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History
FOR KIDS

SPECIAL DIGITAL EDITION

Canada's History Magazine for Kids

Kayak



HOW

FURS

BUILT CANADA



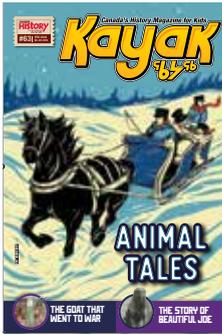
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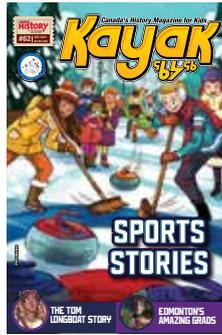
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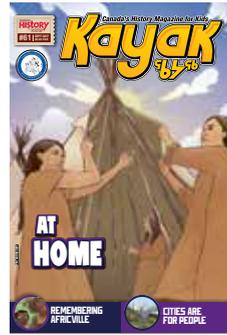
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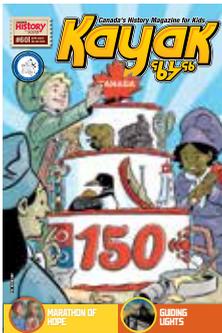
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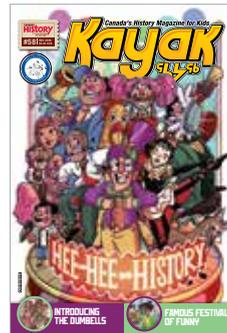
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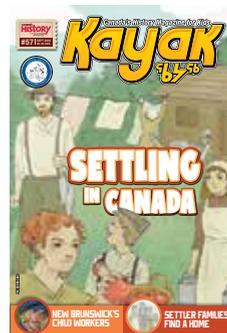
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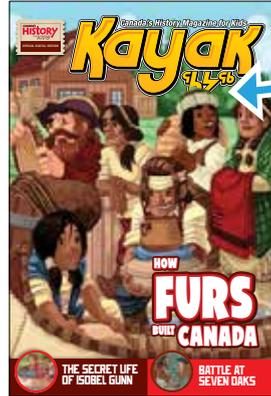
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9/15/25 Psst! These symbols spell "Kayak" in Inuktitut.



Cover illustration: Alex Diachon

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FROM-THE-EDITOR



When we talk about the fur trade, we mean a time starting in the late 1600s when companies based in Europe spread throughout what is now Canada. They traded with Indigenous people for animal fur, mostly from beavers but from other animals, too. The Hudson's Bay Company, often called HBC, is one of the oldest companies in the world. It got its start trading furs in 1670. Others such as the North West Company followed, and so did bitter fights over furs. Canada would be a very different

place without the fur trade, but the lives of Indigenous people would also be completely different. The fur trade brought them useful tools as well as hard times. And a new people, the Métis, emerged as the fur trade reached its height in the 1700s and 1800s. Knowing about the fur trade and how it shaped Canada helps us understand who we are as a country and how we got that way. Read on to discover how the fur trade worked, who kept it going, and the impact it left behind.

Nancy

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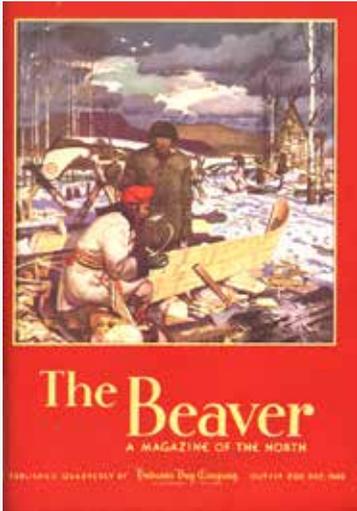
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HUDSON'S BAY

FUR REAL



100 NUMBER OF YEARS *KAYAK*'S BIG SISTER MAGAZINE HAS BEEN AROUND. FIRST CALLED *THE BEAVER*, THIS MAGAZINE ABOUT CANADA'S HISTORY IS NOW CALLED *CANADA'S HISTORY*.

A FACTORY IN FUR TRADE TIMES WASN'T WHAT YOU'RE THINKING. IT WAS A PLACE WHERE THE FACTOR — THE GUY IN CHARGE — AND COMPANY EMPLOYEES LIVED AND TRADED.



The **hommes du nord** (northmen) were tough fur traders who ranged far and wide. They made fun of the men who were based in Montreal and spent the winters there, calling them **mangeurs du lard** or pork-eaters.



THE CREE COMMUNITY OF **WASKAGANISH** CELEBRATED ITS 350TH ANNIVERSARY IN 2018. OVER THE CENTURIES THE SETTLEMENT, WHICH WAS ONE OF THE FIRST FUR TRADE POSTS, HAS BEEN KNOWN AS **CHARLES FORT, FORT SAINT-JACQUES, FORT CHARLES AND FORT RUPERT.**

A men's beaver hat cost about **21 shillings** in 1770. That's about **\$150** today.



THE BEAVER IS THE **LARGEST RODENT** IN NORTH AMERICA.

6,000,000 NUMBER OF BEAVERS BELIEVED TO HAVE LIVED IN CANADA BEFORE THE FUR TRADE STARTED.

THE BUSINESS THAT CREATED A COUNTRY

It's amazing to think that without a fad for a certain kind of hat, Canada might not exist, and the lives of Indigenous people would probably be completely different. Whether you think it mostly helped or harmed, there's no question that the fur trade changed everything.

Hats made from beaver pelts were such hot fashion items in Europe in the 1500s that within 20 years, there were almost no beavers left there. Meanwhile, European fishermen on the east coast of what's now Canada were trading with Indigenous people for food and furs.

Most men who settled in New France in the early to mid-1600s hoped to farm, but there were so few women that only one man in seven could find a wife and start a family to help him with the crops and animals. Many Frenchmen took off into the wilderness instead to make their living trading with Indigenous people for the furs Europeans desperately wanted.



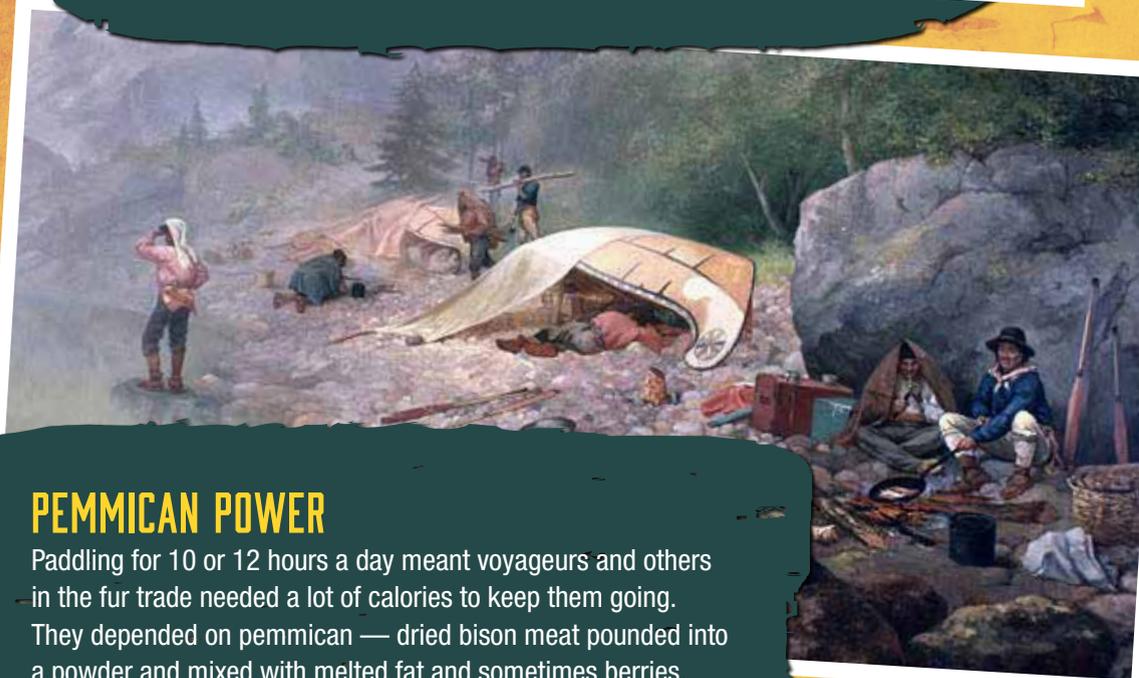
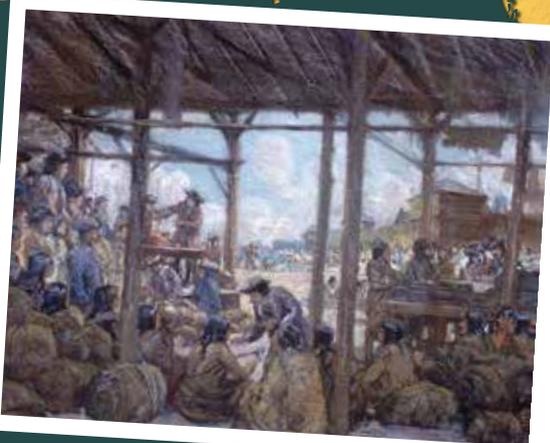
COUREURS DE BOIS USUALLY WORKED ON THEIR OWN. THEY WERE EXPERTS AT TRAVELLING THE WILDERNESS, WHETHER ON WATER OR LAND, AND ALSO TRADED FOR FURS. **VOYAGEURS** USUALLY WORKED FOR A COMPANY, AND MOSTLY JUST PADDLED OTHERS, WHO DID THE ACTUAL TRADING.



