

**Special History:
The Environment and the Fur Trade
Experience in Voyageurs National
Park, 1730–1870**



Midwest Region
National Park Service

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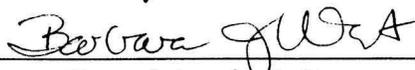
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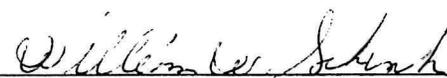


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Cover illustration: *Canoe Manned by Voyageurs Passing a Waterfall*, 1869. Page 53: *Voyageurs at Dawn*, 1871. Frances Anne Hopkins, artist. Courtesy of National Archives of Canada, Ottawa (Acc. Nos. 1989-401-3x; C-2771 and 1989-401-3x; C-2773).

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Introduction

As the fur trade spread northwestward from the Great Lakes and Hudson Bay in the eighteenth century, an organized system of transportation and supply formed over a 3000-mile canoe route between Montreal and Fort Chipewyan on the shores of remote Lake Athabaska. The “Voyageur’s Highway” that threaded this vast northern wilderness included some 120 exhausting portages, 200 treacherous rapids, and 50 lakes large enough that stormy weather could imperil even the big “Montreal” canoes. At Rainy Lake, on the present boundary between Minnesota and Ontario, voyageurs on the eastward journey from the interior met crews on the westward journey from Montreal, exchanged cargoes, and turned around. This epic journey was repeated annually over a span of decades. Traversing the border lakes country in what is now Voyageurs National Park, the French-Canadian voyageurs paddled up to 16 hours a day, made encampments, traded with Indians, and sometimes met death and a lonely burial.

The purpose of this study is to investigate written records of the fur trade and glean information that will be of use to those who manage and interpret Voyageurs National Park. The fur trade covered a vast territory, but it left behind few lasting physical traces. The infrastructure for this sprawling international commerce consisted of no more than a few wilderness outposts and a far-flung system of waterborne transportation. Most of what we know about the fur trade experience comes from the traders’ own written accounts—translated, edited, and interpreted by fur trade historians who have sifted diligently through these materials over the past one hundred years and more. This report is based on a review of the historical literature and a selective reading of most of the extant primary source material for information specific to the Rainy Lake Region.

Voyageurs National Park was authorized in 1971 and established in 1975. Its purpose is to preserve “the outstanding scenery, geological conditions, and waterway system which constituted a part of the historic route of the Voyageurs who contributed significantly to the opening of the Northwestern United States” (P.L. 91-661). The national park encompasses an environment of lakes, wetlands, and upland forest of approximately 218,059 acres. The park area includes four large lakes (Rainy, Kabetogama, Namakan, and Sand Point) and more than two dozen smaller ones.

Perhaps the essential words in the park’s enabling legislation are “part of the historic route.” The park’s terrain is a representative portion of a much greater historical geography. The voyageurs’ travels through what is now Voyageurs National Park were generally part of much larger journeys. Rainy Lake was a transportation hub and a strategic crossroads in the fur trade, as will be explained in subsequent chapters.

In this report, “the Rainy Lake Region” refers to all that area from the north shore of Lake Superior westward to Lake of the Woods and the Red River. Voyageurs National Park encompasses a part of the Rainy Lake Region (Figure 1). All of the major fur trading companies that operated in the area had posts near the outlet of Rainy Lake in the vicinity of what is now Fort Frances, Ontario and International Falls, Minnesota. Historic activities surrounding these

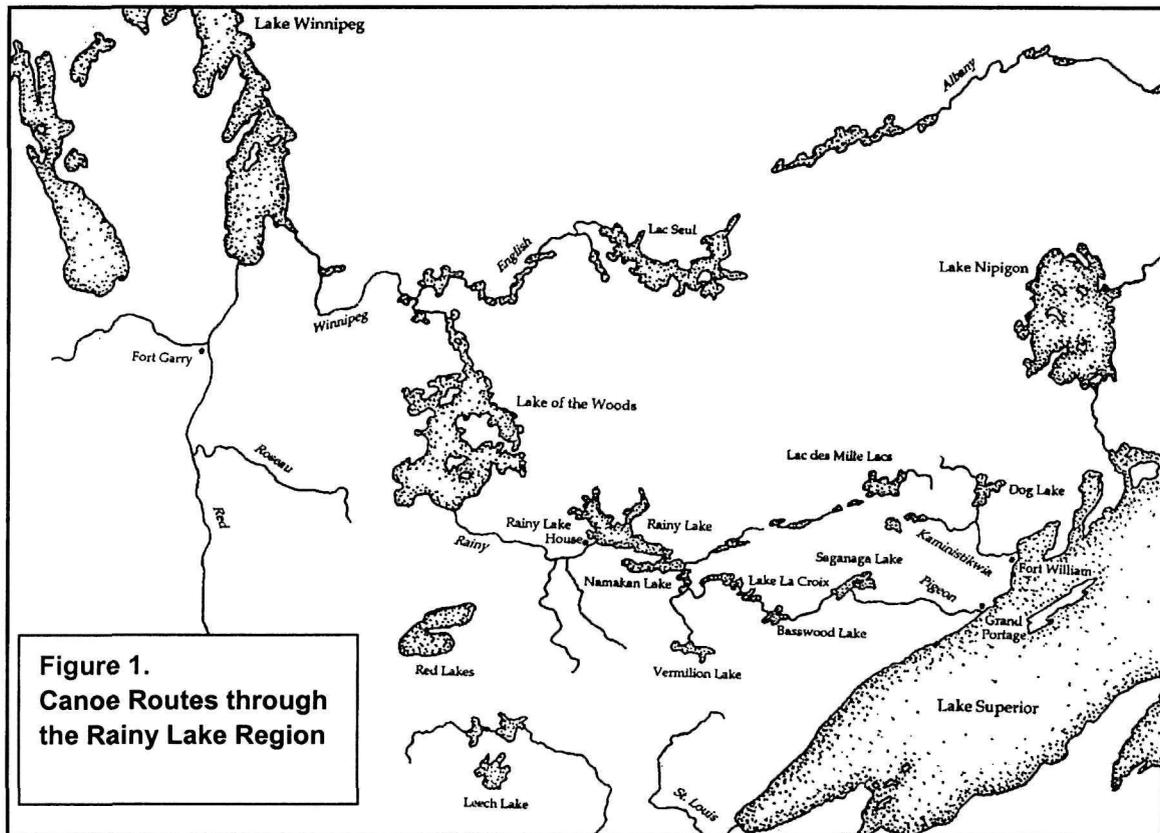


Figure 1.
Canoe Routes through
the Rainy Lake Region

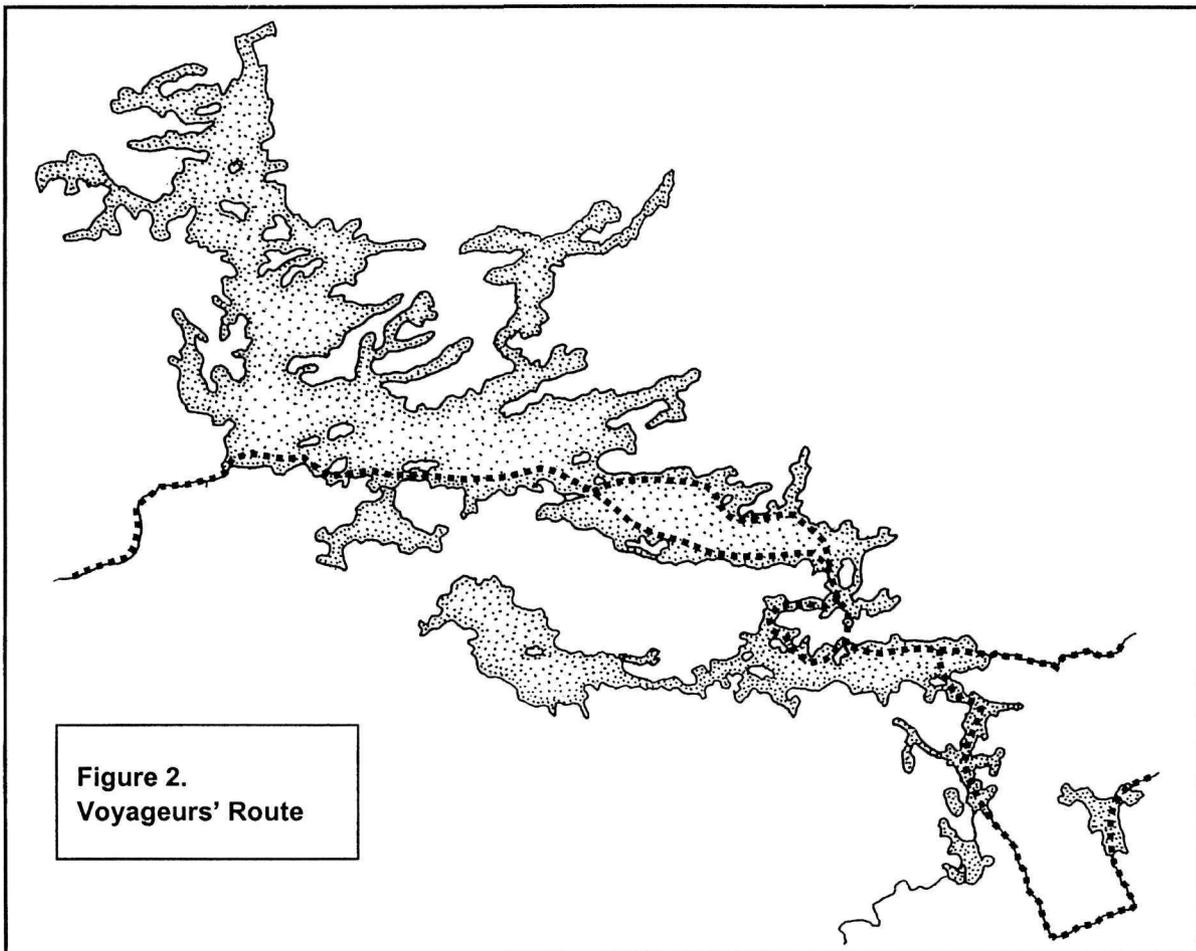
posts give the Rainy Lake Region much of its historical significance, but the posts themselves were situated a few miles outside of the park boundary. The origin and present condition of these posts may be briefly described:

- ◆ **Fort St. Pierre.** This small wintering post was built by the French in 1731. Currently there is a reconstruction of this post at Pithers Point. Although an archaeological survey was conducted at Pithers Point in the late 1950s, the exact site of the post is not confirmed.
- ◆ **North West Company Post.** This post was used as a relay point for cargoes moving between the interior and Montreal. No drawing or plan of the post is known. There is a Heritage Foundation commemorative plaque at the presumed site of the post on private property near the Red Dog Inn Hotel, located on Keating Avenue and River Drive in Fort Frances, Ontario.
- ◆ **Hudson’s Bay Company Post.** This post was built subsequent to the North West Company post and continued to serve as a store until 1923. Plans, drawings, and photographs of this post have been collected to assist with interpretation of this site, which is similarly marked with a Heritage Foundation commemorative plaque. Some archaeological survey was done at the site in the 1980s. The site is now occupied by offices of the paper mill in Fort Frances, Ontario.
- ◆ **American Fur Company Post.** This post was located on the south bank of the Rainy River near the Hudson’s Bay Company post. The exact location has not been determined and there is no site interpretation.

- ◆ **Bourassa's Fort.** This small outpost was built by the French and later re-established by the British in the early 1800s. Archaeological survey was done in the mid-1990s, establishing its precise location on the west shore of Crane Lake. Nothing remains of the post that is visible to the untrained eye.

Besides occupying these posts, fur traders frequently came to shore on their watery passage through what is now Voyageurs National Park (Figure 2). Traveling westward, the fur traders entered the park either on the Namakan River or through Little Vermilion Narrows. Usually, they portaged across what they called "New Portage" (now Bear River) from Namakan Lake to Rainy Lake, thereby shortening their route and avoiding a portage around Kettle Falls. From the east edge of the park to the east end of Rainy Lake was a journey of one or two days. If conditions were favorable they could traverse the length of Rainy Lake in another day. More often, it took a day and a half or two. In the two to four days that they traveled through the park, the fur traders made the kinds of stops that were typical of their journey as a whole: to have a meal or smoke a pipe, to daub fresh pitch on the canoes, to dry out wet clothing and other goods in the sunshine, to trade with Indians, and to camp overnight or wait out a storm. Fur traders also went on shorter trips from the post for purposes of trading, hunting, and fishing.

In addition to archaeological investigations conducted by various agencies at four out of five of the fort locations noted above, the National Park Service (NPS) initiated archaeological investigations in Voyageurs National Park in 1979-1980. Several archaeological sites have been



recorded relating to native use and occupation, logging camps, and the brief gold rush era. Sites featuring items of the fur trade include locations at Sand Point and on nearby islands in Sand Point Lake. Artifacts of the fur trade are also found on the shoreline of Rainy Lake from Kettle Falls to Soldier's Point. To date, the NPS has taken a conservative approach toward investigating these sites. Fur trade artifacts found within the park include such items as brass buttons, brass kettle fragments, a frizzen from a trade gun, muskrat spears, offset awls, a lock plate from a trade gun, spoons, and a fire steel. Some items date to an early period. A French clasp knife was probably manufactured between the 1730s and the 1760s, and an English razor bears the name of a London manufacturer of 1774-1797. With the limited amount of testing done at these sites to date, it is difficult to determine whether items were lost or discarded by fur traders or Indians, and what kinds of activity occurred at each site. Although maximum lake levels in Voyageurs National Park are higher today than they were in the fur trade era, many archaeological sites around the lake shores are on a gradient that extends both above and below the high water mark. Moreover, some inundated sites may still possess a high degree of integrity. One of the aims of this study is to provide a digest of historical documentation that will assist archaeologists in a new phase of archaeological investigation focused on potential fur trade sites.

Although the environment in Voyageurs National Park has changed markedly since the fur trade era, it still bears a strong resemblance to the wild landscape known to the voyageurs. The modern park visitor sees forested uplands, rocky lakeshores, grassy portages, labyrinthine waterways, and big waters relatively clear of vessels. Although summer homes may be seen in some areas, and resort development is conspicuous in the vicinity of Kettle Falls and the entrance to Black Bay, most of this landscape evokes a feeling of desolation and stark beauty comparable to how the land appeared in the fur trade era. And although water levels in the major lakes are now regulated by dams and the flora and fauna have been altered by logging and other human land use activities, forest composition and species diversity are more characteristic of the fur trade era than they are elsewhere in the surrounding region. Nevertheless, natural resource managers have an incomplete understanding of environmental conditions during the fur trade era--both in terms of how the environment differed from the present and how it was altered by the heavy harvest of beavers and other fur bearers.

The National Park Service (NPS) intended this special history study to have relevance for cultural and natural resource managers and interpreters on the park staff. Although each of these three staff groups is primarily concerned with different resources, park management increasingly aims at an interdisciplinary, holistic approach in defining cultural and natural resources and the stories that are imbedded in them. With that aim in view, the material in this report is organized by subject area with the hope that each staff group will benefit from having its subject area treated in a separate chapter and the subject chapters included together in a single report. If members of the park staff will consider more than the subject chapter that is pertinent to their staff group, then the interdisciplinary aim of this special history study will be met.

The report is organized in four chapters. The first chapter provides a chronological overview of the fur trade in the Rainy Lake Region as background for the rest of the report. The second chapter focuses on the fur trade experience, and is aimed at highlighting the kinds of factual detail and primary source material that will be of most interest to interpreters on the park staff. The third chapter is concerned with the material culture of the fur trade and is directed primarily toward cultural resource managers. The fourth and last chapter attempts to provide some

historical perspective on environmental conditions in the fur trade era, and is intended to serve primarily the park's natural resource managers.

A Note on Sources

Core collections of published and unpublished primary source material are located at Voyageurs National Park and the NPS Midwest Archeological Center in Lincoln, Nebraska. The library at Voyageurs National Park contains an excellent rare book collection with many volumes dating from the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The more fragile volumes are held in the museum. At the Midwest Archeological Center, Archeologist Tom Thiessen has compiled more than fifteen feet of vertical files containing articles, chapters, and notes relating to the fur trade experience in the Rainy Lake Region. Particularly noteworthy are Thiessen's transcriptions of various manuscripts from the Manitoba Provincial Archives, the Hudson's Bay Company Archives, and the National Archives of Canada. Without the benefit of this extensive previous research, this study would not have been possible.

Additional research was conducted at the National Archives of Canada, the Provincial Archives of Ontario, the Minnesota Historical Center, and libraries at the University of Washington, the University of Montana, and the University of Nebraska. With one exception, the richest sources for this study were in published form, often in obscure publications, and the biggest research challenge was to locate as many of these items as possible. The single exception was the Hudson's Bay Company post journals for Lac La Pluie (Rainy Lake) fort. The journals provide the most detailed record of fur trader activities in the region to be found anywhere.

Throughout the report, the author has quoted material from Hudson's Bay Company post journals and district reports and has cited the Hudson's Bay Company Archives, series, roll, and folio number where the material may be found. This was done for the convenience of the future researcher. It must be noted that in most cases the author did not use the original material, but relied instead on meticulous transcriptions prepared by Tom Thiessen. Inevitably this handwritten material is subject to various verbatim interpretations. The sheer quantity of transcribed material used in preparing this report precluded the author from checking the verbatim accuracy of the quotations. Any quotation of this material for other purposes should be based on a careful textual comparison with the original material on microfilm in the Hudson's Bay Company Archives.

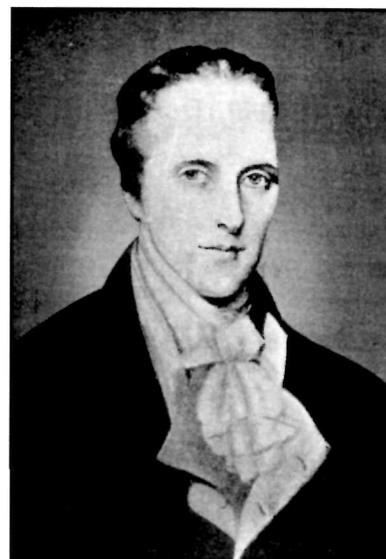
There are some troublesome weaknesses in the historical record. While the post journal provides much detail on the operations of the Hudson's Bay Company in the Rainy Lake Region, few equivalent post journals survive for the North West Company or the American Fur Company, both of which had forts in the area for many years. The superiority of the Hudson's Bay Company's records is even more pronounced during the critical period around 1816 during the Red River Troubles, thanks to the voluminous correspondence contained in the Lord Selkirk papers. By contrast, the American Fur Company papers are difficult to use and contain very little information on the Rainy Lake Region, while the North West Company papers are mostly lost. Documents are also sparse for the French period. Apart from the published writings of La Vérendrye and Saint-Pierre, information on the French fur traders was drawn from secondary sources. These cite to archival materials in France and at the library of McGill University in Montreal.

Chapter One

The Rainy Lake Region in the Fur Trade

Geography of the fur trade

Historians of the fur trade have shaped their material around three major themes. First, historians have interpreted the fur trade as an object of imperial rivalry, first between England and France and later between Britain and the United States, as these nations competed for possession of the North American continent. Second, historians have interpreted the fur trade as an incubus for three of North America's early corporate giants: Hudson's Bay Company, North West Company, and American Fur Company. Third, and most recently, historians have treated the fur trade as a system of cultural exchange between Europeans and Indians. For all three of these interpretive frameworks, geography provides essential context.



Thomas Douglas,
the Fifth Earl of Selkirk

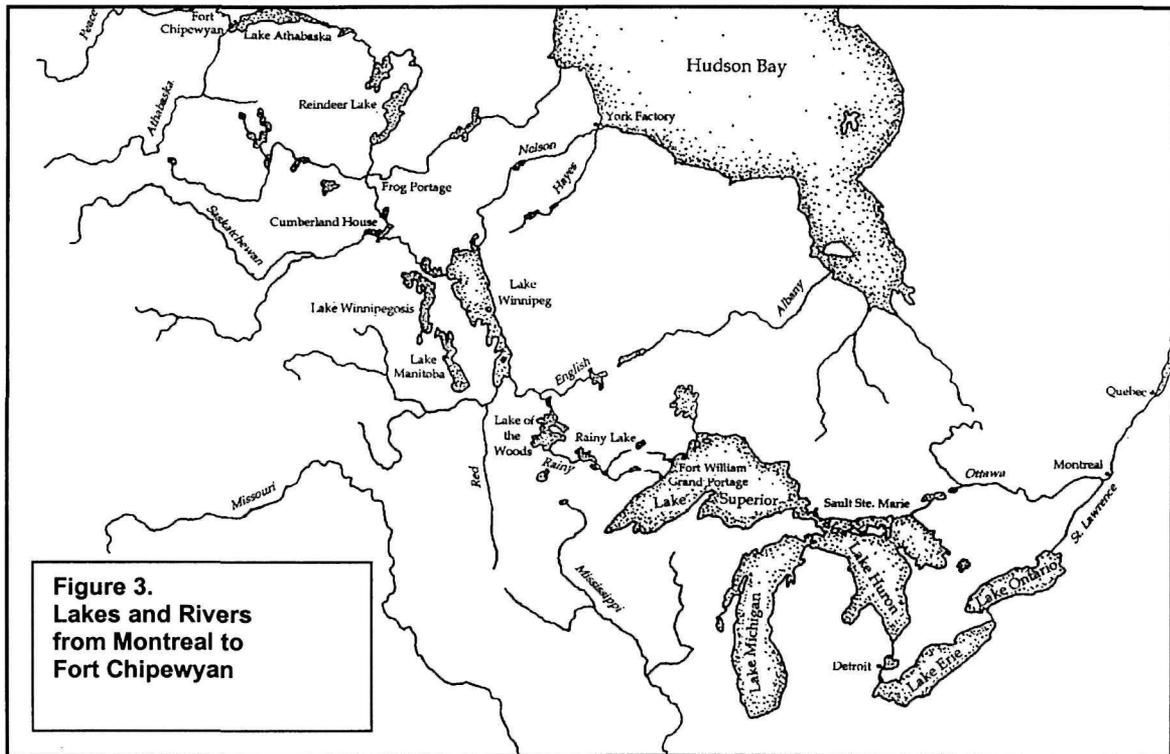
Geography was important to the fur trade in various ways. First, the physical geography of North America—the system of lakes and rivers, the Rocky Mountain cordillera, the deep indentation of Hudson Bay—determined the main outlines of expansion and competition between the great fur trade rivals. As the fur trade penetrated thousands of miles into the interior of the continent, transportation became a major component of the business. Goods were moved almost entirely by water: by ship between Britain and Hudson Bay, by large canoe between Montreal and Grand Portage via the St. Lawrence and Ottawa rivers and the Great Lakes, by lighter canoe through the maze of lakes and rivers of the Canadian Northwest, by keelboat and steamboat on the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. Interior waterways formed the highways of commerce throughout the fur trade era, and the lay of the land funneled this commerce into a few main channels. As historian Daniel Francis has remarked, the rivalry between the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company “was not really between two commercial enterprises at all; rather it was a rivalry between two great geographic possibilities. Would the resources of the western hinterland flow southeastward across the Great Lakes and down the Ottawa River to Canada? Or would they take the shorter route north and east through the stunted forest of the Shield to the swampy shores of Hudson Bay?”¹ To these two possibilities could be added a third. If the political history of North America had been different, the furs might have moved

¹ Daniel Francis, “Traders and Indians,” in *The Prairie West: Historical Readings*, edited by R. Douglas Francis and Howard Palmer (Edmonton: Pica Pica Press, 1985), p. 58.

southward through the Mississippi Valley. The Rainy Lake Region was contested terrain in the fur trade largely because it was a key to all three geographic possibilities (Figure 3).

The geography of natural environments also affected the fur trade. The abundance, diversity, and commercial value of fur-bearing species varied widely across North America. Beavers were abundant nearly everywhere when Europeans first arrived, but the fur trade soon reduced their numbers in the East. Other fur-bearing species had a more restricted range; marten, for example, were abundant in the north but less common in the Rainy Lake Region and nonexistent farther south. Moreover, individual animals of any fur-bearing species grew denser, richer coats wherever the winters were most severe. Thus, the fur trade was drawn to the northern latitudes, the interior of the continent, and finally to the mountains—all those places where the best pelts were to be found. Due to effects of climate and environment, the richest fur country in North America centered on Lake Athabaska. It was the great prize, the “El Dorado of the Canadian fur trade.”² While fur traders plied their industry all the way from the Atlantic seaboard to California, the great fur trading enterprises—the Hudson’s Bay Company and the North West Company—organized themselves around the problem of extracting furs from this remote interior in the Canadian Northwest.

To reach the Athabaska country, it was necessary to develop extensive networks of posts. The posts served not only as centers for trade, but as points of supply for the voyageurs on their long journeys to and from the Athabaska country. Some posts, such as those below the outlet of Rainy Lake, grew crops of grain and vegetables to feed their own personnel as well as the crews



² Eric W. Morse, *Fur Trade Canoe Routes of Canada: Then and Now* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), p. 19.

of voyageurs passing through. The posts also employed hunters and fishers who augmented the store of agricultural produce with game and fish. All posts, however, relied to a varying degree on trade with Indians to procure their supply of food stuffs. Thus, the fur trade involved not only the exchange of European goods for furs, but a significant exchange of European goods for game, fish, and other provisions as well. In this latter exchange, variations in the natural environment were critical. The Rainy Lake Region, for example, was noted as an important

Carver describes the Indians at Grand Portage in 1767

Here we found the king of the Christenoes and several of his people encampd who was glad to see us, (and several tents of the Assinipoils which I mentioned before was a revolted band from the Naudowessee and speak their language. These two nations seemd much connected together by fraquent intermarrying and inhabit the country between the Chipeways teretories on Lake La Plue and Lake Winipeek and trade chiefly to Hudson's Bay, but came here in search of traders from Michilimackinac with a design if possible to git some of them to go into their country and winter with them. The reason they give for their coming here after traders is that they say that at Hudson's Bay they are forced to give much more for their goods then for those they purchase of traders from Michilimackinac or Montreal.

—*The Journals of Jonathan Carver*, p. 130.

source of wild rice for the provisioning of forts and birch bark for the construction of canoes. On a larger scale, the southward flow of furs from the Athabaska country was matched by a northward flow of pemmican to feed the northern posts. One historian has described the northern plains, with its large numbers of bison, as “the pantry of the northwestern fur trade.”³

The geographic distribution of native peoples across North America also had a crucial bearing on the fur trade. Indian peoples accomplished most of the actual hunting and trapping for the fur companies. They formed an indispensable labor supply. Some groups, such as the Cree and Chipewyan who inhabited the area around Hudson Bay, were excellent and willing hunters and trappers. Other groups, such as the Huron and Iroquois who came from the Lower Great Lakes country, were more interested in serving as traders, or

“middlemen,” traveling between French and

English settlements and Indian groups located farther west. The Ojibwe filled yet another role, hunting and trapping as well as provisioning the posts with native foods. Capable hunters and fishers of the north country, they also gathered wild rice and—in the nineteenth century—raised a limited amount of corn and vegetables which they traded to the Europeans. Their homeland, which stretched from Michigan to northwestern Ontario, was at the northern limit of Indian agriculture.⁴ With their relatively broad subsistence base, the Ojibwe were considerably more numerous than the thinly scattered Cree who inhabited the forest country to the north. For all of these reasons the Ojibwe were especially important to the fur trade.

Shifting tribal territories were another important aspect of the geography of the fur trade. Many Indian groups were in motion in this era, moving westward to occupy better fur trapping

³ Arthur J. Ray, “The Northern Great Plains: Pantry of the Northwestern Fur Trade, 1774-1885,” *Prairie Forum*, vol. 9, no. 2 (Fall 1984), pp. 263-280.

⁴ Tim E. Holzkamm and Leo G. Waisberg, “Agriculture and One 19th-Century Band: ‘They Hardly Ever Loose Sight of Their Field,’” *Papers of the Twenty-Fourth Algonquian Conference*, edited by William Cowan (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1993), pp. 407-408.

country or to escape the fury of the Iroquois, who sought to dominate the fur trade in the Lower Great Lakes Region. Generally aware of this movement, fur traders took an avid interest in the Indian population and cultures wherever they went, since their Indian trading partners were as important as the fur resources themselves in determining the profitability of any district. Indeed, the fur traders' post journals and correspondence generally contain more information about Indian peoples than they do about the abundance and diversity of fur bearers and other wildlife. As will be discussed below, Ojibwe are generally thought to have moved into the Rainy Lake Region in the early 1700s.⁵

Historical Overview of the fur trade in the Rainy Lake Region

French Trade and Exploration, 1688-1763

The first French trader to reach the Rainy Lake Region was probably Jacques de Noyon, a native of Three Rivers in the St. Lawrence Valley. An independent trader, Noyon appears to have had no official purpose for his exploration. In 1688, he ascended the Kaministikwia River to Dog Lake, then to Lac des Milles Lacs and the maze of lakes and rivers leading to Rainy Lake, where he passed the winter. At Rainy Lake he learned from Indians, probably Assiniboine, of a large lake to the west (Lake of the Woods) and a river that flowed from that lake to the fabled Western Sea. Although Noyon's account had no immediate effect with French officialdom, it steadily gained force through the subsequent travels of numerous voyageurs between Lake Superior and Lake of the Woods. Noyon's account finally surfaced nearly 30 years later in a report by the governor of New France, Philippe de Rigault, Marquis de Vaudreuil, and his *intendant*, Claude Michel Bégon, to Duke Philippe of Orleans, regent of France during the minority of Louis XV. They argued that the route pioneered by Noyon showed promise for establishing a way to the Western Sea.⁶

Vaudreuil and Bégon's report was timely. By the Treaty of Utrecht of 1713, France had acceded to Britain's position on Hudson Bay. There were to be no more military expeditions against the Hudson's Bay Company's forts as had occurred in the 1600s. If France were to gain the upper hand in the fur trade of the Canadian Northwest, it would have to get there by way of the Great Lakes or the Mississippi Valley. Thus, the search for the Western Sea offered the inviting prospect of loosening Britain's ties with the Indians who inhabited the interior and who traveled great distances to trade with the British at their forts on Hudson Bay.⁷

The Council of Marine gave Governor Vaudreuil orders to proceed. A chain of posts would be established to support the exploration. About 50 men in seven or eight canoes would proceed to Lake Superior, build the first fort on the Kaministikwia, and perhaps a second at Rainy Lake. Half of the party would occupy the posts; the other half would search for the route to the Western Sea. The posts themselves would be financed by the fur trade, while the government of France

⁵ The best description of this fluid geography of territories is Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁶ Nellis M. Crouse, *La Vérendrye, Fur Trader and Explorer* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1956), pp. 6-8.

⁷ Crouse, *La Vérendrye*, p. 8.

would pay for the actual expedition of discovery. "This arrangement was an important one," writes one historian, "and shows better than anything else how the fur trade and the work of exploration were inextricably interwoven."⁸

The leader of this expedition was an officer named Zacharie Robutel de la Nouë. He set out from Montreal in 1717 and erected a fort near the mouth of the Kaministikwia.⁹ Apparently he did not succeed in establishing a post at Rainy Lake owing, it seems, to hostilities in the area between the Sioux and the Cree.¹⁰

After four years of fruitless efforts at diplomacy, Nouë resigned his post. For the next decade and a half, interest in the *postes du nord* and the search for the Western Sea languished.

The project was renewed due largely to the efforts and enthusiasm of one man, Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, Sieur de la Vérendrye. Driven by a thirst for discovery more than a desire to obtain riches in the fur trade, La Vérendrye shrewdly blended the two in order to gain the support of the governor of New France, the Marquis de Beauharnois. The two aims were less compatible than La Vérendrye supposed, however, and his explorations would be increasingly subordinated to the demands of returning a profit to his creditors in Montreal.

La Vérendrye departed Montreal with his three sons, a nephew, and about 50 soldiers and voyageurs in 1731, arriving at the mouth of the Kaministikwia later that summer. La Vérendrye stopped there with the bulk of his men, who were bordering on mutiny, and sent his nephew, Sieur de la Jémeraye, with an advance party to Rainy Lake (or Lac La Pluie, as it was

La Vérendrye reports on the Grand Portage and Kaministiquia routes

I had the honour, Monsieur, of sending you that map as it was traced for me by Auchagah, showing the three rivers which flow into Lake Superior, namely the one called Fond du Lac river, the Nantouagan and the Kaministikwia. The two latter are those on which everything is marked with exactness on the map, lakes, rapids, portages, the side on which the portage must be made, and the heights of land; all this is represented or indicated. Comparing these two routes, the river Nantouagan, which is two days' journey from the river Kaministikwia going towards the extremity of the lake, is, it seems to me, the one to be preferred. It has, it is true, forty-two portages, while the Kaministikwia has only twenty-two; but, on the other hand, it has no rapids, while the other has twelve, two of which are long and very shallow. Besides, the road is straight and one third shorter. The height of land for this route is not over fifty leagues distant, and after seventy leagues at most there is a steady descent. Finally, in spite of all the portages, the savage assures me that, with easy travelling, we shall get from Lake Superior to Lake Tecamamiouen [Rainy Lake] in twenty days at most, and from there in four days to the Lake of the Woods, and in ten to Lake Winnipeg.

—*Journals and Letters of Pierre Gaultier de la Vérendrye and his Sons*, pp. 53-54.

⁸ Crouse, *La Vérendrye*, p. 9.

⁹ Historian E. E. Rich states that the post had existed since 1713, and was "transformed into a strong fort" in 1717. E. E. Rich, *Hudson's Bay Company, 1670-1870*, vol. 1 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1960), p. 515.

¹⁰ Crouse, *La Vérendrye*, p. 9; historian David Lavender cites "perennial warfare between the Sioux and Ojibwas" in *Winner Take All: The Trans-Canada Canoe Trail* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1977), p. 170.

known to the French). After passing the winter at Kaministikwia, La Vérendrye joined his nephew in 1732 at their new post near the outlet of Lac La Pluie. La Jémeraye named it Fort St. Pierre in honor of his uncle.¹¹

In 1732, La Vérendrye established a strong post on the west shore of Lake of the Woods, called Fort St. Charles. From there he sent one of his sons to choose a site for another fort near where the Red River empties into Lake Winnipeg. In succeeding years, forts were established there and at the confluence of the Assiniboine and Red rivers. "These were indeed but slight and temporary buildings," historian E. E. Rich remarks, "but they clearly marked the fact that La Vérendrye had opened up durable communications between Montreal, Lake Superior and Lake Winnipeg."¹² If the placement of these forts seemed somewhat tentative from the standpoint of reaching the Western Sea, La Vérendrye was mindful of his ultimate source of supply to the east. The forts were located at the farthest reach of what a canoe brigade could cover by leaving Montreal in the spring and returning with their burden of furs in the fall.¹³

Another key to La Vérendrye's position was his desire to stay on friendly terms with the Sioux. This powerful nation occupied the head of the Mississippi Valley and ranged as far north as the Rainy Lake Region. Sioux neutrality was critical to the French as the latter struggled to maintain peace with the Fox in present-day Wisconsin. The Sioux, for their part, were anxious that the French traders should not aid their own enemies, the Cree and Ojibwe.¹⁴

The French advance into the Rainy Lake Region and the country around Lake Winnipeg met with a sad reverse in 1736. It was intended that La Jémeraye lead an expedition southwestward to the territory of the Mandan tribe, but in May he died mysteriously near Lake of the Woods. Soon thereafter, a canoe party of 21 men, led by a priest and La Vérendrye's oldest son, were massacred on an island in Lake of the Woods, probably by Sioux who mistrusted the French traders' friendly relations with the Cree and Ojibwe. Despite his severe personal loss, La Vérendrye did not give up his search for the Western Sea, but his exploits turned increasingly to improving relations with the Indians in order to keep the men in his forts supplied with food and to satisfy the merchants in Montreal. Indeed, he was accused of neglecting his promise to push westward and of concentrating too heavily on the beaver trade around Lake Winnipeg. In 1742, he mounted a final expedition southwestward under the command of his remaining two sons; possibly they reached the foot of the Rockies although it seems more likely that they got only as far as the Black Hills. La Vérendrye retired in 1744, received another appointment to his former command in 1749, and died in Montreal in December of that year while making plans to explore the upper Saskatchewan River.¹⁵

¹¹ Grace Lee Nute, *Rainy River Country* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1950), p. 6. Also see, Pierre Gaultier de Varrenes de La Vérendrye, *Journals and Letters*, edited by Lawrence J. Burpee (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1927).

¹² Rich, *Hudson's Bay Company*, vol. 1, p. 518.

¹³ Lavender, *Winner Take All*, p. 186.

¹⁴ Louise Phelps Kellogg, *The French Régime in Wisconsin and the Northwest* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1925), pp. 336-337. Also see Rhoda R. Gilman, "The Fur Trade in the Upper Mississippi Valley, 1630-1850," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 58 (Autumn 1974), pp. 3-18.

¹⁵ Rich, *Hudson's Bay Company*, vol. 1, pp. 520-523.

Historians agree that La Vérendrye did not receive the recognition from contemporaries that he deserved. His achievement was underscored by the failure of others who followed him. Nicolas-Joseph de Noyelles succeeded La Vérendrye to the command of the western forts from 1744 to 1749, and after the death of La Vérendrye in 1749, Jacques Repentiquy de Saint Pierre received the honor. The latter extended the French sphere of influence a little farther up the Saskatchewan River.¹⁶ With the outbreak of war in 1754, the period of French activity in the Rainy Lake Region came to an end. France abandoned its chain of western forts stretching from Rainy Lake to the Saskatchewan, and by the Treaty of Paris of 1763 ending the Seven Years War, surrendered all of its claim in North America. For about thirty years, however, France had challenged England's hold on the fur trade around Hudson Bay. The western forts, the Hudson's Bay Company historian E. E. Rich has written, "made Rainy Lake and Lake of the Woods into French inland seas and diverted much of the furs of the Assiniboine and the Saskatchewan from Hudson Bay to the St. Lawrence."¹⁷ The French thrust foreshadowed the North West Company's challenge to the Hudson's Bay Company monopoly in the period 1790-1821 (Figure 4).

Rise of the North West Company, 1763-1793

The 1760s and 1770s were a time of transition in the fur trade. The area north of the Ohio River and east of the Mississippi River became part of British America, while the area west of the Mississippi River (Louisiana) passed to Spanish dominion. Nevertheless, traders of French extraction (Canadians) still dominated the fur trade throughout this vast territory. Even after the former French forts were closed, traders continued to winter in the region, returning east or south each summer to sell their furs and obtain new provisions.¹⁸

An increasing number of independent British traders entered the business. Mostly of Scottish extraction, they were called "pedlars" by officials of the Hudson's Bay Company because they followed the French pattern of taking goods to the Indians rather than making the Indians travel to their trading posts. The competition between Canadian and British traders in this period has been documented through an examination of traders' licenses issued by the governor of Quebec.

¹⁶ Jacques Legardeur de Saint-Pierre, *Officer, Gentleman, Entrepreneur*, trans. and ed. by Joseph L. Peyser (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1996); W. J. Eccles, "La Mer de l'Ouest: Outpost of Empire," in *Rendezvous: Selected Papers of the Fourth North American Fur Trade Conference, 1981*, edited by Thomas C. Buckley (St. Paul: North American Fur Trade Conference, 1984), p. 8.

¹⁷ Rich, *Hudson's Bay Company*, vol. 1, p. 524.

