fremont, Republican candidate for President, claimed to have discovered the South Pass. Ramsay wrote a lengthy letter to the Detroit Free Press.

"Pathfinding, he said, did not necessarily qualify a man for the presidency. Besides, Fremont had not discovered the pass. Briefly he outlined Hunt's overland expedition of 1811-12, and then told of the first crossing of South Pass, west to east, 'in the month of November, 1812,' thirty years before Fremont saw it.

'The seven persons forming the party were ROBERT McCLELLAND [sic], of Hagerstown, Maryland, who with

the celebrated captain WELLS was chief of spies under General WAYNE in his famous Indian campaign, JOSEPH MILLER, of Baltimore, for several years an officer in the United States army, ROBERT STUART, a citizen of Detroit, BENJAMIN JONES, of Missouri, who acted as huntsman to the party, FRANCOIS LE CLAIRE [sic], a half-breed, and ANDRE VALLEE, a Canadian voyageur, and RAMSAY CROOKS, who is the only survivor of this small band of adventurers."65

This man, Ramsay Crooks, who had probably more than anything else, relished the fact that he had lived a most fascinating life, died on June 6, 1859.

"According to the New York Herald, 'He seemed to die of no particular disease.

He quietly passed from the world as one retired to sleep.' He was seventy-two years old."66



### Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup>David Lavender, The Fist in the Wilderness, Garden City, New York, 1964, p. 1.
- <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 2.
- <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 53.
- <sup>4</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 59.
- <sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 62.
- <sup>7</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup>Elliott Coues, ed., History of the Expedition under the Command of Lewis and Clark, Vol. III, New York, 1965, p. 1211.
- <sup>10</sup>Lavender, p. 78.
- <sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 80.
- <sup>12</sup>Arthur D. Howden Smith, John Jacob Astor, Philadelphia, 1929, p. 150.
- <sup>13</sup>John Upton Terrell, Furs by Astor, New York, 1963, p. 159.
- <sup>14</sup>Hoyt C. Franchere, ed., The Overland Diary of Wilson Price Hunt, Ashland, Oregon, 1973, p. 19.
- <sup>15</sup>Washington Irving, Astoria, Clatsop Edition, Portland, Oregon, p. 121.
- <sup>16</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup>Hoyt C. Franchere, ed., Adventure at Astoria, 1810-1814, By Gabriel Franchere, Norman, Oklahoma, 1967, p. 65.
- <sup>18</sup>Jim B. Schick, Walla Walla, Washington, Union Bulletin, "The Story of John Day", no date or page number available.
- <sup>19</sup>Dorothy O. Johansen and Charles M. Gates, Empire of the Columbia, New York, 1967, p. 103.
- <sup>20</sup>Terrell, p. 224.
- <sup>21</sup>Kenneth Wiggins Porter, John Jacob Astor, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1931, p. 700. (Vol. II)

<sup>22</sup>Terrell, p. 255.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Lavender, p. 249.

<sup>25</sup>Grace Lee Mute, Lake Superior, New York, 1944, p. 71.

<sup>26</sup>Porter, p. 693.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 702

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Terrell, p. 269.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 270.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Porter, p. 797.

<sup>37</sup>Terrell, p. 270.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 271.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 272.

<sup>40</sup>William Watts Folwell, A History of Minnesota, St. Paul, Minnesota, 1922,  
p. 168. (Vol. I)

<sup>41</sup>Terrell, p. 308.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 314.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 315.

<sup>45</sup>Folwell, p. 169.

<sup>46</sup>Terrell, p. 312.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 316.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p. 374.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 366.

<sup>50</sup>Lavender, p. 357.

<sup>51</sup>Terrell, p. 384.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 387.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p. 378.

<sup>54</sup>Lavender, p. 413.

<sup>55</sup>Porter, p. 779.

<sup>56</sup>Lavender, p. 414.

<sup>57</sup>Hoyt C. Franchere, ed., Adventure at Astoria, 1812-1814, By Gabriel Franchere  
p. xvii.

<sup>58</sup>Lavender, p. 411.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p. 417.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. 418.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., p. 419.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid.

### Annotated Bibliography

Coues, Elliott. History of the Expedition under the Command of Lewis and Clark,

Vol. III, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1965.

This was used to document the time that Ramsay met Lewis and Clark on the Missouri. It is an easy to read edition of Lewis and Clark's journals.

Folwell, William Watts. A History of Minnesota, Vol. I, St. Paul, Minnesota;

Minnesota Historical Society, 1922.

This was used to document the government factory houses, which Ramsay succeeded in eliminating. It is an interesting, easy to read history of Minnesota.

Franchere, Hoyt C., Ed. Adventure at Astoria, 1810-1811, by Gabriel Franchere,

Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967.

This is a first-hand account of the founding of Astoria, and was used in researching that aspect of Ramsay's life. It was also used to document the later association of Ramsay Crooks and Gabriel Franchere.

Franchere, Hoyt C., Ed. The Overland Diary of Wilson Price Hunt, Ashland,

Oregon: The Oregon Book Society, 1973.

This is Hunt's first-hand account of the overland expedition to Astoria, and was used to document Ramsay's connection with it. It is interesting and easy to read, with many maps and illustrations, and the picture of Ramsay Crooks used on the title page of this paper was taken from it.

Irving, Washington. Astoria, Clatsop Edition, Portland, Oregon: Binford and

Mort, no year given.

This book was used in researching Ramsay's role in the founding of Astoria. It was also used to document the overland party's meetings with Daniel Boone and John Colter. This edition is fun to read, and has many maps and illustrations.

Johansen, Dorothy O. and Gates, Charles M. Empire of the Columbia, New York:

Harper and Row, 1967.

The class text was used to document Ramsay's role in the founding of Astoria, and the discovery of the South Pass.

Just, Marie Crooks. A Minnesota Pioneer--William Crooks, June 20, 1924.

This is a paper read by my great aunt to the Minnesota Historical Society on the date above. It contains a great deal of family history used in the writing of this paper.

Lavender, David. The Fist in the Wilderness, Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1964.

This is a biography of Ramsay Crooks, and was used mainly in this paper to document Ramsay's early life, his meeting with Lewis and Clark, and his last years. It is a well-documented book, and aside from its one mistake concerning Ramsay's father's occupation, it is well worth reading.

Nute, Grace Lee. Lake Superior, New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1944.

This book was used to document the later life of Ramsay's daughter, Hester Crooks. It is part of the American Lake Series, and reads well. It contains a picture of Ramsay Crooks on page 62.

Porter, Kenneth Wiggins. John Jacob Astor, Vol. II, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1931.

This is recognized as the best book on John Jacob Astor. It was used in this paper to sort out the complicated partnerships of the American Fur Company, as well as to ascertain Astor's role. A diagram of the American Fur Company over the years on page 750 was especially helpful.

Schick, Jim B. Walla Walla, Washington, Union Bulletin, "The Story of John Day", no date available.

This was a Xeroxed copy of an article on John Day given to me by my father. It was used to document Ramsay's association with John Day in the overland expedition.

Smith, Arthur D. Howden. John Jacob Astor, Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1929.

This book was used to simplify some of the details in Porter's book. It is a much easier book to read than Porter's, but lacks Porter's depth.

Terrell, John Upton. Furs By Astor, New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963.

This book was of immense help in the writing of this paper. It was used to document most of the dealings of the American Fur Company between the years 1817-1834. It was also helpful in the research of Ramsay's marriage. It is easy to read, and very interesting to the amateur historian.