These *voyageurs* and *coureurs de bois* (runners of the woods) paddled thousands of kilometres from Montreal into what was known then as the Northwest. They were looking for beaver, but also traded for what were called fancy furs such as fox, marten, mink, fisher and others.

Sometimes the traders went right to where Indigenous hunters and trappers lived, and sometimes the Indigenous people came to the trading posts set up by the Europeans (mainly English and Scottish). For 250 years, the fur trade boomed. It supported explorers who pushed west and north, mapping their journeys along the way. Its fur trade posts led European settlers all the way to the coast of British Columbia.

By the 1820s, beavers and many other fur-bearing animals had been severely over-hunted. In the 1830s, cheaper silk hats became fashionable, with even more types of cloth soon driving prices down even more. Within about 40 years, the trade in beaver pelts was pretty much over.



PEMMICAN POWER

Paddling for 10 or 12 hours a day meant voyageurs and others in the fur trade needed a lot of calories to keep them going. They depended on pemmican — dried bison meat pounded into a powder and mixed with melted fat and sometimes berries. Pemmican was easy to carry and slow to spoil, and a little bit of it provided a lot of energy.



HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY

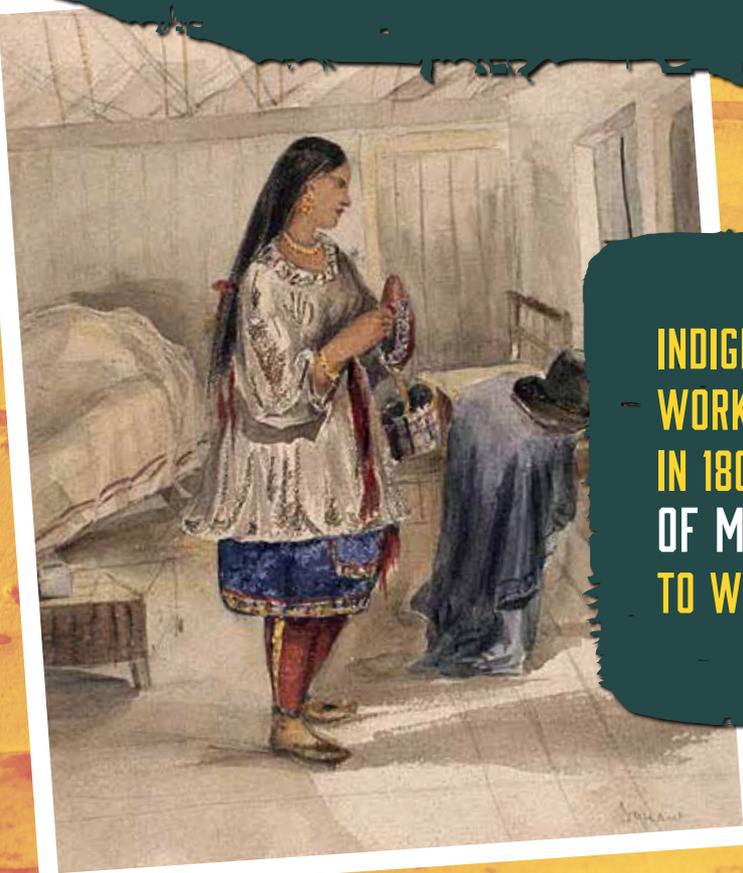
NORTH WEST COMPANY

Established	1670	1779
Short form	HBC, Baymen	Nor'Westers
Owned by	Scottish merchants	English merchants
Employees	British; mainly Scots, many from the Orkney Islands	mostly French-Canadians
Base	head office in England; posts mainly located on the shores of southern Hudson Bay	head office in Montreal; posts mainly along rivers and lakes in the vast Northwest
Obtained furs by	waiting in factories or forts for Aboriginal people to bring furs to them	paddling out into the wilderness to trade with Aboriginal people in their home areas
Motto	<i>Pro Pelle Cutem</i> (For the pelt, the skin)	Perseverance!

“THE BEAVER DOES EVERYTHING PERFECTLY. IT MAKES KETTLES, HATCHETS, SWORDS, KNIVES AND BREAD.” –INDIGENOUS TRADER, COMMENTING ON WHAT THE EUROPEAN FISHERMEN WERE WILLING TO TRADE FOR BEAVER PELTS

WOMEN WORKERS

The fur trade wouldn't have existed without non-stop work by Indigenous women. They made snowshoes, moccasins and all kinds of clothes. They repaired canoes, planted and harvested corn, chopped firewood, prepared animal skins and pelts for sale, washed clothes and cooked meals. They also made the all-important pemmican. Because of their many skills, Indigenous women were allowed to work in fur trade posts, places where European women were not allowed because life there was thought to be too rough for them. Men who worked for the fur companies often married Indigenous women, known as "country wives." No doubt many were truly caring relationships, but it was also cheaper for these men to marry Indigenous women than to pay them for all the work they did. The children of fur traders and Indigenous women were the first Métis people. Some of these marriages survived, but many men in the fur trade simply left these women and children behind when they returned to Europe, and married again.



**INDIGENOUS WOMEN
WORKING AT YORK FACTORY
IN 1800 MADE 650 PAIRS
OF MOCCASINS FOR MEN
TO WEAR THAT SUMMER.**

STYLIN' BEAVER

There were many popular kinds of hats made from beaver pelts



"CONTINENTAL" HAT



ARMY HAT



THE D'ORSAY



THE REGENT



NAVAL COCKED HAT



THE PARIS BEAU



THE WELLINGTON



A CLERICAL TYPE



FROM PELT TO HAT

A **coat pelt** or *castor gras* was several pelts sewn together into clothing and worn with the fur next to the body until the long guard hairs fell off. It was soft and easy to work with. A **parchment beaver** or *castor sec* was stretched and dried, and still had the long guard hairs attached. Hat-makers in Europe shaved the guard hairs off the pelt and smushed it so the little barbs on the soft undercoat stuck together. This process, called felting, created a high quality, stiff material that held its shape when made into a hat.

"HENCEFORTH ALL GENTLEMEN'S HATS SHALL BE FASHIONED OF BEAVERSKINS."

—KING CHARLES II, 1670

BEAVER HATS SHOWED A MAN WAS WEALTHY AND IMPORTANT, AND OFTEN SIGNALLED WHAT HIS JOB WAS. THEY ALSO SHED RAIN, WHICH WAS IMPORTANT IN DRIZZLY ENGLAND BEFORE THE UMBRELLA WAS INVENTED. A BEAVER HAT WAS HIGHLY PRIZED AND WOULD OFTEN BE PASSED FROM FATHER TO SON.

istockphoto

WHAT A BEAVER BOUGHT

For a while, each trading post offered different things in exchange for furs. Smart Aboriginal people shopped around for the best deal. Eventually, Hudson's Bay factors caught on and set up what they called a "standard of trade" so that everyone used the same system. Here's how it worked in Fort Albany in 1733.



