FOR TEACHERS

The Life of a Voyageur

Using HBC historic images and accompanying text, teachers and students can explore the life of the voyageur, one of the most interesting stories in Canada's history.

The demand for furs in Europe stimulated the growth of trade and exploration in Canada. The French were the first to establish fur trade routes into and beyond the Great Lakes. In 1670 the Hudson's Bay Company was formed and set up a series of fur trading posts along the shores of Hudson Bay, where the First Nations would bring furs to trade. The North West Company, formed in 1779, took over the French routes and extended them. They took a proactive approach to the trade, sending out brigades of canoes, manned by voyageurs, from Montreal to an important inland base at Lake Superior. This group was called Montreal Men or pork-eaters (mangeurs de lard). They would pass the trade goods to a second group of voyageurs called the North Men (hivernants - literally, "winterers") who departed from the northern meeting point to go further west of Lake Superior into the interior through a network of rivers and lakes. The Montreal Men would then load their canoes with bundles of beaver pelts and start the trip back to Montreal while the North Men would paddle further west and spend the winter there.

In the fur trade period, there were few roads in what is now Canada. The highways were the waterways and the <u>vehicle</u> was the canoe, designed and perfected by the First Nations. The voyageurs made these long and difficult journeys to deliver the cargoes to the posts and to return with vessels laden with furs.





Who Were the Voyageurs?

Most voyageurs were French Canadian, recruited from villages and towns, like Sorel, Trois-Rivières, Quebec and Montreal.

Voyageurs could be identified by their distinctive clothing. They often wore a red toque and a sash around their waist. The white cotton shirt was protection from the sun and mosquitoes. They also wore breeches with leggings and moccasins. In colder weather, they kept warm with a \underline{capote} .



Could You Be a Voyageur?

Voyageurs had to be short, approximately 5' 4" (1.63 m), as the space in the canoe was needed for cargo. They were strong and healthy men who could withstand harsh weather conditions and maintain a very fast paddling pace.

The route from Montreal to Lake Superior and back would take 12 to 16 weeks. The men paddled from sunrise to sunset, heaving back-breaking packs of trade goods and furs over grueling portages.

There were many risks, many men drowned, suffered broken limbs, twisted spines, hernias, and rheumatism.



The Voyageur Diet

The voyageurs needed food that was high in calories and would not spoil as they travelled. They ate two large meals a day – breakfast and dinner. The men began paddling before sunrise, stopping just before 8:00 a.m. after a 3-hour paddle for a meal of pork, beans, and biscuit that was pre-cooked the night before. Biscuits were made from water and flour.

The voyageurs ate a mid-day snack of pemmican and biscuit around 2:00 p.m., while paddling. At night, they settled by the firelight to enjoy a meal of pemmican, dried peas, or cornmeal. Cornmeal was made into hominy, a type of thick white porridge combined with bacon fat or bear grease for added taste. Sometimes they would have meat or fish that had either been caught or traded for during the day. Voyageurs became known as pork eaters because of the amount of pork fat added to their meals.



Pemmican

This lightweight and nutritious food was the staple of the voyageur diet, providing some 5,000 calories a day if needed. The dried meat could be preserved almost indefinitely, which was a perfect meal for long trips into the wilderness. Reportedly tasting "like cold beef mixed with rancid fat and hair," a voyageur typically consumed about one and half pounds of pemmican a day.

Pemmican comes from the Cree language - pemmi meaning meat and kon meaning fat. It was made from buffalo or caribou meat cut into thin slices and placed on a large wooden grate over a slow fire or exposed to the sun. Once dried, the meat was pounded between two stones and mixed with melted fat.

Pemmican was very versatile and could be eaten raw, fried, or cooked up into a rubbaboo, a kind of stew, consisting of flour, water, maple syrup, and chunks of pemmican.



Canoe Brigades

The spring brigades of canoes left Montreal around May 1st arriving at the west end of Lake Superior by mid-June carrying trade goods, supplies, and passengers to the forts and posts. The large canoes, called <u>canots du maître</u>, travelled in brigades of five canoes. Each canoe included a <u>bowman</u> or <u>avant</u> who guided the canoe, the <u>middlemen</u> or <u>milieux</u> who had the least experience and paddled in the middle of the boat, and a <u>steersman</u> or <u>gouvernail</u> who would stand or sit at the back and steer on instructions from the <u>bowman</u>.

The canots du nord that were used to go further west of Lake Superior were smaller canoes with five man teams.



The Inland Meeting Point

Grand Portage was the meeting point of the Montreal voyageurs and the wintering *North Men*. After the U.S./British North America border was determined in 1802, the meeting point was moved to Fort William because Grand Portage was now located in U.S. territory.