¹⁸ Gilman, "The Fur Trade in the Upper Mississippi Valley, 1630-1850," pp. 8-9. Harold A. Innis notes, "Contact with the Northwest country inland from Grand Portage appears to have continued with little interruption throughout the war period. Statements with considerable authority claim that French and English traders went to Rainy Lake in 1761 and remained until 1763." *The Fur Trade in Canada* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), p. 188. Duncan M'Gillivray, in his "Sketch" of the North West Company, writes: "Montreal was taken in 1760 and in the Spring of the following year some English & French traders sent goods to Lake Superior, and a few went even as far north as the Rainy lake where they continued until 1763 when the Post at Michilimackinac was taken by the Indians; who from affection to their ancient allies the French, and instigated by some traders who as well as the savages were unwilling to recognize the Capitulation, made between the French and English commanders, made war on all the posts occupied by the British from Niagara to La Baye—Sir Alexander Mackenzie says the trade did not recommence until 1766." Quoted in "Some Account of the Trade Carried on by the North West Company," in *Report of the Public Archives for the year 1928*, ed. by Arthur G. Doughty (Ottawa: F. A. Ackland, 1929), p. 59.

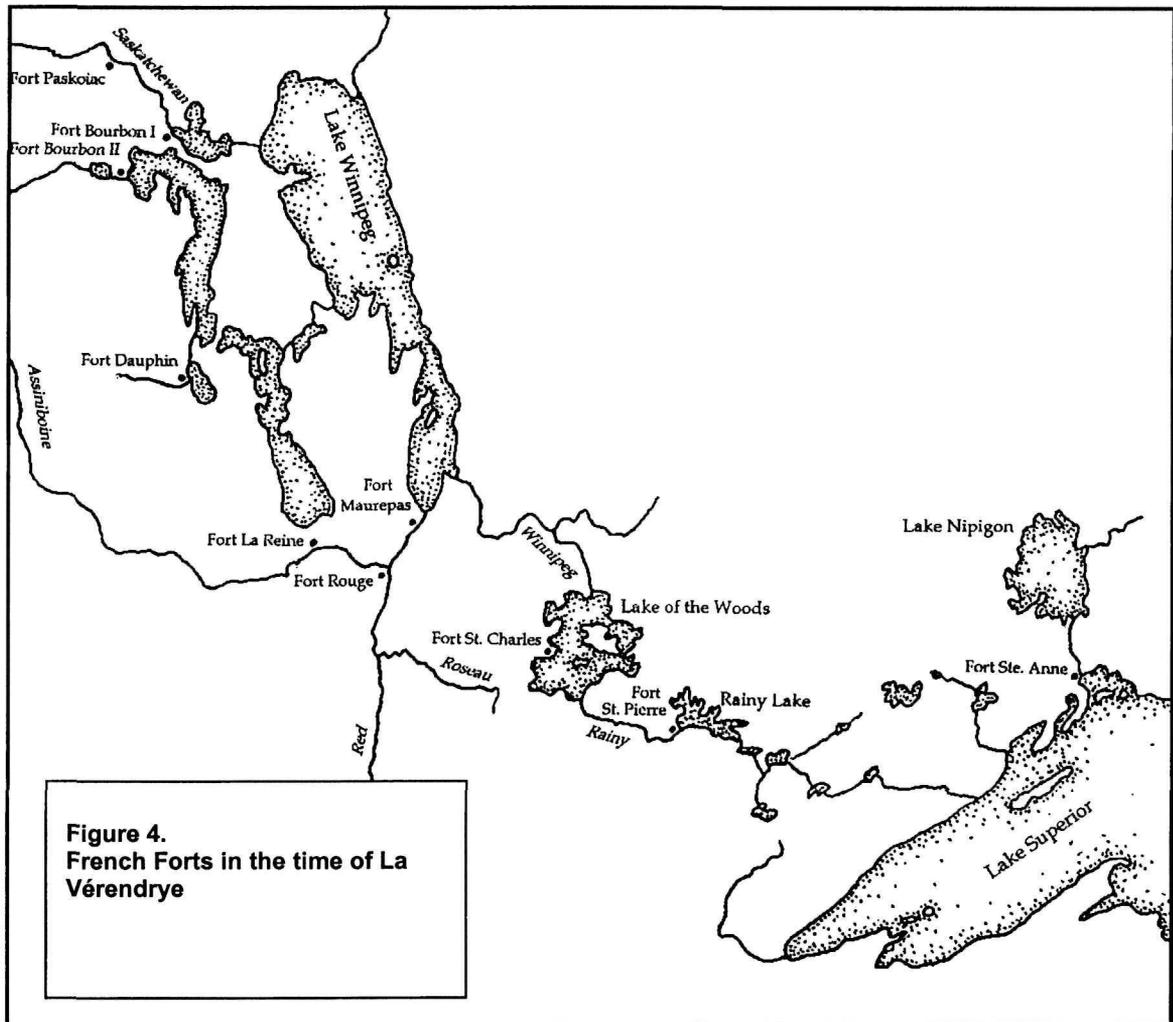


Figure 4.
French Forts in the time of La
Vérendrye

While licensed Canadian traders outnumbered British by more than four to one, the British traders generally worked in partnerships or combinations, listed larger numbers of canoes per license, and operated farther west where the fur returns were greatest. “Probably the reason for the success of the British in these far fields,” writes one historian, “lay in their ability to command more capital than the French traders.”¹⁹ A trip to the Northwest in this period was generally a three-year undertaking. Getting outfitted at Montreal or Michilimackinac, a trader transported goods in the first season by large canoe as far as the western end of Lake Superior, wintering either at Grand Portage or Rainy Lake. During the second summer, he might travel the waterways in the region around Lake Winnipeg or establish a post in some central location. Thus, he would not have furs to transport back to Montreal until his third season in the Northwest. Since the trader obtained his goods on credit, he required business connections with

¹⁹ Kellogg, *The British Régime in Wisconsin and the Northwest*, p. 103.

substantial creditors in order to reach so far into the interior. Creditors included people of rank in Montreal and Quebec—mostly British who enjoyed the patronage of British rule.²⁰

These conditions laid the foundation for the rise of the North West Company. Historian W. Stewart Wallace, editor of *Documents Relating to the North West Company* (1934), chronicled the pedlars' activities beyond Lake Superior in this period. The first known trader to reach the Saskatchewan after 1763 was a Canadian known to Hudson's Bay Company officials as "Franceway." He was followed by James Finlay, who established "Finlay's House" on the Saskatchewan in the winter of 1768-69, and by Thomas Corry, who traded in the Saskatchewan country during 1771-73. Barthélemi Blondeau and William Bruce reached the Northwest in 1772, Joseph and Thomas Frobisher in 1773, James Tute, Charles Paterson, William Holmes, and Peter Pangman in 1774, and two men from the American colonies, Peter Pond and Alexander Henry, in 1775.²¹ Henry left a journal of his travels, the earliest known written account by one of the pedlars.²² After Pond and Henry, the number of pedlars increased each year.

The precise origins of the North West Company are obscure. Undoubtedly it began as an informal pooling of resources among certain traders and grew into a larger concentration. Wallace notes a single license in 1775 that was granted to James McGill, Benjamin Frobisher, and Maurice Blondeau for twelve canoes, with 78 men, bound for Grand Portage and beyond. Alexander Henry described this pool as follows:

Four different interests were struggling for the trade of the Saskatchewan, but, fortunately they had this year agreed to join their stock, and when the season was over, to divide the skins and meat. This arrangement was beneficial to the merchants; but not directly so to the Indians, who, having no other place to resort to, nearer than Hudson's Bay, or Cumberland House, paid greater prices than if a competition had subsisted.²³

Wallace finds that this pool, while confined to the Saskatchewan and lasting only one winter, soon spawned similar combinations in Montreal and Michilimackinac. In 1779, eight different partnerships joined to form a sixteen-share concern. After four years this agreement was succeeded by another. Although no copy of the latter agreement survives, historian H. A. Innis reconstructed a list of the likely shareholders. Circumstantial evidence suggests that by 1783 the northwest trade was consolidated under the dominant partners of Simon McTavish and Benjamin and Joseph Frobisher.²⁴

²⁰ Kellogg, *The British Régime in Wisconsin and the Northwest*, pp. 103-104; E. E. Rich, *The History of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1670-1870*, vol. 2, (London: The Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1959), pp. 28-29. Note that French and British traders working in the Upper Mississippi Valley at this time tended to return east or south each summer to exchange their furs for new supplies. See Rhoda R. Gilman, "The Fur Trade in the Upper Mississippi Valley, 1630-1850," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 58 (1974), p. 9.

²¹ W. Stewart Wallace, ed., *Documents Relating to the North West Company* (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1934), pp. 2-3.

²² Alexander Henry, *Travels & Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories*, edited by James Bain (Toronto: George N. Morang & Company, 1901).

²³ Quoted in Wallace, *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, p. 5.

²⁴ Wallace, *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, pp. 5-7. Innis cited in Wallace.

Benjamin and Joseph Frobisher were brothers who, with their younger brother Thomas, were engaged in the fur trade from 1764 until the death of Joseph, the last surviving brother, in 1810. Simon McTavish had entered the fur trade from Albany, New York, wintering at Detroit as early as 1773 and perhaps earlier. After the Quebec Act of 1774, which annexed the Indian territories to the province of Quebec, McTavish moved his base of operations to Montreal where he remained throughout the American Revolution. By 1775 he was engaged in the northwest trade in partnership with James Bannerman. Wallace concludes that McTavish initiated the reorganization of 1783 largely with the hope of obtaining monopoly control of the Northwest in exchange for withdrawing from the fur trade around Lake Michigan. McTavish would be the

“guiding spirit” of the company until his death in 1804.²⁵

North West Company Agreement, 1790

Articles of agreement entered into at the Grand Portage between McTavish Frobisher & Coy, Nicholas Montour, Robert Grant, Patrick Small, William McGillivray, Daniel Sutherland, John Gregory, Peter Pangman, and Alexander Mackenzie, for the purpose of carrying on a Trade on their joint Accounts, to that part of the Indian Country commonly called the North West, or elsewhere as the Parties may hereafter agree; to be divided into twenty shares of which McTavish Frobisher & Coy are to hold six twentieths, Nich Montour two twentieths, Will McGillivray one twentieth, Daniel Sutherland one twentieth, John Gregory, two twentieths, Peter Pangman two twentieths, and Alex. Mackenzie, two twentieths, in all profits and loss arising from thence; to commence with the first outfit for the year 1792, and to continue there after for the full and complete term of seven years...

– *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, edited by W. Stewart Wallace, pp. 84-85.

After the agreement of 1783, the North West Company still had one significant challenger in the field, the firm of Gregory, McLeod and Company. During the winter of 1786-87, the two rival concerns occupied winter quarters in close proximity in the Athabaska country. There was a scuffle between the men of the North West Company under Peter Pond’s command and the men of Gregory, McLeod and Company under the trader John Ross, one of the partners of 1779 who had been edged out in the reorganization of 1783. Ross was shot and killed, and when word of the murder eventually reached Montreal, Peter Pond was arrested, brought to trial, and acquitted. In the meantime, the partners in both concerns decided to combine so that there would be no reprisals. Thus, a new agreement in 1787 reorganized the North West Company on the basis of 20 shares, with the partners of Gregory, McLeod and Company included. That same year, McTavish, Frobisher and Company formed

and soon positioned itself as the financial headquarters of the North West Company in Montreal.²⁶

Perhaps the most important innovation by the North West Company, other than its securing of a near monopoly on trade, was to establish a great supply depot at Grand Portage. By outfitting the trader at the west end of Lake Superior instead of at Michilimackinac or Montreal, the trader could get far up the Saskatchewan or into the Athabaska region by his first winter, and

²⁵ Wallace, *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, pp. 9-11.

²⁶ Wallace, *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, pp. 13-15.

return to Grand Portage with his packs of fur in the following summer. Peter Pond first demonstrated the advantage of such a forward supply base when he boldly outfitted from Grand Portage in 1776. Three years later he brought out more than 80,000 fine beaver skins from the Athabaska region, convincing the partners in the newly formed North West Company that opening up the Athabaska region should be their ultimate goal.²⁷

After the establishment of a fort at Grand Portage, the next important development in this long-distance supply line was the establishment of an advance depot at Rainy Lake. The North West Company established a fort near the falls below the outlet of Rainy Lake in 1787.²⁸ Historian David Lavender has described the new relay system:

As soon as merchandise arrived at Grand Portage, clerks and voyageurs spread it out on long tables in the warehouses, sorted it according to the requests of the different inland posts, and bundled it into new canvas-wrapped, ninety-pound *pièces*. Handpicked crews labored with these bales up the nine-mile carrying place, loaded them into *canots du nord*, and hurried them through the winding streams and over the granite portages to Rainy Lake. There about August 1 they met the weather-blackened voyageurs who had left Athabaska late in May. The parties exchanged goods for furs, howled through a regale, and then started back toward their respective destinations.²⁹

The rendezvous at Rainy Lake saved the men who were stationed in the interior three to four weeks of toil across the “height of land” separating the inland waterways of the Northwest from the Great Lakes/St. Lawrence River basin. Since the rivers and lakes in the Athabaska region were only ice-free and navigable from the middle of May to the middle of October, this extra time effectively allowed the North West Company to station its wintering men that much farther north and west.³⁰ Consequently, two wintering partners, Peter Pond and Alexander Mackenzie, reorganized the Athabaska department in the winter of 1787-88. Henceforth, operations in the Athabaska region centered at Fort Chipewyan on the shore of Lake Athabaska. (From here, Mackenzie departed on his first great voyage of discovery down the Mackenzie River to the

Arctic Ocean in 1789. Four years later in 1793, he undertook his second great journey up the Peace River and over the Rockies to the Pacific Ocean.)³¹

Sir Alexander Mackenzie describes the significance of Lac La Pluie

Here the people from Montreal come to meet those who arrive from the Athabasca country, as has been already described, and exchange lading with them. This is also the residence of the first chief, or Sachem, of all the Algonquin tribes, inhabiting the different parts of this country. He is by distinction called Nectam, which implies personal pre-eminence. Here also the elders meet in council to treat of peace or war.

– Alexander Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal*, p. lvi.

²⁷ Gregg A. Young, “The Organization of the Transfer of Furs at Fort William: A Study of Historical Geography,” *Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society Papers and Records* 2 (1974), pp. 30-31.

²⁸ Lavender, *Winner Take All*, p. 245. It is possible that the post was already eight or nine years old in 1787.

²⁹ Lavender, *Winner Take All*, pp. 244-245.

³⁰ Young, “The Organization of the Transfer of Furs at Fort William,” p. 32. Young provides an excellent discussion of the number of days required on each leg of this complicated relay system.

³¹ Lavender, *Winner Take All*, p. 245; Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada*, pp. 200-201.

As the North West Company consolidated its hold on the Northwest and reaped a huge reward in furs, Hudson's Bay Company men saw their own influence over Ojibwe, Cree, and Chipewyan groups grow increasingly tenuous. Looking for a weakness in their rival's operation, they found it in the North West Company's long supply line. Their point of attack was the country from Rainy Lake to Lake Winnipeg, which the Hudson's Bay Company could reach by way of the Albany and English rivers.

The North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company, 1793-1821

From 1793 to 1821, the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company were locked in a bitter struggle for supremacy. In the course of this struggle, the Rainy Lake Region acquired strategic importance beyond its value for furs. The Hudson's Bay Company sought to replace its rival as the main trading partner with the Indians around Rainy Lake, and thereby render this key post on the voyageur route from Grand Portage to Fort Chipewyan untenable for the North West Company. Sharp competition for the Indian trade affected the fur companies' relations with the Indians, generally making conditions worse for the Indians. It also exacerbated differences between Hudson's Bay Company men and North West Company men, who were already separated by ethnicity and contrasting company cultures. The struggle came to a head after Thomas Douglas, the Fifth Earl of Selkirk, who was a large investor in the Hudson's Bay Company, established a settler colony on the Red River. Lord Selkirk's enterprise was closely identified with the Hudson's Bay Company. During the ensuing strife, known to history as the "Red River Troubles," the Rainy Lake Region continued to play a strategic role even as the main drama unfolded 150 miles to the west.

If the Hudson's Bay Company had the advantage of being able to supply its forts on Hudson Bay by sea, the upstart North West Company made the most of its long, tenuous, river-born transportation network. By 1795, the North West Company controlled an estimated 11/14 of the fur trade in Canada. Independent traders held another 1/14, and the Hudson's Bay Company was reduced to a modest 2/14.³² As early as 1774, Hudson's Bay Company men realized the need to push inland with their own trading posts, and built Cumberland House on the lower Saskatchewan River. They built other posts, including Osnaburg House on Lake St. Joseph in 1786. This latter post opened the route from Hudson Bay to Lake of the Woods via the Albany and English rivers. It also gave them a purchase on the Indian trade around Lake Nipigon, north of Lake Superior.³³ This was as far south as the Hudson's Bay Company advanced until 1793, when it dispatched John McKay to the Rainy Lake Region.

During his four years in the Rainy Lake Region, McKay recorded day-to-day events in the post journal.³⁴ His narrative has been summarized both by Grace Lee Nute in *Rainy River*

³² Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada*, p. 258.

³³ Gordon Charles Davidson, *The North West Company*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1918), p. 69. On the Hudson's Bay Company's strategy in pushing south, see Harry W. Duckworth, "The Madness of Donald Mackay," *The Beaver* 68, no. 3 (1988), pp. 25-42; and John Jackson, "Inland from the Bay," *The Beaver* 72 no. 1 (1992), pp. 37-42.

³⁴ John McKay, Lac La Pluie Post Journals for 1793-1794, 1794-1795, 1795-1796, and 1796-1797, Hudson's Bay Company Archives (HBCA), B.105/a/1-4.

Country and by A. M. Johnson in “Hudson’s Bay Company on Rainy River, 1793-95.”³⁵ McKay and his men struggled through two winters as they learned where to fish, traded with the Indians for moose and deer meat, and made a modest start in cultivating a garden. A friendly but insistent rivalry developed between McKay and the North West Company trader, Charles Boyer, whose own fort was located only a short distance away. Their men played football, celebrated Christmas and New Years, and occasionally extended a helping hand to each other. Meanwhile, Boyer tried to deceive McKay about where to find Indians, and McKay attempted a ruse to get Boyer to build his new post behind his own on the path most often used by trading Indians, but neither man was able to fool the other. This quaint interaction by two unusually civilized traders belied the vicious competition that would develop over the next two decades.

Historian Daniel Francis has remarked that the Hudson’s Bay Company and the North West Company were as different “as two trading companies possibly could be.”³⁶ They were organized differently, their employees were of different ethnic and religious backgrounds, and they took different approaches toward trade with the Indians. The Hudson’s Bay Company was organized “in the traditional mould of the imperial trading company, chartered by the British monarch and given a monopoly to exploit the resources of its far-flung possessions.” With its headquarters in London, most of the company’s directors had never been to North America. They were cautious and inflexible in the face of competition. The Hudson’s Bay Company was divided into “officers” and “servants.” The officers expected advancement based on patronage more than merit. The servants, who came from the English working class or the Scottish islands, had little incentive to try for promotion into the officer ranks. Yet despite a rigid, class-based organization and conservative leadership, the company possessed the advantages of long experience and internal discipline.

The North West Company, by contrast, was “a restive partnership of aggressive colonial merchants.”³⁷ The upper ranks of the company, known as clerks or *bourgeois*, came from Scotland and England primarily. After several years of experience in “Indian country,” it was possible for a clerk to become a partner in the company. Indeed, many of the company’s leaders continued to serve in the interior and were called “wintering partners,” while other men in the top ranks of the company took care of affairs in Montreal, purchasing goods and marketing furs. The company recruited its laborers from among the Canadian voyageurs. The French-speaking voyageurs paddled the canoes, built the posts, and performed the grunt work. They seldom rose to the rank of *bourgeois*, let alone partner. Separated from the *bourgeois* by language, religion, class, and culture, the voyageurs were possessed of an independent spirit. “If a Hudson’s Bay Company trading house resembled a military barracks,” writes Francis, “a Nor’Wester establishment had more in common with a rowdy tavern.”³⁸

Social historians have delved into the contrasting organizational structures of these two great fur companies to understand “fur trade society”—a broad concept embracing all Europeans and

³⁵ Nute, *Rainy River Country*, pp. 15-16; A. M. Johnson, “Hudson’s Bay Company on Rainy River, 1793-95,” *The Naturalist* (1961), pp. 9-14.

³⁶ Francis, “Traders and Indians,” p. 59.

³⁷ Francis, “Traders and Indians,” p. 59.

³⁸ Francis, “Trades and Indians,” p. 60.

Indians who participated in the economic system. Fur traders frequently married native women, and these unions produced a growing (and aging) population of mixed-blood offspring. The social historians have discovered profound differences in the way the two companies discouraged, sanctioned, or supported interracial marriages and in the way they treated mixed-blood offspring. In general, the North West Company took a more positive approach to interracial unions, which in turn enhanced trade relations between the company and native groups. Mixed-blood offspring of Hudson's Bay Company men were known as "Country-Born," and were expected—with limited support and little hope of success—to be assimilated into British society. Mixed-blood offspring of North West Company men were known as *métis* and maintained stronger ties to their native kin. The *métis*, writes Sylvia Van Kirk, "developed a strong sense of their place in the West and were able to produce articulate leaders to defend it."³⁹

These differences in social patterns appeared in microcosm in the Rainy Lake Region, as will be shown in the next chapter. What is significant here is that the differences in social patterns played an important role in the conflict between the two companies over the Hudson's Bay Company's Red River colony. As early as the 1800s, the North West Company recognized the growing need to provide some form of support for retired employees and their native dependents. A plan to develop a settlement for retired employees and their native dependents at Rainy Lake failed to materialize because of the bitter trade rivalry there, and instead a *métis* settlement appeared in the Red River country.⁴⁰ When the Hudson's Bay Company supported a colony in the Red River country, bringing emigrants from the Orkney Islands by way of Hudson Bay, friction soon developed between the *métis* and the new colonists.

The Red River colony was the brainchild of Thomas Douglas, Earl of Selkirk, who came to dominate the Hudson's Bay Company in the first two decades of the nineteenth century. Lord Selkirk, like the Nor'Westers, saw a vital need for a colony to take care of retired servants who had married *à la façon du pays*, or according to the custom of the country. The colonial scheme had more than the former employees' welfare in view. Selkirk anticipated that the company would provide logistical support to the colony and the colony would provide a steady source of new recruits for the company. More importantly, as the Hudson's Bay Company moved inland in the 1790s and early 1800s, it needed more provisions for its many new posts. The area south of Lake Winnipeg was the most important district in the provisioning trade, yielding pemmican and wild rice. The colony would capture this trade and augment it with agricultural produce. For this reason alone, the North West Company bitterly opposed the Hudson's Bay Company's scheme.⁴¹

Lord Selkirk's motivation was not entirely mischievous, for in the early 1800s there seemed to be a strong likelihood that the two great fur companies would soon amalgamate and that the colony would serve the needs of the whole combined enterprise. Once the two companies were

³⁹ Sylvia Van Kirk, "Fur Trade Social History: Some Recent Trends," in *The Prairie West: Historical Readings*, p. 80.

⁴⁰ Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976), p. 51.

⁴¹ E. E. Rich, *The Fur Trade and the Northwest to 1857* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1967), pp. 206-207.

joined, Selkirk reasoned, the competition over the provisioning trade would recede. There would be fewer posts overall, and lines of supply would be shortened as northwest posts would communicate directly with Hudson Bay.⁴² Selkirk was well aware of internal divisions within the North West Company that could lead to its demise despite its position of dominance.

The most serious internal division among the Nor'Westers involved Sir Alexander Mackenzie, the partner who explored the Mackenzie and Peace rivers in 1789 and 1793. As early as 1797, Mackenzie began positioning himself to start a rival concern, or to "oppose" as it was termed then. In 1799, he departed the company acrimoniously. After a sojourn in Britain, during which time he received a knighthood and published his *Voyages from Montreal*, Mackenzie returned to Canada in 1802. The following year he took charge of the New North West Company, also known as Sir Alexander Mackenzie and Company or the XY Company after the "XY" brand used on its packs of furs. The precise origins of this company are obscure, but it seems to have been in existence by at least 1800. Selkirk stated that it formed in 1798. In any case, after Mackenzie assumed leadership the XY definitely menaced the North West Company.⁴³

The growing competition was demonstrated through the rapid proliferation of trading posts all over the Canadian Northwest in the 1790s and 1800s. Several posts appeared along the eastern end of the Grand Portage-Rainy Lake route, including an XY fort.⁴⁴ Although the Hudson's Bay Company abandoned its trading house below the outlet of Rainy Lake about 1797, there were again two rival posts here in 1804, when trader Hugh Faries visited a post owned by the XY Company.⁴⁵ That year the North West Company relocated its great wilderness depot at Grand Portage to Kaministiquia and named it

Duncan McGillivray explains the effect of competition on the fur trade

While the struggle between the two companies existed there was nearly double the usual quantity of spiritous liquors consumed in the Indian Country. In examining the moral effects of the intercourse between the traders and the savage tribes, it is not easy to avoid the political consequences which present themselves; since the control of the Indians will be always in the hands of those who supply them with arms and clothing. While the trade is confined to a single company that Company is bound by every motive which self interest can supply to preserve the savages from wars, drunkenness [sic], idleness, or whatever else would divert them from the chase and lessen the quantity of skins annually received at the different posts. And whenever their services might be required in War, their obedience and alacrity would be in a direct ratio of the influence which the traders might possess over them.

– Duncan McGillivray, "Some Account of the Trade Carried on by the North West Company," pp. 62-63.

⁴² Rich, *The Fur Trade and the Northwest to 1857*, p. 207.

⁴³ Davidson, *The North West Company*, pp. 76-78, 89. See also Sir Alexander Mackenzie, *Journals and Letters*, edited by W. Kaye Lamb (Cambridge: Hakluyt Society Extra Series No. 41, 1970).

⁴⁴ Grace Lee Nute, "Posts in the Minnesota Fur-Trading Area, 1660-1855," *Minnesota History* 11 (December 1930), p. 357.

⁴⁵ Nute, *Rainy River Country*, p. 17.

Fort William, and about the same time it established a subpost at Little Vermilion Lake (Crane Lake). John McLoughlin occupied the latter post in 1807-08.⁴⁶

Lord Selkirk finally obtained his land grant for the Red River colony in 1811. Named Assiniboia, the grant covered 116,000 square miles and stretched from Lake Winnipeg into present-day North Dakota. Never had the North West Company's long supply line through the Rainy Lake Region been so vulnerable. Indeed, so close was the Rainy Lake Region to the colony that people traversed the intervening country by two main routes: the canoe route down Rainy River to Lake of the Woods and thence up the Winnipeg River, and an overland route by way of the Warroad River, a portage, and the Roseau River to the Red River.⁴⁷

Tensions between colonists and *métis* mounted following the so-called "Pemmican Proclamation" in 1814. Faced with wintertime food shortages, the Hudson's Bay Company officer in charge, Miles Macdonell, issued a written proclamation that no food—meat, grain, or vegetables—could be exported from Assiniboia. Stores of pemmican belonging to the North West Company were impounded. The *métis* objected that the Hudson's Bay Company had no right to regulate their trade in pemmican, and the North West Company was equally determined that the pemmican trade should not be interrupted.⁴⁸ This ignited a period of strife. There was a massacre of the governor and several followers (the Massacre of Seven Oaks), numerous illegal seizures of property, and various sham arrests in which clerks of both companies were taken prisoner or forcibly extracted from the country to stand trial in Montreal.⁴⁹

In 1816, Lord Selkirk employed a force of *Meurons*, Swiss mercenaries from the Napoleonic Wars, to reassert control in the Red River colony. Approaching by way of the Great Lakes, the *Meurons* captured the North West Company's Fort William at Kaministikwia. Next, the force moved on the North West Company's post at Rainy Lake. Historian Grace Lee Nute has described what followed:

Peter Fidler was in charge of the attacking party at Rainy Lake late in 1816. The first attempt was unsuccessful, for when Fidler called upon the clerk in charge, J. W. Dease, to surrender, the latter refused. Fidler, lacking men to enforce his demand, returned to Fort William, secured more soldiers, two fieldpieces, and Captain D'Orsonnens, and returned to invest and blockade the fort. As Dease had only seven men with him, all depending on fishing and gathering wild rice for subsistence, he was forced to yield.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Nute, "Posts in the Minnesota Fur-Trading Area, 1660-1855," p. 360.

⁴⁷ Nute, *Rainy River Country*, p. 20.

⁴⁸ Rich, *The Fur Trade and the North West to 1857*, pp. 209-235.

⁴⁹ The turmoil was described in a number of tracts, some more propagandist than others. For a checklist of these contemporary accounts, see W. S. Wallace, "The Literature Relating to the Selkirk Controversy," *Canadian Historical Review* 13 (March 1932), pp. 45-50. See also Rich, *The Fur Trade and the Northwest to 1857*, chapters 11 and 12.

⁵⁰ Nute, *Rainy River Country*, p. 21.

This opened the way to the Red River settlements, and the rebellion fell apart. The North West Company regained its post at Rainy Lake, but the Hudson's Bay Company established its own in the region which it had abandoned nearly twenty years earlier.⁵¹

In an effort to restore harmony, Selkirk negotiated with the Catholic Church to send a mission to the Red River settlements by way of Rainy Lake. Although the colonists were predominantly Protestant, Selkirk shrewdly calculated that the Catholic priests would reduce friction between the colonists and the *métis* by appealing to the Catholic voyageurs in their midst.⁵² This initiative resulted in a brief Catholic mission to Rainy Lake itself in 1816-18.

By 1818, peace was restored in the Red River settlements and throughout the country from Rainy Lake to Fort William. The points of conflict between the two great fur companies moved from the center to the ends of the North West Company's supply line—to the courts in Montreal and the remote posts of the Athabaska country. The Hudson's Bay Company mounted an expedition to Lake Athabaska in 1818 that met with the arrest of its leader by the Nor'Westers and starvation during the winter. A second expedition was more successful in establishing the company's presence there. Meanwhile, numerous lawsuits involving charges of murder, kidnapping, and seizures of property, brought by both companies against each other, demonstrated the paralysis of the Canadian courts and ended in a rash of case dismissals and acquittals. Charges against Lord Selkirk himself were still pending when Selkirk died of illness in 1820. The Nor'Westers, alarmed and disgusted by all the strife, finally negotiated a merger with the Hudson's Bay Company in 1821.⁵³

The Hudson's Bay Company and the American Fur Company, 1821-1842

The union of the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company in 1821 brought an end to the fierce competition and strife that had racked the fur trade in Canada for more than two decades. While the merger secured the Hudson's Bay Company monopoly from Hudson Bay to Lake Athabaska, the company still faced competition along the international boundary with the United States. Nowhere was the threat of competition more significant than in the Rainy Lake Region. Under the aggressive leadership of George Simpson, who joined the company in 1820 and quickly established himself as its guiding force, the Hudson's Bay Company recognized two sources of competition in the Rainy Lake Region: independent traders and the American Fur Company.⁵⁴

The most important independent trader in the area was George Johnston. Based in Sault Saint Marie, Johnston established two posts in the Rainy Lake Region in 1821. One post was on Little Vermilion Lake (Crane Lake) in American territory and the other on Mille Lacs in British territory. Johnston put in charge of these posts one Joseph Cadotte and two men by the name of

⁵¹ Nute, *Rainy River Country*, p. 21.

⁵² Grace Lee Nute, ed., *Documents Relating to the Northwest Missions, 1815-1827* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1942), p. xiii.

⁵³ Rich, *The Fur Trade and the Northwest to 1857*, pp. 227-235.

⁵⁴ John S. Galbraith, "British-American Competition in the Border Fur Trade of the 1820s," *Minnesota History* 36 (September 1959), pp. 241-242.

Paul and Bazil Beaulieu. The Hudson's Bay Company took stern measures to eliminate these competitors, first trading with the Indians for such bargain prices that they would not have any dealings with Johnston's men, and then purchasing all the wild rice around Rainy Lake in order to starve them out. Cadotte's force at Mille Lacs was attacked by Indians and driven back to American territory. Beaulieu's force, augmented by Cadotte's when they were already short of provisions, soon began to desert him. By 1823, Beaulieu himself and his handful of followers were starving. By the following year, Johnston's traders appear to have abandoned the Rainy Lake Region.⁵⁵

The Hudson's Bay Company had a more formidable rival in the American Fur Company. Founded by New York financier John Jacob Astor in 1808, the American Fur Company initially entered the fur trade through a series of combinations similar to those under the North West Company. Notably, the Pacific Fur Company operated in the Far West, and the South West Company operated from the Great Lakes to the Mississippi Valley. Both concerns included a number of Canadian partners. During the War of 1812, Astor had to sell his interest in the Pacific Fur Company to his Canadian partners. Meanwhile, at the other end of the continent the reverse occurred, with Astor securing control of the South West Company. By 1821, Astor's American Fur Company was prepared to compete with the Hudson's Bay Company for the Upper Mississippi fur trade.⁵⁶

The American Fur Company operated under a different system than either the Hudson's Bay Company or the North West Company. Astor acted as importing and selling agent for the American Fur Company, which in turn served as liaison to the traders in the field. Each trader was assigned a department, or "outfit." The trader normally assumed all risk of profit or loss, although sometimes the American Fur Company shared in profit or loss on a fifty-fifty basis. The American Fur Company tried to minimize competition among its own traders, but was never completely successful.⁵⁷

Historian David Lavender argues that the chief difference between the American Fur Company and its northern rivals—its lack of monopoly control—was due primarily to geography. In Canada the few constricted routes of long-distance trade abetted monopoly, whereas in the United States the opposite was true. Three major routes to the interior were available: the Hudson and Mohawk valleys (aided by the Erie Canal after its completion in 1825), the Ohio River, and the Mississippi River. Steamboats aided use of the latter. By 1823, steamboats navigated the Mississippi River as far north as present-day Minneapolis. "Only where a single trade artery dominated a large region, as in the case of the Missouri River," Lavender observes, "did any department of the American Fur Company approach economic dominance." Geography was a deterrent to monopoly in the United States for another reason, too. In the warmer latitudes of the United States, white settlement encroached on the fur trade

⁵⁵ Galbraith, "British-American Competition in the Border Fur Trade of the 1820s," pp. 242-245.

⁵⁶ David Lavender, "Some American Characteristics of the American Fur Company," in *Aspects of the Fur Trade: Selected Papers of the 1965 North American Fur Trade Conference*, edited by Dale L. Morgan et al. (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1967), pp. 33-34.

⁵⁷ Lavender, "Some American Characteristics of the American Fur Company," pp. 36-37.

more readily than it did in Canada. Frontier settlement increased the opportunities for independent traders.⁵⁸

The American Fur Company established posts at Grand Portage, Rainy Lake, Vermilion Lake (not to be confused with Little Vermilion or Crane Lake), and Warroad during the winter of 1822-23. These were all in the Fond du Lac Department, which extended west from Lake

The American Fur Company raises prices

The Indians of this Region through Competition & various other Courses have been in the habit for these 15 years of Getting the whole of the ammuniion and tobacco Gratis so that you may see what was their first sensation when they found that the goods had risen in price and that they would get nothing for nothing— all our people at first despaired of the sweep of the measures which I was determined to apply in the Fall-- but to Show them that there was no alternative I gave them leave who where [sic] afraid to retire and go Back to the South which settled some and gave a spur to their Exertions and Every thing since that time has gone on smoothly and correctly.

— William Aitken to Ramsey Crooks, December 25, 1834, American Fur Company Papers.

Superior along the international boundary. By this point in time, traders generally recognized the old voyageur route from Grand Portage via Basswood Lake as the international boundary. However, the route would not be officially surveyed until 1823 nor finally settled until the Webster-Ashburton Treaty of 1842. Although the U.S. Congress passed a law in 1816 prohibiting British trade with Indians on American soil, Hudson's Bay Company men practically ignored the law in the Rainy Lake Region throughout the 1820s.⁵⁹

The American Fur Company's trader was William Morrison, a former clerk of the North West Company and in George Simpson's judgment, "one of the best and most experienced Salteaux traders in the country."⁶⁰ After he retired in 1826, the trade was handled by William Aitken, head trader of the Fond du Lac Department. The Hudson's Bay Company's trader in charge of the Rainy Lake

District in 1822-23 was Dr. John McLoughlin, a capable administrator with prior experience in the region. "The choice of McLoughlin," writes historian John S. Galbraith, "was in accord with a basic principle of the Hudson's Bay Company's trading policy that the most energetic and effective officers were sent to areas where the opposition was most severe."⁶¹ Further evidence of the importance that the company attached to the Rainy Lake District, Galbraith notes, is the fact that Simon M'Gillivray, another chief trader, was appointed as McLoughlin's assistant, putting two commissioned officers in one small district. In 1824, McLoughlin departed for Oregon and Chief Factor John Dugald Cameron took McLoughlin's place at Rainy Lake. Cameron remained at Rainy Lake until 1830. Although Cameron was friendly toward his rival,

⁵⁸ Lavender, "Some American Characteristics of the American Fur Company," p. 36. Lavender also cites the American predisposition against monopoly as a factor in the different organization of the fur trade south of the international border.

⁵⁹ Galbraith, "British-American Competition in the Border Fur Trade of the 1820s," pp. 245-246. On the survey of the international boundary, see also William E. Lass, *Minnesota's Boundary with Canada: Its Evolution since 1783* (Minnesota Historical Society Press, St. Paul, 1980).

⁶⁰ Galbraith, "British-American Competition in the Border Fur Trade of the 1820s," p. 245.

⁶¹ Galbraith, "British-American Competition in the Border Fur Trade of the 1820s," p. 244.

Morrison, he continued the Hudson's Bay Company policy of competitive trading in order to drive the American traders out of the area.

The competition was finally too costly for the American Fur Company. In 1833, Simpson entered an agreement with Aitken. In return for a payment of 300 pounds sterling per year, the American Fur Company agreed to abandon its frontier posts from Lake Superior to the Red River. The agreement of 1833 gave the Hudson's Bay Company monopoly control over the Rainy Lake Region for nearly a decade. When the American Fur Company failed in 1842, it brought renewed competition along the international boundary.

Last Years of the Fur Trade, 1842-1870

In the period after 1842, the fur trade in the Rainy Lake Region was increasingly shaped by national developments on either side of the international boundary. On the American side, the growth of settlement and transportation gave independent traders greater ability to challenge the dominance of larger trading outfits. Generally this competition from independent traders acted to the detriment of the Indians and the resource because small traders preferred quick gains over steady returns. Moreover, U.S. Indian policy, which forced tribes to cede most of their lands in exchange for reservations and annuity payments, severely compromised the Indians' ability to hunt and trap. Meanwhile, on the Canadian side, the Hudson's Bay Company remained the only governing body for white-Indian relations throughout British America from the prairie to the Rocky Mountains, and it retained a virtual monopoly. It tried to make the most of its monopoly by implementing measures to conserve the fur resources. The growth of settlement and transportation eventually affected the fur trade north of the border, too, however. The forces of change accelerated as Canada moved toward confederation in 1867 and the creation of Manitoba in 1869.