TWO COMBS

OR



20 FISH HOOKS

OR



A PAIR OF PANTS



TWO RED FEATHERS

OR



3/4 OF A POUND OF BUTTONS



A PISTOL

OR



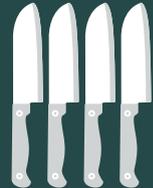
TWO MIRRORS

OR

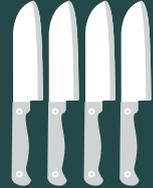


SIX THIMBLES

OR



EIGHT KNIVES



THE FUR TRADE IS VERY DIFFERENT NOW. MOST FUR SUCH AS MINK AND FOX COMES FROM ANIMALS RAISED ON FARMS, BUT FIRST NATIONS AND INUIT STILL TRAP ANIMALS AND SELL THEIR FURS UNDER STRICT RULES.





NO GOING BACK

All of the voyageurs and traders and posts and factories would have been useless without hundreds of thousands of furs. And those furs existed because of the skills of the Indigenous people who hunted and trapped the animals and prepared the pelts for trade. It's unlikely Europeans on their own could ever have found, trapped, hunted, transported and processed the animals whose pelts were so desired back home. The knowledge and abilities Indigenous people had were crucial.

Yes, Indigenous people got new and helpful items in exchange for furs. But the fur trade also changed their lives forever, in ways the first hunters offering beaver pelts couldn't have imagined. We'll never know what Canada would have been like if traditional Indigenous trading patterns and ways of life had been able to continue on their own, without disruption from the fur trade.

Before the fur trade, Indigenous people saw animal skins and furs as valuable because they could be used to make clothing and shelters. When Europeans came to trade useful objects in exchange for furs, it changed the way Indigenous people related to the land and its animals.

The strongest men and women were often so busy supplying furs that they had little time left to hunt for food and care for their own families. And if a trade mission failed, many would starve. Indigenous groups that had mostly left each other alone started fighting over control of territory and the fur-bearing creatures living there.



Contact with European traders could be deadly for Indigenous people, whose bodies had no defences against illnesses the traders brought without meaning to. Smallpox, measles and the flu killed thousands of Indigenous people starting as early as the 1630s.

Pemmican, the fuel of the fur trade, required bison meat. That led to over-hunting of bison, which had been a source of food for thousands of Indigenous people on the prairies.

Over time, many Indigenous people came to depend on the fur trade for food, money and even medical care. They lost the old ways that had worked for so long because they had devoted so much time and energy to supplying the fur trade. Some cruel traders took advantage of Indigenous trade partners by giving them too much alcohol. Pelts could also be traded for guns and bullets, meaning that old rivalries between Indigenous groups became deadlier than ever before.

When HBC sold Rupert's Land — a huge area covering about one-third of modern Canada — to the new country in 1869, nobody bothered asking the Métis and other Indigenous people living there how they felt about it. Their anger led to the Red River Resistance, which in turn led to the first Treaty talks.

FUR TRADE TIMES

1653

The first voyageurs paddle west from Montreal



1660

Radisson and Des Groseilliers return from Lake Superior with 100 canoes full of fur.



1666

British investors, including Prince Rupert, pay for Radisson and Des Groseilliers to explore a fur-trading route through Hudson Bay to avoid paying French taxes.

1673-1684

HBC builds forts along Hudson Bay and James Bay.

1668-1669

The investors pay for Zachariah Gillam to sail the 15-metre *Nonsuch* through a northern route from Gravesend, England, into James Bay to trade for furs.

1670

The "Governor and Company of Adventurers of England Trading into Hudson's Bay" (the Hudson's Bay Company) forms.



1682

A group of Montreal merchants forms the Compagnie du Nord to compete with HBC.

1713

War between England and France ends; as part of the peace treaty, the French return several HBC forts to English control.

1715

Rats and insects destroy the furs stored in Montreal warehouses. More furs are needed, fast.

1774

Samuel Hearne builds Cumberland House, the first HBC fur trade post inland, rather than on the coast.

1768

HBC sees huge losses as Montrealers push west to get to First Nations before they trade with HBC.

1778

Captain James Cook stops off the B.C. coast to trade for sea-otter fur with Aboriginal people.

1779

English, Scottish and French-Canadian businessmen in Montreal form the North West Company to compete with HBC.



1780

An English company makes the first Hudson's Bay Company point blanket, with black stitched lines or points.

1788

NWC builds Fort Chipewyan on Lake Athabasca in what is now northeastern Alberta.



1789

Alexander Mackenzie makes it to the Arctic for the NWC.



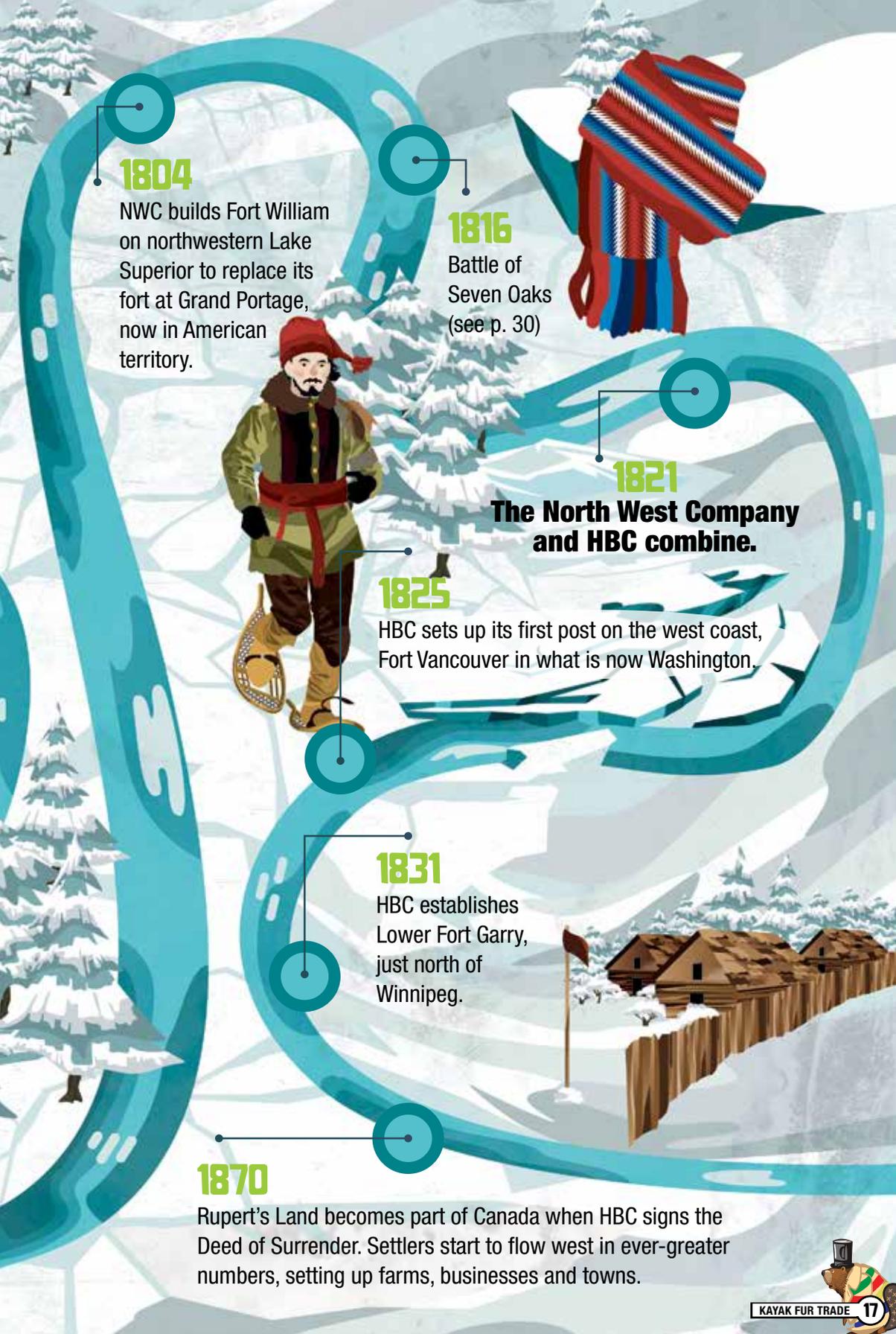
1793

The Nor'Westers control more than three-quarters of fur sales; Mackenzie reaches the Pacific Ocean by land.



