

# Paddling the Boundary Waters Then and Now

By Ernst Behrens



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Upon coming to the U.S. in 1966 as a materials scientist, he worked first with the Lockheed-Georgia Company and then in 1969 with Armstrong World Industries in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where he was a group leader and later a Research Fellow. He has been pursuing an interest in astronomy and cosmology ever since his retirement in 1994.

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The vast canoe area wilderness between Minnesota and Ontario known today as the Boundary Waters is only a small part of an even larger network of lakes, rivers, and forests that the early French fur traders called "le pays d'en haut" (the Upper Country). Each year, tons of animal pelts collected the previous winter were transported in small birch bark canoes over hundreds of miles to a rendezvous in July at Grand Portage on Lake Superior, where they were loaded into bigger

canoes for shipment to Montreal and then on to the fashion centers of Europe. Paddling in the wake of these "voyageurs" is both a great wilderness experience and a nostalgic visit to a fascinating era of North American exploration.

## Then

The northern half of North America was explored quite differently from the southern part, the present United States. Settlement was not a top priority, because the French did not experience the population pressure and did not feel the hunger for new arable land of their British rivals. Throughout their colonization effort in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, they never succeeded in persuading sizeable numbers of their countrymen to pull up stakes and seek a new beginning in the New World. Instead, their arrival and presence in America was motivated by three other factors: exploration, religion, and commerce. Essential to these endeavors was the lightweight birch bark canoe. The only way explorers, missionaries, and traders could penetrate the vast forests was to paddle over tens of thousands of lakes and rivers and to portage their gear and cargo over Indian trails connecting one waterway with the next.

While the Spanish explorers tried to keep their sponsors interested in North America with fantastic tales of golden treasures, the French and British stumbled upon a more tangible asset: animal furs in general and beaver furs in particular. Originally, the fur trade depended only on enterprising individuals, the so-called "coureurs de

bois" (woodlands runners), who operated without government license but had good connections to the Indians. Strong demand from the European fashion industry later led to the creation of powerful trading companies.

The Hudson Bay Company (HBC) was established by royal British charter in 1670 upon the recommendation of two French coureurs de bois, the Sieur de Grosseillier and his young brother-in-law, Pierre Radisson. The company built forts and "factories" on the shores of James and Hudson Bay and later expanded its presence inland to the southwest. The Cree Indians would bring beaver furs to the forts to be loaded onto ocean-going vessels and shipped to Europe (Nute).

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The French along the Saint Lawrence Seaway were denied access to the

Hudson Bay by the Treaty of Utrecht of 1713. They originally traded with the Algonquins and Hurons, but were forced farther west by the ongoing warfare with the Iroquois (Cartier; Goetzman and Williams 58-59). Their ships could sail only as far as Montreal, where the Lachine rapids blocked further advancement. Using birch bark canoes as their only means of transportation, they opened up a vast trade route extending 3000 miles west from Montreal, up the Ottawa and Mattawa Rivers, through Lake Nipissing, down the French River into Georgian Bay and the North Channel of Lake Huron, over the Sault Sainte Marie and into Lake Superior, to the Grand Portage trade center at its western end. From here, the route continued further west along an eight-and-a-half mile portage trail, bypassing several rapids and three high waterfalls on the Pigeon River, into a corridor of thousands of lakes and rivers.

These waterways were explored between 1728 and 1738 by a French fur trader with the aristocratic name Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, Sieur de La Vérendrye, who operated out of Fort Kaministiquia, near present-day Thunder Bay. Some 30 miles west of Grand Portage and 949 feet above Lake Superior, he had reached the “hauteur de terre” (Height of Land) on the Laurentian continental divide where the flow of water reversed its direction. For a short while, the old illusion of a downhill ride to the “Western Sea” was revived until it became clear that the waters flowed into the Hudson Bay rather than the Pacific Ocean. La Vérendrye created a chain of forts along the way: Charlotte at the western end of the portage, St. Pierre, which is now International Falls, on Rainy Lake, St. Charles on the Lake of the Woods, and La Reine on the Assiniboine River. His youngest son, Louis-Joseph “le Chevalier,” circled Lake Winnipeg in 1739-40 and reached the forks of the Saskatchewan River, where Fort La Corne was built in 1753, thus consoli-

dating French dominance of the interior trade routes (Jenkinson, chapter 9).