Shortly before the American Fur Company filed for bankruptcy in 1842, it sold its interest in the old Western Department to Pierre Chouteau, Jr., and Company of St. Louis. Chouteau's partners were Hercules L. Dousman and Henry H. Sibley, and the new organization was called the Upper Mississippi Outfit. The line of demarcation between this outfit and the American Fur Company's Northern or Fond du Lac Department followed tribal territory; the former trading with the Sioux and Winnebago, the latter with the Ojibwe. This quickly broke down after the American Fur Company went bankrupt. By 1843, Dousman and Sibley were supplying a string of loosely allied traders in the Ojibwe country of northern Minnesota.⁶²

In 1846, there was another reorganization. Dousman withdrew from the partnership. Seeing his Winnebago trading partners forced to accept a reservation in north-central Minnesota between the Sioux and Ojibwe, Dousman shifted his wealth into timber and railroads. Sibley, meanwhile, established a retail outlet in the burgeoning town of St. Paul which he called the "St. Paul Outfit," and made a separate arrangement with Chouteau to trade with the Sioux, which he called the "St. Peter's Outfit." A further consolidation of interests under Sibley in 1847

⁶² Rhoda R. Gilman, "Last Days of the Upper Mississippi Fur Trade," in *People and Pelts: Selected Papers of the Second North American Fur Trade Conference*, edited by Malvina Bolus (Winnipeg: Peguis Publishers, 1972), pp. 112-116.

produced the “Upper Sioux Outfit.”⁶³ Traders attached to these outfits operated as far north as Pembina in the Red River country, thereby annoying the Hudson’s Bay Company. In 1848, a post was established at Red Lake, as near to Rainy Lake as the Americans would come after their withdrawal from the area in the early 1820s.⁶⁴

Throughout this period, the Indians grew increasingly dependent on the fur trade for their livelihood. Instead of bartering furs for cash, they worked on a credit system. “In theory the Indian brought his winter’s catch of fur to the trader’s post and bartered it for the marginal luxuries that made his life in the wilderness easier,” writes historian Rhoda R. Gilman. “In reality the Indian, in Aitken’s words, ‘had to submit to his trader.’ Although masked by attitudes and terminology dating from an earlier era, the relationship was not too different from that of an employer who pays at piece rates and keeps his workers in debt to the company store.”⁶⁵

Traders got involved in federal treaty-making with the Indians. When Indians ceded lands, traders demanded compensation from the government on behalf of their Indian debtors. Sometimes they received direct payments, as when traders obtained a subsidy of \$310,000 under the Sioux, Chippewa, and Winnebago treaties of 1837. Traders also profited indirectly through the government’s payment of annuities, most of which went to the traders for the purchase of goods or the payment of debts.⁶⁶ Some traders such as Robert Stewart of the North West Company and William Aitken of the American Fur Company later served on treaty commissions or became agents of the Indian Office. Reformers argued that traders unjustly limited the federal government’s interest in Indians to issues of trade. By the 1840s, Indian policy reform efforts were directed at reducing the traders’ influence in Indian affairs.⁶⁷ Government officials slowly eliminated the practice of using treaty annuities to satisfy Indians’ indebtedness to traders. In the long run, the reservation policy worked to the destruction of the fur trade, demoralizing the Indians and increasing the deadly toll from disease, starvation, and alcohol dependence. “Without exaggerating greatly,” Gilman writes, “one might argue that the Upper Mississippi Valley fur trade in its final stages collapsed not from depletion of the wild game but for lack of Indians.”⁶⁸

North of the border, the Hudson’s Bay Company faced different circumstances. Although there was little pressure from white settlement, the fur resources were depleted after years of struggle with the North West Company. As early as 1822, George Simpson sought to implement conservation measures to allow fur-bearer populations a chance to recover. These measures included extending the fur trade into new territories, eliminating posts in depleted areas, encouraging Indians to hunt species other than beaver, discouraging Indians from taking “summer” beaver, eliminating the use of steel traps and castoreum, and introducing a quota

⁶³ Gilman, “Last Days of the Upper Mississippi Fur Trade,” pp. 120-121.

⁶⁴ Nute, “Posts in the Minnesota Fur-Trading Area, 1660-1855,” p. 369.

⁶⁵ Gilman, “Last Days of the Upper Mississippi Fur Trade,” p. 126.

⁶⁶ Gilman, “The Fur Trade in the Upper Mississippi Valley, 1630-1850,” p. 18.

⁶⁷ Robert A. Trennert, “William Medill (1845-49),” in Robert M. Kvasnicka and Herman J. Viola, eds., *The Commissioners of Indian Affairs, 1824-1977* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), pp. 31-35.

⁶⁸ Gilman, “Last Days of the Upper Mississippi Fur Trade,” p. 127.

system for beaver.⁶⁹ These early efforts largely failed in the Rainy Lake Region because of competition with the Americans and *métis*. Moreover, Indians in the Rainy Lake Region and elsewhere in Canada tended to resist the company's conservation measures because they did not understand them. The Indians believed the abundance or scarcity of animals depended on various *manitos*, or spirits, who controlled the success of their hunts. They also lacked a system of land tenure that recognized property rights, and their political organization did not permit effective sanctions against trespass.⁷⁰

The Hudson's Bay Company embarked on another conservation program in 1841. It was based on a strict quota system that set a limit on each post's fur returns. Any post trader who did not respect the quota would be retired from the company. Such a policy demonstrated the advantage of monopoly, and after a three-year trial period the quota system appeared to produce results. Beaver populations recovered in many areas, and the quotas were relaxed.⁷¹

Despite this success, the Hudson's Bay Company faced new difficulties by the mid-1840s. As the supply of beaver recovered, the price of beaver pelts fell. Silk replaced beaver felt as the material of choice for men's hats. Moreover, the Hudson's Bay Company was unable to prevent independent traders from making inroads in the Red River area. Improvements in transportation between Minnesota and the Red River settlements assured a vigorous independent trade in skins and furs, particularly buffalo robes. By 1856, shipments of furs from Pembina and Red River through St. Paul included, according to one statement, "64,292 rats; 8,276 minks; 1,428 martens; 876 foxes; 3,600 coons; 1,045 fishers; ...7,500 buffalo robes" and other furs, valued at \$97,000.⁷²

The growing commercial ties between the Red River settlements and American communities south of the border led to a Canadian expedition in 1857 aimed at locating an overland transportation route north of the international boundary from Upper Canada to the West. The expedition's leader was Henry Hind and its surveyor was Simon J. Dawson. The latter recommended a land and water route from a point on the north shore of Lake Superior near Fort William to the south shore of Lake Winnipeg at Fort Garry. The route would feature wagon roads at both ends and a 311-mile water route, including 10 portages across the middle section. Before anything more was done with this plan, the Panic of 1857 temporarily dampened the government's interest in it.⁷³

Canadian nationalist concerns about the vulnerability of the Red River country persisted. After the Civil War, Irish-American "Fenians" staged raids across the border. In 1867, the U.S. purchase of Alaska from Russia gave Canadians further pause. In 1868, one year after confederation, the Canadian government organized a second expedition to develop a connecting

⁶⁹ Arthur J. Ray, "Some Conservation Schemes of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1821-1850: An Examination of the Problems of Resource Management in the Fur Trade," *Journal of Historical Geography* 1 (1975), p. 50.

⁷⁰ Ray, "Some Conservation Schemes of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1821-1850," pp. 57-58. For a recent overview of Indian conservation practices in the fur trade, see Shepard Krech III, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1999), pp. 173-209.

⁷¹ Ray, "Some Conservation Schemes of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1821-1850," pp. 63-65.

⁷² Quoted in Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada*, pp. 330-331.

⁷³ Jack Manore, "Mr. Dawson's Road," *The Beaver* 6 (February/March 1991), p. 6.

road to the West, based on Dawson's plan. Dawson began work that year with a crew of 800 laborers. The following year, the government purchased Rupert's Land from the Hudson's Bay Company, clearing the way for the creation of the new province of Manitoba.⁷⁴

The *métis* of the Red River country rebelled against this annexation, imprisoned the newly appointed governor, and elected one of their own, Louis Riel. The young Canadian government now faced its baptism by fire. In 1870, it sent the Red River Expedition, a mixed force of Canadian and British soldiers and voyageurs, over the uncompleted road to suppress the Red River rebellion. Under the command of Colonel Garnet Wolseley, the force of 1,200 troops traveled from Toronto to Fort Garry in 96 days, and the rebels scattered at its approach.⁷⁵

The movement of so many men and supplies over the voyageur route was unprecedented. If the victory over the rebels lacked glory, participants in the Red River Expedition found a claim to fame instead in their swift march through the Canadian wilderness. Numerous accounts were published about the journey. This created an acrimonious debate over the actual condition of the road and the character of the military's achievement: was the road as deplorably primitive as the expedition members contended, or had the expedition leaders wasted time and resources on an excessive amount of logistical organization? The controversy is tangential to the history of the fur trade except for the fact that it produced a flood of descriptive travel accounts at the close of the fur trade era.

Diary of a Private Soldier of the Red River Expedition

Monday, 6th—At 7:30 we left Sandy Beach, as we called last night's camp ground, and continued our way through Lake Nameukan, passing in several places the camp grounds of other crews, where the fires were still burning, also, camps of Indians who stood on the shore watching the strange sight of boat loads of white soldiers passing by. The wind being favorable part of the time, we were able to use our sails, which was a great assistance. When we had rowed and sailed a distance of about 12 miles, we were met by three boats filled with voyageurs, who having accompanied the expedition as far as Kettle Falls were now returning...

— Justus A. Griffin, *From Toronto to Fort Garry*, p. 32.

The road, as much as the expedition itself, marked a kind of conquest or death of the wilderness in the Rainy Lake Region. As such, it was a turning point in the fur trade. The road was opened to civilian traffic on June 15, 1871 and by October 1873 it had carried some 2,739 people, of whom 805 were settlers.⁷⁶ By 1871, a steam-powered tug was hauling passengers between Kettle Falls and Rainy Lake.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Manore, "Mr. Dawson's Road," p. 6.

⁷⁵ Manore, "Mr. Dawson's Road," p. 7.

⁷⁶ Manore, "Mr. Dawson's Road," p. 8.

⁷⁷ Tom Thiessen notes of "Journal" of Colonel Thomas Scott, November 23, 1871, Provincial Archives of Manitoba.

Chapter Two

The Fur Trade Experience in the Rainy Lake Region

The fur trade experience is the subject of an abundant historical literature. With the exception of Grace Lee Nute's several works published in the 1940s and 1950s, however, there is little that focuses on the Rainy Lake Region. This chapter draws from primary sources to demonstrate how the fur trade experience in the Rainy Lake Region either exemplified or differed from the fur trade experience elsewhere. The main purpose of this chapter is to guide interpreters and other NPS staff to primary source materials that could be used to enrich Voyageurs National Park's interpretive program.



Indian and trader

The chapter is organized around two themes: trade and transportation. Trade was at the heart of fur trade society. It brought together Indians and non-Indians and encouraged them to bridge an enormous cultural divide. Trade also entailed competition between rival companies and highlighted significant differences between company cultures. Trade often occurred when people encountered one another on the move, but mostly it took place at the trading post; therefore, day-to-day life around the post is covered under the theme of trade. Reminiscences and travel diaries provide considerable information on trade, but post journals are the best source for details on this theme.

Transportation was nearly as prominent in the fur trade experience as trade itself. For the semi-nomadic Ojibwe, canoe travel was integral to their aboriginal way of life; the fur trade only encouraged Indians to make longer trips such as that of John Tanner and his family from the Rainy Lake Region to Michilimackinac as described in *A Narrative of Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner* (1830). For European and American traders, however, the adaptation to canoe travel formed one of the most distinctive aspects of their experience. Reminiscences about the fur trade usually make reference in the title to travel, and sometimes even to canoe travel, as in John J. Bigsby's *The Shoe and Canoe, or Pictures of Travel in the Canadas* (1850). Depending on the period within the fur trade era and the person's position within the fur trade company, some traders spent nearly their entire time traveling. Even those traders who occupied posts for most of the year traveled locally on a frequent basis and made long journeys once a year or more. Post journals are useful sources of information on transportation, but the many published diaries and reminiscences are the richest source for this theme.

Trade

From a strictly economic standpoint, the fur trade consisted of two kinds of exchange: a primary concern with furs, skins, and other animal products that had value in distant markets, and a secondary concern with food stuffs and other items of immediate necessity for fur trade society—the so-called “provisioning trade.” Company officers might differentiate between the two kinds of trade in their account books and year-end reports, but in other respects the two kinds of exchange overlapped. Trade was as much a basis of social relations as a system for economic gain.

One of the earliest accounts of trade in the Rainy Lake Region is that of Alexander Henry in his *Travels and Adventures*, in which he describes an encounter with Ojibwe during his journey westward in 1775.

We encamped at Les Fourches, on the River a la Pluie, where there was a village of Chipeways, of fifty lodges, of whom I bought new canoes. They insisted further on having goods given to them on credit, as well as on receiving some presents. The latter they regarded as an established tribute, paid them on account of the ability which they possessed, to put a stop to all trade with the interior. I gave them rum, with which they became drunk and troublesome; and in the night I left them.¹

Typical of so many descriptions of trade, Henry’s succinct account is deceptively simple. It touches on no less than four significant features of trading. First, his party traded for canoes rather than pelts—an example of the provisioning trade. Second, he mentions the Indians’ desire for credit, a feature that became more common as time passed. Third, he notes that the Indians demanded presents, an important part of the ritual that surrounded trade. Fourth, he alludes to the role of liquor and its effect on how the encounter ended. Trading involved much more than an exchange of goods; economic interests were tightly bundled with social and cultural meanings that formed the foundation of fur trade society.

Traders often recorded specific types and quantities of goods they exchanged. In 1793, John McKay traded an unidentified Indian chief two gallons of spirits and two pounds of tobacco for sixteen gallons of rice.² In 1819, an Ojibwe named The Little Rat brought 20 muskrat skins and a half beaver pelt to the Rainy Lake Fort, for which he received one gallon of “Leeward Island Rum.” A few days later, another Ojibwe named The Little Deer obtained a credit of 50 Made Beaver at the post. For this quantity of furs, The Little Deer received “a Complete Chief Clothing with a Flag,” plus two and a half gallons of rum, one and a half pounds of powder, three pounds of BB shot, one and a half pounds of “low India—,” one comb, three knives, one fire steel, one pound of tobacco, eight flints, and one fourth pound vermilion—all taken from the store.³

¹ Henry, *Travels and Adventures*, p. 240.

² John McKay, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1793-1794, Hudson’s Bay Company Archives (HBCA), B.105/a/1, fo.5.

³ Roderick McKenzie, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1819-1820, HBCA, B.105/a/7, fo. 37.

The Little Deer's purchase of "a Complete Chief Clothing with a Flag" on credit illustrates an important strategy that traders employed to secure trading relationships with more Indians. By giving certain Indians extra presents and outfitting them in scarlet coats and pants, traders hoped to influence these "chiefs" to encourage other Indians to trade with them as well. Honoring such men as "chiefs" benefited both parties: The Little Deer gained prestige among his own people, and the trader gained new trading partners. Roderick McKenzie alluded to this practice when he recorded, on September 29, 1819, that The Little Deer and The Little Rat had both been promised "chief's clothing" by his predecessor, Robert Logan. The two Indians, he wrote, "expect those articles & likewise better treatment than the rest of there [sic] tribe." A shrewd trader such as McKenzie tried to be sensitive to such relationships when he started at a new post. "The rat again made a Second demand for Rum," McKenzie noted in the post journal on the following day, "which I was obliged to give him it would appear that this Indian has been indulged a good deal by the deceased Mr. Don[al]d McPherson & afterwards by Mr. Logan..."⁴

Roderick McKenzie describes a trading session

In the morning early arrived The little Deer who after smoking his pipe Said he has Come to take debt. Without Saying any thing I told Mr Buck to go to the Store & Select Such articles as he thought the Indian would require & ask for. Some time after I told the Deer to follow me, he received 50 Made Beaver after which he enquired if there were no Coats. I answered that there was a Complete Chief Clothing with a Flag for him which I got laid aside with the following Articles 2 1/2 Gallons Rum, One & half pound powder, Three ditto Shot BB, One & half do low India— One Comb— 3 knives One Fire Steel One pound Tobacco Eight Flints One Fourth pound Vermilion. After Mr Buck had delivered the whole I requested him as he speaks the language tolerably well to tell the Indian that I expected he would make a good hunt & endeavor to get a few young men attached to him as also to keep clear of the Nwt all which he promised to do. [He] took his departure immediately without Seeing any of the Indians about the Fort which I was well pleased at knowing if he once broached his Keg it would be the Commencement of a Couple of days drinking at least.

— Roderick McKenzie, Lac La Pluie Post Journal, October 2, 1819.

Little Deer's credit was measured in 50 "Made Beaver." Made Beaver was the term fur traders used to describe a certain quantity and value of furs. A Made Beaver was the equivalent of a single prime beaver pelt. It took a number of lowly muskrat skins to equal one Made Beaver, while a single good bearskin was typically worth three Made Beaver. The fur trade was based on the barter system, yet the Made Beaver increasingly served as

a kind of "currency" that standardized the value of pelts. European trade goods could also be measured in terms of Made Beaver. For instance, a gun could be priced at fourteen Made Beaver, a blanket valued at seven Made Beaver, and a hatchet exchanged for one Made Beaver. In practice, however, the value of goods relative to Made Beaver could fluctuate a good deal. As historian Daniel Francis has observed, the trader had various means of deviating from a fixed price schedule. He could arbitrarily raise prices of goods he had in store—particularly if competition from other traders was not too keen. He could insist on discounting the value of furs if they were small, thin, worn, or otherwise damaged. He could shortchange the Indians when he

⁴ Roderick McKenzie, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1819-1820, HBCA, B.105/a/7, fo. 36.

weighed shot or measured cloth. And he could tamper with the goods, diluting rum with water for example.⁵ Evidence of these practices, according to Francis, may be found in Indians' demands to "give us full measure," as well as in traders' account books. None of the Hudson's Bay Company account books for Lac La Pluie district contained such evidence, however. It would seem that most traders did not admit to such practices in official company documents.

Trade was surrounded by ritual. The ritual varied little from place to place or between companies. Indians visited the posts not only to procure goods, but also to engage in ceremony, to renew friendships, and to assert their position of equality with the non-Indian traders. Duncan M'Gillivray described the ritual that attended trading:

When a Band of Indians approach near the Fort it is customary for the Chiefs to send a few young men before them to announce their arrival, and to procure a few articles which they are accustomed to receive on these occasions—such as Powder, a Piece of Tobacco and a little paint to besmear their faces, an operation which they seldom fail to perform previous to their presenting themselves before the *White People*. At a few yards distance from the gate they salute us with several discharges of their guns, which is answered by hoisting a flag and firing a few guns. On entering the house they are disarmed, treated with a few drams and a bit of tobacco, and after the pipe has been plyed about for some time they relate the news with great deliberation and ceremony....When their lodges are erected by the women they receive a present of Rum proportioned to the Nation and quality of their Chiefs and the whole Band drink during 24 hours and sometimes much longer for nothing....When the drinking match has subsided they begin to trade.⁶

Trade at the Rainy Lake Fort was no less ritualized. Frederic Damien Huerter, an employee of the North West Company from 1816 to 1819, described the post trader's insistence on proper attire by his men for the benefit of the Indians.

The day of our arrival at Laclapluie 13th. June Lieutt. Missary told me on the portage, it was Mr. McLeods orders that I should put on my regimentals which I complied with, after I was dressed Mr. McLeod told me that the Fort of Laclapluie was a place of great resort for Indians, and it was necessary that we should all appear in Regimentals.— That the Indians might see we belonged to the King— Lieuts. Missary & Brumby, their two servants, and also Charles Reinhard and I were in Regimentals on arriving at the Fort. There were many Indians there, Mr. McLeod had them all assembled in the Fort, and made a Speech to them. I happened to be out of the way, on my return to the Fort, Charles Reinhard informed that McLeod wanted me, as well as every one of us, to be present at the Council but by the time I entered the Hall, he had already delivered his Harrangue so I did not hear it.⁷

The greatest ceremony of the year at Rainy Lake was the grand medicine dance, which drew hundreds of Ojibwe from all over the region. A post trader at Fort Frances (the former Rainy Lake Fort) described the event in the post journal in 1837:

⁵ Francis, "Traders and Indians," p. 64.

⁶ Quoted in Francis, "Traders and Indians," pp. 63-64.

⁷ Frederic Damien Huerter, "Narrative," Selkirk Papers, National Archives of Canada (NAC), Reel 4, p. 3324.

[June 19.] Many arrivals of Indians all encamped and assembling at the portage for the purpose of celebrating the yearly grand Medicine or Mitayway—

[June 26.] Mr. Taylor here gives us a description of the frightful and warlike appearance of 30 or 40 Indians or rather painted and naked ragamuffins dancing inside the Fort for Some Rum and Tobacco, and curiously enough informs us of the feasting dancing, crass playing and preparations for the approaching celebration of the mysterious Grand Medicine, or Devilry as he calls it in one part of his Journal.

[July 3.] More arrivals of Indians principally from Leech Lake and Red lake. at last Mr. Taylor informs us, of the commencement of the devilry or Grand medicine, precluded as it would seem by a grand War dance, by the Leech Lake Indians and here again Mr. Taylor could not but admire the noble and martial bearing of these rogues: and in conclusion says that it cost him two fathoms of Tobacco for the dance and the sight of it which was certinly cheap enough for the gratification he seems to have enjoyed on the occasion.

[July 10.] A large number of Indians (mostly Leech Lake) leave this on their way back to their Country after acquitting themselves here of their Religious duties and Ceremonies in the Mysterious Mitaiway dance or grande Medicine— All left this peaceably enough, without offering or doing any mischief to our Cattle & horses. rather a fortunate circumstance, from Such a large assemblage of Indians and of a different tribe & families, who are very apt to be mis-chievously inclined when gathered and Idling in Such numbers at one spot.⁸

Credit, or “debt” as the traders called it, increasingly defined the “mode” of trade. Historians debate the extent to which Indians became dependent on the traders. “The Indians were not defenceless [sic] when it came to trading,” writes Daniel Francis. “They were as expert at haggling as the white man, and they could simply refuse to trade their furs if they couldn’t strike a deal. This threat was given special force when rival traders were in business nearby.”⁹ Yet traders themselves recognized that the credit system gradually transformed the Indian into a quasi-employee of the company. “In theory,” explains Rhoda R. Gilman, “the independent Indian brought his winter’s catch of fur to the trader’s post and bartered it for the marginal luxuries that made his life in the wilderness easier. If he were dissatisfied with the price offered, he refused to trade. In reality, the Indian, in Aitken’s words, ‘had to submit to his trader.’” Gilman argues that by the 1830s if not earlier, the ritual of the fur trade served to mask the fact that trader and Indian were locked in an exploitative relationship.¹⁰

The credit system developed early in the Rainy Lake Region where competition between companies was particularly keen. Traders offered credit as a means of securing trade at the expense of their rivals. The Hudson’s Bay Company trader John McKay alluded to “giving

⁸ Anonymous, Lac La Pluie Journal for 1837-1838, HBCA, B.105/a/20, fo.2-3. Henry Youle Hind reported in the late 1850s that some 500 to 600 Indians attended the grand medicine ceremony some years, while the number of Indians trading at the fort could reach 1500. Henry Youle Hind, *Narrative of the Canadian Red River Exploring Expedition of 1857 and of the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition of 1858*, (London: Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, 1860), p. 83.

⁹ Francis, “Traders and Indians,” p. 65.

¹⁰ Gilman, “Last Days of the Upper Mississippi Fur Trade,” p. 126.

debt” as early as 1793.¹¹ He complained three years later of the amount of credit being extended by North West Company traders in the region. “The more outfits in such a small area the more dearer they must buy their trade,” he observed, “for an Indian will take debt from one and trade his furs to another of the same concern.” McKay accused his Canadian competitors of encouraging the Indians to cheat on their debts.¹²

The use of credit became prominent again in the years 1816-1817 when the Hudson’s Bay Company and the North West Company actually came to armed conflict in the Rainy Lake Region.¹³ It was frequently mentioned again in the early 1820s when the Hudson’s Bay Company sought to force the American Fur Company to abandon its tenuous hold in the border lakes country. In 1825, post trader John Cameron described the credit system as he had applied it over the previous few years. The details he entered in his district report for that year display a remarkable degree of sensitivity and moral ambivalence, as well as self-justification, about his trading practices. His “article” on “mode of trade” is quoted here in full.

Mode of Trade. This is a difficult article to dwell upon. when people are alone, they may act as they please, but when along side of opposition a trader must be guided by Circumstances which are liable to frequent changes. He must Sometimes act differently with different Indians and at times must vary his Conduct with Some Indian. An Indian is not always the same thing. However the general mode is, to Supply an Indian in the Fall, if not with his wants, at least, with a Sufficiency to enable him to pass the Winter. The Summer is not the Season for hunting. Indians therefore with their families are generally Naked in Autumn, hence the absolute necessity of advancing an Indian Some goods on Debt, without which it would be impossible for him, in this Department, to get through the Winter. In other parts of the Country where large Animals are numerous, An Indian may Cloath himself with leather: but here it is impossible, he can have no other recourse whatever but to our Goods, Nay, we are obliged to bring in drest leather & parchments, to Supply him with the Means of Making his shoes & Snowshoes. We make a point however, of dealing out his Supplies according to his ability as a hunter. To Some More, others less. It must be observed that there is Some Art in refusing an Indian, as well as in making him a present. A quality too much neglected by Some Traders; and altogether unattainable by others. My custom when giving out debts is I have a Blotter made for the purpose before me I call each Indian who is present and desire him to name the Articles he is most in want when he names an Article that I think he can do without, I tell him so, & make him acknowledge his inability from the poverty of his Lands to pay a heavy debt.— After I have written what he is to get on debt I add the gratuities Such as a Couple of Measures of Ammunition to every Man of family, two Knives, a Steel, an Awl, five Needles five flints—Some Thread, a little Vermillion and half a fathom of Tobacco besides Liquor— To young men who have no families one Knife, a Steel, three flints & Some vermillion besides Liquor. Sometimes a foot of Tobacco. After he wants of all present are are [sic] written down, I give the Blotter to the Clerk, who calls the Indians to the Shop One after the other, and delivers to each the Articles Mentioned to his name—

¹¹ John McKay, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1793-1794, HBCA, B.105/a/1, fo.5-fo.7.

¹² John McKay, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1796-1797, HBCA, B.105/a/4, fo.10d-fo.11.

¹³ See, for example, Friedrich Von Graffenreid, *Sechs Jahre in Canada, 1813-1819*, (Bern: Ib Haller sche Bucher, 1891), p. 10. Typescript from a handwritten translation by Elsbeth Glocker in Tom Thiessen’s possession.

Every one gets their Liquor apart. Once the Blotter is taken to the Shop, it is in vain for any to recall to his Mind Articles that he has forgotten, unless it is a file or an ax I always make it a point to Send off an Indian pleased after he has taken debt, and I Seldom or never fail, but then, I am lavish with the Liquor— In Winter however, I generally make up for my extravagance in the fall. I always give them a Dram on their arrival and on their departure.

On my arrival in Autumn 1824 I gave out no debts untill my Neighbour had begun— I found he had begun by Keeping the old Prices but the Ammunition & Tobacco he gave out for Nothing and with an unsparing hand. When I began I lowered the prices on all the prime goods— Some articles two Skins, others One, but charged them the Ammunition & Tobacco they took— of the Ammunition I gave good measure— the Tobacco at half price. This Plan I had adopted with a view of encouraging the Indians to make good hunts, as well as to induce them to be more honest & faithful to our Establishment. I had also Some hopes it would tempt Some of the Vermillion Lake Indians to bring me their Furs in the course of winter. Their hunts however were too trifling, and however well inclined they might have been to Come they were too well watched & fleeced to Keep any thing for me. Our own Indians, with the exception of One, were faithful: but from the exhausted state of their hunting grounds & more particularly from their want of provisions: their Hunts did not answer their good intentions nor my hopes.

The Doctor [John McLoughlin] was in the habit of Cloathing a few of the Chiefs, whether they had paid their debts or not. In this I have differed from My Friend as I found the Chiefs did not lay a Sufficient Value on the cloathings consequently had become rather remiss in their exertions. Indeed they Considered the Cloathings as their due providing they had not given a Skin to the O.P. [opposing or rival post]. However I gave them to understand: that I had never despised my Cloathings So far as to put them on Chiefs who were so largely in debt as they were; that any stranger who would look in the Books and see their Balances, would not believe they were Chiefs but consider the word Chief attached to their names as a Mistake, that they appeared to look on a Chiefs Cloathing as a mere common dress to deserve which, they did not deem it worth their while to exert themselves: that they must be more sparing in taking debt, and more diligent in paying: that I did not intend to break them but Still Considered them as Chiefs; and would always feel a pride in cloathing them, providing I would See no Balances against them; with much more to the Same purpose. Their pride was hurt; but no feelings wounded.

I have not altered the prices of goods from last year Altho I had threatened the preceeding spring that if I came back I would.

After my arrival last September I told the Indians that not one was to get a Skins worth of Goods before he had paid the balance due on the Goods he had from me the Autumn before. As for the Balances due the Doctor, I would pass over them for the present. nor had I any intentions of exacting furs for them, but whenever they would be Successful in gathering a good Crop of rice I would then insist on the Doctors debts being paid. Though they did not all pay their Balances, yet, I was well pleased with their exertions, for generally speaking, their Fall Hunts were good. In all my discourses with them Since My arrival last— I never gave them the least hint that I thought there was an Opposition on the opposite Side— no more, than if there never had been an American in the Country.

My first year here, I made no presents of goods to any Indians whatever, except two, Horse Lake Rat and little Deer of War-road. To the first, I gave a laced Capot & pair Leggens— and Some Silver works to his Wife. To the latter I gave a pr: Leggens, a Breech-Cloth, and a new net. The former was an American Indian, who had given me all his Hunt which was mostly Beaver. The little Deer had made a very good hunt and was almost uncommonly honest. Last fall I was more generous— I gave four Capots, with as many pairs leggens and as Many Sleeves to Indians good hunters who have large families and who were going to a great distance to hunt. This Spring after they had finished their winter Hunts and returned from their ineffectual efforts; I treated them as if they had made good spring hunts since their want of Success Was by no means owing to a want of exertion as I never Saw Indians got to work more heartily. But from the amazing height of the water it was impossible for them to make rat Hunt[s]. To four of the principle Men I gave each a common Coat, to one a Shirt, to another a pair of Leggens— with Some trifling articles to the young men who had behaved well, besides Ammunition Tobacco & Vermillion to all. I gave amongst them all about five Kegs of mixed Liquor. In My speeches to them I condoled with them on the Starving State that the Major part of them had past the winter, in the mean time pointed out the necessity, as well as Suggested the Means, to the best of my judgement, of Collecting as much Provisions during Summer as possible. I lamented the cause which led to the failure of their Spring hunts which disabled them from clearing off their debts. I should have been happy, for their own Sakes, as well as mine that they had been Successful; but Still, I was Satisfied with their exertions therefore exonerated them from all Blame. To two or three with whom I was not pleased for want of exertion in winter because the[y] had not Starvation for an excuse, I gave proper reprimands. I encouraged the whole to bring good bark in Summer in order to Score off their debts. They all went off highly pleased after repeatedly observing that they were much better treated than they expected or deserved.¹⁴

Was the relationship between trader and Indian exploitative? Certainly it contained many harsh features and probably most traders and Indians wrestled with the issue to one degree or another. Compared to the harsh conditions surrounding the terms of employment of *engagés*, Indians had considerable freedom to come and go, work when they pleased, and negotiate the price of their labor. Yet the Indians' relatively primitive political and material culture placed them at a disadvantage with the Europeans and the system tended to reward those traders who were most adept at manipulating the Indians according to their vulnerabilities. Traders tacitly acknowledged the Indians' growing dependency in the way they identified them. In the early years, traders referred to the Indians in the Rainy Lake Region by their tribe or clan name. As time passed, they increasingly identified them by company affiliation. Dr. John McLoughlin, in particular, wrote frequently of "our Indians" when he was in competition with the Americans.¹⁵

As Cameron's article attests, the credit system involved traders and Indians in highly personalized relationships. Traders came to know much more about their trading partners than simply their trustworthiness and hunting ability. They were aware of feuds between Ojibwe bands. They knew the number of wives and children who were dependent on each Indian hunter. In 1817, trader Donald McPherson noted the deaths of two Indians, remarking that he had had to

¹⁴ John Cameron, Lac La Pluie District Report for 1825-1826, HBCA, B.105/e/6, fo.4d-fo.6d.

¹⁵ John McLoughlin, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1823-1824, HBCA, B.105/a/9, passim.

cancel their combined debt of 80 Made Beaver and that they had both left “numerous family to deplore their loss.”¹⁶ In 1830, Cameron had been in the Rainy Lake Region for six years and knew hundreds of Indians by name. He listed all 629 Indians—men, women, and children—in the district report for that year. Allowing for three or four exceptions, he noted that they were “honest enough” and would “give hunts” to pay their debts.¹⁷

Generally throughout the fur trade, relations between traders and Indians were peaceful. Traders and Indians in the Rainy Lake Region followed the general pattern, despite keen competition between rival companies for the Indians’ loyalty. Violence, or even the threat of violence, was rare. Two Indians murdered two men of the North West Company at their fishing place near the outlet of Rainy Lake in 1793. John McKay wrote a detailed account of the killings based on what he was told by the North West Company’s William Boyer.¹⁸ During a scuffle in 1817, a Hudson’s Bay Company man shot an Indian, probably fatally. Donald McPherson’s narration of the event is so vivid as to be worth quoting—although it must be stressed that the event was highly unusual.

A Gang of Indians (commonly called the Cranes) arrived a short time after who in their drunken fits shot 3 of the Cattle, they immediately came to the Gate & cut it oppen [sic] with Hatchet and went in the Fort when they attempted to break open the Store doors, but the Clerk with his men fired on them, the Indians returned the firing but without any injury, the people being in one of the Houses prevented the Indians and another was shot in the back, he tells me that he thinks the Indian have expired since.¹⁹

The Rainy Lake post journals are filled with references to the use of liquor in trading and to displays of Indian drunkenness. Indeed, liquor was as much a part of the ritual of trade as an actual commodity of trade. Traders usually dispensed liquor and tobacco to Indians as gifts in order to initiate or conclude a trading session. Often when Indians arrived at the fort there would be a day or two of drunken revelry and only afterward did traders and Indians exchange manufactured goods for furs. Traders found the Indians’ desire for liquor and the Indians’ drunken behavior rather appalling, even frightening, but the protocols of trade nevertheless demanded the liberal use of liquor. In the Rainy Lake Region, where competition between traders was often intense, liquor probably flowed even more freely than elsewhere.

John Tanner describes the theft of his cache

In a former season, Net-no-kwa had made a deposit of valuable furs, near the trader’s house, on Rainy Lake, not having confidence enough in the honesty of the trader, to leave them in his care. When we returned to this spot, we found the sunjegwun [cache] had been broken up, and not a pack, or a skin, left in it. We saw a pack in the trader’s house, which we believed to be one of our own; but we could never ascertain whether they or some Indians, had taken them. The old woman was much irritated, and did not hesitate to ascribe the theft to the trader.

— *A Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner*, p. 69.

¹⁶ Donald McPherson, Lac La Pluie District Report for 1816-1818, HBCA, B.105/e/1, fo.10.

¹⁷ John Cameron, Lac La Pluie District Report for 1829-1830, HBCA, B.105/e/9, fo.4d-10.

¹⁸ John McKay, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1793-1794, HBCA, B.105/a/1, fo.10-fo.11.

¹⁹ Donald McPherson to Lord Selkirk, May 14, 1817, NAC, Selkirk Papers, Reel 4, p. 3423.

Fur trade scholars have sought to place the use of liquor in cultural perspective. During the fur trade era, members of the clergy condemned the amount of liquor present on the frontier, and traders were certainly not immune to their ideas. Traders viewed Indians' behavior according to their own cultural norms, and described Indians' use of liquor in tones that betrayed their own sense of discomfort about it. Sifting through this evidence judiciously, scholars of the fur trade have attempted to understand Indians' use of liquor in terms of native cultural norms. While acknowledging that liquor had an insidious and destructive effect on many individual Indian lives, these scholars have stressed the flexible and enduring nature of the fur trade and the positive ways in which Indians and traders created a new society.²⁰

Besides the system of credit or "debt" and the ritual use of liquor, another crucial aspect of trade involved intermarriage and the resulting ties of kinship between European and Indian. The new social history in the 1970s produced two noteworthy contributions to the historical literature on this aspect of the fur trade: Sylvia Van Kirk's *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870* (1976) and Jennifer S. H. Brown's *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (1980). These works find intermarriage between traders and native women to be a key factor in understanding the social stability of the fur trade. Van Kirk focuses on the role of women in the development of fur trade society, tracing the contribution and changing experience of Indian, mixed-blood, and white women over 150 years. Brown uses an anthropological approach to explore kinship connections among personnel and company families in the Hudson's Bay and North West companies. Brown highlights fundamental differences in the way the two companies accommodated interracial marriages and their mixed-blood offspring, and shows how these differences created two distinct societies. Specifically, she shows how the offspring of North West Company traders and native women gravitated to the native culture and formed a distinctive group called the *métis*, while the offspring of Hudson's Bay Company traders and native women—the so-called "country-born"—found a tenuous place in English society or the company hierarchy in North America.²¹

A familiarity with the works of Van Kirk and Brown provides useful context for understanding the conflict between the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company over the Red River settlement (see Chapter One), especially as it involved an uprising by the *métis*. However, as that conflict spread to the Rainy Lake Region in 1816-1817, its social basis was less clear. Indeed, the pivotal event in the Rainy Lake Region in 1817 involved the seizure of the North West Company's fort by *Meurons*, Swiss mercenaries in the employ of the Hudson's Bay Company. The events of 1816-1817 are detailed both in the Hudson's Bay Company's post journals and in the papers of Lord Selkirk. At the local level these sources tell a dramatic story, but they do not reveal the substrata of fur trade society very clearly.

²⁰ For a study of Indian use of liquor during the fur trade, see R. C. Dailey, "The Role of Alcohol among North American Indian Tribes as reported in The Jesuit Relations," *Anthropologica*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1968), pp. 45-57. For a focus on liquor in trade ritual, see Bruce M. White, "A Skilled Game of Exchange: Ojibway Fur Trade Protocol," *Minnesota History*, vol. 50 (Summer 1987), pp. 229-240.

²¹ Van Kirk, "Fur Trade Social History: Some Recent Trends," pp. 71-72; and Jennifer S.H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980).

Similarly, the marriage patterns and different treatments of mixed-blood offspring revealed by Van Kirk and Brown are not particularly obvious in these records. There are few references to interracial marriages or their offspring. Donald McPherson, the Hudson's Bay Company trader in 1817, had a Canadian wife while his assistant was married to "a small metis." The German traveler Frederic Von Graffenreid revealed the outsider's prejudice toward such marriages when he remarked in his diary, "It felt odd that I had to be entertained by two individuals and their wives, one of whom was half savage and the other in no way belonged to the Canadian upper class."²² Fur trade historians have observed that interracial marriages were important in securing trade with neighboring Indian groups, but at Rainy Lake there is little evidence of this. Traders consistently attributed their success or difficulty to other factors such as the supply of rum or the offering of debt by rivals.