1798

HBC introduces its legendary creamy white blanket with green, red, yellow and blue stripes.



1804

NWC builds Fort William on northwestern Lake Superior to replace its fort at Grand Portage, now in American territory.

1816

Battle of Seven Oaks (see p. 30)

1821

The North West Company and HBC combine.

1825

HBC sets up its first post on the west coast, Fort Vancouver in what is now Washington.

1831

HBC establishes Lower Fort Garry, just north of Winnipeg.

1870

Rupert's Land becomes part of Canada when HBC signs the Deed of Surrender. Settlers start to flow west in ever-greater numbers, setting up farms, businesses and towns.

PADDLES, POSTS AND PROFITS

Just think about it: Somehow, a gigantic business covering most of a continent not only grew and made money, it lasted more than two centuries. Here are just some of the interesting people who made the fur trade possible.



RADISSON 1636-1710 & DES GROSEILLIERS 1618 -ABOUT 1696

Médard Chouart, Sieur Des Groseilliers grew up in Roman Catholic religious settlements where he learned about fur trading. His brother-in-law Pierre-Esprit Radisson, captured by Iroquois as a boy, knew many First Nations languages and customs. The two

were the original coureurs de bois, showing it was possible to travel deep into the wilderness and return with valuable furs. Their voyages showed a way to get the pelts from Indigenous suppliers to Europe, and led to the founding of the Hudson's Bay Company. He and Radisson would later join the Compagnie du Nord. English people they dealt with sometimes called them Radishes and Gooseberries.

THANADELTHUR ABOUT 1697-1717

Captured by the Cree who fought with her Chipewyan people because of the fur trade, this teenaged young woman escaped and made it through the snow to some HBC workers who took her to York Factory. Because she spoke English as well as Cree and Chipewyan, and was smart and determined, Thanadelthur was able to bring about a peace agreement. When she caught a disease and died, Thanadelthur was barely out of her teens but had created lasting peace that allowed HBC to expand its trading network all over the north.



Buffalo Bill Centre of the West, Alex Douchon



JOSEPH 1740-1810, BENJAMIN 1742-1787 AND THOMAS FROBISHER 1744-1788

Although they became wealthy businessmen, the Frobisher brothers got their start through hard work and maybe even a bit of trickery. Joseph spent the winter of 1774-75 in what is now northern Manitoba trying to buy loads of furs from traders heading for HBC posts. The brothers were part of the original group that formed the North West Company in 1779.



SIMON MCTAVISH ABOUT 1750-1804

Although he arrived almost penniless in what would become the United States in 1764, McTavish started building his own fur-trading business almost right away. He saw the chance at wealth in the north, rather than going south or west as other American traders were doing. He eventually moved his business's base to Montreal and joined with the Frobisher brothers and other partners to create the North West Company.

SAMUEL HEARNE 1745-1792

Hearne would likely never have survived to make history if he had not had the help of the great Chipewyan chief, Matonabee, while working for HBC exploring the area west of Hudson Bay. By 1773, traders from Montreal were choking off the supply of furs to HBC from Indigenous people, so Hearne was assigned the huge job of building Cumberland House, the company's first trading post not on the coast of Hudson Bay or James Bay.



SIR ALEXANDER MACKENZIE ABOUT 1764-1820

Mackenzie (not to be confused with Canada's second prime minister) left Scotland and started in the fur trade at 15. His tireless westward exploration helped the North West Company push into new territory beyond Rupert's Land. He is believed to be the first European to cross North America, arriving on the west coast in July, 1793.

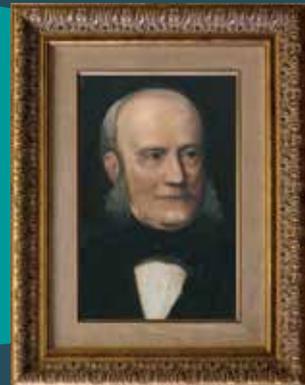


DAVID THOMPSON 1770-1857

Raised poor in England, Thompson joined HBC in 1784, jumping to the Nor'Westers in 1797. He learned from and respected Indigenous people he met, such as the Piegan chief Saukamappee. He travelled more than 80,000 kilometres on foot, by canoe and on horseback, mapping huge areas. His Métis wife Charlotte Small and their 13 children came with him much of the way.

GEORGE SIMPSON 1787-1860

Simpson, another Scot, became Governor of Rupert's Land in his early 30s. He oversaw the deal to combine HBC and the North West Company. He made epic, months-long trips west in the mid-1820s by horse and canoe. HBC made a lot of money in the 40 years Simpson was in charge, but many felt he cared more for those profits than for how the people, land or animals were doing.



JOHN RAE 1813-1893

As a doctor at the HBC post in Moose Factory in what is now Ontario, the Orkney-born Rae became interested in fur-trading and exploring the Arctic. He learned snowshoeing, hunting, igloo-building and other skills from the Cree and Inuit. He sailed on several missions to explore and map the Arctic coast and islands, which he preferred over working at a trading post.



DONALD A. SMITH 1820-1914

If anybody knew every corner of the fur-trading business, it was Smith. He was the only HBC governor to start as a lowly grader of muskrat fur and work all the way up to the top job.

JAMES MCKAY 1828-1879

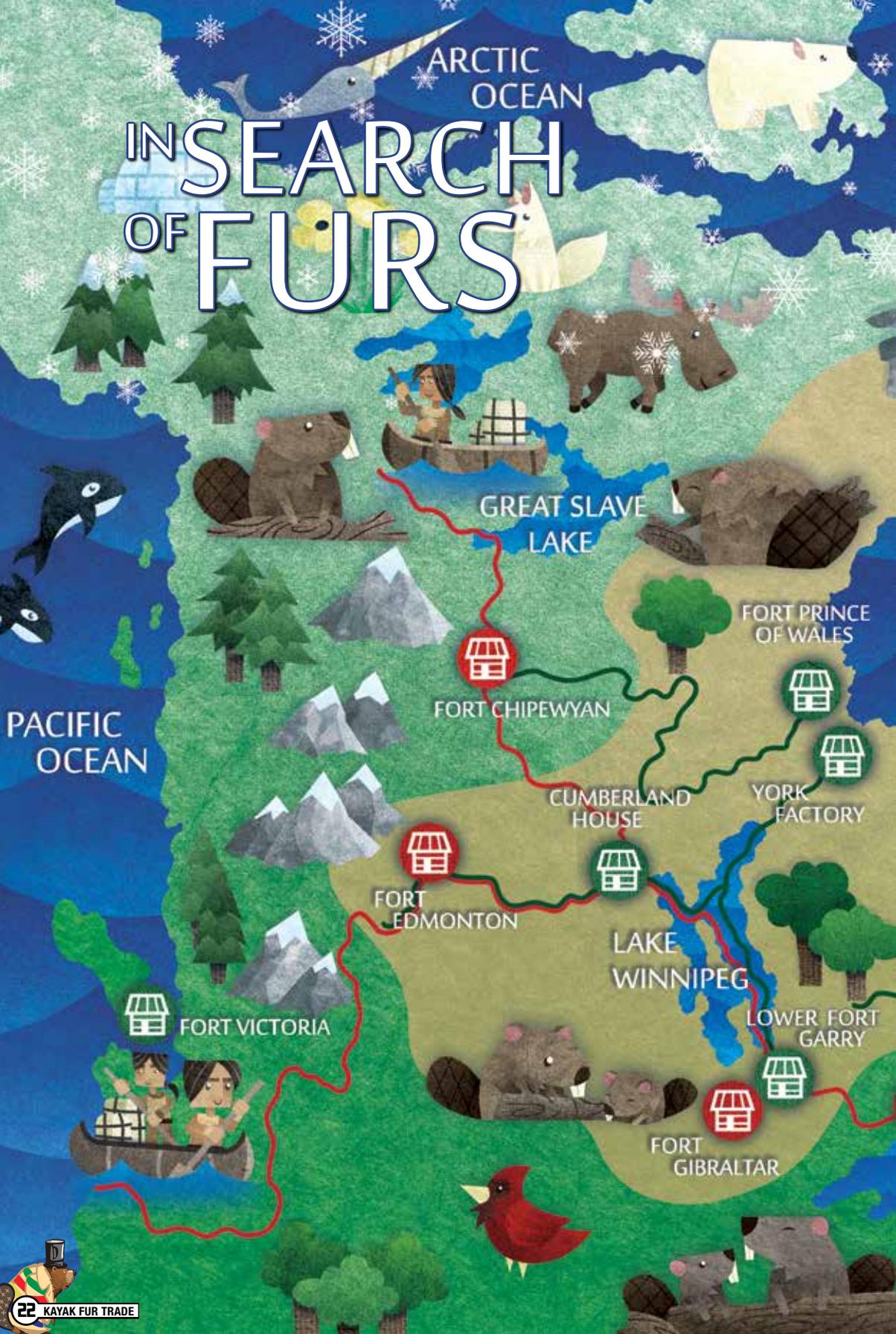
A burly Métis man born in what is now Alberta, McKay spoke many First Nations languages as well as English and French. He was strong and tough. One story tells of him carrying Sir George Simpson, head of the HBC, on his shoulders through a swamp. He became a successful businessman and politician in the Red River settlement, helping to create Treaty 1.