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The indispensable workhorse for all explorations, missionary work, military operations, and trading was the birch bark canoe, with its impressive payload-to-weight ratio of about 40. Bulky cargo (barter goods from east to west and animal pelts from west to east) was transported between Montreal and Grand Portage in large 36-foot Montreal Canoes (“canots du maître”) with a payload of 5000 lbs and a crew of fourteen. They traveled in “brigades” of four to eight canoes, taking one-and-a-half to two months for the 1200-mile one-way trip. Company executives or urgent mail traveled in smaller and lighter express canoes (“canots légers”), similar to the 25-foot north canoes used in the Upper Country beyond Grand Portage. These could carry up to 2500 pounds of cargo and a crew of eight, yet were light enough to be portaged by only four men. The 15-foot Indian canoe was similar in size to the modern recreational canoe and carried two or three people plus a load of up to a thousand pounds.

Even though New France was ceded to Britain at the Treaty of Paris in 1763, the commercial rivalry between the fur traders continued, at times even escalating into shooting hostilities. In 1784, the Northwest Company was established in Montreal and took over the French trade route. More trading posts were built beyond the Assiniboine River all the way north to Fort Chipewyan on Lake Athabasca. By then, even the most isolated trading posts would sell English fabrics, Venetian glass, and French brandy.

While the shareholders and office workers now had names like McLeod, McTavish, Macdonell, and Mackenzie, their employees (“engagés”) were French-Canadians with names like Boiselle, Chauvin, Ducharm, and LeFevre (Sivertson). These “voyageurs” were the most interesting and unique characters in the fur trade. They provided the labor to move mountains of furs and barter goods over thousands of miles. With such vast distances of wilderness to cover, the Northwest Company needed men who could travel far, work tirelessly, and live simply. Most voyageurs carried little more than a musket and knife, kettle and cup, and a pipe with enough tobacco for the trip. Stocky, powerful men, they could move two, sometimes even three ninety-pound packs over numerous portages through clouds of mosquitoes and black flies. Not surprisingly, hernia was a common problem, sometimes fatal.

Since there was normally no time to go hunting, fishing, or gathering, voyageurs would sometimes subsist for months on pea soup, corn mush, and buffalo pemmican. On special occasions they were treated to a cup of rum from their master. With hardly any spare room to move their legs, they could paddle briskly for long hours, one stroke a second, while keeping up their spirits with rhythmic songs from their large repertory. One of these gentle tunes, *À la claire fontaine* (At the

clear fountain), originated around 1759 among the French defenders of Québec under the Marquis Louis de Montcalm and is now a popular children's song in the French-speaking world.

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The following testimony of a typical voyageur, delivered when he was past seventy and quoted in Grace Nute's *The Voyageur*, gives us an idea of the kind of men they were:

I could carry, paddle, walk, and sing with any man I ever saw. I have been twenty-four years a canoe man and forty-one years in service. No portage was ever too long for me. Fifty songs could I sing. I have saved the lives of ten voyageurs, have had twelve wives and six running dogs. I spent all my money in pleasure. Were I young again, I should spend my life the same way over. There is no life so happy as a voyageur's life.

A bright sash, worn around the waist, served both as a pocket and a symbol of their calling. Even though they were in a hurry to complete the round trip of their voyage before the rivers and lakes would freeze up again, they performed numerous ceremonies at strategic points along their route. Whenever they came across wooden crosses near dangerous falls or rapids, where some of their colleagues had perished, they took off their red caps and uttered a prayer. Newcomers, so-called pork eaters (“mangeurs de lard”) from Montreal were officially received into the prestigious club of Northwesteners once they passed the Height of Land. From then on, they were allowed to wear a feather or a colored plume on their hats as a status symbol. The voyageurs with the most prestige were the experienced winterers (“hivernants”) who spent the winter months in the back country with their native wives and families. Their close relationship with the natives was of great value to their trading company. In spite of his rough work far away from western civilization, the voyageur exercised extreme politeness when addressing other people, especially ladies, natives, and superiors. Even though he could neither read nor write, his graceful French expressions, while meaning very little, were quite effective in establishing good relations.

The lands south of the Pigeon River were acquired by the United States as part of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. In order to avoid paying U.S. taxes, the Northwest Company moved its trading center northward to a new location named Fort William near the sites of the old French Fort Kaministiquia and modern Thunder Bay. In the war of 1812, the Northwest Company made their employees available to serve in the Corps of Canadian Voyageurs. Most of them were *métis*—descendents of French-Canadian men and native women. In spite of their undisciplined behavior and insubordination, the voyageur soldiers provided valuable

service through their intimate knowledge of the natives and their land. The Northwest Company and the Hudson Bay Company became strong competitors and even fought a brief war over the Red-River Settlement in present-day Manitoba. It culminated in the Battle of Seven Oaks on June 19, 1816, and the destruction of the Hudson Bay Company's Fort Douglas in what is now the city of Winnipeg. Eventually, however, the two companies were forced to merge in 1821, thus imposing an end to their dispute. A decade later, the beaver fur trade declined due to both over-trapping and diminished consumer demand. In 1882, when the Canadian Pacific Railroad reached Winnipeg, Fort William was closed down. Some voyageurs found new jobs in commercial fishing, logging, or mining, but most just faded away into history. This colorful but illiterate group of people kept no records of its way of life—we can only imagine what they were really like.