Perhaps the two companies' proximity in the Rainy Lake Region made the company cultures more alike than in other regions. Certainly the Hudson's Bay Company employed a large number of Canadians with French surnames at its Rainy Lake Fort. Lord Selkirk recognized the importance of this element in the population when he worked with the Catholic Church to send Jesuit missionaries to the area in 1816-1818. When the Jesuit missionary Joseph Norbert Provencher arrived in July 1818, he held Mass at the North West Company fort one day and the Hudson's Bay Company fort the next. Significantly, the first Mass included a baptism of nineteen children from both forts, and the families of both companies gathered again for an evening service.²³

Labor relations were also probably more alike at these two rival forts than was typical for the North West and Hudson's Bay companies because the employees fraternized and company officers colluded in maintaining discipline. It was not possible for a

Names of Officers and Men of the Hudson's Bay Company wintering at Lac La Pluie, 1818-19

Robert Logan, chief master
 Donald McPherson, master
 Robert Jones, master
 Duncan McDonald, clerk
 Godin, clerk
 George Yarns, interpreter
 Michel Bourquet, interpreter
 Joseph Daleaur, guide
 Baptiste Lafrance, guide
 Ambrose Martineau, carpenter
 Barthelem Faizic, carpenter
 Joseph Courrett, laborer
 Joseph Poirier, laborer
 Goullez, laborer
 St. Paire, laborer
 Upay, laborer
 Tonjeu, laborer
 Rainger, laborer
 Carpentier, laborer
 Goddard, laborer
 Terrar, laborer
 La Rente, laborer
 Robert McGregor, laborer
 Patrick Cummins, laborer
 Miller, laborer
 Johnston, laborer
 Beads, laborer
 Dudley, laborer
 Hugh Cameron, laborer
 McDonald, laborer
 John McDonald, laborer
 James Merwick, laborer
 Baptiste Raymon, laborer
 James Morach, laborer
 – Robert Logan and Robert Jones, Lac La Pluie
 Post Journal for 1818-19

²² Graffenreid, *Sechs Jahre in Canada, 1813-1819*, p. 10.

²³ Nute, ed., *Documents Relating to Northwest Missions, 1815-1827* pp. 123-124.

hired man, or *engagé*, to quit one company and go to work for the other. When a man named Gayou deserted the North West Company and sought a new place at the XY Company fort at Rainy Lake in 1804, the master of the fort cooperated in his arrest and immediate return to his original employer.²⁴ “Deserters” of either company were treated harshly. When a man named Roy deserted from the North West Company fort at Rainy Lake in 1806, the master trader “made an example of him by making him stand an Hour naked on the Roof of the A. Store.”²⁵ When several *engagés* conspired to mutiny at Rainy Lake in 1794, the company arrested the ringleaders and sent them “down to Montreal in disgrace.”²⁶

The traders who served the rival companies at Rainy Lake were nevertheless aware of certain differences between the companies. For example, the Hudson’s Bay Company had a more structured hierarchy based on class and kinship; the North West Company was more open to risk-taking and advancement based on merit. A trader like John McKay of the Hudson’s Bay Company was probably a little in awe of his counterpart, Peter Grant of the North West Company who, according to McKay, had “a share of the profits and of course must have a share of the loss.”²⁷ The North West Company’s Duncan McDonald, meanwhile, expressed disgust at the way the more class-conscious Hudson’s Bay Company promoted “drunkards” as long as they could speak and write well.²⁸

If cultural differences existed in the food ways of the two companies, these are undetectable in the primary sources. Fur traders coped with a spare and monotonous diet and seem to have thought constantly about having enough to eat. To a large extent, they adopted the Ojibwe diet, relying on sturgeon and wild rice as their two mainstays. The longer a fort had been established, however, the more its occupants were able to mix some familiar garden vegetables and grain products into their diet as a result of their farming activity. In addition, the men enjoyed wild meat, as well as a certain quantity of salt pork and other food items imported from Britain or Montreal.

Keating describes what the voyageurs ate

Leading a laborious and hazardous life, in a country destitute of game, they generally subsist upon maize boiled with fat. The maize is first cleared of its husk and then boiled in water. One quart of prepared grain, and two ounces of melted suet, form the usual ration of an Engagé, unless pemmican can be procured. We were likewise obliged to live for a long while upon this unpalatable food; the only variety we had was a sort of hasty pudding; made with meal and buffalo grease, and seasoned with service berry.

– William H. Keating, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of St. Peter’s River*, p. 139.

²⁴ Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders of the North West*, (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1965), p. 206.

²⁵ McLellan, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1806, NAC, Selkirk Papers, Reel 9, p. 9259.

²⁶ Duncan M’Gillivray, *The Journal of Duncan M’Gillivray of the North West Company*, Ed. Arthur S. Morton. (Toronto: The MacMillan Company of Canada, Ltd., 1929), p. 8.

²⁷ John McKay, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1796-1797, HBCA, B.105/a/4, fo.7.

²⁸ Lord Selkirk Papers, NAC, Reel 5, p. 15.

Traders prepared wild rice in the same manner as the natives, boiling it with a little fat, fish, sugar, or any kind of wild meat.²⁹ One quart of the grain, boiled in two gallons of any kind of broth until it came to the consistency of porridge, could keep a man fed for a day.³⁰ Traders prepared sturgeon in the native fashion, too. The Indians prepared this food by cutting the meat into thin flakes which they dried over a slow fire and then pounded between stones until it had the consistency of a sponge. Eaten with oil, the dried sturgeon meat afforded a “rich & Substantial Food.”³¹

Daily life at either fort revolved around physical toil, mostly outdoors. The post journals record the daily assignment of men to various tasks, usually in groups of two or three presumably as a safety measure. Tasks included hunting or fishing to secure meat, cutting wood, building and repairing structures, planting or harvesting crops, tending livestock, and looking for Indians with whom to trade. There was some degree of specialization, for example, certain craftsmen were employed in making birchbark canoes. John McLoughlin described the array of tasks on May 26, 1823: “The Men Employed making Canoes—planting potatoes—sowing wheat all at once—the Women of the fort drying sturgeon and sowing Indian corn.”³² Work routines tended to follow a seasonal rhythm: fishing, hunting, and harvesting crops in the fall; trading and ice-fishing in the winter; planting crops, building canoes, and storing ice in the spring; transporting goods in and out of the country in the summer.

The fall harvest of crops occurred in late September and early October. First the men reaped the wheat and barley and put the grain in the barn. If harvesting was too long delayed the result could be ruinous. John Cameron reported a sad state of affairs upon his arrival at the post in late September 1826:

Had our wheat been reaped in time, we would have a fine Crop Considering the quantity Sown which was only twelve Bushels. But the late Strong winds have injured it extremely. We shall have little or no Barley. Indeed I had not Sufficient time last Spring to get the ground all Ploughed, of which it was much in want. We shall have an abundance of Turnips— But our Kitchen Garden yields nothing, every thing has been destroyed by Grubs. I am Sorry to find that there is no Hay to be got anywhere in Consequence of the High Water. A Little has been mowed about the Fort and the old Establishment, and very poor stuff it is, besides there is not enough to feed one Horse throughout the winter.³³

The harvest might be concluded with a celebration. John Cameron wrote in the post journal for October 2, 1824:

²⁹ Masson, *Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest*, (New York: Antiquarian Press, Ltd., 1960), p. 309.

³⁰ John McLoughlin, “The Indians from Fort William to Lake of the Woods,” Ed. Richard H. Dillon. *Amphora*. 8 (Spring-Summer 1971), p. 15.

³¹ John Cameron, Lac La Pluie District Report for 1825-1826, HBCA, B.105/e/6, fo.4.

³² John McLoughlin, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1822-1823, HBCA, B.105/a/8, fo.14d.

³³ John Cameron, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1826-1828, HBCA, B.105/a/12, fo.1-1d.

On the 28th ulto in the Evening Mr McGillivray gave us a Dance. This was called the Harvest Dance in Consequence of the Men having tyed a dozen Ears of Corn taken from the last Sheave put into the Barn, with a little ribbon and presented to Mr McG. as a Bousquet.³⁴

After the grain was in the barn, fall harvest activities continued with threshing in the barn and milling the grain into flour. The potato crop would stay in the ground a little longer; the men would finish digging potatoes by mid-October.

Fall fishing centered on the sturgeon migration, and the more sturgeon that could be caught or traded in the fall the better the outlook for getting through the winter without too much hunger. Another journal entry by John Cameron (November 11, 1826) fairly represents the way that sturgeon were obtained.

The two Indian Lads returned the day after they went off to let me Know that the Indians were Killing a Considerable number of Sturgeons. On Monday I Sent off the Interpreter with a man and the two Indian Lads in order to get all he can from the Indians and to Kill Some himself. On the 8th I sent off three men who takes down two Horses and a young Bull in Boat to the Little Forks where the Animals are to be left to pass the winter as there is plenty of Horse Tail Grass there. The men takes down a Canoe with the Boat. The Canoe was for the purpose of bringing up the Sturgeon that Chatelin might have collected. They arrived this evening with 94 Sturgeons besides four split one.³⁵

Fall hunts were also common, although this activity could continue into the winter especially when fall fishing was poor. John McKay described his bitter frustration during the winter of 1793-94 when a pack of wolves stole some 200 pounds of venison and he had to send his hunters out to get more meat. Killing some moose that February, the hunters slept by their kills each night till they were able to get the meat back to the fort.³⁶

Building construction took place in the fall, although it too could continue into the winter and spring. In the fall of 1818, two carpenters from the Hudson's Bay Company fort were assigned to assist "the freemen" (retired former employees) in building a house. Another man was employed digging a cellar for the officers' house, and two other men were sent down the river to build a house in which to prepare laths and timbers for canoe construction.³⁷ Another task in the fall was to prepare clothing and equipment for the winter, including mittens, snowshoes, and sledges.³⁸

The winter months featured trade, for it was at this time of year that animal furs were at their best. To facilitate trade, men sometimes drew the unwelcome assignment to pass time in "watching tents" and steer Indians toward their fort. Sometimes pairs of Hudson's Bay and North West company men occupied neighboring tents, watching for Indians and hoping to see

³⁴ John Cameron, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1824-1825, HBCA, B.105/a/10, fo. 3d.

³⁵ John Cameron, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1826-1828, HBCA, B.105/a/12, fo.6-6d.

³⁶ John McKay, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1793-1794, HBCA, B.105/a/1, fo.13-15.

³⁷ Robert Logan, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1818-1819, HBCA, B.105/a/6, fo.5d-8d.

³⁸ Donald McPherson, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1817-1818, HBCA, B.105/a/5, fo.5.

them and get out to them ahead of their rivals. Sometimes the men traveled to Indian camps to encourage the Indians to bring in their hunts.³⁹ And on still other occasions the company men went to trade directly in native camps and villages. This form of trade was known as *en dérrouine*.⁴⁰

Another winter activity, even more unpleasant in cold weather, was ice-fishing. Roderick McKenzie described this job: "Three men and myself, I recollect, visited six nets three times a day from under the ice . . . but no mittens can be used during that serious operation. The fingers and wrists, while occupied in managing the nets and disentangling the fish from the meshes, must be kept constantly immersed to prevent their freezing."⁴¹

Undoubtedly, winter tested the men's morale more than any other season. Short days and long nights, frightfully cold temperatures, strict rationing of provisions, and stoppage of mail all tended to make the winter months an experience to be endured. Christmas and New Year's celebrations relieved the tedium and hardship somewhat and usually framed a full week of merriment, as the stern John McLoughlin recorded in 1823-24:

[December 25, 1823.] This being Christmas gave the men twenty five pounds flour and four Sturgeons to feast themselves

December 26.] All hands [illegible] gave the men a diner and a Gallon spirits Among them last night this Evening Mr McGillivray arrived with Deschamps and [illegible]

[December 27.] fair but Cold all hands idle

[December 28.] fair but very cold—

[December 29.] The men bought a little liquor and are Keeping up the Holidays

[December 30.] the men unwell or rather too much [illegible] to work after their frolic

[December 31.] this Evening arrived Frozen[?] feet brought thirty odd Skins of his Debt—

[January 1, 1824.] this being the new Year gave the men a treat of twenty five pounds flour and three Sturgeons to feast themselves in the Evening as usual on this day gave them a dance invited Cote the American Clerk with the women of their [illegible]— but told him that none of his men must come none of the American people are allowed to come except Cote the Master I do this to prevent any misunderstanding arising in consequence of men going with Stories from one house to the other⁴²

The employees at the fort had other diversions in winter. They played football among themselves or with the men of the rival post. Sometimes they enjoyed pet animals. The

³⁹ Donald McPherson, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1817-1818, HBCA, B.105/a/5, fo.11-12.

⁴⁰ John Francis McDermott, *A Glossary of Mississippi Valley French, 1673-1850*, (St. Louis: Washington University Studies, New Series, Language and Literature No. 12, 1941), p. 66.

⁴¹ Masson, *Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest*, p. 28.

⁴² John McLoughlin, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1823-1824, HBCA, B.105/a/9, fo. 39.

Hudson's Bay Company men had a pet river otter in 1821. The otter was reportedly as tame and affectionate as a dog and had the full run of the grounds. It frequently swam in the river but always returned to the fort.⁴³ The men had less success with two pet foxes in 1837. "They give us some trouble in attending them and watching their mischievous and cunning tricks," the master wrote in the post journal. "There is no hope of taming or domesticating them. They are both as wild & incorrigible thieves as their Fathers & Mothers were before them—we will most likely be under the necessity of hanging them for the safety of our poultry and young pigs."⁴⁴

As winter turned to spring, men were employed in chopping ice and filling the ice house. Hugh Faries noted in his diary in 1804 that he had put five men to work for two days filling the ice house.⁴⁵ John McLoughlin wrote in the post journal on February 1, 1823, that his men had commenced this task and had the ice house about one-third full.⁴⁶ The ice house preserved meat, vegetables, and grain through the heat of summer.

One of the most important tasks of the spring was canoe construction. The birch and cedar forests in the region provided essential raw materials for canoes, making Rainy Lake a prime location for canoe manufacture and adding to the area's strategic importance for both the Hudson's Bay and North West companies. Sometimes the men at the post secured the supply of wood for canoes, and on other occasions they traded with Indians for these materials. Two Indians in 1830, for example, brought 59 rolls of bark to the fort "which was taken on their debts." For many years, a man named Augee built all of the canoes at Rainy Lake Fort. He would build as many as eight canoes in a season.⁴⁷

Springtime also saw the return of water transportation, the renewal of long-distance communications with the arrival of mail packets in the light, fast canoes, and preparations for the supply of large brigades moving east or west through the country. Many of the employees of the fort undertook long journeys themselves during the summer months, leaving their wives and

A hunting trip to Black Bay

We arrived at our destination that evening, a hill between the lake and a large swamp. Behind us we were protected by a pine forest and in front of us we had an overview of the canal that connects the immeasurable swamp and the lake. As the fire was being lit, a number of bustards flew past us. Two of them we shot down and roasted on a stick. They provided an excellent evening meal. Of the uncountable wild geese that followed, we shot a bunch. Early the next morning we were awakened by an indescribable noise, which stemmed from a multitude of migrating birds that were wobbling in the melted morass. We spent five wonderful days on this hill with magnificent weather and bagged an unbelievable number of birds.

—Friedrich Von Graffenreid, *Sechs Jahre in Canada, 1813-1819*, p. 113.

⁴³ Nicholas Garry, "Diary of Nicholas Garry," in *Proceedings and Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, Second Series—Vol. VI (Ottawa: James Hope & Son, 1900), p. 126.

⁴⁴ Anonymous, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1837-1838, HBCA, B.105/a/20, fo.7.

⁴⁵ Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders of the Northwest*, p. 229.

⁴⁶ John McLoughlin, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1822-1823, HBCA, B.105/a/8, fo.11d.

⁴⁷ John Cameron, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1829-1830 and 1830-1831, HBCA, B.105/a/14 -15, passim, quote on fo.5d.

children behind. Sometimes, on the eve of such a mass departure, the fort would stage an all-night farewell dance.⁴⁸

Transportation

The speed of travel over the canoe routes in the Rainy Lake Region varied considerably depending on the type of canoes, the experience of the crews, the kind of weather encountered, and the current water levels. To make the trip from Rainy Lake to Lake Superior in ten days was to make good time, although it could be done in half that. Two weeks was perhaps an average time, and if conditions were unfavorable it could take much longer. When the Red River Expedition set out in 1870, each brigade was given no less than 60 days' rations for the trip from Lake Shebandenwa (near Fort William) to Fort Frances.⁴⁹

Experienced crews of voyageurs could propel the canoes at an amazing speed, but travelers had to allow for frequent interruptions. Portages were, of course, the biggest cause of delay along this route and were described in detail by many travelers. Since the many portages along the route lay east of Voyageurs National Park, they will not be described here. They are relevant inasmuch as the farthest west leg of the Fort William-Fort Frances route, where the traveler reached the big waters of Namakan and Rainy lakes, required little time and effort compared to the 150 miles preceding it.

Another source of delay involved the frequent need for gumming the canoes. Crews had to stop often to daub the birchbark canoes with pitch, which acted as a sealant and helped the canoes cut the water more cleanly. Crews might stop twice in a morning for gumming, and the job could take as much as half an hour. Often this chore would be combined with a stop for a meal. Gumming could not be done in the rain, nor in the heat of the day. If the gum was not boiled enough it would be too soft. Then, running through the waters, the gum would become still softer and rough, slowing the canoe or causing it to leak.⁵⁰

Delays also occurred whenever a canoe's lading got wet, for it became necessary to disembark the goods and lay them out on the ground to dry. If it was a cool day and the sun became hidden, or if it began to rain, the whole operation might have to be interrupted and resumed again later.

Bad weather not only caused delays, it could imperil the lives of the travelers. Although crews made better time on the big waters, especially if there was a fair breeze to hoist a sail, they had to put ashore when winds became too strong. A traveler described the Rainy Lake crossing in 1845:

Dame Fortune does not always persecute her friends; and although she had retarded us hitherto a good deal, with contrary winds and rain, she kindly assisted us when we

⁴⁸ John Cameron, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1824-1825, HBCA, B.105/a/10, fo.19d.

⁴⁹ John Emslie, "Journal of Expedition to Fort Garry, 1870," Microfilm Collection, NAC, p. 5.

⁵⁰ Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders of the Northwest*, p. 200; Garry, "Diary of Nicholas Garry," p. 120; Delafield, *The Unfortified Boundary*, Robert McElroy and Thomas Riggs, eds. (New York: n.p., 1943), p. 424.

commenced crossing Lac la Pluie next morning, by raising a stiff, fair breeze. Now, be it known, that a canoe, from having no keel, and a round bottom, cannot venture to hoist a sail unless the wind is directly astern—the least bit to one side would be sure to capsize it; so that our getting the wind precisely in the proper direction at the commencement, was a great piece of good fortune, inasmuch as it enabled us to cross the lake in six hours, instead of (as is generally the case) taking one, two, or three days.⁵¹

Historian Grace Lee Nute estimates that voyageur crews could average four to six miles per hour without sail and up to ten miles per hour with a favorable wind in their sail. When strong winds forced them ashore, they called this delay a *degradé*.⁵²

Numerous sources describe the colorful crew members themselves, and the subject is covered in detail in Nute's *The Voyageur* (1955). A good example of a contemporary description is that of Nicholas Garry. Traveling in 1821—the year that the North West Company merged with the Hudson's Bay Company—Garry described the change in expedition style as his party left Fort William for Rainy Lake.

Travelling is now more expeditious than from Montreal. All is Life and Animation and Anxiety who shall lead the march. The men, who are now called North West Men, hold in great contempt the Pork Eaters, whose Journey finishes at Fort William, and are so called from their Food consisting of Pork to mix with their Indian Corn. The Canoe is now less, the Weight little more than 2 cwt. which is necessary from the numerous and long Portages which present themselves at every moment. The [Crew of the] Canoe consists of a Foreman or Guide, a Steersman and six Men. The Canoe is carried by two Men at the Bow and Stern and carried erect. In the morning before Daylight the Tent is struck and you are left without Covering to dress as well as you can. The Poles of the Tent being placed at the Bottom of the Canoe this Expedition is necessary.⁵³

In addition to bad weather, deadly rapids were another danger attending any journey by canoe. There were a number of fatal rapids on the route between Fort William and Rainy Lake; however, the only fatal canoe accident known to have occurred in the vicinity of Voyageurs National Park involved the trader Donald McPherson and an Indian boy, whose canoe capsized in Rainy Lake. This accident was blamed on the canoe having been overloaded with cargo.

Hudson's Bay Company trader Donald McKay survived a canoe accident but lost two of his men on his return trip from Rainy Lake to Osnaburgh in the spring of 1792. Although the accident occurred well north of Voyageurs National Park, McKay's account is so harrowing as to be worth quoting here:

About twenty yards from the Shore a tree happened to fall into the River on which we got fould which pushed us out into the Suction of the fall, in half a Second we was Irrecoverable, it was so suddent that our presence of mind was Stupified; but seeing death on both sides, I cryed to all hands to jump out towards Shore, which I did myself

⁵¹ Ballantyne, *Hudson's Bay; or Every-day Life in the Wilds of North America*, (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1848), pp. 239-240.

⁵² Grace L. Nute, *The Voyageur*, (New York and London: D. Appleton, 1931), p. 27.

⁵³ Garry, "Diary of Nicholas Garry," p. 122.

and providently my hands got hold of a Rock but my feet got no bottom, but the Strong Current thro me in on the rock from which I crawled a shore, the water that got in my mouth & eyes which blinded me so much that I do not Know how the rest got a Shore— John Sutherland Magnas Birdsay John Louttet & Louis Jolly Caurr got safe a Shore; the Unfortunate John Towers and James Taylor was in the boat, when I recovered I lookd & see the boat rested on a Rock at the very top of the fall and the poor Lads in it, I called to them to thro it to us & got hold of it and fasten it to a tree a Shore, John Towers with great Spirit put himself on the line and made two Successfull pushes on it, but [on] the third the line broke between his hands and [he] fell in the fall and was never seen again— I believe he was dashed to pieces before he got to the bottom of the fall— James Taylor had hold of the Oar Ring that Steered the boat in his hands when the boat went of[f] the Rock, the head was dashed to pieces before the [Stern?] went of[f]— in few Seconds we have seen James Taylor fast to a Small piece of the Stern of the boat below the fall & cried for help, but it was not in our power to give him any Assistance as he would be down the next fall before we could Launch and unload the boat of John Richards which was the only boat in Company, the said John Richards did much exert himself on this unfortunate affair, he ran along Shore with a long Pole to try if he could come nigh James Taylor, and at the top of the other fall he got so near as to touch his shoulder but he was so much gone that he had not the sense to take hold of it.⁵⁴

Finally, cold temperatures and pan ice were a threat to the fragile birchbark canoes, rendering canoe travel in late fall or early spring both hazardous and problematic. When the lake surfaces were partially frozen, floating ice could tear a hole in a canoe and sink it. One party arrived at Fort Frances in late November 1834 terrified and exhausted after breaking through new ice the whole length of Rainy Lake. “The only thing that saved them from going to the bottom,” the chief trader wrote, “was that their canoe with the cold was cased over both in and out with ice.”⁵⁵ Birchbark canoes were known to crack in the cold air when hauled out of water, too.⁵⁶

Besides annoying delays and worrisome dangers, the traveler also experienced physical discomforts on the journey. Occasionally an unhappy traveler complained of light rations or outright hunger, but in general the men seem to have been well-fueled while en route. Starvation may have been a regular feature of winters at the fort, but it was much less common other times of the year. Fatigue overtook the traveler much more often than hunger, especially when it was necessary to run against a head wind or endure a lot of rain. Mosquitoes were still another source of physical discomfort. Gabriel Franchere was “tormented” by the mosquitoes on the banks of the Rainy River.⁵⁷ John Bigsby wrote that the mosquitoes on Rainy Lake were “ferocious, their bites being also much envenomed by our salt diet.”⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Donald McKay, Journal kept by Donald McKay on a trip to Rainy Lake in 1792, HBCA, B.3/a/93b, fo. 10-10d.

⁵⁵ William Sinclair, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1834-1835, HBCA, B.105/a/19, fo.9.

⁵⁶ James Evans, Diary, 1839, Minnesota History Center (MHS), Manuscript Collection P489, Box 6, p. 4.

⁵⁷ Gabriel Franchere, *Narrative of a Voyage to the Northwest Coast of America*. Trans. and ed. J. V. Huntington. (New York: Redfield, 1854), pp. 334-335.

⁵⁸ John L. Bigsby, *The Shoe and Canoe Canoe, or Pictures of Travel in the Canadas*. 2 vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1850), p. 242.

Despite these many hardships, most travelers seem to have regarded the journey in a positive light as an adventure. Certainly there is a positive theme of adventure in the many written accounts, and there is a sense of willingness on the part of the *engagés* to undertake local travel evident in the post journals as well. The songs and traditions of the voyageurs also reveal an appreciation for the journey.

What is less evident in the historical record is a sense of landscape appreciation. While the modern recreationist finds the landscape of the voyageurs' route appealing because of its wild character, travelers in the fur trade era were generally ambivalent, even indifferent, toward the landscape. There was so much wildness in it as to be monotonous or taken for granted. One suspects that Nicholas Garry's reaction to the scenery around Rainy Lake—that it was “very uninteresting, low Banks and stunted Fir Trees”—may have been typical.⁵⁹

Historians of landscape appreciation deal with a subject that is highly imprecise and subject to various interpretation. A number of seminal works in this field date from a period in American historiography when historians were intent on plumbing “the American mind,” a theoretical construct that has lost favor in the past three decades. Nevertheless, several such studies remain influential; for example, Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950); Hans Huth, *Nature and the American: Three Centuries of Changing Attitudes* (1957); Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1964); and Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964).⁶⁰ Nash, for example, develops the idea that harsh physical conditions largely fashioned pioneer attitudes toward wilderness. Frontiersmen tended to view wild landscapes negatively as long as they remained threatening. Marx depicts European influences on American attitudes toward land and progress, and reveals the widespread embrace of a “pastoral ideal” that placed select elements of the industrial age in a kind of middle landscape between city and wilderness. Curiously enough, even though the fur trade was largely at odds with the advance of settlement, those fur traders who were literate and committed their impressions to writing still appear to have embraced this “pastoral ideal.” In the absence of any real traces of the industrial age in the Rainy Lake Region, travelers imagined future farms and towns and commerce where the landscape was most like the settled countryside of England with which they were familiar. Thus, numerous travelers commented on the “beauty” of the Rainy River, praising its strong, even current, its handsomely foliated banks, its likeness to rivers in England, and the “variety of delightful scenes which its banks disclose at every winding.”⁶¹ Implicit in many of these recurring appreciative descriptions is the thought that the landscape would eventually be softened by signs of civilization. It is also

⁵⁹ Garry, “Diary of Nicholas Garry,” p. 123.

⁶⁰ Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950); Hans Huth, *Nature and the American: Three Centuries of Changing Attitudes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957); Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 3d ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

⁶¹ Delafield, *The Unfortified Boundary*, p. 426; Bigsby, *The Shoe and Canoe*, p. 270; Sir George Simpson, *Narrative of a Journey Round the World during the years 1841 and 1842*, 2 vols. (London: Henry Colburn, 1847), p. 35; Garry, “Diary of Nicholas Garry,” p. 124; Ballantyne, *Hudson's Bay; or Every-day Life in the Wilds of North America*, p. 237; quotation in M'Gillivray, *The Journal of Duncan M'Gillivray of the North West Company*, p. 9.

worth noting that the Rainy River presented a safe and easy passage compared to the big waters and frequent portages to the east, and that ease and safety readily translated into beauty.⁶²

⁶² The conspicuous exception in the area of landscape appreciation is John Bigsby, who wrote lyrically about the landscape's most wild aspects. For example, Bigsby wrote of Rainy Lake: "The [northeast] horn is remarkable for the pure, smooth, porcelain whiteness of its granite hills, which are often very high, and gleam through their scanty clothing of pine in a beautiful and singular manner, while the dark forests of cypress at their feet greatly heighten the general effect....At a place where a lofty cascade falls into the lake with a loud roar, this kind of scenery is quite melodramatic. It presents a somewhat new combination of colours in landscape—white rocks, black foliage, and blue lake." Bigsby, *The Shoe and Canoe*, p. 264.

Chapter Three

Material Culture

This chapter examines the documentary record for what it reveals about the material culture of the fur trade. Its target audience is cultural resource specialists who manage Voyageurs National Park resources relating to the fur trade. Its purpose is to supplement existing knowledge about the fur trade experience within the park as revealed by archeological investigation, and to assist future archeological studies.



Voyageurs at Dawn, 1871. Frances Anne Hopkins, artist.

The University of Minnesota conducted an initial archeological survey of Voyageurs National Park in 1977, and the NPS undertook more extensive work in 1979 and 1980. These investigations have yielded a considerable amount of information about Indian occupation of the area in late prehistoric and historic periods. Prehistoric sites date from the Archaic period down to the Terminal Woodland period. Relatively few sites are associated with the fur trade era. There is a paucity of sites dating from about 1600 to about 1730, leading investigators to speculate that Indian use of the national park area was at a low point during the 17th and early 18th centuries compared to the previous fifteen centuries. There are several sites with some material dating from about 1730 to 1870. Historic sites mostly date from post-1870 and are predominantly associated with Ojibwe occupation or lumbering.¹

Some sites within the park have yielded artifacts associated with the fur trade. In some cases, it is not clear whether the artifacts reflect sites of actual encounters or habitations during the fur trade era or whether the artifacts were lost or discarded at a later time. For example, Jesuit trade rings were found together with items of English and American manufacture at Sand Point, and Ojibwe probably occupied this site during the French period as well as later in the fur trade era. Items of English manufacture were found on islands near Sand Point, but the collection of other material from these sites suggests that they date from a later period. Ojibwe occupation sites dating from the historic period are concentrated around Black Bay, Moose Bay, the west end of Kabetogama Lake, Crane Lake, Sand Point Lake, and perhaps Kettle Falls. Some of these

¹ Mark J. Lynott, Jeffrey J. Richner, and Mona Thompson, "Archeological Investigations at Voyageurs National Park: 1979 and 1980," Midwest Archeological Center Occasional Studies in Anthropology No. 16 (Lincoln: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Midwest Archeological Center, 1986), pp. 283-285; Jeff Richner, comments supplied to author on draft, February 22, 2000.

occupation sites possibly date back to the fur trade era. Numerous local artifact collections contain significant numbers of artifacts from the fur trade era, suggesting that there are many more sites remaining to be officially recorded.²

Archeological investigation is complicated by the fact that water levels have been altered since the fur trade era. Dams constructed in the early 1900s at Kettle Falls, between Namakan and Rainy lakes, and at International Falls, Minnesota, below the outlet of Rainy Lake, raised water levels in all four major lakes in Voyageurs National Park. No doubt many archeological sites connected with the fur trade are to be found along historic portages or lake shores that now lie under water. Archeologists have investigated submerged canoe wrecks or their sunken cargo in various rapids in the Boundary Waters, but no such underwater investigations have been made within the park.

The fur trade was fundamentally concerned with the exchange of products. Europeans brought to this exchange goods such as guns, blankets, brass, and liquor, while Indians traded furs, skins, isinglass (a gelatin derived from sturgeon bladders used as a clarifying agent and glue), and other animal products, as well as food stuffs such as wild rice, fish, and pemmican. Many of these items were so perishable as to disappear entirely from the archeological record, while other items could have a long life perhaps even being passed from generation to generation. Since the trade involved great distances, items changed hands and moved around extensively. Yet the system was such that trade goods were seldom stockpiled or amassed in large quantities. There were exceptions. Indians sometimes cached their products rather than trading them immediately in order to await more favorable conditions for travel or barter. As the pelts accumulated at each trading post, the trader pressed and wrapped the pelts in canvas for shipment by canoe. These packs of so-called “made beaver” (a unit of measure equal to one prime beaver skin) were occasionally lost in canoe accidents. Similarly, European goods were wrapped in assorted bales and transported by canoe to the trading posts. Occasionally such cargoes sank to the bottom of a lake or river with an errant canoe. Many fur trade artifacts, together with the remains of actual canoes themselves, have been recovered through underwater archeology. These sites are concentrated below treacherous rapids or waterfalls. None is known to exist within the relatively calm waters that flow through Voyageurs National Park, although cargoes might have been lost at such treacherous locations as Kettle Falls and Brule Narrows.³

Besides the exchange of goods, the fur trade involved an elaborate system of transportation and supply. European and American traders sought to develop efficient routes for travel and the movement of goods. While their transportation system generally made use of natural waterways, some efforts were made toward improving these routes, particularly along portages, which they often described as “roads.” Place names, landmarks, and improvements made along such “roads” were all part of the cultural landscape of the fur trade.

Finally, the fur trade drew thousands of Europeans and Americans into the North American interior far in advance of permanent white settlement, and this population required habitations.

² Jeffrey J. Richner, interview with Ted Catton, October 1, 1999.

³ See Robert C. Wheeler, Walter A. Kenyon, Alan R. Woolworth, and Douglas A. Birk, *Voices from the Rapids: An Underwater Search for Fur Trade Artifacts 1960-73*, Minnesota Historical Archaeology Series No. 3, (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1975).

These wilderness installations varied in size and duration. In general, they can be classified into four tiers. In the first tier, there were a few major depots where goods were stockpiled for distribution: the Hudson's Bay Company's York Factory and Albany Factory, the North West Company's Grand Portage and Fort William, and the trading center known as Michilimackinac that passed from French to British to American control. From these depots, goods were distributed to a second tier of establishments known as posts, forts, or houses. (These three terms are used interchangeably below.) These posts could have a population of a few dozen men and their families. They might be comprised of a post and stockade as well as outlying residences, livestock barns, vegetable gardens, and cultivated fields. Post traders often sent their subordinates to occupy satellite posts, usually described as subposts or outposts. This third tier in the system consisted of smaller, more ephemeral establishments that were typically dependent on the larger post for provisions. In the fourth tier were camps of various kinds. Where there was competition from other traders, as at Rainy Lake, men were sent to occupy overnight camps, or "watching tents," where they could hail Indians and direct them to the post. Watching tents are mentioned repeatedly in the Rainy Lake post journals, but there is no evidence that they consisted of anything more than a canvas shelter. To help with provisioning the post, the traders also established fishing and hunting camps. In addition to these various habitations belonging to Europeans and Americans in the fur trade, Indians occupied their own camps. White and Indian habitations sometimes overlapped, as when both groups used the same fishing places or Indian groups camped in the vicinity of the post.

This chapter discusses the material culture of the fur trade as it was expressed in products of the trade, transportation, and habitations.

Products of the Trade

Products of the fur trade included canoes and sleds for transportation, various manufactures (which the Indians soon distinguished as French, British, or American), tobacco, liquor, furs, and hides. In addition, many food items were exchanged in both directions. Although the ultimate aim of the traders was to ship products back to Montreal or London or New York, much of the trade involved goods that were used or consumed on the frontier. These latter products belonged to the so-called provisioning trade.

Canoes

The fur trade required great numbers of birchbark canoes. The North West Company developed a system of transportation involving two transfer points on the route from Montreal to the interior. The first, located on the north shore of Lake Superior, involved the transfer of cargoes from the large "Montreal canoe" or *canot du maître*, built for travel on the Great Lakes, to the smaller "north canoe" or *canot du nord*, designed to negotiate the swamps and rapids of the inland waterways. The second, at Rainy Lake, involved another transfer of cargoes from the canoes manned by Montreal-based crews to canoes manned by voyageurs of the Athabaska

Department. In some cases, Montreal canoes were used between these two transfer points, with their loads suitably reduced for the many portages between Lake Superior and Rainy Lake.⁴

The Rainy Lake Region, with its forests of birch, was a center for construction of the north canoes. In the early years of the fur trade, Europeans traded goods for canoes of Indian manufacture.⁵ By 1830, the fort at Rainy Lake employed a French-Canadian craftsman who was an expert canoe maker and could turn out several canoes in a season.⁶ Canoes, together with wild rice, became one of the most important products of the region.

The north canoe took a crew of four to six men, depending on the distance that the men would travel and the amount of provisions that they needed to carry. The canoe carried a lading of about 35 packages, with roughly a third consisting of provisions for the journey. The crew consisted of a foreman, a steersman, and two to four middlemen. The foreman, who sat in the bow and was in command of the vessel, had to be adept at reading the rapids, while the steersman had to be accomplished in attending the helm. Both of these skilled men made half again the wage of the middlemen, who sat two abreast in the middle of the canoe. For each four to six canoes there was a conductor or pilot in command of the whole brigade.⁷

Canoes were made entirely from the products of the forest: pine or cedar for the frame, birch bark for the walls, fibrous strands of tree roots for stitching material, and pine pitch for sealant. A single birch tree generally yielded enough bark to cover a north canoe. Pieces of bark were sewn together with pieces of tree roots, called *wattape*, usually from the white spruce. The birchbark covering was then placed over a framework of thin boards, usually made from white cedar. The cover was lashed to the gunwales with *wattape*, and held firm with four to nine narrow thwarts or bars placed across the top at intervals. The latter were made of pine or cedar. Boards about four inches in width were then installed to provide bench seats for the crew. Finally, the canoe was readied for use by daubing or “gumming” it with the pitch of pine trees. Canoes had to be gummed frequently to keep them watertight.⁸

⁴ Lavender, *Winner Take All*, p. 245; Young, “The Organization of the Transfer of Furs at Fort William: A Study of Historical Geography,” p. 33. The arrival of a Montreal canoe at Rainy Lake Fort, with its large 11-man crew, is mentioned by Roderick McKenzie in the Lac La Pluie post journal for October 3, 1819. See Roderick McKenzie, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1819-1820, HBCA, B.105/a/7, fo. 37.

⁵ For example, Alexander Henry the Elder mentions buying canoes from Ojibwe at the Forks on the Rainy River. *Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories*, p. 240. Also see John McKay, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1795-1796, HBCA, B.105/a/3, fo. 29. On April 13, 1796, McKay wrote, “The Indians making small canoes. I cannot get them to go hunt Beaver. they say; they have more profit from making large Canoes for the Canadians then hunting Beaver in the spring.”

⁶ John D. Cameron, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1829-1830, HBCA, B.105/a/14, fo. 46. Also see Donald MacPherson’s letter to Lord Selkirk of October 13, 1817, in Lord Selkirk Papers, NAC, Reel C-4, p. 4128. MacPherson informed Selkirk of his intention to build as many canoes at the fort as possible in the coming spring, provided that a canoe builder could be sent from the Red River colony. He noted that there was enough bark and *wattape* in store for eight north canoes.

⁷ Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal* (London: R. Noble, 1801), pp. xlvi-xlviii.

⁸ Nute, *The Voyageurs*, p. 25. Sir George Simpson provides the following description of canoe construction: “The outside is formed of the thick and tough bark of the birch, the sheets being sewed together with the root of the pine-tree split into threads, and the seams gummed to make them air-tight. The gunwales are of pine or cedar of about three inches square; and in their lower edges are inserted the ribs, made of thin pieces of wood, bent to a semicircle. Between the ribs and the bark is a coating of lathing, which, besides warding off internal injury from the
... continued on next page

Montreal canoes were built with the same materials and according to the same technique but on a larger scale. William M'Gillivray provided a good description:

These canoes were exceedingly strong and capacious, they were about thirty-six feet in length, by six feet wide, near the middle; and although the birch bark which formed a thin external coating over their ribs of white cedar, and their longitudinal laths of the same wood, appeared to compose but a flimsy vessel, yet they usually carried a weight of five tons. It may be as well to state that this cargo was very carefully stored, in order to remove any unequal pressure, which would have been fatal to such a vessel. Four poles, three or four inches at their thickest ends, denominated by the Canadians, *grand-perch*, were laid side by side in the middle of the bottom of the canoe. On these poles, the cargo was carefully arranged so that all the weight rested on them, and none allowed to press against the bare and unprotected sides of the canoe. Every package was made up of the weight of ninety pounds and none heavier.⁹

Both Montreal and north canoes plied the waters of what is now Voyageurs National Park. From about 1788 to about 1821, the big Montreal canoes regularly appeared at the North West Company's fort at Rainy Lake to take the loads of furs brought down by north canoe from the Athabaska Department. Historian Gregg A. Young has made a close study of this traffic and estimates that about 30 Montreal canoes made the difficult trip between Lake Superior and Rainy Lake each summer, leaving Grand Portage or Fort William about July 1 and arriving at Rainy Lake about mid-July.¹⁰ Even long after the North West Company merged with the Hudson's Bay Company, the large canoes still occasionally made an appearance at Fort Frances. In September 1837, for example, three Montreal canoes arrived with a large number of passengers, mostly families.¹¹

The Montreal canoe carried a mast and lug-sail. In addition, each crew member had his own paddle and a ten-foot setting pole, made of ash and shod with an iron ferrule at each end, which, attached to a strong line, was used to tow the canoe upstream through rapids.¹² There were three sizes of paddles: the common paddle, about two feet long and three inches wide, which was used by the middlemen; a longer paddle, about five inches wide, which was used by the steersman; and a still longer paddle used by the foreman when running rapids. Paddles were made of red spruce or maple. The blades were usually painted red and decorated with markings of green and black.¹³

fragile covering, serves to impart a firmness to the vessel." Simpson, *Narrative of a Journey Round the World*, Vol. 1, p. 14. See also a classic work on canoes, Edwin Tappan Adney and Howard I. Chapelle, "the Bark Canoes and Skin Boats of North America," Smithsonian Institution, United States National Museum, Bulletin 230, Washington, 1964.