FRANCES ANNE HOPKINS 1838-1919

Born Frances Anne Beechey, this artist married Edward Hopkins, who worked for the HBC, and moved to the Montreal area in 1858. She often travelled by canoe, sometimes on long journeys through the wilderness. Her beautiful paintings of voyageurs paddling and camping captured a disappearing way of life as the company started to move pelts using steamships and the railway. In some of her most famous paintings, like the one shown above, she painted herself into the picture. Can you spot her in the canoe?

IN SEARCH OF FURS



ARCTIC OCEAN

GREAT SLAVE LAKE

PACIFIC OCEAN

FORT CHIPEWYAN

FORT PRINCE OF WALES

CUMBERLAND HOUSE

YORK FACTORY

FORT EDMONTON

LAKE WINNIPEG

FORT VICTORIA

LOWER FORT GARRY

FORT GIBRALTAR



ATLANTIC OCEAN

HUDSON BAY

FORT ALBANY

JAMES BAY

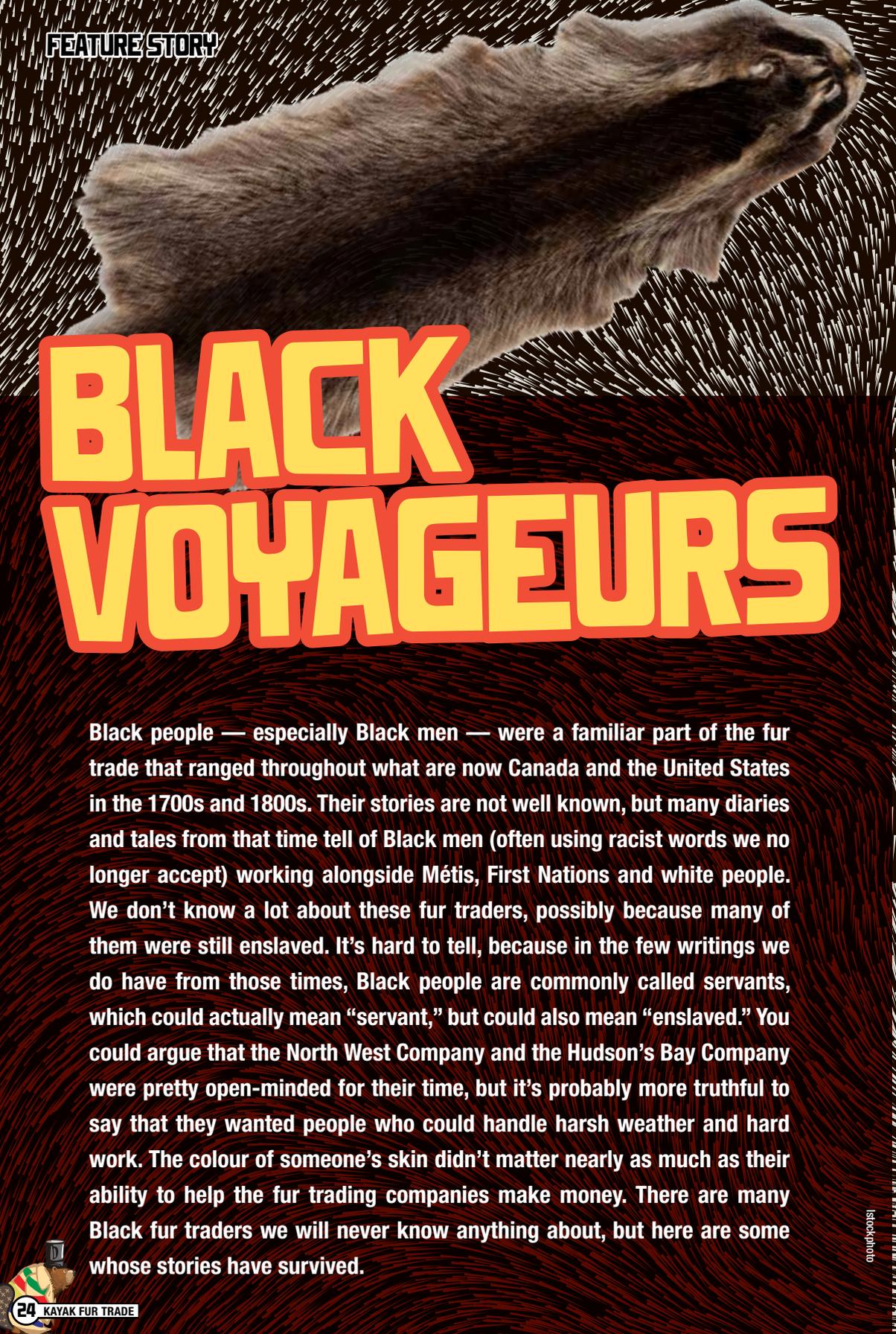
MOOSE FACTORY

FORT WILLIAM

MONTREAL

LAKE SUPERIOR

-  RUPERT'S LAND
-  HUDSON'S BAY CO. POST
-  NORTH WEST CO. POST
-  HUDSON'S BAY CO. ROUTES
-  NORTH WEST CO. ROUTES



BLACK VOYAGEURS

Black people — especially Black men — were a familiar part of the fur trade that ranged throughout what are now Canada and the United States in the 1700s and 1800s. Their stories are not well known, but many diaries and tales from that time tell of Black men (often using racist words we no longer accept) working alongside Métis, First Nations and white people. We don't know a lot about these fur traders, possibly because many of them were still enslaved. It's hard to tell, because in the few writings we do have from those times, Black people are commonly called servants, which could actually mean "servant," but could also mean "enslaved." You could argue that the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company were pretty open-minded for their time, but it's probably more truthful to say that they wanted people who could handle harsh weather and hard work. The colour of someone's skin didn't matter nearly as much as their ability to help the fur trading companies make money. There are many Black fur traders we will never know anything about, but here are some whose stories have survived.

JOSEPH LEWIS

We don't know if Lewis was free or enslaved when he was born in New Hampshire around 1772. When he was about 20, he joined a Montreal fur business, likely the North West Company, but he jumped to the Hudson's Bay Company a few years later. He was known as an excellent paddler who helped with mapping expeditions into what are now British Columbia and the Northwest Territories. He lived in what is now Alberta between about 1799 and 1820, marrying a First Nations woman in 1806. In 1810, he travelled with a man named Joseph Howse, who was the first HBC employee to cross the Rocky Mountains. Their expedition mapped a huge area of what are now Alberta and B.C.