When the canoes from Montreal and the Interior met, there was a celebration with foods the voyageurs did not have on the trip. Their meeting every summer was known as the Great Rendezvous. Then, the *North Men* prepared for their trip back to the Interior with trade goods for the First Nations peoples, while the *Montreal Men* packed their canoes full of furs for the return journey to Montreal.



A Killing Pace

Voyageurs were renowned for their strength, endurance and, incredible speed in paddling a canoe. Setting out before sunrise, they maintained a rhythm of approximately 45 strokes a minute. That's 6.5 miles/hr (11km/hr)! At that rate, a crew covered up to about 100 miles a day (160 km). To keep a rhythm for their paddling, voyageurs sang a variety of songs.

Every hour there was a scheduled rest stop when the men could smoke a pipe. These breaks were critical in order to maintain the pace. Distances came to be measured in terms of *pipes*. A three-pipe lake – 12-15 miles (19-25 Km) long – was equal to three hours' travel, the distance usually covered before breakfast.



The Portage

Portages were walking trails that connected bodies of water or bypassed a section of water that voyageurs could not paddle through because of obstacles. Voyageurs had to carry, on foot, all the cargo from the canoe as well as the canoe itself.

Each voyageur carried two or more packs and walked at least ½ mile (.8 km) over a trail. If the portage was longer, they would put the bundles down and go back for another load. Each man had to carry from six to eight bundles on each portage. Sometimes they would walk 3 miles a day (5 km) as well as paddling long distances.



How Much Did the Voyageur Carry?

The canoe carried 65 bundles of goods to trade as well as food for the trip, their personal belongings, an axe, a kettle, and material to repair the canoe. The canoe itself weighed 300 lbs (136 kg) adding to the weight the voyageurs carried over a portage.

Each bundle weighed 40 kg (90 lbs.). Voyageurs used a tumpline to carry the bundles. They wore this leather sling across their forehead and attached to the first bundle that hung low on their back. A second bundle was placed on top of this bundle. In order to carry the load, the voyageur walked half-bent over for at least a 1/2 mile (.8 km).



The Voyageur Camp

At the end of the day, there was much for the voyageurs to do even though it was between 8:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. at night. After their meal, they would make repairs to their equipment or canoe and prepare the peas and pork strips for the next day's breakfast when they added corn biscuits. When they were finished all of the work, the voyageurs told stories and sang songs until it was time to sleep.



The End of the Day

Shelter for the night was an overturned canoe, a bed of moss, and a blanket or furs for warmth. If the weather was bad, they erected a tarp as cover. They got up at 3:00 a.m. to start their day all over again.

For More Information

HBC Links

The Canoe Poster
The Canoe Poster Teacher Guide
The Long Struggle with Montreal
Our History: The Canoe
Our History: The North West Company

External Links

"The Voyageurs" NFB Film
The Voyageurs
The Canoe
Wintering Voyageurs
Glossary of French and English Terms
What Voyageurs Wore
Fur Trade
A Year in the Life of a Canoe Brigade

IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

Big Idea

The fur trade introduced a variety of goods to First Nations which impacted international trade patterns and the lives of Aboriginal people.

Critical Questions

- · Who were the voyageurs?
- What were the challenges that the voyageurs faced?
- · How did the voyageurs contribute to the fur trading process?

Curriculum Connection Social Studies/History courses

Tasks

Each task focusses on one aspect of a voyageur's life. Students can choose an aspect that interests them to investigate further. Together with the teacher, students decide on questions to guide their inquiry.

Profile of a Voyageur

Questions to Guide Students' Thinking

- What physical characteristics did the voyageur have? Why were these important?
- · Where did the voyageurs come from?
- · What did they wear? Why?
- · What did they eat? Why?
- How was the food prepared on their journey?
- · How did they pass the time while paddling and at the end of the day?

Challenges and Hardships

The voyageurs were outdoors for their entire journey. They were also away from their homes for long periods of time.

Questions to Guide Students' Thinking

- · What challenges did life in the outdoors present and how did the voyageurs deal with these challenges?
- · What do you think was the most demanding for the voyageurs? Explain your reasoning.
- · Why do you think the voyageurs were willing to endure the hardships of these trading journeys and being away from their homes?

IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

Tasks

A Voyageur's Duties and Their Role in the Fur Trade

Questions to Guide Students' Thinking

- What were the main duties of the voyageurs?
- What other functions did they perform?
- Why were these important to the fur trading process?

Students decide how they can share their findings to engage an audience.

Some suggestions include:

- Write a song or poem that reflects a voyageur's life.
- Create a visual display to depict the life of a voyageur.
- Use media to present your findings, e.g., a broadcast interview, film clip, narrated story.

Re-enact the aspect of the voyageur's life that you investigated.