⁹ Quoted in Davidson, *The North West Company*, pp. 216-217.

¹⁰ Young, "The Organization of the Transfer of Furs at Fort William: A Study of Historical Geography," pp. 32-34.

¹¹ Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1837-1838, HBCA, B.105/a/20, fo. 37.

¹² Davidson, *The North West Company*, p. 217.

¹³ Nute, *The Voyageur*, p. 26; David Szymanski, comments to author on draft, February 28, 2000. The most detailed study on this subject is the two-volume work by Tim Kent, *Birchbark Canoes of the Fur Trade*. It is the
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Sleds

In winter, canoe travel became progressively more dangerous as lakes began to freeze and cold temperatures made the birch bark brittle. Nonetheless, Indians and traders traveled by canoe as long as there was open water, sometimes making perilous trips through broken pan ice.¹⁴ When lakes and rivers froze over, Indians and traders traveled on foot. Interestingly, despite the presence of horses at the Rainy Lake House no mention was found of men riding horses. Instead, they rode on horse-drawn sledges or dog-sleds.

Unfortunately, post journals and reminiscences provide only rare glimpses of this type of transport. Post trader John McKay reported the arrival of Indians in February, 1794, hauling a sledge loaded with venison.¹⁵ The North West Company's post trader and one of his clerks made a trip by horse sledge on February 1, 1818, as noted by Donald MacPherson in the Hudson's Bay Company's post journal. The men used this mode of transportation to travel a few miles east to visit a camp on the shore of Rainy Lake.¹⁶ The Hudson's Bay Company's Charles S. Crowe, assigned to Fort Frances in 1873, traveled by dog teams from Fort Garry on Lake Winnipeg to his new post with three men and his family, a journey of nine and a half days. Crowe's daughter wrote many years later, "Remember in those days there were no stopping places anywhere on the trail, just had to make camp wherever night overtook us, and there the men would make a shelter out of pine boughs and build a large fire in front of the shelter to keep the wolves away."¹⁷

An entry in the Hudson's Bay Company's post journal for February 18, 1820 suggests that dogs and dog sleds may have been the personal property of the men. Roderick McKenzie requested Bazile Plante and two other men to travel from the post to an Indian camp. Plante informed McKenzie that his dogs were not strong enough to go, but he was willing to drag a sled himself. Instead, McKenzie assigned Plante a different job at the post. "This surprised him a good deal & I believe [he] regretted having Said any thing about his Dogs," McKenzie wrote.¹⁸ Evidently Bazile Plante owned and cared for his own dogs while the sled was the property of the post.

French Goods

From the limited primary sources pertaining to trade between the French and the Indians in the Rainy Lake Region in the period prior to 1763, nothing was gleaned specifically relating to the kinds of goods traded. The secondary literature asserts that French traders generally found themselves at a disadvantage in their competition with the English owing to the Indians'

best-researched source available concerning all aspects of canoe design, construction, and use. The reference is from Theodore Karamanski, comments to author on draft, June 12, 2000.

¹⁴ William Sinclair, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1834-1835, HBCA, B.105/a/19, fo. 9.

¹⁵ John McKay, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1793-1794, HBCA, B.105/a/1, fo. 14d.

¹⁶ Donald MacPherson, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1817-1818, HBCA, B.105/a/5, fo. 12d.

¹⁷ Mrs. G. Scott, "Pioneer Days of Fort Frances," March 1941, Provincial Archives of Ontario [hereafter PAO], RG 16, Series 16-87, File 15-2.

¹⁸ Robert McKenzie, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1819-1820, HBCA, B.105/a/7, fo.67.

The Meurons depart Fort William in winter

After the people celebrated Christmas in their own way, I succeeded in getting underway on Dec. 31, 1816. At 10 o'clock we departed, accompanied by Lord Selkirk and almost all the inhabitants of the Fort. For the first day our gear was carried on 4 horse drawn sleds. For myself I had a sled pulled by 3 dogs. They pulled my gear and their own nourishment of salted frozen fish. At night we camped. After the horses were sent back, I divided the people into 3 sections. There were 18 soldiers and 3 Canadians, of whom 2 had been sent ahead and 1 a 65 year old, who knew the land and stayed with us and served as leader. I had a hard time getting the people settled down, because as a result of the numerous farewell toasts they were more or less drunk. Around midnight I woke up and saw that they were all asleep. I will never forget the scene that presented itself. By the light of the flickering from 3 fires and in their strange clothing and manifold positions they resembled a band of brigands. The artistic picture was completed by the sleds set around for protection, the guns leaning against trees and the distant howling of wolves. I got up to smoke a pipe and it came to me that in this hour in my homeland new years would be celebrated. A year ago I was in Montreal, where we serenaded friends and then joined a party of 15 lantern bedecked sleds. Everyone was carried off and happy. Today I find myself in a northern forest looking ahead to hardships and dangers, which are not without a certain attractiveness for me. When I finished my pipe, I laid myself on top of my bison pelt and slipped into my blanket, that I had made into a sack which proved itself to be very practical.

– Friedrich Von Graffenreid, *Sechs Jahre in Canada, 1813-1819*, p. 102.

preference for English manufactures. French kettles, for example, were not as sturdy or light as English kettles, and French cloth was of inferior quality and came in duller hues than English cloth.¹⁹ To hold the Indians' allegiance, the French government invested in the manufacture of silver and enamel medals for gifts to chiefs. In the early 1700s, as much as 20,000 *livres* a year was spent on Indian presents, and the manufacture of medals for this purpose was eventually exported from France to Montreal.²⁰ Unfortunately, the journals of La Vérendrye and Saint-Pierre do not provide any details on the kinds of goods that French traders brought into the Rainy Lake Region in the 1730s, 1740s, and 1750s.

British Goods

Sir Alexander Mackenzie described the variety of British goods used in the Indian trade in the 1790s. These included coarse woolen cloths, milled blankets, guns, ammunition, "twist" and "carrot tobacco," linens, coarse sheetings, "Manchester goods" (cotton), thread, lines, twine, common hardware, cutlery, brass and copper and sheet-iron kettles, silk and cotton handkerchiefs, hats, shoes, hose, calicoes, printed cottons, and other items. An anonymous author provided another list of principal trade items in 1811. These included blankets from Witney, Oxfordshire; woolen goods from Yorkshire (comprising strouds, coatings, meltons, serges, flannels, and common blue and scarlet cloth); Manchester cotton goods (comprising striped cottons, dimities, janets, fustians, printed British cottons, shawls, handkerchiefs, gartering, and ferreting); large

¹⁹ Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada*, pp. 84-85.

²⁰ W. J. Eccles, *The Canadian Frontier 1534-1760* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1969), p. 137.

quantities of hardware; Irish linens; Scotch sheetings; osnaburgs; large quantities of nets, twine, birdlime, thread, and worsted yarn; brass, copper, and tin kettles; pistols, powder, ball, shot, and flints; paints; stationery; and beads.²¹

Portion of an invoice found in the papers of Sir Alexander Mackenzie

Invoice of Goods forwarded from Montreal by Sir Alexander Mackenzie & Intended for Lac Lapluie, marked as in Margin—

3 pair HB 3 1/2 ft. Blankets		50/	/	10	"
5 pair " 3 ft. D°		40/	10	"	"
5 pair " 2 1/2 ft. D°		30/	/	10	"
10 pair Com 3 ft. D°		38/	19	"	"
10 pair " 2 1/2 ft. D°		30/	15	"	"
6 pair " 2 ft. D°	20/	6	"	"	
7 pair " 1/2 ft. D°		17/6	6	2	6
6 pair 1 ft. D°		15/	4	10	"
4 ps. HB Blue strouds		305/	61	"	"
6 ps. Com D°		180/	54	"	"
1 ps. Scarlet Cloth 15 yards		14/	10	10	"
1/2 ps. Spotted swanskin		140/	3	10	"
3 gro. London Scots Garters		30/	4	10	"
1 gro. Highland D°		23/	1	3	"
3 gro. Scarlet & Stripes D°		27/	4	1	"
3 gro. Plain D°	21/	3	3	"	
1 gro. Nonsopretties		15/	"	15	"

Liquor is conspicuously absent from both lists and tobacco is omitted from the second. Traders tried to keep quantities of both liquor and tobacco on hand at all times because these items were essential to good trade relations. In times of keen competition between the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company, or between the British and the Americans, traders of the Rainy Lake Region assumed that the Ojibwe would take their furs to whichever post offered the best price in liquor. Thus, they could ill afford to run out of liquor (or tobacco), even though they recognized that liquor had a deleterious effect on many of the natives. It is possible that liquor was omitted from the lists because the trading companies did not want to draw attention to the importance of these items in the fur traders' relations with the Indians. It is also possible that company officials considered liquor as distinct from other trade goods because it was primarily used in the provisioning trade. The Hudson's Bay Company's post journals are filled with references to trading liquor and tobacco for fish, wild rice, and other provisions. Soon after establishing his post in 1793, for example, John McKay reported: "I am Obliged to buy

²¹ Davidson, *The North West Company*, pp. 220-221.

Every ounce [ounce] of Country Provisions that We Eat as we cannot Procure any ourselves which Will be very hard on the Brandy.”²²

Historian Bruce M. White has argued that liquor occupied a central place in Ojibwe fur trade protocol, and was often dispensed as part of the social ritual attending trade rather than as a specific commodity of exchange.²³ White found evidence that between 1794 and 1796, McKay purchased moose meat, fish, and wild rice to the value of 400 made beaver, and that 88 percent of this was exchanged for brandy and the rest for ammunition and a little cloth. Similarly, North West Company trader François Malhiot purchased food to the value of 288 made beaver, of which 60 percent was bought with liquor alone and another 30 percent with liquor and tobacco together. If the trader ran out of alcohol, he had difficulty obtaining any provisions.²⁴

The Hudson’s Bay Company maintained yearly account books, some of which survive in the Hudson’s Bay Company Archives. These give a clearer picture of the variety of British goods that were imported into the Rainy Lake Region. The earliest extant account book is an inventory of the goods on hand in the North West Company’s Fort Lac La Pluie, seized by Lord Selkirk’s soldiers in 1816. It lists the number of each trade item and their total value. The inventory also includes farming equipment, tools, furnishings, food, and furs. The list includes many small items that could potentially survive a long time: scissors, tin tobacco boxes, ivory combs, steel trap springs, scythes, hoes, sickles, hinges, among others.²⁵

The account book for the Hudson’s Bay Company’s Rainy Lake House in 1819 listed many similar items to those that the North West Company had on hand in 1816, but in addition it listed several items of adornment. These included silver arm bands, tinsel epaulets, silver ear bobs, buttons (common and plated), brooches, and ostrich feathers.²⁶ Not all items in the account books were traded to Indians; many were purchased by the employees of the company for their own use or for family members. This is evident from the individual accounts kept for each employee. For example, Vincent Roy, Jr., an interpreter at Rainy Lake, was charged for the following items in 1822: one brown cloth, one fine scarlet vest, four yards black cloth, two rolls of satin ribbon, one yard of fine “Cambric,” a half pound of colored thread, three yards of cotton, and 25 needles.²⁷

The Hudson’s Bay Company trader John McKay closed his journal for each year with an accounting of provisions and brandy served to the employees, furs acquired, goods on hand, goods traded to Indians on the trip from Osnaburgh to Rainy Lake, and sundry other lists. These journals disclose the variety of goods brought into the Rainy Lake Region in the mid-1790s: beads, blankets, boxes, bells, ice chisels, woolen and duffel cloth, files, flints, guns, powder, handkerchiefs, hatchets, brass kettles, copper camp kettles, clasp knives, yew-handled knives,

²² John McKay, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1793-1794, HBCA, B.105/a/1, fo. 7d.

²³ White, “A Skilled Game of Exchange: Ojibway Fur Trade Protocol,” pp. 229-240.

²⁴ White, “A Skilled Game of Exchange: Ojibway Fur Trade Protocol,” p. 235.

²⁵ “Inventory of the Fur Trade, Fort Lac La Pluie, North West Co., October 1816,” copy provided by Tom Thiessen.

²⁶ Lac La Pluie Account Book for 1818-1819, HBCA, B.105/d/1, fo. 39d.

²⁷ Lac La Pluie Account Book for 1822, HBCA, B.105/d/8, fo. 3d.

needles, sashes, shot and ball, calico shirts, jackets, hats, tobacco, thread, twine, ivory combs, scissors, shoes, soap, and razors.²⁸

The fur companies also prepared “bills of lading” (descriptions of cargo) for each canoe. A volume labeled “L.L.P. Bills Lading” survives in the collection of the Thunder Bay Historical Society. This volume contains 97 pages of itemized lists of goods that were shipped from the North West Company’s Lac La Pluie fort to more remote locations between July 30, 1806, and July 31, 1809. The company assigned each canoe in a brigade a number, and made a list of all goods and the total number of “pieces” put in that canoe. As historian Joseph D. Winterburn explains,

A piece was a package, weighing about 90 pounds, that was designed for portaging and proper storage in the canoe. Great care had to be taken to balance the size of each piece by distributing heavier goods among the lighter. This prevented the pieces in the form of bales, kegs, bags, or cassettes from becoming too bulky....The pieces made up the “outfit”, that is, all the supplies needed to outfit a post for an entire season. This included trade goods as well as supplies needed to maintain the post.²⁹

The bills of lading also reveal the kinds of equipment with which each canoe was outfitted. This kit was called an *agres*. In 1806, the contents of the outfit were itemized; later these were standardized and entered in the record as simply the *agres*. They consisted of a kettle, an oil cloth used to protect the cargo from water damage, a sponge to soak up water that leaked into the canoe, a codline used to track the canoe up rapids, an ax, a sail, six pounds of refined spruce gum, a bunch of wattap (spruce root used to sew the seams in canoes) and one fathom of birch bark for canoe repairs.³⁰

American Goods

The Treaty of Ghent of 1814 was supposed to give the Americans possession of the south bank of the Rainy River and the south shore of the border lakes country, together with the exclusive right to trade with the Indians on American territory. Inasmuch as the Ojibwe

Lac la Pluie Inventory of Merchandise &c delivered over to M^r. Chastelain on a/c of the Earl of Selkirk by M^r. Trean of N.W.Co. 10th Oct^r 1816.

	Price	Value		
17 3/4 ^c Blankets	15/7	13	4	11
18 2 1/2 D.	13/6	12	3	.
5 2 D.	9/11	2	5	5
3 1 1/2 D.	7/10	1	3	6
2 1 D.	7/.	.	14	.
2 pieces Common blue Shrouds	16/1	16	18	.
17 yds Scarlet Cloth	12/4	10	9	8
13 Rappots & cils	17/.	11	1	.
9 D. 3 1/2	16/11	5	14	3
8 D. 3	12/9	5	2	.
5 D. 2 1/2	10/8	2	13	4
2 D. 2	8/6	.	17	.
8 D. 1	4/3	1	14	.
6 Common Corduroy Jackets	17/9	5	6	6
27 fine D. D.	29/2	39	7	6
2 Slightly Stained D.				
4 fuslain D.				
Remaind forward		L		

²⁸ John McKay, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1795-1796, HBCA, B.105/a/3, fo.37-39.

²⁹ Joseph D. Winterburn, “Lac La Pluie Bill of Lading, 1806-1809,” *Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society, Papers and Records*, Vol. 9, 1981, pp. 8-9.

³⁰ Winterburn, “Lac La Pluie Bill of Lading, 1806-1809,” p. 11.

moved freely back and forth across the border, the idea of “American” and “British” Indians was highly problematic. Moreover, U.S. Customs officials were too far away to constitute much of a threat to Hudson’s Bay Company traders at least until the mid-1820s. Nevertheless, American traders entered the Rainy Lake Region by 1821 with the expectation of supplanting their British competitors on American territory.

The advent of American traders in the Rainy Lake Region probably had little effect on the range of goods involved in the fur trade. British traders obtained tobacco from the American South and rum from the West Indies, and imported nearly everything else from the British Isles. The range of goods had already expanded greatly since the mid-eighteenth century to include such items as spring-operated animal traps, augers, nails, handsaws, corn mills, burning glasses, clay pipes, and all variety of silver ornaments. Historian Rhoda R. Gilman has referred to the ornamental material as “pan-Indian,” manufactured by Europeans solely for the North American Indian market and traded to the Indians without much distinction between tribes.³¹ American traders did not add appreciably to the variety of goods.

An account book exists for the Fond du Lac Department of the American Fur Company from 1824. The material listed in the book was divided between Rainy Lake, Sandy Lake, and Fond du Lac. The list extends for nine pages and contains the same kinds of items as were recorded in the Hudson’s Bay Company’s account books: cloth of various types, colors, and patterns; ornaments such as ear bobs and brooches, cookware such as kettles and knives; tools such as hooks, axes, and traps. The inventory includes various items of clothing, too: capotes, calico shirts, and cotton pantaloons.³²

Ojibwe Goods

The Ojibwe brought two main categories of goods to the exchange: furs and food. They worked on two levels, sustaining the traders with basic necessities such as wild rice and fish, while also furnishing the traders with those animal products that would ultimately find their way to European markets.

Traders’ journals are filled with references to the provisioning trade. When traders were traveling between posts, they were generally more concerned with obtaining food than furs, and invariably their supplies for the trip included a stock of liquor and tobacco for purposes of trade. Jonathan Carver recalled that his party in 1767 procured “some rice and plenty of fish” from Ojibwe at Grand Portage. “Otherwise we must have starved to death, for hunting had been poor.”³³ Alexander Henry the Elder traded with Ojibwe at the Forks on Rainy River in 1775. The Ojibwe wanted presents, or tribute, in recognition of their ability to prevent trade with the interior. “I gave them rum,” Henry wrote, “with which they became drunk and troublesome; and in the night I left them.”³⁴ On his first trip from Osnaburgh to Rainy Lake in September 1793,

³¹ Gilman, “The Fur Trade in the Upper Mississippi Valley, 1630-1850,” p. 13.

³² Bela Chapman Letterbook, MHS, Henry H. Sibley Papers, M164, Roll 17, pp. 20-28.

³³ Jonathan Carver, *Three Years Travels through the Interior Parts of North-America* (Philadelphia: Key & Simpson, 1796), p. 131.

³⁴ Henry, *Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories*, p. 240.

John McKay and his party relied on a combination of food traded from the Indians, “European provisions,” and fish that they caught along the way. On one day, for example, he obtained “3 days fresh venison and twelve gallons of rice” from trade. Shortly after his arrival at Rainy Lake, McKay made a trip to Lake of the Woods for the purpose of obtaining rice for the fort’s pantry. He reported in the post journal that one Ojibwe chief traded him 16 gallons of rice for two gallons of liquor and 2 pounds of tobacco. In all he procured only 30 gallons of rice from the Lake of the Woods Ojibwe, and concluded that the men of the North West Company had beat him to the trade.³⁵

Next to rice, the Ojibwe’s most important contribution to the provisioning trade was dried fish. Traders soon learned from the Ojibwe where the best fishing places were located, but they were not as successful at fishing. The traders only employed nets to catch sturgeon, whereas the Ojibwe caught them with nets or spears. The Ojibwe cut the sturgeon into thin flakes, which they dried over a slow fire. They then pounded the dried flakes between stones until they became like a kind of sponge. When eaten, the absorbent pieces of dried fish were dipped in oil (animal fat), making them “a rich and substantial food of which they are fond.”³⁶ The most productive sturgeon fisheries were located along the Rainy River.³⁷

Ojibwe also supplied the traders with “grease” or animal fat, venison, fowl, and berries. A list of provisions served to the men over a six-month period at the Hudson’s Bay Company’s Rainy Lake fort in 1796 gives some indication of the importance of the provisioning trade, as native foods easily overshadow imported foods. John McKay listed: 30 gallons brandy, 234 gallons rice, 7 gallons bear oil, 151 pounds bacon, 40 pounds beef, 3439 pounds fish, 324 pounds pork, 418 pounds venison, 21 geese, and 97 ducks.³⁸

The Ojibwe supplied the vast majority of furs and hides that were shipped out of the Rainy Lake Region. They hunted animals for their furs and hides at all times of year, although they hunted most often in the winter when the animals’ fur coats were at their “prime” and would fetch a better price. Beaver pelts were the most common product in the early years, while muskrat skins became the most common product (though not the most valuable) in the later years of the fur trade. Other kinds of furs harvested by the Ojibwe of the Rainy Lake Region included bear, “cat” (lynx), fisher, marten, mink, moose, and otter. Rare but present in the Rainy Lake trade were caribou, porcupine, fox, and weasel. Seemingly no fur-bearing animal was too small to be harvested: ground squirrels and skunks were traded as well.³⁹

³⁵ John McKay, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1793-1794, HBCA, B.105/a/1, fo. 3-5.

³⁶ John D. Cameron, Lac La Pluie District Report for 1825-1826, HBCA, B.105/e/6, fo.4.

³⁷ Tim E. Holzkamm, Victor P. Lytwyn, and Leo G. Waisberg, “Rainy River Sturgeon: An Ojibway Resource in the Fur Trade Economy,” in *Aboriginal Resource Use in Canada: Historical and Legal Aspects*, edited by Kerry Abel and Jean Friesen (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1991), p. 121.

³⁸ John McKay, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1795-1796, HBCA, B.105/a/3, fo. 37.

³⁹ John McKay, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1795-1796, HBCA, B.105/a/3, fo. 38d.

Transportation

Traders usually described the landscape of the Rainy Lake Region in terms of expeditiously traveling through it. They wanted to avoid getting lost in its maze of waterways, and they sought the least arduous routes, which generally meant the routes with the fewest and shortest portages. The Rainy Lake Region contained an uncommon amount of vertical relief, producing some exciting rapids and a sense of accomplishment after traversing it. On the westward journey, the traveler often experienced a remarkable acceleration of daily progress when he reached the big waters in present-day Voyageurs National Park, passing the length of Namakan and Rainy lakes in a day or two when it had taken him ten times that long to cover the distance from Lake Superior. At the west end of Rainy Lake the traveler usually enjoyed a short layover at one of the trading posts, followed by a more relaxing paddle down the broad, even current of the Rainy River to Lake of the Woods. These traveling experiences shaped how fur traders responded to the landscape. The traders noted fewer landmarks and named fewer places in the present-day national park than they did east of the park where the route posed more difficulties. Yet Rainy Lake itself was one of the most famous landmarks of the Canadian Northwest, and the Rainy River acquired a reputation as a river of uncommon beauty and tranquility.

The French named these features *Lac La Pluie* and *Rivière Du Pluie* for the mist spreading from the falls that were located a short distance below the outlet of the lake. La Vérendrye referred to Rainy Lake by an Indian name, *Tecamamioüen*, in a letter of 1730, but called it by the French name in 1748.⁴⁰ Joseph La France gave an explanation of the French name in his account of 1740 (published by Arthur Dobbs in 1764), and while some argued that the lake was named for the weather, or was a corruption of *René*, its supposed French discoverer, most accepted the derivation given by La France.⁴¹ English-speaking fur traders usually referred to the lake by its familiar French name, or even by its initials, L.L.P., until about the 1830s (Figure 5).

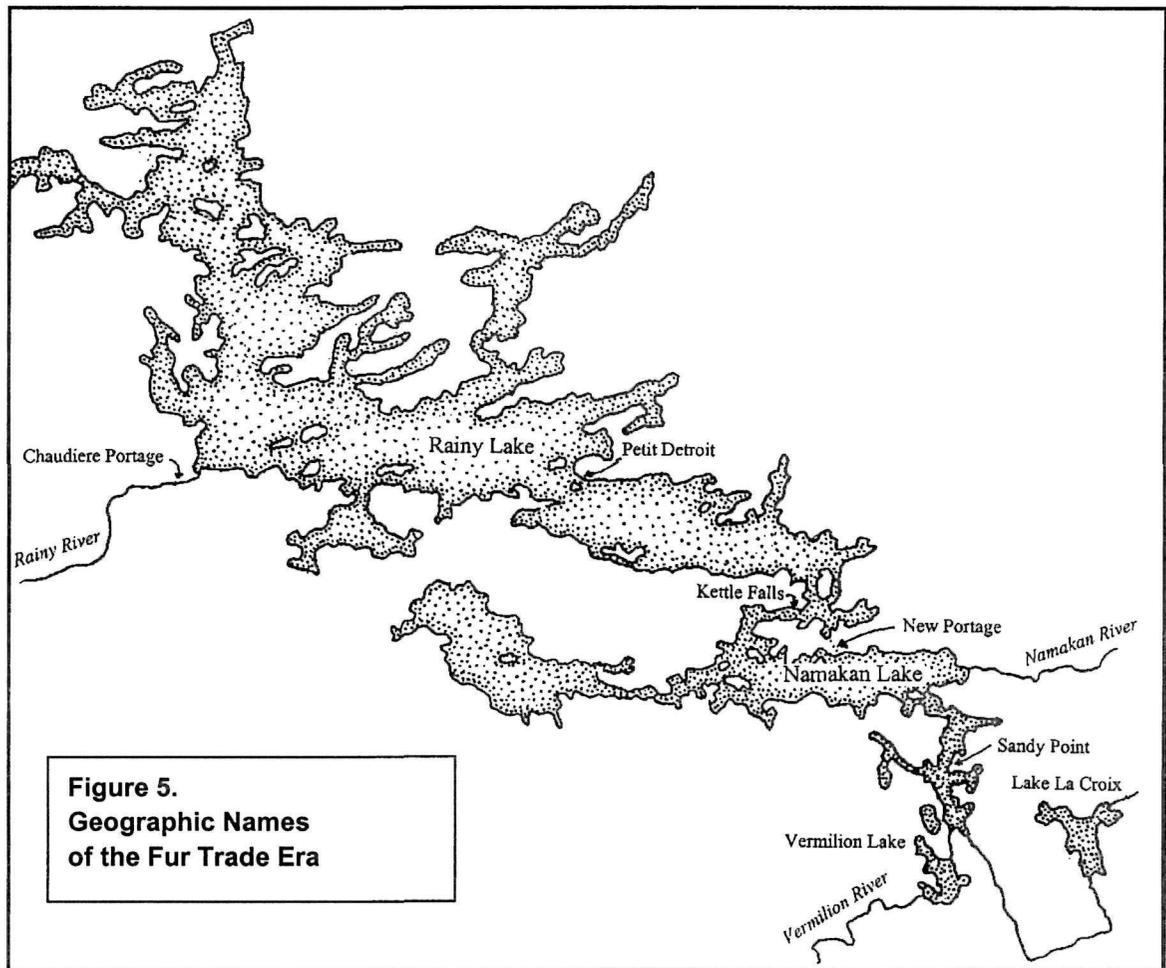
Many travel accounts describe the well-known lake. Jonathan Carver, a “pedler” and early visitor to the region, was one of the first to describe the outlines of Rainy Lake. He referred to a “Great Rainy Lake” and a “Little Rainy Lake” separated by an isthmus. He noted that the eastern arm of the lake was generally shallow, and he greatly overestimated its length at 300 miles.⁴² John J. Bigsby, a doctor and member of the Boundary Commission that traversed the Rainy Lake Region in 1823, referred to the “northeast horn” and “northwest horn” of Rainy Lake. The northeast horn, he wrote, was “remarkable for the pure, smooth, porcelain whiteness of its granite hills, which are often very high, and gleam through their scanty clothing of pine in a beautiful and singular manner, while the dark forests of cypress at their feet greatly heighten the general effect.”⁴³ Bigsby’s account is unusually appreciative of wild nature; it reflects the

⁴⁰ La Vérendrye, *Journals and Letters of Pierre Gaultier de Varennes de la Vérendrye and his sons*, p. 55; Lease, October 22, 1748, De La Vérendrye Papers, A-L399, Minnesota Historical Society.

⁴¹ Arthur Dobbs, *An Account of the Countries Adjoining to Hudson’s Bay in the North-west Part of America* (Toronto: S. R. Publishers Limited Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1967), p. 33. Also see the footnote on the lake’s nomenclature in Elliott Coues, editor, *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest* (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1897), p. 18.

⁴² Carver, *Three Years Travels through the Interior Parts of North-America*, pp. 71-72.

⁴³ Bigsby, *The Shoe and Canoe, or Pictures of Travel in the Canadas*, p. 264.



Romanticism that affected literary circles in his times. A more typical response was that of the Hudson’s Bay Company’s Nicholas Garry, who wrote in his diary in 1821: “Rainy Lake is very uninteresting, low Banks and stunted Fir Trees. Indeed, all the Lakes we have passed since we left Fort William present little to gratify the Eye.”⁴⁴

The falls below the outlet of Rainy Lake were perhaps the most renowned landmark in the region during the fur trade era. In characteristically prosaic fashion, Alexander Henry the Younger gave the name of the portage around the falls as “Chaudiere portage,” (French for waterfall) and stated that it was about 200 paces.⁴⁵ Bigsby noted the falls were in two stages separated by a “boisterous interval of 50 yards.” He gave the height of the two stages as 10 feet and 20 feet.⁴⁶ Adding to the fame of the falls, the Hudson’s Bay Company fort stood on the north bank of the river only a few hundred yards downstream.

Its fame notwithstanding, naming of this landmark was inconsistent—just as it was for other landmarks in the Rainy Lake Region during the fur trade era. Some called it Kettle Falls, while

⁴⁴ Garry, “Diary of Nicholas Garry,” p. 125.

⁴⁵ Coues, ed., *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest*, p. 19.

⁴⁶ Bigsby, *The Shoe and Canoe*, p. 271.

others reserved that name for present-day Kettle Falls at the other end of Rainy Lake.⁴⁷ Similarly, some called it by the French name Chaudiere Falls, while others applied that name to present-day Kettle Falls.⁴⁸ Perhaps since naming was inconsistent, the waterfall was most often identified by its location rather than by name.

Present-day Kettle Falls was another landmark of the fur trade era. Roderick McKenzie described the falls as an important fishing place for Indians and European traders in 1819.⁴⁹ John D. Cameron referred to Kettle Falls as a meeting place with the Ojibwe headman, Two Hearts, in 1825.⁵⁰ The Reverend Peter Jacobs, passing through in 1852, noted that the Indians gathered at Kettle Falls during the whole summer, where they caught fish “in great numbers by scooping them up from the eddies and whirlpools in the rapids.”⁵¹

Various members of the Boundary Commission of 1823 used the name Kettle Falls for this landmark and described its distinctive appearance. Joseph Delafield, for example, stated that the falls was named for a hole worn in the rock at the side of the falls in the shape of a kettle. According to tradition, the excavation was the work of Indians, but Delafield noted that it was “plainly the work of a boulder set in motion by the rapids when they overflowed the spot.”⁵² Stephen H. Long commented that they were viewing the falls in high water conditions.⁵³ Many years later, a soldier of the Red River Expedition described the appearance of the falls in low water conditions:

Kettle Falls is scarcely entitled to the name when the water is so low as at present, though it no doubt deserves it in the spring, for a huge semi-circle in the rock on each side of the rapid presents a kettle-like appearance, in which the water doubtless boils as in a cauldron. In searching for a reason for the name of these falls, I discovered a hole in the rocks very like the inside of a kettle, perfectly smooth, and which would probably hold about five or six gallons.⁵⁴

Stephen H. Long described alternate routes taken by the voyageurs around this obstacle. In high water (the condition in which Long observed it), the voyageurs took the direct route between Rainy Lake and Namakan Lake (Bear River and New Portage). In low water, this route required a tedious portage so the voyageurs took the “Kettle Portage” around the falls. Although the latter followed the circuitous course of the main river (through Kettle Channel and Squirrel

⁴⁷ Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders of the Northwest*, p. 104. The reference is by John MacDonell in 1794.

⁴⁸ Delafield, *The Unfortified Boundary*, p. 420.

⁴⁹ Lac La Pluie Journal for 1819-20, HBCA, B.105/a/7, fo. 20d, October 2, 1819.

⁵⁰ Lac La Pluie Journal for 1824-1825, HBCA, B.105/a/10, fo. 6, January 22, 1825.

⁵¹ Peter Jacobs, *Journal of the Reverend Peter Jacobs* (New York: Peter Jacobs, 1857), p. 30.

⁵² Delafield, *The Unfortified Boundary*, p. 421.

⁵³ Stephen H. Long, *The Northern Expeditions of Stephen H. Long: The Journals of 1817 and 1823 and Related Documents*, edited by Lucile M. Kane, June D. Holmquist, and Carolyn Gilman (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1978), pp. 217-218.

⁵⁴ Justus A. Griffin, “From Toronto to Fort Garry: An Account of the Second Expedition to Red River,” *Evening Times* (Hamilton, Ontario, 1872), p. 33.

Narrows) it required only the one portage all the way to Namakan Lake and thus saved time and effort.⁵⁵

New Portage was the most important portage of the fur trade era in the vicinity of Voyageurs National Park. (It is located just outside the park in Ontario.) Today most of New Portage is submerged and appears on maps as a bay called Bear River. Sir Alexander Mackenzie may have been the first to describe it.⁵⁶ In *Voyages from Montreal*, he detailed all the portages between Lake Superior and Rainy Lake, describing New Portage thus:

The discharge of the lake [Namakan] is from a bay on the left, and the portage one hundred and eighty paces, to which proceeds a very small river, from whence there is but a short distance to the next Nouvelle Portage, three hundred and twenty paces long. It is then necessary to embark on a swamp, or overflowed country, where wild rice grows in great abundance. There is a channel or small river in the centre of this swamp, which is kept with difficulty, and runs South and North one mile and a half, with deepening water. The course continues North-North-West one mile to the Chaudiere Portage, which is caused by the discharge of the waters running on the left of the road from Lake Naymaycan, which used to be the common route, but that which I have described is the fastest as well as shortest.⁵⁷

Descriptions of New Portage vary, owing to differences in water conditions from time to time. Most accounts refer to two portages separated by a swampy stretch. Lord Selkirk made the portage in June 1816 at a time of low water and reported having to walk through grass and rushes for about a mile, “dragging the canoes thro’ soft mud.” Nicholas Garry crossed New Portage in wetter conditions in 1821, and found this middle section not only navigable but rather pleasant, with “beautiful white water lilies, high grass, underwood and wild rice growing in the water.” He recorded the first portage going westward as 400 paces and the second as about 300 paces. After both portages, his party still had to negotiate about two miles of swamp where the “mosquitoes were dreadful.”⁵⁸ Stephen H. Long, going eastward, entered a “small stream called New Portage River which proved very crooked.” He described the intermediate swamp as about 700 yards long and abounding with wild rice.⁵⁹ Similarly, S. J. Dawson described “a circuitous narrow river, without perceptible current, passing through a reedy expanse fringed with low willow for about 3 miles.”⁶⁰ Peter Jacobs, crossing the portage in the highest water he had ever seen, estimated the two portages were each a half-mile long and a half-mile apart.⁶¹ By 1870, the

⁵⁵ Long, *The Northern Expeditions*, pp. 217-218.

⁵⁶ Alexander Henry the Younger made note of it in his journal of 1800, edited and published by Elliott Coues in 1897. Coues, ed., *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest*, p. 18. Coues erred in construing this portage to be Gold Portage between Kabetogama Lake and Black Bay. See his footnotes 20 and 21, pp. 17-18.

⁵⁷ Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal*, p. lv.

⁵⁸ Garry, “Diary of Nicholas Garry,” p. 125.

⁵⁹ Long, *The Northern Expeditions*, p. 217.

⁶⁰ S. J. Dawson, *Report of the Exploration of the Country between the latter place and the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan*, (Toronto: John Lovell, 1859), p. 81.

⁶¹ Jacobs, *Journal of the Reverend Peter Jacobs*, p. 30.

name New Portage was no longer in common use for this long-standing route; instead, the two portages were known as Turtle Portage and Bare (or Bear) Portage.⁶²

Additional portages became popular in later years as use of smaller canoes grew more common. Grassy Bay Portage provided a short cut between Sand Point and Namakan lakes. Lost Bay Portage extended from Saginaw Bay across the base of Soldier Point to Lost Bay. Gold Portage provided a route between Kabetogama Lake and Black Bay on Rainy Lake.⁶³ Its name presumably derives from its use during the Rainy Lake gold rush in the late nineteenth century. No references to any of these routes were found in the fur traders' journals.

Namakan Lake was another landmark to the fur traders. Historian Elliott Coues, who researched many geographical place names for his edited volume, *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest* (1897), gave this account of the lake's name: "Thompson calls this Lac le Mecan, as if it were French; McKenzie maps 'L. Micane'; but it is an Indian name, now rendered Namakan, Namekan, Namaukan, or Nameukan, referring to a place at a fall where the natives speared sturgeon."⁶⁴

Sand Point Lake was less well known than Namakan Lake. Considerably smaller, it was thought by some to form an arm of Namakan Lake and by others to form a single body of water with Crane Lake and Vermilion Lake. Moreover, if one took the northern route from Lake Superior that came down the Namakan River, then Sand Point Lake was bypassed. Still, the sandy point for which it was named became a recognizable landmark. Charles Whittlesey, a geologist who explored the country in 1848, commented on this feature in his journal. "In this region of bare rocks & boulders a sand beach is so seldom seen as to be a remarkable object & I suppose the lake just passed received its name from a Sandy Point on its eastern shore."⁶⁵

The fur traders left few permanent place names on all the islands, bays, and narrows across the whole expanse of Rainy Lake. When they identified specific landforms, such as an island chosen for a campsite, it was usually by reference to how many hours they had traveled since their last *degrade*. Even Brule Narrows, the place where Rainy Lake pinches to a width of a few hundred yards, creating strong currents, was known to the fur traders by the generic French name, *Petit Detroit*, or Little Narrows. Sometimes it was called simply the Detroit. Alexander Henry the Younger mentioned Petit Detroit in his journal of 1800.⁶⁶ Hugh Faries passed another party going the opposite direction "at Detroit in LLP" in 1804.⁶⁷ Joseph Delafield, surveying the

⁶² Tom Thiessen notes on "Journal of John Louis Hubert Neilson," NAC, MG 29 E, vol. 37, June 27, 1871; "Diaries of Josiah Jones Bell," PAO, microfilm, August 7, 1870. G. L. Huyshe referred to "New Portage" in *The Red River Expedition* (New York: MacMillan and Co., 1871), pp. 132-133.

⁶³ Mary Graves, comments to author on draft, February 22, 2000.

⁶⁴ Coues, ed., *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest*, p. 17. See also Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal*, p. lv.

⁶⁵ Charles Whittlesey, "Valley of the Rainy Lake," Western Reserve Historical Society [hereafter WRHS], p. 56. Coues writes that Sand Point Lake was named for *Pointe de Sable*, which Henry Alexander the Younger noted in his journal of 1800. Coues, ed., *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest*, p. 17.