This 1832 painting by American artist Henry Byam Martin is called *A pilot steering down the rapids of the St. Lawrence.*

A Black man named Glasgow Crawford worked as a cook at Fort Chipewyan in northern Alberta around 1820. He spoke French, English and Iroquois. His boss's diary mentions that Crawford sometimes got annoyed when local kids – Métis and First Nations – hung around his kitchen. The diary adds that the kids didn't like to listen to his scoldings because his skin was darker than theirs.





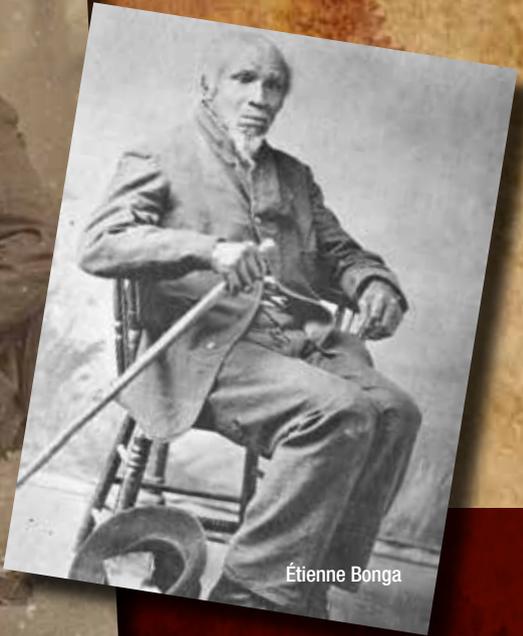
SIR JAMES DOUGLAS

Some called him Old Square Toes because he was so focused on details and looking proper. He's also known as the Father of British Columbia for his time as Great Britain's governor on what is now Canada's west coast. James Douglas was born in the South American country of British Guiana in 1803. His father was Scottish and his mother was, in the wording of the time, "a free coloured woman." He went into the fur trade with the North West Company when he was just 16, and became an HBC employee when the companies joined together five years later. By 18 he was in charge of his own fur trade post. His intelligence and hard work helped him rise in the company, although his fierce temper sometimes got in the way of his success. In 1828, he married Amelia Connolly, a half-Indigenous woman. In 1849, HBC put him in charge of all of Vancouver Island, and a few years later, Britain made him governor. (He gave up his role with HBC in 1858.) Douglas soon realized that the British government didn't seem terribly interested in protecting the region, so he built forts and settlements to keep the Americans out, and approved the formation of a citizen military unit called the Victoria Pioneer Rifle Corps, often known as the African Rifles. It was made up entirely of Black men. He treated First Nations people better than most politicians of his time, and fought slavery, which he hated. Although many people found him cold and self-important, he never stopped educating himself, and never missed a single day of work. Queen Victoria made him a knight. There are many places in B.C. named for him, including Douglas Peak, Douglas Channel, Douglas College and Sir James Douglas Elementary School.





Georges Bonga



Étienne Bonga

PIERRE, GEORGES [GEORGE] AND ÉTIENNE [STEPHEN] BONGA

Pierre Bonga, the son of an enslaved couple living in what is now northern Michigan, was an interpreter for the North West Company who worked around the Red River area of what is now Manitoba. He married an Ojibwe woman whose name we don't know, and by 1819 he was a well-known fur trader himself. George was born to the couple around 1802 in what is now Minnesota, and went to school in Montreal. Because he spoke English, French and Ojibwe he was hired by the American Fur Company to be an interpreter as well as a fur trader in the 1820s. After the company went out of business in 1842, he continued to work in the fur trade alongside his Ojibwe wife. He was known for his size, strength, wealth and gentlemanly ways. His younger brother Stephen also worked for the AFC as a clerk and did some trading in Ontario between about 1827 and 1833. He spent lots of time outdoors paddling the voyageurs' waterways. They had two other brothers who also worked in the fur trade.

Public Domain



TRADE-OFF

Aboriginal people quickly saw that they could gain valuable items by trading beaver pelts and other kinds of furs. Which of these items, known as **trade goods**, were actually used in the fur trade and which weren't?



COOKING POTS

Although the shiny copper pots traded by the fur companies weren't necessarily better than the clay ones Aboriginal people were already using, copper was an important metal in many of their cultures, making the pots very valuable.

COFFEE

Until the Europeans offered it in exchange for furs, Aboriginal people had never tasted coffee, which was soon prized for its taste and the energy it gave those who drank it.





GUNS

Much more effective than bows and arrows or spears, guns like this one were instantly popular with Aboriginal people. One, the North West Gun, was specially designed for use in the fur trade, using ideas from Aboriginal people that would make it work better in our climate.

TOBACCO

Although some First Nations grew their own tobacco, most preferred what came from the southern United States and especially Brazil.



BLANKETS

Indigenous people sewed these warm wool blankets into clothes, and wrapped themselves up in them for warmth. Still popular today, HBC blankets are most famously cream-coloured with four bright stripes, but could also be solid blue, red or green.



BEADS

These beautiful little objects weren't just trinkets. They were usually made in Italy and had striking patterns and colours. Many contained gold. Indigenous people sewed them onto clothes and other personal items. Some chiefs would even throw them into the water to show how rich they were.





THE LAST BATTLE OF SEVEN OAKS

Written by Heather Wright Illustrated by Celia Krampien

GRANTOWN, MANITOBA, 1821

The boys were fighting as usual. Whenever enough families got together, and enough boys had nothing to do for a while, the battle began.

This time the families were gathered to celebrate Pierre's grandmother's birthday. All the aunts, uncles and cousins who could travel to Grantown had made the trip. While the grown-ups talked and the pig was cooking on the spit, the boys went to battle.

The field behind the barn was renamed La Grenouillère and the boys took sides. Pierre's father, Paul, leaned on the fence and watched them.

"I get to be Cuthbert Grant!" yelled Pierre.

"You were Grant last time. This time you have to be Governor Semple," said Francis.

"Okay, but I want to be a Nor'Wester next time."

"I've been a Bayman twice," piped up Michel. "I get to be a Nor'Wester this time."

"You can be François Boucher. Now go talk to Semple like Grant ordered!" said Francis.

The boys stood in two uneven groups — more Nor'Westers than Baymen — with Michel leading one side and Pierre the other.

"Wait! I don't have a horse," protested Michel.

Pierre ran to the fence and grabbed two hay rakes. He gave one to Michel.

"Now you do!" said Pierre. He and Michel mounted their imaginary horses, scowling at each other as they became their characters, riding into battle at the head of their forces.

Michel/Boucher yelled. "What do you want?"

"What do you want?" Pierre/Semple yelled back.

"We want our fort!"

"Then, go to your fort!"

"Why did you destroy our fort, you rascal?" yelled Michel.

Pierre pretended to grab the reins of Michel's horse. That was it! All of a sudden, everyone was pointing an imaginary gun and yelling "bang!" In moments, most of the Baymen were sprawled on the ground. The Nor'Westers whooped, "Victoire, victoire, la victoire de la Grenouillère!"

In the middle of the cheering, Pierre saw his father leaning against the fence, holding a piece of paper. “That’s how it went, right Papa?”

The other boys sprang back to life or stopped yelling. Everyone waited for Paul’s answer. After all, he’d known a man who had actually been at the battle five years ago.

“Then Governor Semple came and tore down our fort and kicked us all out of our homes,” added Michel. “And he stopped us from using the river to get food to our men.”

The boys nodded at the familiar story.

“Do you remember what happened after the battle?” asked Paul.

“Lots of people got arrested and



Paul nodded. “Oui, that’s how it went.” He looked at the boys. “But can anyone tell me why the Baymen and the Nor’Westers were fighting?”

“It was about food. It was about our pemmican,” said Francis. “The Baymen took food from our trading post on the Assiniboine. And they stopped us sending food to the other Nor’Westers who were hunting for furs. They gave our food to the settlers, so our men didn’t have anything to eat. No food meant they couldn’t hunt.”

sent to Montreal, but they’re all home again,” said Pierre.