### Now

More than 150 years have elapsed since the last voyageurs paddled the lakes and rivers of North America in their birch bark canoes. Part of their territory has become a protected wilderness area, where people may visit but not remain. The Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCWW) and the Quetico Provincial Park extending along the U.S.- Canadian border west of Lake Superior are managed by the U.S. Forest Service and the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, respectively. To avoid overcrowding, group sizes in the U.S. are limited to a maximum of nine people and four canoes. A quota system allows entries at numerous designated points. All visitors are supposed to observe the “Leave-No-Trace” principle, and this seems to work well. In order to find one's way through this maze of waterways and portage trails and not to get lost in one of the ten thousand lakes, a

compass as well as accurate and detailed maps are essential.

In spite of the growing popularity of kayaks, the good old canoe is still the preferred watercraft for the Boundary Waters. It is easier to portage by one person and has much more load capacity for weeks of travel. Canoes are also lighter than kayaks, especially when they are made out of Kevlar. They can be carried readily on a standard yoke, while no such efficient portage device is available for kayaks.

The best time to paddle the Boundary Waters is late summer and autumn, when the days are still warm and mosquitoes and black flies are all but gone. When I visited the area in July of 2005 while taking part in an Elderhostel (now “Road Scholar”) program, we started out at Mudro Lake near Ely, camped on an island plateau at Horse Lake, and paddled all the way down Horse River to the Lower Basswood Falls on the Canadian border. We saw loons, turtles, and beaver along the way, and at night heard timber wolves howling in the distance.

Like so many small waterfalls, the Lower Basswood Falls did not look particularly dangerous, but the previous year they had been the scene of an all-too-common drowning accident. A group of young people was playing at the bottom of the falls, when one of them was pulled under and trapped in the hydraulics. Divers from National Geographic had recently retrieved various voyageur paraphernalia like pots, pans, and knives from the same falls.

There are at least thirty Native American pictographs in the area of the Boundary Waters. The most readily accessible are on the east shore of Lac LaCroix on Irving Island, on the west shore of Crooked Lake north of the Lower Basswood Falls, and in the Cache Bay area of Saganaga Lake. One of the finest specimens, however, is painted on a rock at North Hegman

Lake near Ely. It is estimated to be 500 to 1000 years old and represents a clearly drawn moose, a dog or wolf, a man-like figure, and three canoes. The red ochre paint is hematite with a remarkably durable binder made from bear grease or gulls’ eggs. Most other paintings are at a height from which a man could paint while standing in a canoe, but the Hegman Lake paintings are high up on a cliff, probably done by someone sitting leisurely on a rock ledge, where he had a steadier platform. Visiting the rock paintings requires a permit from one of the U.S. Forest Service Stations.

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At one point during our stay, we noticed a developing forest fire on our neighboring island, apparently started by a thunderstorm the night before. We tried to extinguish it with water from the lake, but a day later, it had flared up again. Fortunately, another group of campers could alert the U.S. Forest Service, who came in by seaplane and took care of the fire. Strangely enough, one of the campers in that group suffered a stroke the same day and had to be evacuated by return flight.

I received my own share of mishaps, as I found out after my return home when I discovered that the ulnar nerve on my left arm had been permanently

damaged from carrying heavy gear over numerous portages. These are just some of the hazards to which Boundary Water paddlers have always been exposed. The voyageurs must have known them too, without having access to the resources we nowadays take for granted. After one week, our bones were aching, yet our overall portage length was just 1344 rods (1 rod = 16.5 feet = one canoe length) or 4.2 miles – one half the Grand Portage trip the voyageurs did in a single day. They carried at least 180 pounds on their backs, whereas our heaviest backpack was “only” 100 pounds. In addition, their canoes were quite fragile compared to our modern boats and had to be repaired frequently en route, using only material from the woods: birch bark sewed together with fine roots from red spruces (“wattape”) and caulked with melted gum from pine trees.

Considering the incredible stamina, resourcefulness, and frugality of these people, we could not feel anything but great respect for them, as well as gratitude for our opportunity as modern voyageurs to enjoy the tranquility of a northern lake surrounded by dark forests and what Sigurd Olson calls the “Singing Wilderness.”

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