⁶⁶ Coues, ed., *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest*, p. 19.

⁶⁷ Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders of the Northwest*, p. 202.

international boundary in 1823, reported making camp on a rocky island at “a place called the Detroit.”⁶⁸

More than a century after Delafield made his journey, members of another international boundary commission described an island in the middle of Brule Narrows as having “a lone tree used as a range mark by steamboat pilots.” They identified this landmark as “Lone Tree Island,” although the name does not appear on modern maps. It was a custom of the voyageurs to honor an important passenger by modifying such a conspicuous tree as this into a “lob stick.” The men would lop off all of the tree’s lower branches to create a tuft at the top, and would then carve the name of the passenger in the trunk. It is tempting to imagine that this lone tree was a “lob stick,” but no solid evidence has been found that this tree was so modified by the voyageurs.⁶⁹ There is a Lobstick Island in the Canadian waters of Rainy Lake, presumably named for such a tree. Local residents say that until the 1970s there was a lob stick in King Williams Narrows, which appeared on postcards.⁷⁰

The fur traders often referred to the eastern end of Rainy Lake by another generic French term, the *Grand Traverse*, or big crossing. Broader and with fewer islands than other parts of the lake, it presented voyageurs with the all too familiar choice of making a B-line across big water or taking a longer and safer route close to shore. In doubtful weather the decision could be a difficult one. Stephen H. Long estimated that the Grand Traverse was about 12 miles and “destitute of islands” for its whole length.⁷¹

The fur traders’ preference for plain, descriptive place names may have reached a peak with *Portage des Morts*, or Portage of the Dead. Located several miles east of Voyageurs National Park, it was so named for the number of men who had drowned trying to run the rapids rather than portage around them. Traveling through the area in 1821, Nicholas Garry recorded in his diary that he saw “numerous crosses or burial places.”⁷²

Fur traders were prosaic and parsimonious in their use of place names probably because they traveled over such a huge expanse of terrain. Names such as New Portage and Little Narrows had the practical purpose of alerting travelers to shortcuts and hazards. Hardly unique to the Rainy Lake Region, these names were used over and over across the continent. By contrast, soldiers of the Red River Expedition, coming from a different work culture, were quick to bestow names on memorable geographic features as they moved through the region in 1870. Soldier Point on the south shore of Rainy Lake may come from this experience, although no evidence was found for it.⁷³ Other place names appear not to have lasted. Sergeant John

⁶⁸ Delafield, *The Unfortified Boundary*, p. 421.

⁶⁹ International Boundary Commission, *Joint Report Upon the Survey and Demarcation of the Boundary between the United States and Canada from the Northwestern Point of Lake of the Woods to Lake Superior* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1931), pp. 385-386. On lob sticks, see Nute, *The Voyageur*, p. 67.

⁷⁰ Mary Graves, comments to author on draft, February 22, 2000.

⁷¹ Long, *The Northern Expeditions*, p. 217.

⁷² Garry, “Diary of Nicholas Garry,” p. 123.

⁷³ Note that a 1916 survey and report for the International Joint Commission found two buildings belonging to Harry Smith at this location. Adolph F. Meyer and Arthur V. White, *Report to International Joint Commission relating to Official Reference re Lake of the Woods Levels* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1917), p. 21.

Emslie's unit camped one night on an island "in the center" of Namakan Lake and "christened it Canvas Island."⁷⁴ It is not clear whether "in the center" referred to half the distance that the men traveled to New Portage, half the distance across Namakan Lake, or even half the distance across Namakan and Kabetogama lakes combined, since Kabetogama Lake was often considered part of Namakan Lake. In any case, the name did not survive. Another unit named a place on Namakan Lake "Sandy Beach."⁷⁵

The Hudson's Bay Company post journals for Rainy Lake House carry many references to geographic names, but most of the place names in circulation in the Rainy Lake Region during the fur trade were for points outside the national park: Lake of the Woods, Manitou Rapids (on the Rainy River), the River Seine (which flows into Rainy Lake from the north), Dry Berry Lake, White Fish Lake, Vermilion Lake, Lake La Croix, Basswood Lake, Portage de Jourdin (near Dog Lake), and Point des Meurons (nine miles west of Fort William), among others.

The fur traders sought to ease their way through this country by taking the paths of least resistance and giving names to such features as lakes, rivers, and portages so that they could remember the lay of the land. For the most part they used existing watercourses without making physical modifications of the landscape. Occasionally, however, they made improvements. They marked trees to show the way, cut vegetation out of the way, and set logs in the ground to help them get across boggy areas. Any recognized route could be called a "road" whether or not it was improved, but by the nineteenth century the term applied more often to something that the company maintained. Sometimes the term "made road" appeared.⁷⁶

Lord Selkirk took a keen interest in establishing such "roads." In 1817, when the Hudson's Bay Company was fighting the Nor'Westers for possession of the fort at Rainy Lake, Selkirk ordered trader Donald McPherson to "cut" a road from Rainy Lake to Grand Portage. The route, Selkirk indicated, should keep to the north of Lake La Croix and Lake Saganaga and "the old canoe track." He suggested that McPherson employ Indians, noting that Indians had already begun the job from Grand Portage to Lake Saganaga but that they were unfamiliar with the country past that point. Selkirk's specifications for the road are of interest. It was to consist of more than blazes on trees (or *plaques* as the voyageurs called them); it was to be a cleared path through the forest and undergrowth wide enough "to make an easy Snow Shoe tract."⁷⁷

The North West Company made its own road between Fort William and Rainy Lake. When Garry traversed it in 1821, he found recent repairs to several sections, including a point at Middle Portage where three logs were placed together, and another point at Savanne Portage where the road went through a swamp. At another place called French Portage, Garry found the road in a "ruinous rotten State."⁷⁸

⁷⁴ John Emslie, "Journal of Expedition to Fort Garry, 1870," Microfilm Collection, NAC.

⁷⁵ Griffin, *From Toronto to Fort Garry*, pp. 31-32.

⁷⁶ Garry, "Diary of Nicholas Garry," p. 123.

⁷⁷ Lord Selkirk to Donald McPherson, February 22, 1817, NAC, Lord Selkirk Papers, Vol. 10, p. 3189 (Reel 4).

⁷⁸ Garry, "Diary of Nicholas Garry," pp. 121-123.

Roderic McKenzie describes the origins of the Kaministiquia route

After a long absence in the Indian territories, I paid this year a visit to Canada. Returning the following Spring, on my first trip from Grand Portage to *Lac La Pluie*, I met a family of Indians at the height of land from whom I accidentally learned the existence of a water communication a little way behind and parallel to this, extending from Lake Superior to Lake *La Pluie*, which is navigable for large canoes and, if adopted, would avoid the Grand Portage.

This was excellent information; of course I immediately engaged one of the Indians to meet me at a certain point in *Lac La Croix*, to show me this new route but on my arrival, as appointed, the Indian was not there. However, being acquainted with the entrance of the route, I proceeded without him and reached post of the Company where I procured a guide who accompanied me to Caministiquia on Lake Superior, from whence I soon reached Grand Portage, being the first who reached there from *Lac La Pluie* direct by water communication.

This apparently new route, being at the door of Grand Portage, and formerly used by the French, it is most astonishing that the North-West Company were not acquainted with it sooner.

It may be right to observe here that, after the peace of 1783, the Commissioners appointed by the British and American Governments for settling the boundaries, decided that the Grand Portage was within the limits of American territories.

In 1784, at the establishment of the North-West Company, the Directors, in consequence of the decision of the Commissioners, despatched an expedition to survey a water communication said to exist between *Pays Plat*, in Lake Superior through Nipigon to *Portage de l'Isle* in River Winipic, which after two months of hard labour, was reported impracticable, so that the North-West Company were left awkwardly situated, without one opening for their trade, until the present discovery.

In the History of Canada, repeated mention is made of the establishment of Caministiquia, and it appears by vestiges and report that the French establishments were destroyed by fire. In the river of Caministiquia, at a short distance above the fort, there is a fall which, in my opinion, is little inferior in splendor to the Falls of Niagara.

In consequence of this discovery, measures were adopted for the removal of the establishment of Grand Portage to Caministiquia, and in 1801, the necessary preparations having been made, Caministiquia became the head of the North-West Company for ever after.

– Roderic McKenzie, “Reminiscences,” in L. R. Masson, ed., *Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest*, pp. 46-47.

Hudson's Bay Company men seem to have made repairs to this road as a matter of course. In 1850, an officer named James Anderson led a brigade of six canoes from Fort William to Rainy Lake and back two times during the summer. On his second trip, Anderson noted in his journal that his men cut all the trees in the portages between French Portage and Fort William, including “immense pines” that lay across the portages.⁷⁹ It is unclear whether they were cutting saplings and deadfall that had accumulated over a period of years or during an ordinary winter, or indeed, whether the “immense pines” had fallen recently in an unusual storm.

⁷⁹ James Anderson, “Journal of a Trip,” [1850], Microfilm Collection, NAC.

Dawson's road, surveyed in 1859 and finally completed in 1871, was somewhat more elaborate. When the military used it in 1870, they carried larger boats over the route than had ever been used in the fur trade.⁸⁰ Henry Youle Hind, a geologist with the first Red River Expedition, noted that the old road of the North West Company needed to be "cleared, and tramways laid down, over which loaded boats may be hauled by appropriate tackle."⁸¹ Apparently the idea was to lay wooden rails end to end so that boats could be skidded along them. Much of the actual work of road construction was carried out in 1870 by the military force under General Wolseley. G. L. Huyshe, a member of the latter expedition, reported just such an arrangement at New Portage between Namakan and Rainy lakes. His detachment cut a path and laid "skids" across this section.⁸²

Park officials are aware of one case of historical graffiti, probably from the fur trade era. The inscription "HUGH" appears on the rock on the north side of Soldier Point. It is visible only during extreme low water conditions. Local residents have attributed the inscription to fur trader Hugh Faries.⁸³

Habitations

Habitations in the Rainy Lake Region included posts, outposts, and camps. Related features included cultivated fields and vegetable gardens, livestock pens or grazing areas, and burial grounds.

Fort William

The Rainy Lake Region had no major installations on the scale of the Hudson's Bay Company's York Factory or the North West Company's Fort William, but the latter was close enough to exert an enormous influence. The buildings of Fort William in 1817, according to fur trader Ross Cox, included a large house and dining hall, a council house, a doctor's residence, store houses for furs and merchandise, a forge, various workshops with apartments for the mechanics, and a prison. The entire compound was surrounded by a stockade and bastions, and more habitations for voyageurs and Indians were located outside the fort's walls.⁸⁴ Fort William was a veritable city in the wilderness, with a population of as many as 3,000 people.

Posts

The first post in the Rainy Lake Region was Fort St. Pierre, built in 1731. No physical description of the fort has been found. It had already vanished by the time the North West

⁸⁰ S. J. Dawson, *Report on the Red River Expedition of 1870* (Ottawa: Times Printing and Publishing Co., 1871), passim.

⁸¹ Hind, *Narrative of the Canadian Red River Exploring Expedition of 1857 and of the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition of 1858*, p. 217.

⁸² Huyshe, *The Red River Expedition*, pp. 132-133.

⁸³ Mary Graves, comments to author on draft, February 22, 2000.

⁸⁴ Davidson, *The North West Company*, p. 238.

Company arrived in the area, although Sir Alexander Mackenzie and his contemporaries knew where the fort had once stood. In *Voyages from Montreal*, Mackenzie stated that the French fort had been situated at a bay in the Rainy River below a rapid and two miles above the famous falls. In Mackenzie's time, the site consisted of a "beautiful meadow, surrounded with groves of oaks."⁸⁵ Research by historian Lawrence Burpee, as well as archaeological investigation, has placed the fort at Pither's Point, a peninsula on the Canadian side of the Rainy Lake outlet.⁸⁶ Historian Grace Lee Nute described the appearance of Fort St. Charles, built one year after Fort St. Pierre at Lake of the Woods, as a likely approximation of Fort St. Pierre's design:

It extended about sixty feet from Angle River and about a hundred feet southward into the forest. Consisting of four main buildings with fireplaces, a powder magazine, a storehouse, a watchtower, and a stone, or partially stone, chapel, it was a little smaller than Fort Beauharnois on Lake Pepin, and somewhat larger than Fort St. Pierre, which it superseded for some years, at least, as headquarters for La Vérendrye. Yet it was not a very substantial affair, if we are to believe a man who lived there and who described it as "but an enclosure," inside which were "a few huts of squared logs, calked with earth and covered with bark."⁸⁷

The North West Company built a post about a mile and a half below the outlet of Rainy Lake in 1787.⁸⁸ Mackenzie wrote that the fort was "situated on a high bank on the North side of the river."⁸⁹ John McKay of the Hudson's Bay Company described this rival fort as "formidable" in appearance.⁹⁰ By 1800, the fort had a large garden in which the proprietor cultivated potatoes and various other vegetables.⁹¹ In 1813, a visitor to the fort reported seeing "cultivated fields and domestic animals, such as horses, oxen, cows, etc."⁹² Few other descriptions of the North West Company fort are known.

As the fort grew in importance, serving as an advance depot where the crews from the Athabaska District exchanged freight with the crews from Montreal, it must have grown into a sizable operation. A list of the men at Lac La Pluie Department in 1805 included 39 names. Of this number, 6 were clerks (4 of whom had English or Scottish names) and 33 were guides, interpreters, foremen, steersmen, middle men, and summer men (all but one of whom had French names).⁹³ Hugh Faries, chief clerk at the fort in 1804, kept a diary that gives hints of the fort's appearance at that time. There were several "little houses" for the employees. These were made of squared logs with stone chimneys and plank floors. "Plastering [sic] the houses" appears to

⁸⁵ Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal*, p. lvi.

⁸⁶ Jeff Richner, comments to author on draft, February 22, 2000.

⁸⁷ Nute, *Rainy River Country*, p. 8.

⁸⁸ Daniel Williams Harmon, *A Journal of Voyages and Travels in the Interior of North America* (Toronto: The Courier Press, Ltd., 1911), p. 19.

⁸⁹ Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal*, p. lvi.

⁹⁰ John McKay, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1793-1794, HBCA, B.105/a/1, fo.1.

⁹¹ Henry, *Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories*, p. 20.

⁹² Franchere, *Narrative of a Voyage to the Northwest Coast of America*, p. 335.

⁹³ Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders of the Northwest*, p. 205.

have been an annual chore, shared by all the men, before each winter. There were probably a number of rough outbuildings, including a stable that the men built that fall. Faries made several mentions of an “Athabasca house,” or “Athabasca store,” apparently dedicated to the storage of supplies. Faries also referred to a number of “saw pits.”⁹⁴

The Hudson’s Bay Company established its first post in the Rainy Lake Region in 1793. The first house was located at the Manitou Rapids on the Rainy River. John McKay and his men went back to Albany Fort at the end of the year and when they returned to this house in the following spring they found it partially destroyed. McKay and his men erected a more substantial structure in the fall of 1795 on the shore of Lake of the Woods. He recorded in the post journal that his men laid a foundation for a house 25 feet long by 20 feet wide “within the walls.” Evidently the house was surrounded by a stockade. The house walls were made of logs, the chimney of stones and clay, and the roof of hay. The house had multiple bedrooms and plank floors.⁹⁵ The Hudson’s Bay Company withdrew from the Rainy Lake Region in the late 1790s.

The Hudson’s Bay Company returned to the Rainy Lake Region in 1817. Donald MacPherson oversaw construction of the new fort, which was located within sight of the falls about a mile below the North West Company fort. MacPherson’s post journal mentions the construction of an officers’ house and a men’s house. A Catholic missionary who visited the site during the summer of 1818 described the Hudson’s Bay Company post as under construction and still “in its infancy.”⁹⁶ Nicholas Garry, visiting the post in 1821, was more impressed. He

John Tanner convalesces at Rainy Lake Fort

Mr. Stewart left me at the Rainy Lake trading house, in the care of Simon McGillevray, a son of him who many years ago was so important a partner in the North West Company. He gave me a small room, where my daughters cooked for me, and dressed my wounds. I was very weak, and my arm badly swollen, fragments of bone coming out from time to time. I had lain here twenty-eight days, when Major Delafield, the United States commissioner for the boundary, came to the trading house, and having heard something of my history, proposed to bring me in his canoe to Mackinac. But I was too weak to undertake such a journey, though I wished to have accompanied him. Finding that this was the case, Major Delafield gave me a large supply of excellent provisions, two pounds of tea, some sugar and other articles, a tent, and some clothing, and left me.

– *A Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner*, p. 277.

⁹⁴ Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders of the Northwest*, pp. 214, 218.

⁹⁵ John McKay, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1795-1796, HBCA, B.105a/3, fos. 4d, 5d. McKay noted that the chimneys had to be rebuilt each year as they would usually burn up before the winter was over. But he recorded a new method of construction. “I place the 4 uprites 2 fast farther from one another, then I really mean to Build the Chimney then I tie the cross bars as in other Chimney of this kind only stronger to support the Clay which is a foot on every square from the uprites then when the Clay is dry which becomes as hard as stones I take away the uprites from the Chimney and if I chose may hawl out the crossbars; then the Chimney stands without a bit of wood in her—and when those holes are filled up with well worked Clay that is occasioned by taking away the crossbars; and the Chimney washed with clean Clay about as thick as water grease. it will have all the appearance of a stone Chimney well pasterd.” (Fo. 11).

⁹⁶ Nute, ed., *Documents Relating to Northwest Missions, 1815-1827*, p. 124.

described the post as built upon an eminence “commanding a beautiful and picturesque situation.” Houses were constructed of logs, and window coverings were made of moose skin.⁹⁷

Many years later, members of the Red River Expedition of 1870 described the Hudson’s Bay Company post, renamed Fort Frances. By then it consisted of a collection of one-story block-houses surrounded by a palisade, with about 100 acres of ground cleared for agriculture nearby.⁹⁸ This is essentially the scene that Fort

Joseph Delafield describes the Hudson’s Bay Company post
The Hudson’s Bay Co. fort, as called, consists of a rude dwelling house, facing the cascade & a little below it, a warehouse forming another face, & the men’s quarters the third of a square, the fourth being the river front, with a large gate way. It is enclosed by high pickets, & from the dwelling house thro’ the gate way is a fine view of the cascade.

– Major Joseph Delafield, *The Unfortified Boundary*, p. 422.

Frances pioneer Mrs. G. Scott remembered from her youth, when her father was in charge of the post. A resident at the post beginning in 1873, Scott recalled that the post

was composed of dwelling house for the gentleman in charge, the store and a provision shed and a few small log houses for the hired men and their families. All these buildings were enclosed by a high stockade fence hence the name fort, besides these there were outhouses for animals and dogs. The fort was situated on the banks of the Rainy River just you may say in the bend of the river below the falls.⁹⁹

Outposts

During the period of rivalry between the Hudson’s Bay Company and the North West Company, numerous outposts appeared in the Rainy Lake Region. These were typically occupied by a single clerk and a handful of servants and probably consisted of no more than a cabin and a small garden. Faries noted the existence of an “XY Fort” located within walking distance of the North West Company fort. He also mentioned outposts near Portage La Pente and Jourdain Portage (on the route between Rainy Lake and Fort William).¹⁰⁰ The Hudson’s Bay Company had outposts at Bass Wood Lake, White Fish Lake, and Point de Meuron. No known outposts were located within the boundaries of Voyageurs National Park.

The closest outpost to Voyageurs National Park was probably located on what is now Crane Lake. An archaeological investigation by the Minnesota Historical Society in 1994 linked this site to two French traders under the command of La Vérendrye named Bourassa and Eustache. Possibly the same fort that these men built in 1736 was reoccupied from time to time by the

⁹⁷ Garry, “Diary of Nicholas Garry,” p. 126. Roderick McKenzie referred to the moose skin as “parchments.” See Roderick McKenzie, *Lac La Pluie Journal for 1819-1820*, HBCA, B. 105/a/7, fo. 39.

⁹⁸ Huyshe, *The Red River Expedition*, p. 137; George Adshead, *Journal*, Manitoba Provincial Archives.

⁹⁹ G. Scott, “Pioneer Days of Fort Frances,” PAO, Record Group 16, Series 16-87, File 15-2.

¹⁰⁰ Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders of the Northwest*, p. 206.

French and later the British and Americans.¹⁰¹ Fur traders referred to Crane Lake as Vermilion Lake, or Little Vermilion Lake, which leads to confusion with the larger Vermilion Lake to the south.¹⁰² Lord Selkirk referred to an old North West house at what was presumably the larger Vermilion Lake in 1817: “the old NW house at Vermilion is off the route to the Grand Portage four or five days up a river that falls into Vermilion Lake.”¹⁰³ But historian Grace Lee Nute has concluded that other references to activity at Vermilion Lake, specifically by the Hudson’s Bay Company’s John McLoughlin, relate to Crane Lake on the southeastern edge of Voyageurs National Park.¹⁰⁴ Roderick McKenzie reported that one Mr. Sayer of the North West Company occupied a post at Vermilion Lake with a force of one clerk and six servants in 1819.¹⁰⁵ Dr. McLoughlin noted that a man named Beaulieu was at Vermilion Lake with a force of two clerks and six servants in 1822.¹⁰⁶ (This was one of the Beaulieu brothers who worked for John Johnson, a Scotsman who lived on the American side of the Sault Ste. Marie River and began outfitting traders in the country west of Lake Superior in 1820.¹⁰⁷) During the winter of 1822-1823, Beaulieu and another party of traders, including a man named Youngs Morgan, nearly starved to death at Vermilion Lake.¹⁰⁸ The following year, no less than three outfits were sent to Vermilion Lake, one by Johnson consisting again of two clerks and six servants, another by William M’Gillivray of the Hudson’s Bay Company (under McLoughlin’s command), and a third by the American Fur Company consisting of two clerks and seven servants. Hearing that one of the two American clerks was a customs house officer, and recognizing that Vermilion Lake was in American territory, McLoughlin called M’Gillivray’s men back to the outpost at Bass Wood Lake. In his district report for 1823, McLoughlin noted that the Hudson’s Bay Company had once had a post at Vermilion Lake, but that it had been abandoned because there was no wild rice in the vicinity.¹⁰⁹

James Anderson of the Hudson’s Bay Company, in a diary of 1850, described a house at the outlet of the Namakan River belonging to one “Isbister.” James Isbister served as the post master for the Lac La Pluie District, and was listed in the district’s account book for 1847-1848.¹¹⁰ No other reference to Isbister’s house has been found. Interestingly, his house was located at a popular fishing ground for the Indians. Anderson remarked only that his party dined

¹⁰¹ Elizabeth Knudson Steiner and Robert Alan Clouse, “Historical Research and Archaeological Investigations Relating to the Bourassa Site on Crane Lake, Minnesota,” Archaeology Department, Minnesota Historical Society, 1994, *passim*.

¹⁰² Nute, “Hudson’s Bay Company Posts in the Minnesota Country,” *Minnesota History* 22 (Summer, 1941), p. 275.

¹⁰³ Lord Selkirk to Donald McPherson, March 6, 1817, Selkirk Papers, NAC, Reel 4, p. 3234.

¹⁰⁴ Nute, “Hudson’s Bay Company Posts in the Minnesota Country,” p. 275.

¹⁰⁵ Roderick McKenzie, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1819-1820, HBCA, B.105/a/7, fo.20d.

¹⁰⁶ John McLoughlin, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1822-1823, HBCA, B.105a/8, fo.1d.

¹⁰⁷ Gerald Robert Vizenor, ed., “Clement H. Beaulieu’s Sketch of the Fur-Trade Around Lake Superior,” in *Escorts to White Earth, 1868 to 1968: 100 Year Reservation* (Minneapolis: Four Winds, 1968), p. 67.

¹⁰⁸ Clarissa Headline and Milton N. Gallup, “The Diary of an Early Fur Trader,” *Inland Seas: Quarterly Journal of the Great Lakes Historical Society* 19, no. 2 (Summer 1963), pp. 114-118.

¹⁰⁹ John McLoughlin, Lac La Pluie District Report for 1822-1823, HBCA, B.105/e/2, fo.4.

¹¹⁰ Lac La Pluie Account Book, HBCA, B.105/d/67, fos. 1d-2.

near Isbister's house, which stood "on a point of very rich land, adorned with some splendid weeping elms, whose trunks were encircled by a climbing plant resembling the hop"¹¹¹ (Figure 6).

In the Hudson's Bay Company's Lac La Pluie post journal for 1817-1818, there are numerous references to a "Watch Tent" or "Watching Tent." For a few years, the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company each maintained two camps above and below their respective forts on the Rainy River. The purpose of the camps was to station men at strategic locations to hail approaching Indians and direct them to the company's fort instead of the rival fort. Both companies' upper camps were located within sight of each other at the outlet of Rainy Lake. (References were made to the tent at "the mouth of Lake LaPluie," and "the little Rapid watching place.") The lower camps appear to have been at the Little Fork. Men usually occupied the watching tents in pairs, taking turns in a kind of sentry duty. Some trading took place at these camps as well.¹¹²

The camps were short-lived. The North West Company abandoned its camp at the outlet of Rainy Lake by March 1820.¹¹³ The Hudson's Bay Company apparently abandoned its camp soon afterward. By 1823, the site was no more than a grassy clearing. Joseph Delafield described its appearance:

The River of Lac l'Pluie...flows from the lake over a little rapid of two feet descent, and shortly after another similar rapid, and thence two miles or so to the Hudson's Bay Compy.'s trading post, known as the Fort of River of Lac l'Pluie....Descending the second rapid a handsome lawn coated with high grass presents itself, which I understood was an old lookout station of the Hudson's Bay Co. during the times of opposition, when he who first saw the approach of an Indian's canoe, and first got possession, was the owner of the spoils. Thence the advantage of these "look-outs," which now is of no other earthly use than to please the eye of the traveller and recall scenes far more delightful.¹¹⁴

The Morgan party arrives at Vermilion Lake in a starving condition

We started on again although we was so weak that we could hardly walk. We went on a piece and left the rest of our things, blankets and all, we leaving some the day before. We traveled very slow and stopped by spells to rest. La Rose's wife carried me some five or six miles on her shoulders until near dark when we built a fire where I remained. La Rose and his wife went on and arrived at the house at dark. They informed Mr. Beaulieu of my situation who with his dogs and train, came after me. He brought me a little scorched wheat which I ate that relieved a severe pain in my breast. I then got on to the train and late in the evening we arrived at the house. We found Mr. Beaulieu almost destitute of provisions. He had a few quarts of wheat and not much of anything else. He got of late the most of his living by a few fish they caught now and then.

– Youngs L. Morgan diary, December 3, 1822.

¹¹¹ James Anderson, "Journal of a Trip," NAC, p. 94. Possibly this plant was the wild grape.

¹¹² Donald MacPherson, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1817-1818, HBCA, B.105/a/5, fo.10; Robert Logan, Lac La Pluie Journal for 1819-1820, HBCA, B.105/a/6, fo. 25d; Roderick McKenzie, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1819-1820, fo. 21.

¹¹³ Roderick McKenzie, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1819-1820, fo. 70d.

¹¹⁴ Delafield, *The Unfortified Boundary*, p. 422.

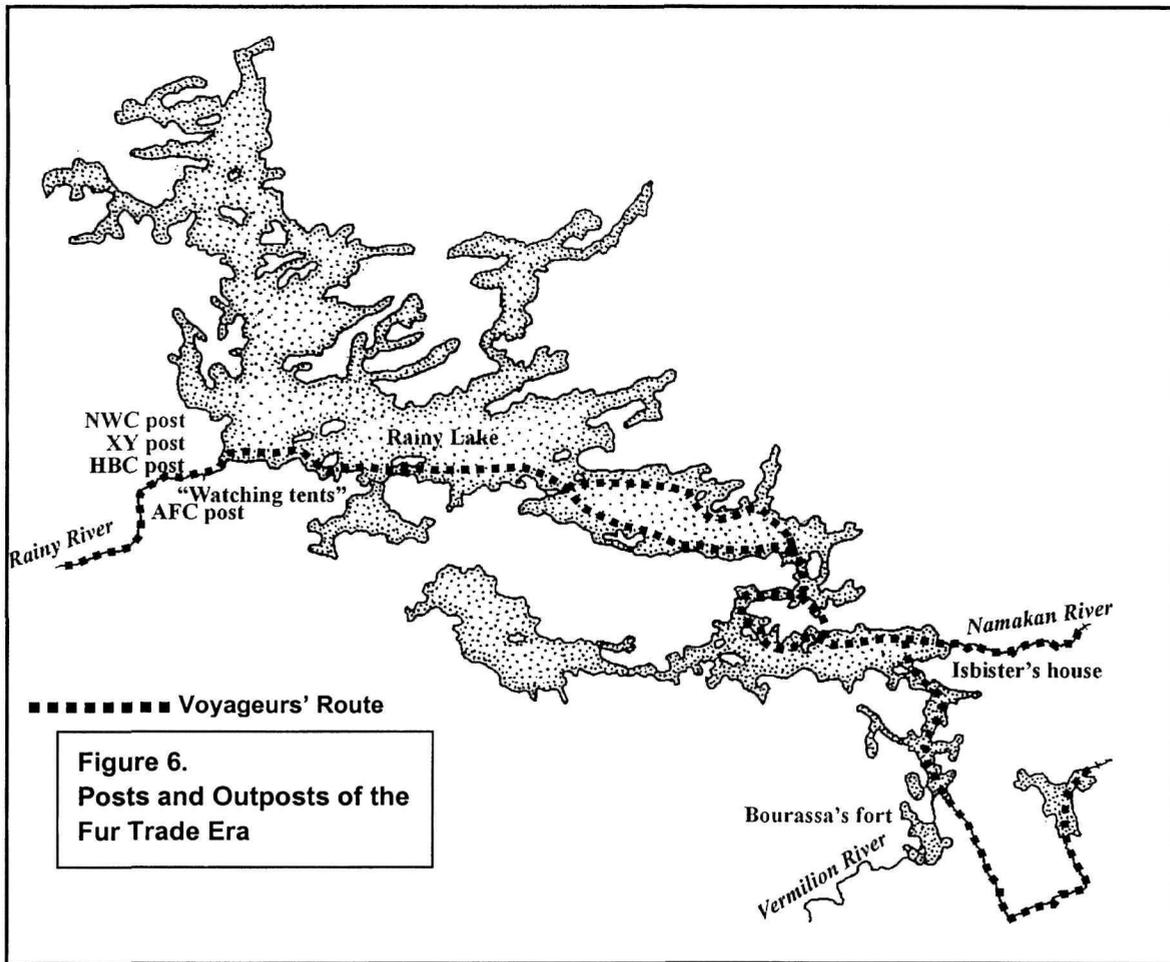


Figure 6.
Posts and Outposts of the
Fur Trade Era

Camps

In addition to manning the watch tents, the post traders frequently went in pairs to look for Indians where they were known to make camps. These were most often fishing places. The men from the post went to these places to fish or trade or both. Three fishing places are mentioned most often in the post journals: Manitou Falls (on the Rainy River), Kettle Falls, and the rapids on the Namakan River.

Indians gathered at Manitou Falls in the fall to catch sturgeon by seining.¹¹⁵ The traders did some seining here themselves, and they also procured some of their sturgeon (a staple in the Rainy Lake Region) through trade with the Indians. Entries in the post journal in October 1819 are suggestive of the fishery's importance. On October 8, Roderick McKenzie sent four men to Manitou Falls with seine nets and three gallons of rum for trade. Losing the road in the new-fallen snow, the men returned to the fort. McKenzie worried that the missed opportunity to trade at Manitou Falls could bring disaster later in the winter. After three weeks of stormy weather, he

¹¹⁵ Donald MacPherson, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1817-1818, HBCA, B.105/a/5, fo.4.

sent another party to trade rum for sturgeon—despite word from the North West Company trader that there were no longer any sturgeon at the falls.¹¹⁶

To the east, Kettle Falls was another fishing place where Indians gathered to catch sturgeon in the fall. Family groups met at the site, and traders from Rainy Lake House found Kettle Falls to be one of the more promising sites to contact Indians. In January 1825, John Cameron wrote in the post journal that an Ojibwe named The Cancer was taking a message to two other Ojibwe, Two Hearts and The Little Rat, to go to Kettle Falls with their “hunts” or skins, and the fort’s interpreter would meet them there.¹¹⁷ According to the Rev. Peter Jacobs, who traveled through the area in 1852, Indians congregated at Kettle Falls throughout the summer, catching white fish in the eddies of the rapids.¹¹⁸

The rapids on the Namakan River were located about seven miles above Namakan Lake. Alexander Mackenzie may have been the first European to record this place. He stated that the name of Namakan Lake derived from a particular fishing place at the foot of a falls where the Indians speared sturgeon.¹¹⁹ Jacobs wrote that the Indians called the place “Nahmagaun” and caught an abundance of both sturgeon and white fish there.¹²⁰ James Anderson, traveling down the Namakan River in 1850, wrote in his diary, “At all the rapids the Indians have erected stages for spearing sturgeon.”¹²¹

Robert M. Ballantyne, an apprentice clerk with the Hudson’s Bay Company who seemed to take more than the usual interest in the native cultures he encountered during his six years in North America, described an Ojibwe family camp on the Namakan River in 1845. It is a remarkably vivid portrait that Ballantyne presented in his book, *Hudson’s Bay*, published three years later after the encounter, and one must assume that Ballantyne wrote from notes he took at the time. Since the portrait provides an image of people inhabiting their built environment, it is worth quoting in full:

In making a portage, we suddenly discovered a little Indian boy, dressed in the extreme of the Indian summer fashions—in other words, he was in a perfect state of nakedness, with the exception of a breech-cloth; and upon casting our eyes across the river we beheld his father, in a similar costume, busily employed in catching fish with a hand-net. He was really a wild, picturesque-looking fellow, interested in his proceedings. When I first saw him, he was standing upon a rock close to the edge of a foaming rapid, into the eddies of which he gazed intently, with the net raised in the air, and his muscular frame motionless, as if petrified in the act of striking. Suddenly the net swung through the air, and his body quivered as he strained every sinew to force it quickly through the water: in a moment it came out with a beautiful white-fish, upwards of a foot long, glittering like silver as it struggled in the mesh. In the space of half an hour he had caught half-a-dozen

¹¹⁶ Roderick McKenzie, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1819-1820, HBCA, B.105/a/7, fo.39.

¹¹⁷ J. D. Cameron, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1824-1825, HBCA, B.105/a/10, fo.6.

¹¹⁸ Jacobs, *Journal of the Reverend Peter Jacobs*, p. 30.

¹¹⁹ Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal*, p. lv.

¹²⁰ Jacobs, *Journal of the Reverend Peter Jacobs*, p. 30.

¹²¹ James Anderson, diary, NAC, p. 94.

in this manner, and we bought three or four of the finest for a few plugs of tobacco. His wigwam and family were close at hand, so, while our men crossed the portage, I ran up to see them.

The tent, which was made of sheets of birch-bark sewed together, was pitched beneath the branches of a gigantic pine, upon the lower limbs of which hung a pair of worn-out snowshoes, a very dirty blanket, and a short bow, with a quiver of arrows near it. At the foot of it, upon the ground, were scattered a few old tin pots, several pairs of moccasins, and a gun; while against it leaned an Indian cradle, in which a small very brown baby, with jet-black eyes and hair, stood bolt upright, basking in the sun's rays, and bearing a comical resemblance to an Egyptian mummy. At the door of the tent a child of riper years amused itself, by rolling about among the chips of wood, useless bits of deer-skin and filth, that is always strewn around a wigwam. On the right hand lay a pile of firewood, with an axe beside it, near which crouched a half-starved, wretched-looking, nondescript dog, who kicked up a tremendous row the moment he cast eyes upon me. Such was the outside. The interior, which was filled with smoke from the fire and Indians' pipes, was, if possible, even dirtier. Amid a large pile of rabbit-skins reclined an old woman, who was busily employed plucking the feathers from a fine duck, which she preserved carefully (the feathers, not the duck) in a bag, for the purpose of trading them with the Company at a future period. Her dress was a coat of rabbit-skins, so strangely shaped that no one could possibly tell how she ever got it off or on. This, however, was doubtless a matter of little consequence to her, as Indians seldom take the trouble of changing their clothes, or even of undressing at all. The coat was fearfully dirty, and hung upon her in a way that led me to suppose she had worn it for six months, and that it would fall off her in a few days. A pair of faded blue cloth leggings completed her costume—her dirty shoulders, arms, and feet being quite destitute of covering; while her long black hair fell in tangled masses upon her neck, and it was evidently a long time since a comb had passed through it. On the other side sat a younger woman similarly attired, employed in mending a hand-net; and on a very much worn buffalo robe sat a young man (probably the brother of the one we had seen fishing), wrapped in a blanket, smoking his pipe in silence. A few dirty little half-naked boys lay sprawling among several packages of furs, tied up in birch-bark, and disputed with two or three ill-looking dogs for the most commodious place whereon to lie. The fire in the middle of the tent sent up a cloud of smoke which escaped through an aperture at the top, and from a cross-bar depended a few slices of deers-meat, which was undergoing the process of being smoked.¹²²

There are numerous mentions of Indians dwelling on the islands in Namakan Lake. Joseph Delafield noted wigwams on several islands in the lake.¹²³ Peter Jacobs wrote in his diary that these islands had enough soil to be cultivated, and some Indian families grew potatoes on them, which they traded to the Europeans.¹²⁴

Traders occasionally described specific locations of other Indian camps. Alexander Henry the Elder, traveling through the area in 1775, noted an Ojibwe village of 50 lodges at "Les

¹²² Ballantyne, *Hudson's Bay; or Every-day Life in the Wilds of North America*, pp. 240-242.

¹²³ Delafield, *The Unfortified Boundary*, p. 421.

¹²⁴ Jacobs, *Journal of the Reverend Peter Jacobs*, p. 30.

Fourches” (Little Fork) on the Rainy River.¹²⁵ John MacDonell traded with The Premier, Nectam, and 20 young men in 1794 at a location on Rainy Lake some “five leagues” from the fort.¹²⁶ Alexander Henry mentioned Pointe de Sable or Sand Point, for which Sand Point Lake is named, where they found some Indians making canoes.¹²⁷ John McLoughlin mentioned sending men to the mouth of the Seine River (which empties into the north side of Rainy Lake) to trade with Two Hearts at his lodge. McLoughlin’s instructions to the men were to cache their trade goods if Two Hearts could not be found.¹²⁸

References to caches are rare in the traders’ journals, probably because caches were by definition secret. John Tanner provided a good description of a cache in his narrative: “Here we had packs to deposit, as we were about to leave the country; and the ground being too swampy to admit of burying them in the usual manner, we made a sunjegwun of logs, so tight that a mouse could not enter it; in which we left all our packs and other property, which we could not carry.”¹²⁹ Interestingly, Tanner maintained that Indians traditionally respected another person’s cache, whereas traders regarded such a find as booty.