“So many others died, though, and never made it home,” said Paul, almost to himself.

The boys nodded solemnly. They’d heard stories of forts being attacked and canoes ambushed in the feud between the Hudson’s Bay men and the Nor’Westers. They’d all worried when their fathers and brothers were away from home.

Paul folded and unfolded the paper he was holding.

“What’s that, Papa?” asked Pierre. They hardly ever got letters, and he was afraid that it was bad news.

“What’s it say?” asked Pierre.

“It says that the North West Company and the Hudson’s Bay Company have joined together. It’s all over.”

“We’ve been fighting all this time and didn’t win?” asked Pierre.

“In a battle only one side can win. But when there is peace, we can all win,” said his father. “We can work and raise our families.”

Pierre hung his head and kicked at the grass.

“What’s the matter?” his father asked.

“It won’t be as much fun playing La Grenouillère anymore,” said Pierre.

“You’ll find other games,” said Paul. “For now, why don’t you all concentrate on eating that pig that’s been roasting all day?”

The boys jumped over and ran to get their plates filled. Paul tore the letter into little pieces and let them float away on the wind. He turned and looked at his family. Instead of wondering when the next attack would come, they were happy and safe. They had a future. Peace is better, he thought. **K**

Lord Selkirk, who had a lot of money invested in the Hudson’s Bay Company, encouraged Scottish settlers to come to the Red River settlement in the area that is now Winnipeg. In 1815, many settlers arrived, but they were too late to plant any crops. Miles Macdonell, a Bayman in charge of the Red River settlement, seized pemmican supplies from the Nor’Westers to feed the settlers. He then passed the Pemmican Proclamation banning the sale of pemmican to the Nor’Westers. Robert Semple, the governor of the Hudson’s Bay settlement on the Red River, tore down the Nor’Westers’ most important trading post, Fort Gibraltar. On June 19, 1816, Semple and a group



Lord Selkirk

of about 25 Baymen left the fort at Seven Oaks to confront General Grant and 61 Nor’Westers and Métis. The Métis called this area Plaine des Grenouilles or Frog Plain. In the fight, 21 Baymen including Semple, and one Métis, were killed. The head of the North West Company and many others were sent to Montreal for trial, but the investigators said neither side could be faulted completely and freed the men. Over the next five years, the violence between the two companies grew worse. In 1820, Lord Selkirk died. The two companies merged the next year. Our story is set in Grantown, a village just west of Winnipeg that was named after Cuthbert Grant. It is now called St. François-Xavier. There is a monument in downtown Winnipeg near the site of the battle.

Trading Places

The fur trade touched pretty much every part of Canada, so there are all kinds of places you can visit to see trade goods, pelts, forts, canoes and more



Montreal, Que.

This site's stone warehouse was built in 1803 to store furs for the North West Company. Lachine was an important spot for the Nor'Westers — trading expeditions left from here, furs were shipped out to Europe and trade goods came and went.

The Fur Trade at Lachine National Historic Site

Peterborough, Ont.

Get a feel for a voyageur's life in the camp set up beside a huge fur-trade canoe. Try picking up one of the super-heavy bundles they carried . . . and then imagine adding another. Check out bark canoes, trade goods and a beautiful 38-centimetre silver canoe given to Sir George Simpson by the Earl of Caledon in 1841.

Canadian Canoe Museum



Parks Canada, Canadian Canoe Museum



York Factory National Historic Site

York Factory, Man.

You can't get there by road — you have to fly or paddle in — so not many people make it to this fur-trade post on Hudson Bay. But for 273 years, York Factory was one of the most important Hudson's Bay Company locations in the country. There were once more than 50 buildings on the site. The main building still stands, along with a cemetery and ruins of two other structures.

Edmonton, Alta.

At a recreated 1846 fur-trade fort, you can visit First Nations tipis, try bartering for trade goods and meet costumed characters from that time.

Fort Edmonton Park



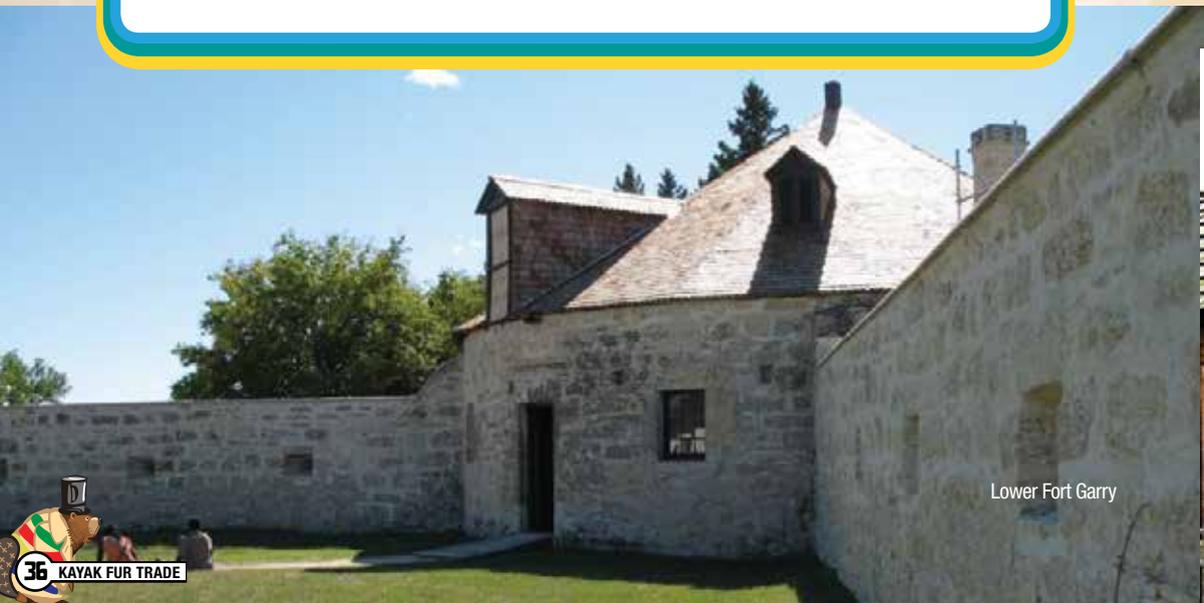


Fort Gibraltar

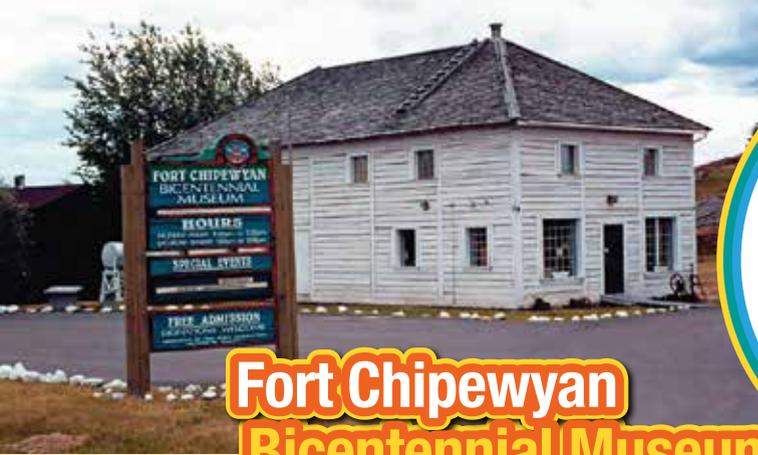
Around Winnipeg

Visit the **Manitoba Museum's** Hudson's Bay Company Gallery to learn more about one of the world's oldest companies. And don't miss the Nonsuch Gallery, with a full-size replica of the small two-masted sailing ship that brought a load of furs to England from Hudson's Bay in 1669 and led to the creation of HBC. Former North West Company post **Fort Gibraltar** shows what life was like there from 1815 to 1821, and hosts the Festival du Voyageur in February. About half an hour north of the city is one of the best places in Canada to discover the fur trade, **Lower Fort Garry**. Inside the stone walls of this HBC post on the banks of the Red River you can chat with costumed guides in a trading post, restored houses and a huge room full of real pelts.

