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Excerpt from the book: MOUNTAIN MEN, by LeRoy R. Hafen

RE: Antoine DuBray (aka Chet or Chat)

## Chat Dubray

by HARVEY L. CARTER  
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Anything about the early life of this trapper or his early connections with the fur trade is entirely conjectural. The name is obviously of French origin and, in all likelihood, its proper spelling was Du Breuil, a name which occurs in early St. Louis as well as among the French Canadians. Such references to him as can be found also use the spelling De Bray, Dubra, Dubras, and other variants.

The first name also presents a puzzle. It is clearly a nickname and is sometimes given as Chet in printed references but is always Chat in the more reliable ones. His given name was probably Antoine.<sup>1</sup> My feeling is that the nickname was "le chat" and that it probably had reference to Dubray's gait or movements which were thought to resemble those of a cat. He was not more than five feet seven or eight inches in height and rather spare in build.<sup>2</sup> Such a man might well have been cat-like in his walk.

Tom Autobees said that his father, Charles Autobees, first came West to the mountains with the American Fur Company about 1828. He named a number of people who came

<sup>1</sup> See Bromwell, *Fifty Niners Directory* in Denver Public Library, p. 84, where Antoine Dubray is listed as witness of a deed in Denver, May 11, 1859, as conveyor of lots in Denver, November 4, 1859, and as grantee of ranch land on the Platte northeast of Denver, December, 1859. Chat Dubray was in Denver at this time and it is likely that he would have used his true name on legal documents. It is most unlikely that there could have been two Dubrays in Denver in 1859. LeRoy R. and Ann W. Hafen list Dubray, Antoine (or Chet) in the index volume of their *Far West and the Rockies Series*, xv, p. 185.

<sup>2</sup> F. W. Cragin Papers, The Pioneer's Museum, Colorado Springs, Notebook v, p. 2. On the other hand, in the matter of the first name, Mrs. Janet S. Lecompte has proceeded on the assumption that Chat was a nickname for Charles. She has located a Charles Dubreuil in the service of the American Fur Company in 1828.

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Chat Debray, a French beaver trapper and squaw man, discovered the body of Thos. Biencoff, murdered by his father-in-law, Stofel, the day after the murder. It had been hidden in a brush pile just below the Boulder crossing on Clear Creek, where Debray had set a beaver trap. Stofel was hung two days later, April 8, 1859.<sup>7</sup>

In May 1859, Chat Dubray was appointed to act as interpreter at the presentation of gifts to the chief of the Arapahoes, who had been invited to speak in Denver and Auraria and to be the guest of those cities. Dubray about this time was the owner of "½ a house and 3 lots, on the N.W. corner of Blake and E. Sts." in Denver.<sup>8</sup>

On June 6, 1859, Albert Richardson, a famous newspaper reporter of the period, arrived in Denver. He had some conversation with Little Raven and also with Dubray. He reported, "Dubray an old trapper who had spent several years among them, spoke it fluently, but thought the tongue of a tribe in New Mexico much more difficult." He then said that Dubray told him that he had lived among the Apaches for eleven years and had only learned two of their words. If Richardson could repeat either word after him, he would give him fifty dollars. Richardson was unable to earn the money.<sup>9</sup>

In January 1865, Chat Dubray was said by a witness to have joined a band of Arapahoes in their attack on the

<sup>7</sup> *Denver Tribune*, January 1, 1881. This item was kindly brought to my attention by LeRoy R. Hafen.

<sup>8</sup> Bromwell, *Fifty Niners Directory*, 84. The chief referred to here was Little Raven. At the meeting, "the interpreter, Antoine DuBray, was drunk" and fell off his chair. The meeting was adjourned for a day so that he could sober up. *The Missouri Democrat*, May 25, 1859, reprinted in LeRoy R. Hafen, *Colorado Gold Rush—Contemporary Letters and Reports*, Vol. x in *Southwest Historical Series* (Glendale, California), 349. This is fairly conclusive evidence that Chat Dubray's first name was Antoine.

<sup>9</sup> Albert Richardson, *Beyond the Mississippi* (Hartford, 1869), 193. It seems doubtful if Dubray had spent eleven years among the Apaches or that he said he had done so. He probably said he had spent eleven years among the Arapahoes and was misquoted. Further, it is not likely that Richardson would have known Apache from Hebrew—or from Arapaho, for that matter.

Dennison ranch north of Denver, during which a young man named Andrews was killed and mutilated. This was one of the Indian retaliations after the Sand Creek Massacre and Dubray may well have sympathized with their point of view.<sup>10</sup>

From this time, Dubray disappears from our ken. He was a squaw man and, if his squaw was a Sioux, this would account for his having spent his later years on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota. He is said to have died there, where he worked as a butcher at Butte Creek issue house. He died on the Big White River, at the mouth of Cottonwood Creek, late in the winter of 1901-1902, where he fell over dead in his wagon as he was going home from beef issue. He is said to have descendants in Pine Ridge and Rosebud reservations today.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Rocky Mountain News*, January 14, 1865.

<sup>11</sup> F. W. Cragin Papers, Notebook v, p. 2.

## Joseph Bissonette

by JOHN DISHON McDERMOTT

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Joseph Bissonette was born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1818.<sup>1</sup> At the age of 18, he headed west to seek his fortune like his ancestors before him.<sup>2</sup> Except for occasional visits to St. Louis to sell furs and buy supplies, Bissonette turned his back on civilization and spent the rest of his life in the Rocky Mountain West. He quickly formed an alliance with the Sioux by marrying into the tribe. His first wife, an Oglala, presented him with seven children, and his second, a Brule, bore him twice that number.<sup>3</sup> As the years passed,

<sup>1</sup> Statement of Joseph Bissonette, Pine Ridge Agency, October 6, 1892, Claim of Joseph Bissonette, no. 1442, and Statement of Joseph Bissonette, Shannon County, S.D., October 6, 1892, Claim of James Bordeaux, Joseph Bissonette, and Charles Primeau, no. 619, Records of the United States Court of Claims, Record Group 123, National Archives. (Hereafter cited as RG 123.) Statement of Joseph Bissonette, Pine Ridge, October 16, 1893, Claim no. 619, Records of the Assistant Attorney General for Claims Cases, Record Group 205, National Archives. (Hereafter cited as RG 205.)

<sup>2</sup> The first Joseph Bissonette to move into the Mississippi Valley from Canada was a smith by profession who settled in Kaskaskia. Records mention him as early as 1739. The first Bissonettes to migrate to St. Louis were Louis and Francois, brothers who became dissatisfied with British rule following the French and Indian War. They arrived in 1767, a year after the beginning of the original settlement. Louis had two sons, Louis and Joseph, and it appears that the latter may have been the father of the Fort Platte trader. Both Louis and Joseph became traders of note and worked for the Missouri Fur Company, among others. Joseph apparently retired from the fur trade in about 1820, but Louis remained active until his death in 1836. See Natalia Maree Belting, *Kaskaskia Under the French Regime* (Urbana, Illinois, 1948), 62; Louis Houck, *History of Missouri* (Chicago, 1908), II, fn. 29, p. 11; Louis Houck, *Spanish Regime in Missouri* (Chicago, 1909), I, fn. 23, p. 58; and II, fn. 18, p. 379. For a nice summary of the career of Louis see John C. Luttig, *Journal of a Fur-trading Expedition on the Upper Missouri, 1812-1813*, ed by Stella M. Drumm (St. Louis, 1920), 149.

<sup>3</sup> Statement of Peter Bissonette, Pine Ridge, September 4, 1894, Claim of Joseph Bissonette, no. 1443, RG 250.