A large number of Indians resided near the Rainy Lake House. Friedrich von Graffenreid, a soldier of the Hudson’s Bay Company, described the large encampment of “Salteaux Indians” (Ojibwe) in 1817. The encampment consisted of about 50 “huts” or wigwams in the longhouse style, elongated rather than round but nonetheless built “in the typical pole and birch bark fashion.” Some of these dwellings, Graffenreid stated, were inhabited by several families. This community was considerably larger than the typical Ojibwe camp, which might consist of a cluster of wigwams and perhaps 30 to 50 men and their families.¹³⁰ Many years later, in the 1870s, the Ojibwe occupied their birch bark wigwams along the bank of the river from Fort Frances to Pithers Point each summer and were away trapping each winter, according to a reminiscence by the daughter of post trader Charles S. Crowe.¹³¹

If Indian camps generally made a fairly light impression on the landscape, traders’ overnight camps made even less of a footprint. Nevertheless, traders sometimes described where they stopped for breakfast or dinner or a night’s rest in fairly precise detail. These references provide clues as to how they traveled through the area and in what locations they were most apt to have discarded or lost material items. As noted earlier, the speed of travel from Grand Portage or Fort William to Rainy Lake House increased once the traders reached the big waters of Lake Namakan and Rainy Lake. The passage typically involved one or perhaps two overnight stops, some additional stops for meals, and sometimes a *degrade* if the weather turned threatening. The traders most often stopped on the small, rocky islands that fringed the two lakes. New Portage

¹²⁵ Henry, *Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories*, p. 240.

¹²⁶ John MacDonell, Journal (transcription). Manuscripts Collection, Minnesota Historical Society, p. 103.

¹²⁷ Coues, ed., *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest*, p. 17.

¹²⁸ John McLoughlin, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1823-1824, HBCA, B.105/a/9, p. 94.

¹²⁹ James Edwin, ed., *A Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner*, (London: Baldwin and Cradock, 1830), p. 65.

¹³⁰ Graffenreid, *Sechs Jahre in Canada*, p. 116.

¹³¹ Mrs. G. Scott, “Pioneer Days of Fort Frances,” March 1941, PAO, RG 16, Series 16-87, File 15-2.

was another common place to rest, as was the Little Detroit (Brule Narrows). Most of these stopping places are probably submerged today.¹³²

The Red River Expedition probably had a somewhat bigger impact when it passed through the area in 1870; indeed, according to some participants it practically cut a road as it went. The force was considerably strung out to avoid congestion at the many portages. Each brigade consisted of three officers, 50 men, and 12 or 13 voyageurs. According to Colonel G. J. Wolseley's orders, each brigade was to encamp at the far (westward) end of a portage and to "pile up their provisions close to the landing place...covering them over with the boat tarpaulins." Cooking fires were to be built close to the water so as to minimize the danger of starting forest fires. All arms were to remain in the arms chests until the force reached Fort Frances. Camp equipment for each brigade consisted of one tent for the officers, four for the soldiers, and one for the voyageurs; Flanders kettles and frying pans for cooking; axes, spades, and shovels for clearing the way; and a kit issued to each soldier containing a waterproof bag, various items of clothing, two gray blankets, mosquito netting, clasp knife, tin cup, tin plate, knife, fork, and spoon, towel, soap, and comb, clothes brush, and a small note book.¹³³

Several diarists in the Red River Expedition of 1870 described locations of camps where their brigades stopped for a night. John Emslie's brigade camped on an island "in the center" of Namakan Lake, which they named Canvas Island because they used one of the boat's sails for a makeshift tent. The same brigade camped the next night on an island in Rainy Lake, which Emslie estimated to be 18 miles from the east shore. The group made little progress against a head wind on the next day and camped on another island in Rainy Lake. The next morning, still rowing against the wind, they crossed to the American shore and finally reached Fort Frances in the evening.¹³⁴

Josiah Jones Bell's brigade camped August 6, 1870, at a high point between two bays on Namakan Lake. After traversing New Portage, they camped August 7 on a rocky island in the "middle" of Rainy Lake.¹³⁵ H. S. H. Riddell's brigade also camped on an island in Namakan Lake, where they were visited by "100 half-starved Chippewa."¹³⁶ Wolseley's orders included a prohibition against allowing Indians to stay in the camps, but it appears to have been difficult to enforce. Emslie's party, for example, was visited by the same group of Indians on two consecutive nights while they traversed Rainy Lake.¹³⁷

¹³² Garry, "Diary of Nicholas Garry," p. 125; Delafield, *The Unfortified Boundary*, pp. 419-421.

¹³³ John Irvine, *Report on the Red River Expedition of 1870* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1871), pp. 8, 14; Huyshe, *The Red River Expedition*, Appendix F.

¹³⁴ John Emslie, "Journal of Expedition to Fort Garry, 1870," Microfilm Collection, NAC.

¹³⁵ Josiah Jones Bell, *Diary*, Manitoba Provincial Archives.

¹³⁶ H.S. H. Riddell, "The Red River Expedition of 1870," *Transactions of the Literary and Historical Society of Quebec, Session of 1870-71*, (Quebec: Middleton and Dawson, 1871), p. 119.

¹³⁷ John Emslie, "Journal of Expedition to Fort Garry, 1870," Microfilm Collection, NAC.

Wild Rice

Wild rice was harvested in the Rainy Lake Region in prehistoric times. There is direct evidence of wild rice use dating back to the Middle Woodland period.¹³⁸ The Ojibwe harvested wild rice in the Rainy Lake Region probably as soon as they occupied the area in the 1700s. Their use of wild rice increased during the fur trade era as they harvested some for their own subsistence and additional quantities for trade.¹³⁹

Since the European fur traders relied heavily on native foods for provisioning their posts, they took a keen interest in the locations of wild rice beds. When La J meraye built Fort St. Pierre in 1731 at the outlet of Rainy Lake, he may have been influenced by the abundance of rice beds around the shore of Rainy Lake as well as the fishery at the falls.¹⁴⁰ Alexander Henry the Elder recognized the importance of this resource in 1775, noting that “the rice grows in shoal water, and the Indians gather it by shaking the ears into the canoes.”¹⁴¹ By the 1790s, traders in the Rainy Lake Region paid close attention to each year’s crop and waited expectantly for the native harvest in late summer. High water levels could have a devastating effect on the rice, and a poor harvest could lead to starvation in the winter. The traders’ dependence on rice nearly rivaled that of the Ojibwe, who were known to withhold rice from commercial sales and retain it for their own subsistence when stocks were low.¹⁴² As late as 1833, traders at Fort Frances faced a food shortage after a poor rice crop the preceding year. An English traveler remarked that the fort had neither meat nor fish owing to the scarcity of rice, which was “generally abundant at this solitary station, growing in the swampy ground around the lake.”¹⁴³ Despite these hardships, the traders managed to keep their posts occupied even in years when the rice crop failed.

Traders remarked frequently on the abundance of wild rice at certain locations along the well-traveled route between Namakan Lake and Fort Frances. The inlets and ponds along New Portage were especially productive. Alexander Mackenzie described this area as “a swamp, or overflowed country, where wild rice grows in great abundance.”¹⁴⁴ Stephen Long wrote that “Small Lakes or pools and swamp abounding in wild rice” were frequent on this portage.¹⁴⁵ Nicholas Garry, traveling westward across New Portage in 1821, described the first section as beautiful in character, with “white water lilies, high grass, underwood and wild rice growing in the water.” As the swamp lengthened, however, he became less impressed. “The Annoyance of the Mosquitoes was dreadful from which we suffered for nearly an Hour, the Distance of the Swamp being about two miles, the Course tedious and difficult.”¹⁴⁶ Gabriel Franchere had a

¹³⁸ Jeff Richner, comments to author on draft, February 22, 2000.

¹³⁹ Thomas Vennum, Jr., *Wild Rice and the Ojibway People* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988), pp. 198-199.

¹⁴⁰ Vennum, *Wild Rice and the Ojibway People*, p. 199.

¹⁴¹ Henry, *Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories*, p. 242.

¹⁴² Tim E. Holzkamm, “Ojibwa Horticulture in the Upper Mississippi and Boundary Waters,” in *Actes du Dix-Septi me Congr s des Algonquinistes*, edited by William Cowan (Ottawa: Carleton University, 1986), p. 149.

¹⁴³ R. N. Back, *Narrative of the Arctic Land Expedition* (London: John Murray, 1836), p. 40.

¹⁴⁴ Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal*, p. lv.

¹⁴⁵ Long, *The Northern Expeditions*, p. 217.

¹⁴⁶ Garry, “Diary of Nicholas Garry,” p. 125.

similar experience crossing New Portage in mid-summer of 1813, finding the “streams impeded with wild rice, which rendered our progress difficult, now traversing little lakes, now passing straits where we scarcely found water to float our canoes.”¹⁴⁷ In 1847, a sportsman by the name of Frederick Ulric Graham traversed New Portage, poling his canoe through “several little stagnant swampy creeks, full of wild rice and frogs.”¹⁴⁸

Wild rice grew in shallow bays along Rainy Lake’s deeply indented shoreline. West of Brule Narrows, Joseph Delafield sighted numerous fields of rice with wigwams pitched on the higher ground nearby, indicating to him that the Indians “were eagerly waiting the harvest time.”¹⁴⁹ The rice fields around Rainy Lake were all the more important because the plant became scarce to non-existent in the prairie country to the west.

Ojibwe Agriculture

The Ojibwe of the Rainy Lake Region raised corn and potatoes. Their agricultural pursuits were near the northern limit of Indian agriculture in North America.¹⁵⁰ Their use of these products appears to have originated in the nineteenth century and to have increased in the latter part of the century. Anthropologists have found that Ojibwe garden agriculture spread quickly in the Upper Mississippi River Region in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, and the phenomenon seems to have spread into the Rainy Lake Region by the 1850s, if not before.¹⁵¹

Anthropologists Tim E. Holzkamm and Leo G. Waisberg have argued that the Ojibwe adopted horticulture in the 1800s to augment their diversified subsistence resource base. Holzkamm and Waisberg focused on the Ojibwe band that occupied the country around Lake of the Woods, but suggested that the patterns revealed for this band were characteristic of other bands of Ojibwe in northwestern Ontario. Of particular interest to Holzkamm and Waisberg were the several “garden islands” in Lake of the Woods. They concluded that horticulture

Wild Rice in the Provisioning Trade

The water was again extremely high above Lake Ounipique particularly within the American Territories, from which not a grain of rice was procured...From Plantation Island we got 58 Bushels of very bad corn which is all the provisions we could get from the Indians. Sturgeon has entirely failed in this river. The Indians made none for themselves, nor did they trade a mouthful with the traders. I could give Mr. McMurray only half the quantity that was required for his post (Bois Blanc)...I gave no grain to Clouston’s Altho’ he always had a share for White Fish Lake. Mr. Bouck got only ten kegs which is half the usual allowance. however He stands a pretty good chance of getting as much more from his Indians, as they have all some corn hid for themselves, which they will no doubt trade in the first drunken frolic they will make either with Bouck or the Americans.

– J. D. Cameron, quoted in Tim E. Holzkamm, “Ojibwe Horticulture in the Upper Mississippi and Boundary Waters.”

¹⁴⁷ Franchere, *Narrative of a Voyage to the Northwest Coast of America*, p. 336.

¹⁴⁸ Frederick Ulric Graham, *Notes of a Sporting Expedition in the Far West of Canada, 1847* (London: Hermione Graham, 1898), p. 23.

¹⁴⁹ Delafield, *The Unfortified Boundary*, p. 422.

¹⁵⁰ Holzkamm and Waisberg, “Agriculture and One 19th-Century Ojibwa Band: ‘They Hardly Ever Loose Sight of Their Field,’” p. 408.

¹⁵¹ Holzkamm, “Ojibwa Horticulture in the Upper Mississippi and Boundary Waters,” p. 144.

appeared in this area by the 1820s, and developed into a significant part of the Ojibwe subsistence economy in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Much of their evidence came from the 1870s and later.¹⁵²

Horticulture may have developed later and to a lesser extent among the Ojibwe in the Rainy Lake Region, owing perhaps to the greater abundance of wild rice in this region compared to the area around Lake of the Woods. The post journals contain numerous references to Indian corn, but it appears that this food was either grown at the fort (the English referred to “Indian corn” even when they grew it themselves) or procured from Ojibwe sources to the west of Rainy Lake House. The earliest known mention of Ojibwe horticulture in the near vicinity of Voyageurs National Park is that of the Reverend Peter Jacobs, who was impressed by the Indians’ potato crops on islands in Namakan Lake. “The islands on the Nahmaguun,” Jacobs wrote, “possess good soil for cultivation; and some of the Indian families have raised a good quantity of potatoes, which they barter to the traders for goods.”¹⁵³ Probably these gardens were fairly new, or they would have been mentioned by earlier travelers. The only other probable reference to Indian horticulture dates from 1870. Josiah Jones Bell, a member of the Red River Expedition, remarked that “there was something very like corn growing” near the point that the New Portage route met Rainy Lake. Elsewhere on the same portage he saw “a log shanty.”¹⁵⁴

Agriculture and Livestock around the Forts

Traders did not rely solely on the Indians for vegetables and grain; they also grew vegetable gardens and sowed various types of grain themselves. (Traders did not, however, harvest wild rice on their own.) They grew hay and raised horses, cows, hogs, and chickens. While numerous rice beds and some Ojibwe gardens were located within the present boundaries of Voyageurs National Park, non-Indian agriculture was probably limited to the immediate vicinity of posts east and west of the park.

The employees of the North West Company may have been the first to introduce European grains in the Rainy Lake Region. Gabriel Franchere noted the existence of cultivated fields and domestic animals around the company’s Rainy Lake House in 1813.¹⁵⁵ When the Hudson’s Bay Company re-established a presence in the area in 1816, the men planted 40 acres of wheat, potatoes, oats, and barley around the new fort and had a substantial farm within two years. The wheat crop harvested in the fall of 1817 was milled into flour in a nearby mill.¹⁵⁶ By 1823, the farm was flourishing. Stephen Long noted that the Hudson’s Bay Company raised Indian corn and other “culinary vegetables,” which were consumed by the men at the fort. William H. Keating listed the products of the farm as wheat, potatoes, maize, peas, beans, pumpkins, and

¹⁵² Holzmann and Waisberg, “Agriculture and One 19th-Century Ojibwa Band: ‘They Hardly Ever Loose Sight of Their Field,’” pp. 418-420.

¹⁵³ Jacobs, *Journal of the Reverend Peter Jacobs*, p. 30.

¹⁵⁴ Josiah Jones Bell, *Diaries*, Ontario Provincial Archives, Toronto.

¹⁵⁵ Franchere, *Narrative of a Voyage to the Northwest Coast of America*, p. 335.

¹⁵⁶ Donald MacPherson, *Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1817-1818*, HBCA, B.105/a/5, fo. 14d.

water and musk melons.¹⁵⁷ The farm itself was located some distance from the house, although it is not clear where.¹⁵⁸

The Hudson's Bay Company farm at Fort Frances continued to thrive in the 1840s and after. The geologist Charles Whittlesey described a "large farm" on his visit in 1848. He remarked that the hay and wheat looked good, and the potatoes and oats were "equal to any." The ground was too wet for corn. At this time, it seems, the fort obtained its corn from Vincent Roy, the son of the retired North West Company employee by the same name who had a farm at the Little Fork (below Fort Frances on the Rainy River).¹⁵⁹ G. L. Huyshe of the Red River Expedition gave a similar impression of the farm in 1870, stating that the fort had a few acres of wheat, barley, and Indian corn, "all of which looked remarkably well."¹⁶⁰

Horses were probably the first domestic animals that traders kept at the fort. In 1804, the North West Company stocked a number of horses at Rainy Lake, allowing the animals to roam freely around the vicinity of the fort.¹⁶¹ In 1816, the North West Company had ten horses and a colt at Rainy Lake.¹⁶² Post trader Donald MacPherson noted that several horses were brought up from Fond du Lac and offered for sale in 1817. The North West Company purchased 13, while MacPherson tried to buy some for the Hudson's Bay Company and was refused.¹⁶³ Post trader John D. Cameron mentioned pigs as early as 1825 and two young heifers in 1829. By this time there were a great number of dogs at the fort. In August 1829, the dogs were in such a starving condition that they attacked and devoured part of a hog while the animal was still alive—much to the disgust of the men, who put the hog out of its misery and then killed six dogs out of concern for the other livestock.¹⁶⁴ By 1837 there were a large number of horses and cattle at Fort Frances.¹⁶⁵ In 1870, Huyshe reported that there were about 20 head of cattle, which required a "vast amount" of hay during the long winters.¹⁶⁶

The post journals contain few details about how these animals were kept. Occasional references to the construction or maintenance of stables suggest that the animals were afforded some shelter although the location of these outbuildings in relation to the palisade is unclear. Probably horses, cattle, and hogs were not penned for much of the year. The post journal for June 21, 1829 contains the remark that "Lafrenier made a Fence to allow the horses, and Cattle

¹⁵⁷ William H. Keating, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of St. Peter's River, Lake Winnepeek, Lake of the Woods, etc.*, 2 vols. (London: Geo. B. Whittaker, Ave-Marie Lane, 1825), p. 125.

¹⁵⁸ Roderick McKenzie, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1819-1820, HBCA, B.105/a/7, fo. 30d.

¹⁵⁹ Charles Whittlesey, Papers, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio.

¹⁶⁰ Huyshe, *The Red River Expedition*, p. 139.

¹⁶¹ Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders of the Northwest*, p. 219.

¹⁶² "Inventory of the Fur Trade, Fort Lac La Pluie, North West Co., October 1816," copy provided by Tom Thiessen.

¹⁶³ Donald MacPherson, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1817-1818, HBCA, B.105/a/5, fo. 9.

¹⁶⁴ John D. Cameron, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1829-1830, HBCA, B.105/a/14, fo. 14d.

¹⁶⁵ Fort Frances Post Journal for 1837-1838, HBCA, B.105/a/20, fo. 22d.

¹⁶⁶ Huyshe, *The Red River Expedition*, p. 139.

to go to the Stable to be under Shelter from the Flies which are numerous.”¹⁶⁷ In the summer of 1837, when hundreds of Indians gathered near the fort for the Medicine Ceremony, the fort’s stockman expressed concern for the animals’ safety.¹⁶⁸

Burial Grounds

Traders made scant references to burial grounds. Evidence was found of only a few burial grounds in the Rainy Lake Region, none of them in Voyageurs National Park.

Nicholas Garry, an official in the Hudson’s Bay Company, noted a “burial place” of a solitary voyageur who was said to have starved to death. The site was located on the Swampy River to the east of Lac des Mille Lacs (well east of the national park). It was marked by a cross. On the same trip, Garry saw numerous other crosses marking the graves of voyageurs who were buried at Portage des Morts. The place, Garry wrote, took its name from the number of fatal accidents that had occurred nearby.¹⁶⁹

Donald MacPherson, the Hudson’s Bay Company’s post trader at Rainy Lake in 1817-1818, drowned in a canoe accident in the early part of 1819. MacPherson was buried in a grave near the fort. The post journal indicates that a funeral service was held at the grave site, followed by a gathering at the officer’s house immediately afterward. This suggests that the grave site was close to the fort.¹⁷⁰ No other record of the location of MacPherson’s grave, indeed no other reference to the grave at all, was found.

G. L. Huyshe and Justin Griffin both give accounts of an Ojibwe burial ground located at Fort Frances in 1870. Apparently it was no longer in use by that time. Huyshe wrote that it was located at the portage around the falls at Fort Frances and appeared as a large field covered with a luxuriant growth of grass. Some of the bodies were buried in the ground “in the usual way.” For example, a child’s grave had been neatly fenced and a child’s paddle and toy canoe were placed by the grave marker. Other bodies were placed in coffins that stood on a platform six or seven feet above

Livestock and agriculture at Rainy Lake

The Calves are in pretty good order. The Horses are very weak but still continues to do a little, we have got all the potatoe Ground planted and I hope we shall be able to finish all of the other ground which are worth[while], notwithstanding the state of the Horses, a little piece of it looks very indifferent, so that I don’t mean to reach the Horses too far for the sake of it, as perhaps that would be the means of preventing them to be able to do any thing to it in the fall, this piece I mean to manure, as soon as the Horses is in a State able to work as also to plow it & by that means I expect that it will give a fine Crop next year. The wheat sown on the 28th April looks well at present, we had a little rain lately which has done much good to the ground.

– Donald McPherson to Lord Selkirk, May 25, 1817, Selkirk Papers.

¹⁶⁷ J. D. Cameron, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1829-1830, HBCA, B.105/a/14, fo. 6.

¹⁶⁸ Fort Frances Post Journal for 1837-1838, HBCA, B.105/a/20, fo. 3.

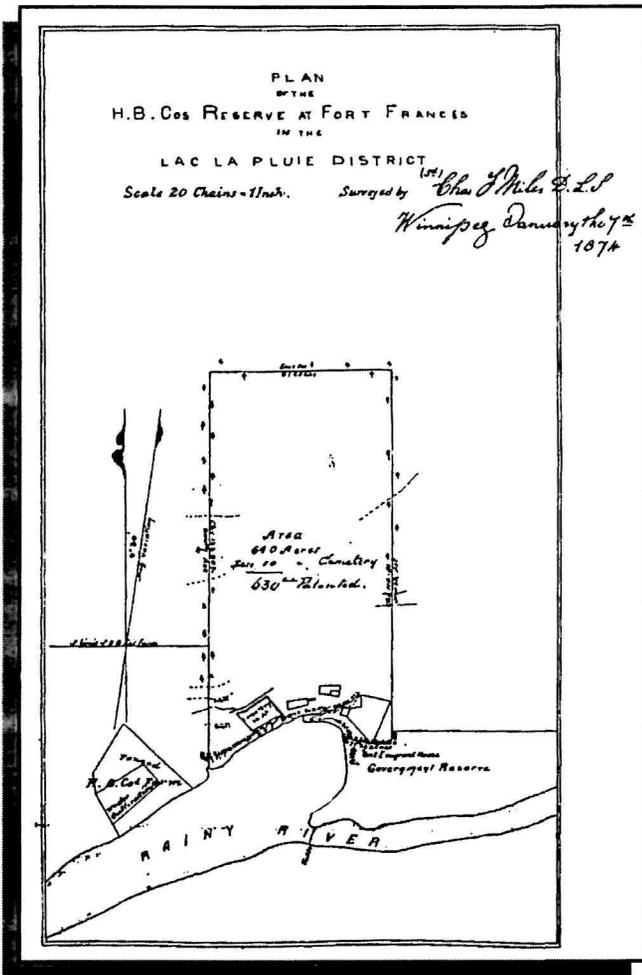
¹⁶⁹ Garry, “Diary of Nicholas Garry,” pp. 122-123.

¹⁷⁰ Robert Logan, Post Journal for 1819-1820, HBCA, B.105/a/6, fo. 19d.

the ground. The platform itself was held up by four stout stakes. Huyshe stated that the latter method was used for the “great chiefs,” but he also noted that some chiefs were buried in the ground. Both Huyshe and Griffin were informed that the custom was to place the corpse in the coffin with the deceased’s gun, kettle, and other valuables.¹⁷¹

A government survey of the Hudson’s Bay Company’s reserve at Fort Frances in 1874 made note of a cemetery located between the fort and the Hudson’s Bay Company’s farm. An unofficial survey map gave the extent of the cemetery as 10 acres. In 1984, a backhoe operator uncovered human burials in this vicinity in the course of breaking ground for a parking lot adjacent to the Boise-Cascade Mill. Subsequent archeological investigation, headed by Grace

Rajnovich of the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Culture, resulted in the recovery of remains of at least thirteen individuals. Rajnovich concluded that most of the burials dated to the period 1840-1880, although some of the burials perhaps dated to an early period from 1817 onward. The cemetery evidently included servants of the Hudson’s Bay Company and their families as well as citizens of the nascent community of Alberton (now Fort Frances, Ontario).¹⁷²



¹⁷¹ Huyshe, *The Red River Expedition*, pp. 151-152; Griffin, *From Toronto to Fort Garry: An Account of the Second Expedition to Red River*, p. 36.

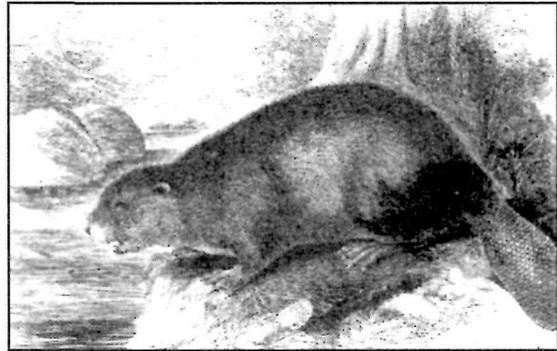
¹⁷² Grace Rajnovich, “Rescue Excavations of the Boise Cascade Burials (DdKi-2) in Fort Frances, Ontario,” Conservation Archaeology Report, Northwestern Region, Report No. 6, 1985, p. 5; Jeffrey Chartrand, “The Osteology and Trace Element Analysis of DdKi-2, Fort Frances, Ontario,” Ontario Ministry of Culture and Communications, Field Services Branch, Northern Region, Conservation Archaeology Report No. 17, 1992, p. 18.

Chapter Four

The Natural Environment in the Fur Trade Era

Voyageurs National Park was established for the purpose of preserving “the outstanding scenery, geological conditions, and waterway system which constituted a part of the historic route of the Voyageurs who contributed significantly to the opening of the Northwestern United States.”¹

Pursuant to this congressional mandate, the National Park Service manages the natural resources in Voyageurs National Park with the goal of approximating as nearly as possible the natural conditions that prevailed during the fur trade era. Natural resource managers have acquired data on past natural conditions from various sources including studies of pollen and charcoal layers found in lakebed sediments, faunal bone counts recovered from archeological sites, and limited use of historical documents. No systematic study of historical sources has heretofore been done. The purpose of this chapter is to familiarize natural resource managers with the breadth and depth of information about the environment that can be gleaned from historical documents. The chapter addresses four topics: climate, flora, fauna, and fisheries.



Nineteenth century naturalist drawing of a beaver

Climate

Historians of climate use historical documents to trace climate change and extreme weather events in the past. For periods of time prior to the advent of weather stations in the late nineteenth century, historical documentation consists primarily of anecdotal comparisons between different places and points in time and unscientific observations of extreme weather events. For the fur trade era in the Rainy Lake Region, historical documentation consists almost solely of observations by fur traders and explorers augmented by occasional climatic data recorded by a geographer such as David Thompson. Despite the limitations of the historical documentation, data drawn from sources like these have been used in other contexts to reconstruct past climatic influences on both the natural and cultural environment.

Fur traders and explorers who recorded their observations on climate in the Rainy Lake Region had a variety of practical concerns in mind. The long, cold winters had a profound effect on local travel as well as on long distance commerce between Fort Chipewyan and Montreal;

¹ Public Law 91-661.

therefore, traders often noted when the surface of the lakes and rivers froze or thawed. Weather events such as unusually high water affected animal populations, so fur traders sometimes noted these as well. A third practical concern was the climate's effect on crops—the vegetables and grain that were planted around the post and the wild rice that the Indians harvested and traded. Finally, weather was a frequent source of discomfort or strangeness; consequently, post journals and travel diaries provide almost daily weather reports and are sprinkled with complaints about excessive cold, rain, or heat. In general, historical documentation of climate conditions falls into two categories: observations that reveal weather patterns, and descriptions of extreme weather events.

One could examine the Hudson's Bay Company post journals and assemble a substantial set of data for the period 1793-1870 on various indices of seasonal weather patterns: first hard frost, first snow, beginning of freeze-up, snow depth in mid-winter, beginning of spring thaw, water depth after spring thaw, frequency of summer storms. Some traders kept more consistent records on the weather than others. Most traders began every entry with a weather report. On September 29, 1796, John McKay recorded a "hard frost." Over the following weeks, his daily observation of the weather went as follows:

September 30	Wind NE fine clear weather.
October 1	Wind SW fine day.
October 2	Wind West clear warm weather.
October 3	Wind West blowing a storm a head with rain most part of the Day.
October 4	Wind West blowing an hurricane with dreadful rain and hail.
October 5	Wind NW with snow.
October 6	Wind North blowing cold and hard.
October 7	Wind blowing a storm.
October 8	Wind East blowing hard.
October 9	Wind South blowing hard.
October 10	Wind South cloudy weather.
October 11	Wind North blowing a strong breeze.
October 12	Wind NW clear weather.
October 13	Wind West fine day.
October 14	Wind SE blowing a perfect storm.
October 15	Wind NW blowing a perfect storm, as it always [does] at this place in the fall.
October 16	Wind West blowing hard.
October 17	Wind SE cloudy weather.
October 24	Wind NE cloudy weather.
October 25	Wind East with snow.
October 26	Wind East with rain all day.
November 4	Wind West blowing a storm as usual. ²

² John McKay, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1796-1797, HBCA, B.105/a/4, fo.8-10.

Most of the post journals follow McKay's format of beginning each entry with a brief weather report. Indeed, the post journal for 1840-1841 consists solely of weather reports from October 1, 1839 to May 29, 1841.³ Most of these post journals have been transcribed by Thomas Thiessen of the Midwest Archaeological Center in Lincoln, Nebraska and these transcriptions are included in the documentation filed with this report.

The post journals contain numerous references to the thickness of the ice. Thin ice inhibited travel just as solid ice facilitated travel. On February 18, 1818, Donald McPherson reported that the ice on Rainy Lake measured 2 1/2 feet thick.⁴ On February 16, 1819, Robert Logan noted that McPherson and a companion had attempted to cross the river but the ice was drifting so much that they could not get over—a description that suggests the beginning of spring break-up.⁵ In late January 1820, Roderick McKenzie reported several days in a row of “amazing cold,” and on January 30 he noted that the ice had once again “set fast below the fall.”⁶ This type of information could be gathered in a weather table to compare climate patterns in the fur trade era with what they are today.

Lac La Pluie District reports are another good source of climatic data for the fur trade era. In these reports, fur traders tended to describe their impressions of the local climate. John Cameron noted in his report for 1826 that winters generally lasted from November 1 to May 1, heavy rains fell in the spring and fall, and hard frosts were known to occur in the summer which often destroyed the crops.⁷ Post trader John McLoughlin summarized his impressions of the local climate in a report, probably written about 1805, on “Indians from Fort William to Lake of the Woods.” He wrote:

The climate is not colder than about Quebec and perhaps not so cold. On the 16th of April, we saw bustards; the 22d, all the snow was off the ground; the 4th May all the ice broke up in Vermilion Lake, which is about ten leagues in length and four in breadth and from fifteen to ten fathoms deep. Moreover, this is thought to be a late spring. Last year, the ice broke up on the 25th April and this year, on the 25th of the same month we saw wild pigeons and it must likewise be observed that in Canada the lakes are much smaller while the rivers are smaller here and the ice is rather carried away by the force of the current than melted by heat of the sun, while here it is the reverse. There is no sudden swell of water sufficient to raise it and no current strong enough to break it. It must melt till it comes into flakes and, being loosened along shore, the least impulse of wind is sufficient to break it, so that often a lake is entirely open in the evening which, in the morning, was an extensive field of ice.⁸

³ Anonymous, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1840-1841, HBCA, B.105/a/21, fo.1-10d.

⁴ Donald McPherson, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1817-1818, HBCA, B.105/a/5, fo.14d.

⁵ Robert Logan, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1818-1819, HBCA, B.105/a/6, fo.17d.

⁶ Roderick McKenzie, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1819-1820, HBCA, B.105/a/7, fo.63d.

⁷ John Cameron, Extracts from Lac La Pluie Reports, 1823-1827, HBCA, B.105/e/8, fo.2.

⁸ John McLoughlin, “The Indians from Fort William to Lake of the Woods,” Manuscript 2364, Rare Books and Special Collections Division, McGill University Libraries, Montreal.

Sometimes traders wrote about the climate based on considerable personal experience. Peter Grant noted that in the course of some eighteen years in the country he had never seen more than three feet of snow depth and in many winters he remembered not more than a foot. Grant's memory of snow depth, however, may be contrasted with two later accounts. In 1820, Roderick McKenzie estimated that the snow depth had reached 4-1/2 feet.⁹ And in 1857, the post trader at Fort Frances informed Henry Youle Hind that snow characteristically accumulated to a depth of four feet. The trader also remarked that he had never known the Rainy River to freeze over between the falls and the Little Fork, nor between the falls and the river's source in Rainy Lake.¹⁰ When this information is compared with Robert Logan's note in February 1819 and Roderick McKenzie's weather reports through the winter of 1819-1820, it suggests that the 1850s were a period of relatively warm winters or that the winters of 1818-20 were unusually cold.

In some cases, weather extremes are stated, not just suggested, in the historical sources. In 1824, John McLoughlin wrote that the winter was so mild, with so little snow, that "martens do not bait."¹¹ The following winter was also mild. On March 23, 1825, John Cameron noted that the Rainy River was open half way down, and on April 23 he reported that no ice remained on the lakes—"a most extraordinary circumstance" according to one of the local Indians. Cameron's Indian informant also stated that most of the muskrats had died in the course of the winter, many perishing inside their lodges. "There is not within the Memory of the oldest People in the Country, Such an other instance of an early Breaking up of the Ice," Cameron wrote. "The Great and Sudden heat which took place with the beginning of this Month Such weather as according to the Natives of the Climate and Country (at least generally Speaking) we should have expected only in May."¹²

Cameron gleaned other climatic and ecological information from the Indians. As heavy rain fell and the Rainy River rose rapidly in early May, Cameron learned of the disastrous effects the high water would have on the wild rice crop. "From the Great rise of the water, we may bid adieu to Rice for this year," he wrote. The next day he added, "I am afraid this high water will Cause a Scarcity during Summer."¹³ In his district report for that year, Cameron blamed the high water for poor fishing, too. "The water was so high in the autumn that McMurray at White Fish Lake caught few fish and his winter fishery was far from being productive."¹⁴ The following year, Cameron further explained that the wild rice was vulnerable to high water in summer and again when the water was low, which caused the stalks to break and the whole crop to fall into the water. Besides the two extremes of high or low water, the wild rice crop was frequently destroyed by high winds, heavy rains, or showers of hail.¹⁵

⁹ Roderick McKenzie, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1819-1820, HBCA, B.105/a/7, fo.68d.

¹⁰ Hind, *Narrative on the Canadian Red River Exploring Expedition of 1857 and of the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition of 1858*, pp. 82-83.

¹¹ John McLoughlin, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1823-1824, HBCA, B.105/a/9, pp. 45-47.

¹² John Cameron, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1824-1825, HBCA, B.105/a/10, fo.12d.

¹³ John Cameron, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1824-1825, HBCA, B.105/a/10, fo.15-15d.

¹⁴ John Cameron, Lac La Pluie District Report for 1824-1825, HBCA, B.105/e/4.

¹⁵ John Cameron, Lac La Pluie District Report for 1825-1826, HBCA, B.105/e/6, fo.1.

Regulated water levels in the twentieth century

Dams constructed at the outlets of Rainy and Namakan Lakes in the early 1900s also have influenced park ecosystems. Periodic reports by Canadian and U.S. engineers (park files) show that yearly water level fluctuations with the dams have averaged 1.1 meters (3.6 feet) in Rainy Lake and 2.8 meters (9.3 feet) in adjoining Namakan, Kabetogama, Sand Point and Crane Lakes. Calculated “natural” fluctuations over this same 1909-1980 period averaged 2.0 meters (6.7 feet) in Rainy Lake and 1.9 meters (6.4 feet) for the Namakan chain of lakes....Regulated fluctuations also have differed from natural fluctuations in timing by their usually having lake levels rising through, instead of peaking, in June and usually having July peaks; by having stable instead of generally declining levels over summer and fall; and, in the case of the Namakan chain, by having declines of about 1.8 meters (6 feet) instead of about 1.1 meters (3.6 feet) over winter (November-March). In the Namakan chain of lakes, the once extensive beds of wild rice have been replaced by other aquatic vegetation in response to the changed water regime, and the greater over-winter water level declines leave beaver and muskrats without shelter or food and dewater northern pike (*Esox lucius*) spawning areas. In all four lakes, the rapidly rising lake levels through June regularly flood the nests of shore and marsh nesting birds, and the stable lake levels over summer and fall allow sand or silt to accumulate on walleye (*Stizostedion vitreum*) spawning areas.

– From “A Boreal Forest Park: Problems and Approaches,” *Park Science*, 1982.

Fur traders commented often on unusually high or low water levels, because they recognized that the water regime influenced three environmental factors that were perhaps of greatest consequence to them: navigability of waterways, animal population fluctuations, and the wild rice crop. In 1835, Cameron reported that the water level was unusually high throughout the route from Lake Winnipeg to Fort William and as a consequence there was a complete failure of rice across the entire region for the third summer in succession—a rare circumstance.¹⁶ Two years later, the Fort Frances post journal recorded yet another wet year. In October the hay stacks were under water and Rainy Lake was so high as to form a bay six feet deep where there had once been an

extensive field of hay.¹⁷ Henry Youle Hind reported extreme low water in 1858—lake levels were four to five feet below water lines on the rocky shores—and he noted that Indians attributed this condition to the light snowfall in the winter of 1857-58.¹⁸

Some historical data could be useful to natural resource managers for establishing what was within the usual range of high and low water levels during the fur trade era, rather than providing examples of high and low extremes. Several travelers commented on the water lines observable along rocky shores. John Bigsby wrote, “Every one of the series of lakes we have been passing through has its own set of water-levels, from one to five horizontal lines, usually green or yellow, and formed of the surface-scum of the waters, which, by the bye, are almost always of the most excellent quality. The larger the lake, the greater the range of water-lines.” Bigsby noted that the water line was highest on the north shore of Rainy Lake, opposite Brule Narrows,

¹⁶ John Cameron, Lac La Pluie District Report for 1834-1835, HBCA, B.105/e/11, fo.1.

¹⁷ Anonymous, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1837-1838, HBCA, B.105/a/20, fo.10.

¹⁸ Hind, *Narrative on the Canadian Red River Exploring Expedition of 1857 and of the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition of 1858*, p. 75.

where it appeared five feet above the current water level.¹⁹ Many years later, the Second Red River Expedition's Justus A. Griffin noted that the water lines around Namakan Lake were seven feet above the current water level. The party did not take the usual portage between Namakan Lake and Rainy Lake (New Portage or Bear River) because the water was too low.²⁰

Others commented on water levels with regard to portages. William Keating described the same low water conditions encountered by Bigsby in 1823:

There can be no doubt that the level of the water changes much, even at this elevated summit, for we find that the routes followed by canoes vary frequently. We are informed that that which we pursued is often so dry as to admit of an easy portage of a mile in the bed of a river which at that time contained sufficient water to float our canoes, even with their heavy loads. As these routes are not all equally long, the shortest and easiest are selected whenever the level of the water admits of their being traveled.²¹

Some travelers described the portages in detail, giving lengths and heights for each. A systematic review of such descriptions could be done to determine variations in water levels at these geographic points.

Portages and Decharge between Namakan River and Rainy River
 Portage du lac de la Pluie.....320 yards
 Decharge du petit Rapide du lac de la Pluie
 Portage Neuf (2).....320 yards, 180 yards
 – William H. Keating, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of St. Peter's River*, p. 141.

The geographer David Thompson recorded yet another type of data: lake water temperatures.²² During a trip in July and August 1839, Thompson obtained the following temperature readings in degrees Fahrenheit:

July	
Lac La Croix	74.5°
Rainy Lake	72°
Rainy River	69°
Lake of the Woods	75°, 70.75°, 72.75°, 71°
August	
Rainy Lake	71°
Namakan Lake	76°
Vermilion Lake	76°
Lac La Croix	72°
Sturgeon Lake	71°

¹⁹ Bigsby, *The Shoe and Canoe*, p. 269.

²⁰ Griffin, *From Toronto to Fort Garry: An Account of the Second Expedition to Red River*, pp. 32-33.

²¹ Keating, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of St. Peter's River*, pp. 125-126.

²² David Thompson, Journals, Provincial Archives of Ontario, MS 25, Reel 6, Bound Volume 36, D.T. Volume 76.