Fort Gibraltar, Alamy



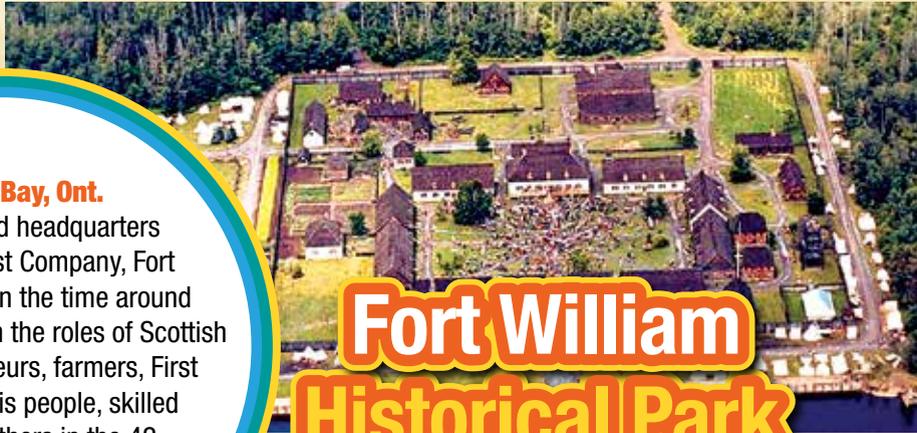
Lower Fort Garry



Fort Chipewyan Bicentennial Museum

Fort Chipewyan, Alta.

Built exactly like the HBC store that stood here in 1870, this museum focuses on Indigenous people's experience of the fur trade and their spirituality, as well as displaying lots of items from that time.

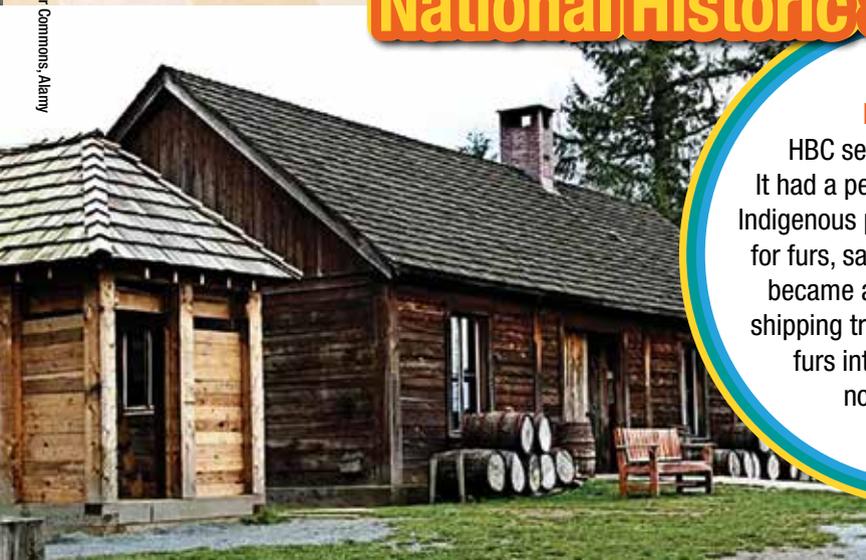


Fort William Historical Park

Thunder Bay, Ont.

Once the inland headquarters of the North West Company, Fort William focuses on the time around 1816. Guides take on the roles of Scottish fur traders, voyageurs, farmers, First Nations and Métis people, skilled workers and others in the 42 reconstructed buildings beside the Kaministiquia River.

Fort Langley National Historic Site



Langley, B.C.

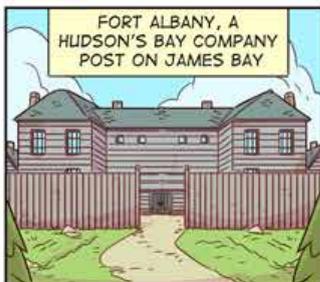
HBC set up this fort in 1827. It had a peaceful relationship with Indigenous people, trading with them for furs, salmon and cranberries. It became an important centre for shipping trade goods, supplies and furs into the rest of what is now B.C., and out to Europe.



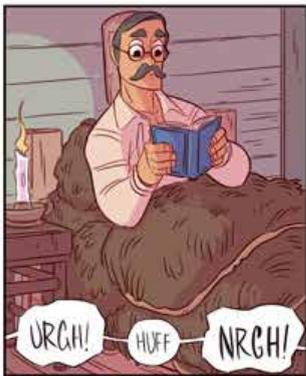
JOHN FUBBISTER AND ISOBEL GUNN

ILLUSTRATED BY
ALEX DIOCHON











AND THEN JOHN FUBBISTER LOOKS UP AT ALEXANDER HENRY AND SAYS...



"I AM A WOMAN, SIR."



"MY REAL NAME IS ISOBEL GUNN."



AND SHE LOOKED DOWN AT HER WEE BABY AND SAID...



AND THIS WEE ONE IS JAMES.



I...BUT...



WHO...



HOW...



NOBODY WAS GOING TO LET ISOBEL GUNN GO BACK TO THE WORK SHE HAD DONE SO WELL WHEN THEY THOUGHT SHE WAS JOHN FUBBISTER. INSTEAD, SHE AND HER BABY WERE SENT BACK TO FORT ALBANY WHERE SHE WAS GIVEN A JOB WASHING CLOTHES.



SHE HATED IT.

AFTER A YEAR, ISOBEL TOOK JAMES, BOARDED THE *PRINCE OF WALES* ONCE MORE, AND SAILED BACK TO ORKNEY.





SHE AND JAMES DIDN'T HAVE MUCH, BUT THEY WERE HAPPY. ISOBEL LIVED TO BE A VERY OLD WOMAN.



AND JAMES...



JAMES GREW INTO A FINE MAN.



WE KNOW VERY LITTLE ABOUT THE LIFE OF ISOBEL GUNN. LIKE SO MANY PEOPLE AT THE TIME, SHE COULD NOT READ OR WRITE, SO SHE DIDN'T KEEP A DIARY OR SEND LETTERS THAT COULD HAVE TOLD US MORE. FOR INSTANCE, WHY DID SHE SIGN UP WITH THE HBC? WAS SHE LOOKING FOR ADVENTURE? FOLLOWING A MAN SHE LOVED? EXCITED TO GO SOMEWHERE NEW AND MAKE MORE MONEY THAN A WOMAN COULD POSSIBLY MAKE IN ORKNEY? WE HAD TO IMAGINE A LOT OF WHAT HAPPENED, BUT WE DO KNOW THAT, AS JOHN FUBBISTER, ISOBEL "WORKED AT ANYTHING AND WELL LIKE THE REST OF THE MEN," ACCORDING TO HUGH HENEY, ONE OF HER BOSSES. WE KNOW SHE WAS REWARDED FOR BEING A GOOD WORKER. AND BECAUSE ALEXANDER HENRY KEPT A DETAILED DIARY, WE KNOW THE INCREDIBLE STORY OF HER ARRIVING AT HIS HOUSE AND GIVING BIRTH TO A BABY. HOW DID SHE KEEP HER SECRET FOR SO LONG? DID HER CO-WORKERS EVER KNOW JOHN'S TRUE IDENTITY? AND WHATEVER HAPPENED TO LITTLE JAMES? (WE IMAGINED THAT HE SURVIVED AND STAYED NEAR ISOBEL, BUT NOBODY HAS EVER BEEN ABLE TO FIND OUT FOR SURE.) THE STORY OF ISOBEL GUNN IS ONE OF THE GREATEST MYSTERIES OF THE FUR TRADE ERA.

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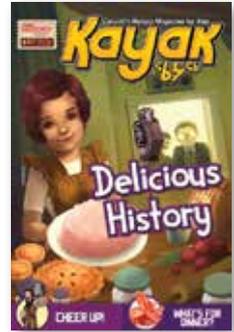
P.28

Coffee is the fake item—it was not used as a trading item exchanged for animal pelts.



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