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Review of *Before Lewis and Clark: The Story of the Chouteaus, the French Dynasty That Ruled America's Frontier* By Shirley Christian

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Before Lewis and Clark: The Story of the Chouteaus, the French Dynasty That Ruled America's Frontier. By Shirley Christian. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004. 509 pp. Map, photographs, illustrations, notes, index. \$27.00 cloth, \$15.00 paper..

Shirley Christian's account of the St. Louis Chouteau family's activities and contributions on the trans-Mississippi frontier in the century between 1763 and 1865 breaks little new ground, but its publication does coincide nicely with the bicentennial of the Lewis and Clark expedition. Historians will find much that is familiar combined with a sympathetic presentation of the principal figures of the Chouteau clan: Pierre Laclède; his successors, Auguste and Pierre Chouteau Sr.; and Pierre Chouteau Jr. and A. P. Chouteau of the third generation. The general reader will encounter a condensed version of the scholarly work of many decades and glimpse a broad panorama of the era when the culture and economy of the Missouri Valley and Great Plains were in transition from Native ways to European and then American influences and practices.

While Christian offers a fairly standard account of the economic and political developments of the period, including the all important fur trade and the transfer of Louisiana from Spanish and French control to American, her primary interest is in the personalities she explores. Little novel comes from this, but

she does provide greater emphasis on some of the spouses, particularly Bérénice Ménard Chouteau, wife of François Gesseau Chouteau, the eldest son of Pierre Chouteau Sr.'s second marriage, and Emilie Gratiot Chouteau, wife of Pierre Chouteau Jr. She also echoes the interest in Native Americans common to most recent historical work.

While the original Chouteau mercantile empire was built extensively on special relationships, familial and governmental, Americans brought a different and less personal system to St. Louis. The elder Chouteaus, Auguste and Pierre Sr., navigated these waters, but imperfectly; Pierre Jr. was to find his place in the new order, prosper, and guide the family to new achievements in finance, lead mining, real estate speculation, and railroads.

Shirley Christian's account of the Chouteaus and their legacy reflects the Pulitzer Prize winning author's capacity to write well and tell an interesting story despite a confusing and ineffective citation system that may have been more the fault of the publisher than the writer. Lacking the comprehensive insight found in Carl Ekberg's *François Vallé and His World: Upper Louisiana before Lewis and Clark* (2002) and omitting much of the detail that lends contrast to earlier histories of the time and place in its attempt to span the generations, *The Story of the Chouteaus* is a convenient starting point for readers newly interested in the subject.

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