Historical sources from the fur trade era are not helpful for determining average lake levels prior to the development of dams. This problem is more complicated than one might expect, because at the time hydroelectric dams were constructed at Kettle Falls and International Falls in the early 1900s, natural conditions had already been altered for several years by numerous logging dams. Around 1915, the International Joint Commission sponsored a study aimed at determining lake levels in a “state of nature.” The consulting engineers who undertook the study assembled considerable historical data on annual precipitation and runoff from the 1880s through 1910. Their final report highlighted changes in the amount of fluctuation before and after the dams were built, but did not disclose average lake levels prior to the development of dams.²³

On January 6, 2000, the International Joint Commission issued a new Supplementary Order for the management of Rainy Lake and Namakan Reservoir in Voyageurs National Park. The impetus for this change came from work by U.S. and Canadian representatives, including the National Park Service, concerned about the ecological effects of the water management regime adopted in 1970. NPS research in the 1980s and 1990s was a significant component of the analysis and final report that petitioned the International Joint Commission in 1993. The change in management will have the greatest impact on Namakan Lake where both the magnitude and timing of water levels will more closely approximate natural conditions. The changes on Rainy Lake, although minor, still hold the potential for some environmental restoration, which has been the park’s principal objective in over twenty years of involvement.²⁴

Historical sources are much less adequate in their coverage of other types of weather events such as hail, wind, and lightning storms and forest fires. In general, such disturbances were more localized than high or low water conditions. Fragments of information may be gleaned from post journals or travelers’ diaries, but one imagines that many such weather events occurred without being recorded. Traversing Rainy Lake in August 1794, John MacDonell described a summer storm: “Rained hailed and thundered in loud peals accompanied by a tempestuous wind, some of the hail stones we picked up were as big as the yolk of an egg.”²⁵ Simon M’Gillivray described the weather in that same month of August 1794: “Scarcely a day passes without producing violent storms of thunder lightening & rain, so that we are up to the knees in mud in most of the carrying places.”²⁶

Forest fires, or the evidence of recent forest fires, are occasionally mentioned. Hugh Faries described a forest fire in the vicinity of the North West Company fort below the outlet of Rainy Lake in late October 1804. Fire was all around, he wrote, and a high wind from the southwest nearly caused the fort itself to catch fire. On the following day, the vegetation was still burning around the fort.²⁷ This was evidently a part of the “great fires” that blew up during the summers of 1803 and 1804. Local inhabitants—probably voyageurs as well as Indians since the actual

²³ Adolph F. Meyer and Arthur V. White, *Report to International Joint Commission relating to Official Reference re Lake of the Woods Levels*, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1917.

²⁴ International Joint Commission Supplementary Order for Rainy and Namakan Lakes, January 6, 2000.

²⁵ John MacDonell, Journal (transcription), MHS, Manuscripts Division, pp. 24-25.

²⁶ M’Gillivray, *The Journal of Duncan M’Gillivray of the North West Company*, p. 8.

²⁷ Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders of the Northwest*, p. 216.

years were remembered—still recalled those terrible fire seasons more than twenty years later. They described to John Cameron how the whole country had been in a continual blaze nearly from one end to the other and that the fires only died when snow fell in the autumn. Cameron speculated that the great fires of 1803-1804 had caused a reduction in the beaver population.²⁸

There were later reports of forest fire. John Bigsby noted that the uplands surrounding the northwest arm of Rainy Lake were largely burned over in 1823.²⁹ Sir George Simpson reported the beginning of a forest fire on the portage between Namakan and Rainy lakes in 1841. “As we were passing down this narrow and shallow creek, fire suddenly burst forth in the woods near us,” he wrote. “The flames, crackling and clambering up each tree, quickly rose above the forest; within a few minutes more the dry grass on the very margin of the waters was in a running blaze; and, before we were well clear of the danger, we were almost enveloped in clouds of smoke and ashes.”³⁰ Simpson’s account underscores the problem of researching fire history in the records of the fur trade, for it was sheer coincidence that Simpson’s party passed through this locality when the fire began. Records of fires may be found in these historical sources, but the evidence of fire is anecdotal.

Flora

Natural resource managers already possess a general understanding of forest types that existed in the late nineteenth century in what is now Voyageurs National Park. Studies of vegetation and fire history of the area include Albert M. Swain, “Vegetation and Fire History at Voyageurs National Park,” Glen F. Cole, “Effects of Man on the Vegetation and Wildlife of Voyageurs National Park,” Michael S. Coffman, Lawrence Rakestraw, and James E. Ferris, “The Fire and Logging History of Voyageurs National Park,” and Vilis Kurmis, L.C. Merriam, Jr., Myron Grafstrom, and Jeffrey Kirwan, “Primary Plant Communities: Voyageurs National Park, Minnesota.” All of these studies date from the late 1970s and early 1980s—soon after the park’s establishment. Research methods included comparison between present vegetation type maps and forest types described in survey notes of the General Land Office from 1881-1894, comparison between Voyageurs National Park and similar Great Lakes forest areas, and paleoecological work based on charcoal and pollen analysis from sediment core samples obtained from two lake bottoms in the park. All of these studies present findings on what forest types were prevalent in the area prior to the advent of logging, dams, and fire suppression.³¹

²⁸ John Cameron, Lac La Pluie District Report for 1825-1826, HBCA, B.105/e/6, fo.3.

²⁹ Bigsby, *The Shoe and Canoe*, p. 267.

³⁰ Simpson, *Narrative of a Journey Round the World*, p. 40.

³¹ Albert M. Swain, “Vegetation and Fire History at Voyageurs National Park,” final report prepared for National Park Service Midwest Archeological Center by the Center for Climatic Research, Institute for Environmental Studies, University of Wisconsin, no date; Glen F. Cole, “Effects of Man on the Vegetation and Wildlife of Voyageurs National Park,” Voyageurs National Park, International Falls, Minnesota, 1980; Michael S. Coffman, Lawrence Rakestraw, and James E. Ferris, “The Fire and Logging History of Voyageurs National Park,” final report prepared for National Park Service by Michigan Technological University, 1980; Vilis Kurmis, L.C. Merriam, Jr., Myron Grafstrom, and Jeffrey Kirwan, “Primary Plant Communities: Voyageurs National Park, Minnesota,” College of Forestry, University of Minnesota, 1978.

Historical sources can augment these studies by providing descriptions of forest types in various localities and at various points in time. Historical sources vary considerably in the amount of detail they provide, and some appear to be based on second-hand information as much as on personal observation. Nevertheless, they represent a potential source of data for forest type mapping. More than a dozen examples are cited here in order to provide natural resource managers with a sense of what the documents contain. For example, these sources appear to indicate that the trees around Rainy Lake were predominantly birch and maple in 1775, and various types of pine some 50 to 75 years later. Natural resource managers might glean additional information from a more intensive search in the historical sources, although the following notes reflect the most broadly descriptive accounts of forest types that were found.

- ◆ Rainy Lake, 1740. Joseph La France passed through the Rainy Lake Region in 1740, and Arthur Dobbs published an account of La France's travels in 1764, which included a short description of the forest bordering Rainy Lake. "He coasted along the North-west Side of the Lake, which was full of fine Woods, but there was none on the Southeast Side, as the Natives informed him, except near the Edge of the Lake, for about Half the Length of the Lake, at which Place a River enters it from the South Side, which comes from a low Country, full of Beavers."³²
- ◆ Rainy Lake, 1775. Alexander Henry wrote: "We now entered Lake à la Pluie, which is fifteen leagues long, by five broad. Its banks are covered with maple and birch."³³
- ◆ Rainy River, 1789. Alexander Mackenzie described the forest along the Rainy River from personal observation. "Its banks are covered with a rich soil, particularly to the North, which, in many parts, are clothed with fine open groves of oak, with the maple, the pine, and the cedar. The Southern bank is not so elevated, and displays the maple, the white birch, and the cedar, with the spruce, the alder, and various underwood."³⁴
- ◆ Rainy Lake Fort, 1800. Daniel Harmon wrote: "Here the soil is better than any we have seen, since we left the Ottawa River. The timber, also, is of a very good size."³⁵
- ◆ Rainy River, 1800. Harmon wrote: "The timber consists of birch, a species of pine, hemlock, poplar, aspin [sic], cedar, &c."³⁶
- ◆ Rainy Lake Region, 1805. John McLoughlin described the region between Fort William and Lake of the Woods in a manuscript dated sometime between 1805 and 1823. Historian Grace Lee Nute has concluded that the most likely date was 1805. McLoughlin wrote: "The trees in these forests are birch, aspine [sic], poplar, elm, bass, tamaric [sic], cedar, white and red pine. The fruit trees are raspberries, strawberries, a kind of small tree which bears wild pears, and a shrub that produces the blueberry, and the red prune tree."³⁷

³² Dobbs, *An Account of the Countries Adjoining to Hudson's Bay in the North-west Part of America*, p. 33.

³³ Henry, *Travels and Adventures*, p. 240.

³⁴ Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal*, p. lvii.

³⁵ Harmon, *A Journal of Voyages and Travels in the Interior of North America*, p. 19.

³⁶ Harmon, *A Journal of Voyages and Travels in the Interior of North America*, p. 20.

³⁷ McLoughlin, "The Indians from Fort William to Lake of the Woods," p. 10.

- ◆ Rainy River, 1823. Stephen H. Long wrote: “The aspect of the country appears to be materially changed for the better, compared to that we have passed since we entered the Lake Weneppeek. The surface is far less rocky and broken, no rocks appear in the river, except boulders occasionally along the shore and the rocks that present themselves at the rapids. The timber growth, besides being larger and more thrifty, presents a variety of trees not to be found below, such as the white oak, the ash, the hiccory [sic], the water maple, the white walnut, the Linden &c. The beautiful shrub called the Larche [*white spruce*] is also found here; the black alder frequently occurs along the river.”³⁸
- ◆ Rainy Lake, 1823. Referring to the area near Kettle Falls, John J. Bigsby wrote: “The vegetation in the bottoms is rich in oak, pine, cypress, poplar, and various useful fruits.”³⁹
- ◆ Rainy Lake, 1823. In the context of describing the vicinity around the post below the outlet of Rainy Lake, William Keating wrote: “The principal growth around the lake is pitch pine, white pine, and spruce.”⁴⁰
- ◆ Rainy River, 1833. John McLean wrote: “Its banks, which are clothed with verdure to the water’s edge, recede by a gradual slope until they terminate in a high ridge, running parallel to the river on both sides. This ridge yields poplar, birch, and maple, with a few pines, proving the excellence of the soil. The interior, however, is said to be low and swampy.”⁴¹
- ◆ Rainy River, 1848. Charles Whittlesey wrote: “On the bottom land the white maple flourishes & the elm.”⁴²
- ◆ Rainy Lake, 1852. Peter Jacobs wrote: “The Lac La Pluie is a large lake, and runs from northwest to a south-east direction, containing many islands well wooded with white and Norway pines, and bounded with rocky and barren shores—but white pine of no large size.”⁴³
- ◆ Rainy Lake Fort, 1857. Henry Youle Hind wrote: “At the entrance of Rainy River on the evening of August 19th, the delightful odour of the balsam poplar (*Populus balsamifera*) loaded the air, and seemed to welcome our arrival in a region differing altogether from those through which we had lately passed. Where Rainy River issues from Rainy Lake, it is a broad and rapid stream, with low alluvial banks, clothed with a rich second growth. The fine forests with which they were once covered had long since been stripped of their ornaments by the occupants of the old North-West and the present Hudson’s Bay Company’s Fort.”⁴⁴

³⁸ Long, *The Northern Expeditions of Stephen H. Long*, p. 212.

³⁹ Bigsby, *The Shoe and Canoe*, p. 264.

⁴⁰ Keating, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of the St. Peter’s River*, p. 124.

⁴¹ John McLean, *John McLean’s Notes of a Twenty-Five Year’s Service in the Hudson’s Bay Territory*, edited by W. S. Wallace (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1932), p. 124.

⁴² Charles Whittlesey Papers, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio, p. 57.

⁴³ Jacobs, *Journal of the Reverend Peter Jacobs*, pp. 30-31.

⁴⁴ Hind, *Narrative of the Canadian Red River Exploring Expedition of 1857*, p. 81.

- ◆ Rainy Lake Fort, 1870. G. L. Huyshe wrote: “There has been at one time a good deal of cleared land round the post, but much of it has been allowed to return to its primitive wildness, and is becoming covered with a scrubby, second growth.”⁴⁵

Historical sources make occasional mention of forest diseases or infestations. The artist Paul Kane found it remarkable, when he passed through the country in 1845, that “the trees on each side of the [Rainy] river, and part of the Lake of the Woods, for full 150 miles of our route, were literally stripped of foliage by myriads of green caterpillars, which had left nothing but the bare branches; and I was informed that the scourge extended to more than twice the distance I have named, the whole country wearing the dreary aspect of winter at the commencement of summer.”⁴⁶ Post trader John Cameron noted in 1830, “there is no Rice in Lake of the Woods this Year owing to a Kind of worm which has destroyed it.”⁴⁷

Fauna

Fur traders took more than a passing interest in the wild animals of the Rainy Lake Region, for virtually every species of mammal, bird, or fish constituted an economic resource, a potential source of food, or both. Personal diaries and post journals are filled with references to large and small mammals, birds, and fish. Most travel accounts in the Rainy Lake Region display a naturalist’s interest in inventorying and cataloguing the wildlife. These historical sources, however, rarely mention reptiles, amphibians, or insects—with the notable exception of mosquitoes.

Observations of fauna in the fur trade era may be grouped into three sets of data. First, fur traders and explorers described the diversity of species they encountered in the Rainy Lake Region. Second, they commented on the relative abundance of different species. Sometimes they observed population trends, but more often they simply commented that a species was abundant or scarce. The abundance or scarcity of particular species may also be inferred from records of fur returns, although fur returns may not be reliable indicators of abundance or scarcity for reasons that will be explained below. Third, fur traders occasionally described ecological relationships affecting animal populations.

The earliest source containing very much data on the diversity of wildlife in the Rainy Lake Region is the Hudson’s Bay Company post journal of John McKay, which begins in 1793 and continues through 1797. It must be noted, however, that McKay described the wildlife he and his men observed from their base at Ash House where the Rainy River enters Lake of the Woods. During their first hungry winter of 1793-94, McKay’s hunters bagged rabbits, deer, and moose. Once McKay traded with an Indian for a “cat” (probably a lynx). On another occasion, he reported that wolves had stolen some 200 pounds of venison.⁴⁸ In the spring of 1796, the men consumed quail, ducks, and geese. Other entries mention porcupine and otter. McKay recorded

⁴⁵ Huyshe, *The Red River Expedition*, p. 138.

⁴⁶ Paul Kane, *Wanderings of an Artist among the Indians of North America* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1859), p. 63.

⁴⁷ John Cameron, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1830-1831, HBCA B. 105/a/15, fo.11d.

⁴⁸ John McKay, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1793-1794, HBCA, B.105/a/1, passim.

the returns for the Lac La Pluie District for that year as follows: 588 beaver, 49 bear, 61 cat, 30 fisher, 30 marten, 25 mink, 651 muskrat, 10 moose, 72 otter, and 20 ground squirrels and skunks.⁴⁹

Various accounts in the 1800s provide data on animals that were most abundant in the region. Dr. John McLoughlin described the fauna in a manuscript titled “The Indians from Fort William to Lake of the Woods.” The manuscript is undated and could have been written any time

between 1804 and 1823. McLoughlin listed 15 species of mammals: moose, elk, caribou, wolf, wolverine, fisher, lynx, marten, bear, fox, hare, beaver, muskrat, otter, and mink. He noted five species of birds that could be seen all year: raven, owl, magpie, partridge, and pheasant. Migratory bird species included “the eagle, crow, bustard, several species of ducks, loon, white and gray goose, and water hen.”⁵⁰ In 1823, William H. Keating noted three species of birds near Rainy Lake House: the ruby-throated hummingbird, black-headed titmouse, and pileated woodpecker.⁵¹ That same year, Stephen

H. Long noted the animals that were most abundant along the lower Rainy River and its tributaries as follows: beaver, otter, muskrat, marten, fisher, Canadian lynx, wolverine, bear, and moose. Less common were the caribou, porcupine, fox, squirrel, and weasel.⁵²

One of the best early sources on wildlife diversity is the Hudson Bay Company trader John Cameron, whose district reports for the Lac La Pluie District in the 1820s provide considerable information. In 1825, Cameron listed waterfowl he had seen, including “bustards” (probably Canada geese), ducks, teals, and “divers,” an occasional swan, “White & grey Geese” (which he observed flying over but seldom lighting) and loons. Other birds included “Grey Eagle, the White Tailed Eagle, Vultures, Owls, Hawks, Cranes, Bitterns, Blackbirds, Robins Woodcock & hen, Wood Peckers, Kingfisher, Nightingale,” grouse (commonly referred to as “pheasant,” and “Two or three Kind of Partridges.”⁵³ In 1827, Cameron listed the moose, reindeer (caribou), beaver, marten, otter, mink, muskrat, and fisher. Cameron also sprinkled his district reports and post journals with observations about what would now be termed animal ecology, such as the relationship between high water and muskrat numbers.

Keating describes the animal life

From Rainy Lake to Lake Superior we did not meet with a single quadruped. The only animals we saw were about thirty or forty birds, chiefly ducks. Among the birds observed were the Canada jay, blue jay, hairy woodpecker, Indian hen, golden plover, and woodcock. We killed five pheasants on the 7th of September; on the 4th we heard, near Rainy Lake, the notes of the whip-poor-will. A rail was also seen, but it disappeared too soon to enable Mr. Say to determine the species.

– William H. Keating, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of St. Peter's River*, p. 143.

⁴⁹ John McKay, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1795-1796, HBCA, B.105/a/3, passim.

⁵⁰ McLoughlin, “The Indians from Fort William to Lake of the Woods.”

⁵¹ Keating, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of St. Peter's River*, p. 125.

⁵² Long, *The Northern Expeditions of Stephen H. Long*, p. 208.

⁵³ John Cameron, Lac La Pluie District Report for 1825-1826, HBCA, B.105/e/6, fo.1.

One of the latest inventories of wildlife made during the fur trade era was that of Henry Youle Hind in the winter of 1857. Hind provides some context for his observations:

The scarcity of animal life at this season of the year on the canoe route has several times been remarked by travelers. It is probable that the noise inseparable from the passage of several canoes through the lakes and rivers would drive away the game into the interior, but their tracks would be seen if they existed in large numbers. On the Kaministiquia the following animals or their fresh tracks were seen: Of quadrupeds: Cariboes, bears, foxes, hares, minks, otters, squirrels, muskrats, and fieldmice. Of birds: eagles, hawks, ducks, pigeons, plover (two varieties), sandpipers, cherry birds, loons, partridges (two varieties), jays, magpies, blackcaps, nighthawks, Canadian nightingales, swallows, humming birds, kingfishers, and owls.⁵⁴

Many other inventories of wildlife can be found in the historical record. Although it would be possible to compile these data and compare them over time, the results would not be entirely reliable. For example, Lac La Pluie District reports represent the observations of fur traders over the course of a complete year, while explorers' accounts reflect the observations in a particular season and along a linear path through the region. These inventories do provide a strong indication of the presence of various species in certain locations. The Fort Frances post journal reports that a "reindeer" (caribou) was killed not very far from the fort in 1837.⁵⁵ Hind's report indicates the occurrence of caribou in the region in 1857.⁵⁶ Similarly, Duncan Graham reported to Lord Selkirk in 1816 that bison were present the year round in the vicinity of the Red River settlement.⁵⁷ Data such as these offer solid evidence of specific aspects of historical wildlife conditions that may be in doubt.

The second type of data that may be gleaned from historical documents of the fur trade era consists of notes on the relative abundance or scarcity of particular species. Simon M'Gillivray stated in the Lac La Pluie District report for 1825 that beaver and otter were most plentiful on the northeast side of the district, while muskrat, marten, and black bear abounded on the southwest side of the district.⁵⁸ There are accounts of vast numbers of birds. Friedrich von Graffenreid described a hunting trip to Black Bay in April 1817 in which he observed "uncountable wild geese" and bagged "an unbelievable number."⁵⁹ Nicholas Garry, in 1821, found the Dog River area "full of wild pigeons," as well as "a great quantity of geese, ducks and loons."⁶⁰ John J.

⁵⁴ Hind, *Narrative on the Canadian Red River Exploring Expedition of 1857 and of the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition of 1858*, p. 55.

⁵⁵ Anonymous, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1837-1838, HBCA, B.105/a/20, fo. 11d.

⁵⁶ Hind, *Narrative on the Canadian Red River Exploring Expedition of 1857 and of the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition of 1858*, p. 55.

⁵⁷ Duncan Graham to Lord Selkirk, December 7, 1816, Selkirk Papers, Reel C-3, NAC, p. 2980.

⁵⁸ Simon M'Gillivray, Lac La Pluie District Report for 1824-1825, HBCA, B.105/e/4, fo.4.

⁵⁹ Graffenreid, *Sechs Jahre in Canada*, pp. 12-13.

⁶⁰ Garry, "Diary of Nicholas Garry," p. 120.

Bigsby claimed that on the Rainy River in autumn “the gun will bring down a score of pigeons, a wild duck, or a swan.”⁶¹

Data on the scarcity of animals, although less common, also can be found in the historical record. In 1823, John McLoughlin stated that there were no marten and that the number of beaver had been diminishing in the district for some time.⁶² That same year, William Keating observed some remains of beaver dams near Rainy Lake House, but noted that the animal had been hunted out in that vicinity.⁶³ In 1825, John Cameron stated his opinion that there were no raccoons in the Rainy Lake Region; the few raccoon skins that had been traded there were brought from the Fond du Lac Department.⁶⁴ In 1830, John Cameron noted that he had never seen such a “complete failure” of muskrats.⁶⁵ The Fort Frances post journal states that marten are again “scarce” in 1838, with half as many killed as in the previous year.⁶⁶

The Hudson’s Bay Company post journals typically conclude with a list of “returns,” or numbers of fur-bearing animals harvested. These data have been used to provide some sense of the relative abundance or scarcity of different species from region to region and over time. However, they must be used with care. As historian Jeanne Kay notes in her analysis of wildlife depletion during the fur trade era in Wisconsin, Hudson’s Bay Company fur trade returns are not necessarily a good indicator of abundance or scarcity. Other factors, such as competition from other traders or diminished effort to hunt on the part of Indians could account for decreases in a given post’s returns. Indeed, traders seldom attributed declining returns to wildlife depletion.⁶⁷

In some cases, information from one period may be compared with information from a later period in order to discern population trends. Jonathan Carver, who traveled through the region in the 1760s, recalled afterward that moose and caribou occurred in the Rainy Lake region “in great plenty.”⁶⁸ Some sixty years later, John Cameron stated in his district report for 1825-1826 that moose were “formerly very numerous” in the district, but now only occurred toward the plains. He added that caribou were also formerly numerous but now scarce. One might conclude that there was a perceptible decline in the numbers of moose and caribou from Carver’s time to Cameron’s time. However, Cameron may have been referring to much more immediate population trends. He also wrote, “In Spring 1824 the Indians Killed a great number [of moose]. But this year, the Same Indians, in the Same places, are almost starving to death.”⁶⁹

⁶¹ Bigsby, *The Shoe and Canoe*, p. 271.

⁶² John McLoughlin, Lac La Pluie District Report for 1822-1823, HBCA, B.105/e/3, fo.3.

⁶³ Keating, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of St. Peter’s River*, p. 125.

⁶⁴ John Cameron, Lac La Pluie District Report, HBCA, B.105/e/6, fo.1.

⁶⁵ John Cameron, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1829-1830, HBCA, B.105/a/14, fo.49.

⁶⁶ Anonymous, Fort Frances post journal for 1837-1838, HBCA, B.105/a/20, fo.24d.

⁶⁷ Jeanne Kay, “Native Americans in the Fur Trade and Wildlife Depletion,” *Environmental Review* 9 (April 1985), p. 121.

⁶⁸ Carver, *Three Years Travels through the Interior Parts of North America*, p. 72.

⁶⁹ Anonymous, Lac La Pluie District Report for 1825-1826, HBCA, B.105/e/6, fo.1.

Occasionally, population cycles can be seen in the records of the fur trade. In 1835, the rabbit population exploded around Rainy Lake House. They were observed everywhere and were even coming into the fort and the bastions. In one week, the men snared 200 of them. Apparently this population peak for rabbits was soon followed by a population peak for lynx, as 87 lynx were reported in the post returns for 1837 and 200 lynx were reported in 1838.⁷⁰

The third type of data may be termed ecological. These consist of notes about ecological relationships that fur traders either observed for themselves or learned from Indians. For example, Indians informed the fur trader John Cameron that a sudden freeze-up in winter would cause a precipitous decline in the numbers of muskrat. As ice formed on the rivers and lakes, water levels would fall, subjecting muskrats to heavy predation. Cameron also observed that “great numbers of animals perish from high waters,” and that bear apparently migrated “to more favorable climes when berries fail.”⁷¹ Similarly, Indians informed the trader John McLoughlin that when water levels were high immature marten would drown; thus the numbers of marten would decline precipitously in those years with unusually wet spring and summer weather. This accounted for the fact that “Martens are Some years very scarce and some years very numerous.”⁷²

By the 1820s, muskrats were a major source of returns for the fur trading companies in the Rainy Lake Region. According to McLoughlin, muskrats were prolific breeders, producing three litters of six to ten young per litter each summer. The Ojibwe preferred to hunt muskrats in the fall when water levels were low but before the muskrat population was subjected to a large winter die off. They hunted the muskrats in their lodges, and when they hunted in winter they frequently found them frozen to death, McLoughlin noted. More muskrats died as a result of winter die off, McLoughlin stated, than were killed by the natives.⁷³ In April 1825, an Ojibwe by the name of the Grand Coquin informed John Cameron that most of the muskrat population was wiped out in the preceding winter; the muskrat lodges were filled with carcasses.⁷⁴

No animal received more attention than the beaver. It was the most economically significant furbearer in the Rainy Lake Region. Today, natural resource managers recognize the beaver as the most ecologically significant animal in the Rainy Lake Region due to its propensity for building dams and altering the hydrology of the aquatic landscape. Beaver dams decrease flow rate of streams, and increase water depth and surface area with their impoundments. Moreover, by felling trees, beaver effectively browse on the forest canopy as well as the vegetation within their reach on the ground, thereby having a greater impact on biomass than any other herbivore. One modern study of beaver on the Kabetogama Peninsula in Voyageurs National Park found that beaver create patches of altered vegetation.⁷⁵ There is no evidence that Indians or European

⁷⁰ William Sinclair, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1834-1835, HBCA, B.105/a/19, fo.14d.

⁷¹ John Cameron, Lac La Pluie District Report for 1825-1826, HBCA, B.105/e/6, fo.2.

⁷² John McLoughlin, Lac La Pluie District Report for 1822-1823, HBCA, B.105/e/2, fo.1d.

⁷³ John McLoughlin, Lac La Pluie District Report for 1822-1823, HBCA, B.105/e/2, fo.1d.

⁷⁴ John Cameron, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1824-1825, HBCA, B. 105/a/10, fo.12d.

⁷⁵ C.A. Johnston, J. Pastor, and R. J. Naiman, “Effects of beaver and moose on boreal forest landscapes,” In *Landscape Ecology and Geographic Information Systems*. S. H. Cousins, B. Haines-Young, and D. Green, eds. London: Taylor & Francis, year?

grasped the ecological importance of the beaver in the fur trade era, but they did put forward theories about the population increases and decreases of this important animal. Again, John Cameron provides the best example of a keen observer in this era. In the lengthy excerpt from his district report that follows, Cameron is critical of the Hudson's Bay Company's efforts to implement conservation measures to protect the beaver from over harvest and offers his own explanation for the beaver's decline.

Beavers. These truly valuable Animals are becoming almost extinct. My first year in the Indian Country the late N.W.Cy. took from the Red River alone three Hundred Packs of Beaver of 90 # each, besides one hundred more at least which was traded by other Companies then trading in Red River— The Same department at present, does not produce ten Packs. In this Department they are very much decreased. South of the Boundary Line, few or none are to be found. To the northward where the Country is much more rocky— the industrious and diligent Hunter Still finds a few. It is a favourite object with our Governor & Council to discourage the hunting of Beaver in Summer as much as possible, which no doubt is very proper: but then, Traders should be extremely cautious in their mode of discouraging the Indians. Should they hold out threats or tell the Indians that they will not receive Summer Beaver Skins. The Indian will then, Kill, Singe & roast his Beaver and after his repast (which all Indians considers the most delicious they can make) whilst in the art of anointing his head with the Oil and licking his chops; Set up a horse—Laugh at the threats & advices of the Whites. We may adopt as many plans as we please to prevent Summer hunting— all will prove Abortive: for there is not an Indian when he sees an Animal, whether he is in want or not; but will let fly a shot at it. We have however a few Indians who would willingly refrain from Killing their Beaver in Summer; were not their lands Open, not only to Indians of this Department, but to Indians of the Neighbouring departments of the southern District: and who grievously laments the impossibility of making a fair Division of their Lands. Many Indians have no hunting grounds which they Can Call their own, they therefore go about poaching on the Grounds of others, hence those who have Beavers Kill them at all Seasons, rather than they should fall into the hands of those roaming Poachers. Beaver like other Small animals are liable to accidents & misfortunes, their greatest Enemy, I believe is fire. I am convinced nothing tended more to the Sudden decrease of Beaver which took place in the beginning of the present Century as the great fires [“wh” is lined out] during the two dry Summers of 1803/4 when the whole Country almost from one extremity to the other was in a Continual blaze and stopt only by the Snows of Autumn. Wolverines are also their enemies. A wolverine will break open a Beaver lodge in the middle of winter and destroy every Beaver within They are destroyed, perhaps, by other causes which are unknown— No doubt they have their Fevers and their Plagues. I recollect when I wintered in Severn River, having heard an Indian Say, that he found five Beaver dead in one lodge, which could not have proceeded from want of food or water as they appeared to have a good stock— Moreover the Indian assured me he had found them fat— therefore their distemper whatever it was, could not have been of long duration.⁷⁶

Ecological information must be evaluated within the context of the era. Although contemporary observers might have drawn erroneous conclusions, they still recorded information

⁷⁶ John Cameron, Lac La Pluie District Report for 1825-1826, HBCA, B.105/e/6, fo.2d.

that can be reinterpreted in light of modern science. Historical sources also contain the occasional direct observation of a predator-prey relationship or some other kind of ecological factor. One of the men in Bigsby's party in 1823 came upon a bear sitting upon its haunches in some unidentified stream near the east end of Rainy Lake. As the man watched, every now and then the bear landed a fish on the bank by striking the water sharply with its paw.⁷⁷ Bigsby also described in graphic detail how his party hunted, killed, and ate a bear:

What I took to be an old hat floating in a wide expanse of water was declared to be a bear. Bears swim low. Both canoes made for him as fast as we could paddle, and we soon came up with poor Bruin.

Our astronomer took his stand at the bow, and quietly discharged his piece into his neck. The animal gave a loud howl, and rolled about in the bloody water violently, while we struck at him with poles and an axe. So great was the hubbub that I thought we should all have been drowned, for a small birch canoe is the last place to make war in; but the bear being soon stunned and quiet, a *voyageur* laid hold of him by the neck, and we slowly drew him to the shore.

When on dry land, and the water had run off a little, the bear suddenly revived, stood up and showed fight, but he was so weakened by loss of blood that a few more blows on the head laid him low for ever. He was skinned that evening, and we made three good meals of him. Fresh meat is a luxury those only can estimate who have been living on salt provisions for some time in hot, steaming woods.⁷⁸

This account of killing and eating a bear serves as a reminder that Indians and Europeans were participants as well as observers of wildlife ecology during the fur trade era. The bear's vulnerability to human predation while swimming across the lake is an ecological factor that largely disappeared in the twentieth century.

Fisheries

Since the end of the fur trade era, fisheries may have changed more profoundly than the assemblage of terrestrial wildlife in the Rainy Lake Region. Commercial fishing of sturgeon in the 1890s and early 1900s led to a drastic decline of that species. Whitefish and pickerel (walleye) were also caught commercially in this period.⁷⁹ Commercial fishing of walleye in Rainy Lake throughout the twentieth century continued to affect population numbers.⁸⁰ Most significantly, dams built in the early 1900s at the outlet of Rainy Lake and at Kettle Falls altered lake levels and blocked fish runs. Logging activity, and to a lesser extent mining activity, also affected fish habitat.

⁷⁷ Bigsby, *The Shoe and Canoe*, p. 264.

⁷⁸ Bigsby, *The Shoe and Canoe*, pp. 251-252.

⁷⁹ H. E. Pearson, untitled report on the history of commercial fishing in the Rainy Lake area, on file in Voyageurs National Park, December 1963[?], passim.

⁸⁰ J. R. Chevalier, "Changes in Walleye (*Stizostedion vitreum vitreum*) Population in Rainy Lake and Factors in Abundance, 1924-75," *Journal of Fisheries Research Board of Canada* 34 (1977), pp. 1696-1698.

The Reverend Peter Jacobs describes the fishery at Kettle Falls

After passing down the river, we soon came to the Kettle Rapids, so called, I suppose, from the whirlpools in these rapids. Here the Indians catch white fish in great abundance, by scooping them up from the eddies and whirlpools in these rapids. This they do during the whole summer season.

– *Journal of the Reverend Peter Jacobs*, p. 30.

Historical sources provide data on particularly productive fishing places before the advent of commercial fishing, logging, mining, and dam construction. Descriptions of these fishing places offer clues about fish habitat in the fur trade era. Indians and European fur traders were also familiar with seasonal migration patterns and spawning periods for particular species of fish and fur traders reported these data in their journals. Historical sources also provide anecdotal information on species diversity and abundance. Much of these data are already

synthesized in the anthropological literature concerning Ojibwe utilization of fishing resources.⁸¹

It is well known, for example, that Manitou Falls on the Rainy River was perhaps the best place in the Rainy Lake Region for catching sturgeon. Indians and fur traders went there in numbers in late summer and fall, and the sturgeon caught at this time of year was often the mainstay of the men at the fort throughout the following winter. The falls below the outlet of Rainy Lake was another good fishing place, which is probably an important reason why so many fur trading posts were located in that vicinity. There was another well-known fishery at Kettle Falls, and yet another at the rapids above the mouth of the Namakan River, popular in summer. John Tanner described a fishery somewhere on Rainy Lake—possibly Kettle Falls—at which sturgeon would go over a falls into a shallow where they were trapped and easily caught.⁸² The best lake fishery in the area was at White Fish Lake, where the Hudson’s Bay Company maintained a small post from time to time.

Sometimes these fisheries failed. Roderick McKenzie reported in October 1819 that his men had gone to Kettle Falls where they intended to catch and trade for fish only to find that there were no fish and the Indians in that vicinity were “starving.”⁸³ Even the sturgeon run at Manitou Falls failed upon occasion, presenting Indians and fur traders alike with a critical shortage of food through the following winter.

In addition to frequent references to sturgeon, fur traders noted the abundance of whitefish, pike, pickerel, and trout. William H. Keating reported “fresh-water salmon,” which he said were

A note on the sturgeon trade

The Men who were Sent for Sturgeon returned last night with twenty eight which were got from Indians. The most of them were Ready cured for the process of drying & Smoaking.

– J. D. Cameron, Lac La Pluie Post Journal, May 6, 1825.

⁸¹ For example, see Holzkamm, Lytwyn, and Waisberg, “Rainy River Sturgeon: An Ojibway Resource in the Fur Trade Economy,” pp. 119-140; Tim E. Holzkamm, “Sturgeon Utilization by the Rainy River Ojibwa Bands,” *Papers of the Eighteenth Algonquian Conference*, edited by William Cowan (Ottawa: Carleton University, 1987), pp. 155-163.

⁸² Tanner, *A Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner*, pp. 78-79.

⁸³ Roderick McKenzie, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1819-1820, HBCA, B.105/a/7, fo.37d.

found in great abundance at the falls below the outlet of Rainy Lake.⁸⁴ John Cameron, always the keen observer of the natural environment, wrote that the lakes and rivers abounded with sturgeon, whitefish, pike, pickerel, perch, suckers, and “a kind of lings,” and that trout were “caught in some lakes.” He noted that whitefish spawned in the first half of October, trout spawned from about August 15 to September 20, ling spawned in February, and all other species of fish spawned in the spring.⁸⁵

It would be difficult to quantify the consumption of sturgeon and other fish by European fur traders. Historical sources provide occasional glimpses of the size of a catch. Hugh Faries noted in 1804 that his men returned from the falls with 1050 white fish, and on another occasion they caught 1100 white fish, and on yet another day, “the Seiners came home with 50 Sturgeon.”⁸⁶ These kinds of reports are exceptional. For the most part, numbers of fish taken or pounds of fish consumed were not recorded.

No discussion of historical sources on the environment in Voyageurs National Park would be complete without reference to the detailed works of the International Joint Commission on Lake of the Woods water levels. Although these studies were conducted after the dams were built in the early 1900s, they contain much historical research on the environment in the decades immediately prior to the dam construction. Several years of data on water levels for Rainy Lake and other regional lakes under natural conditions were assembled and presented. Survey notes on flora and fauna around the shores of Rainy Lake and other regional lakes were accumulated and provide data on historical conditions in the decades immediately following the end of the fur trade era.

Conclusion

In Voyageurs National Park, natural resource managers have the mission to manage ecosystems so that they will approximate, as nearly as possible, the natural conditions that prevailed in the fur trade era. In addition, natural resource managers in Voyageurs National Park share the mission of natural resource managers in other national parks: to preserve natural processes such that the national park can provide baseline data about the way that relatively healthy ecosystems functioned in the past and are apt to function or not function in the future. Twenty years ago when Voyageurs National Park was just five years old, natural resource managers approached their task with a different model of nature than that which prevails today. According to recent trends in ecological theory, the natural environment is less predictable and more influenced by random disturbances than was earlier thought. Natural resource managers must cope not only with a greater level of uncertainty about environmental change in the past, but also with the increasing likelihood that global warming may cause sweeping effects on the environment in the future.

⁸⁴ Keating, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of St. Peter's River*, p. 125.

⁸⁵ John Cameron, Lac La Pluie Post Journal for 1825-1826, HBCA, B.105/e/6, fo.3d.

⁸⁶ Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders of the Northwest*, pp. 216-218.

This review of the historical literature revealed a few broad patterns of environmental change during the fur trade era. Most importantly, water levels fluctuated considerably from season to season and from year to year and extremes of high or low water probably caused more disturbance among wildlife populations and some types of vegetation (such as wild rice) than any other environmental factor. Although fluctuating water levels were the most dramatic result of climatic variation, mild or cold winters seem to have effected animal populations and plant life in other ways, too. Forest fires appear to have been fairly localized with the exception of widespread fires in 1803-04. A preliminary survey of forest-type descriptions suggests that maple and birch predominated along the shores of Rainy Lake in 1775, while various species of pine covered the same area 50 to 75 years later. Finally, it seems clear that beaver populations declined considerably over the first half of the nineteenth century, a condition that would have had significant consequences for forest types.

Historical sources may offer more help on some issues than others. As climate change looms larger in natural resource managers' understanding of past and present environmental conditions, intensive research of climatic data in the historical record may be considered worthwhile. Historical sources are also fairly rich in the amount of data they contain on faunal diversity, but they are less reliable with regard to animal population trends or fluctuations of abundance and scarcity. Historical sources provide some data on prevalent forest types at different points in time, but the data are generally not geographically precise. Finally, historical sources are probably most limited with regard to fisheries. Much of what can be gleaned from historical sources relating to the diversity and abundance of fish species and particularly productive fish habitat during the fur trade era has already been researched and synthesized in the anthropological literature on Ojibwe utilization of fish resources.

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