**SUPERMEN OF NEW FRANCE**

**THE MEN**

You’re running quickly along a forest path. The path goes up and down, left and right,

around and over rocks, trees and streams. You’re carrying your own weight on your

back. If you stumble, you run the risk of severe injury. But you are light on your feet,

leaving ordinary men with no burden gasping for breath as they try to match your pace.

When you reach the end of the carrying, a sixteen to eighteen-hour day of paddling

continues. And you’re thinking, “Bring it on!”

Long days of this kind of work in the relative freedom of the North American wilderness

were what the voyageurs longed for and loved. Mostly born and raised in what is now

Québec, the voyageurs were French by heritage and among the first people to be called

“Canadiens”. Each one lived for challenge. In stark contrast to modern day canoeists,

when they switched from downriver paddling to upriver paddling, their spirits lifted and

they cheered as they paddled harder. Indeed, the king of the fur trade in the United

States, John Jacob Astor, said that a single Canadian voyageur was worth three

ordinary paddlers. Pierre Berton, Canadian writer and historian, called them “supermen

in every sense of the word”.

Standing only about five foot six inches, the average voyageur was astonishing. He was

quite agile, had heavily muscled arms and shoulders, incredible courage and a beautiful

singing voice. Songs were needed to keep up their spirits and to maintain a steady pace

over long periods of time. Many young men were turned away by the North West

Company because they were too tall. There wouldn’t be enough room for long legs

among the merchandise in the canoe.

**THE CARGO**

Each bundle of merchandise, or *pièce*, was carefully weighed. It had to be ninety

pounds, whether it was iron axe heads, steel knives, traps, awls, beads, cloth, blankets

or thread. Similarly, the bundles of fur weighed ninety pounds, squeezed by a huge fur

press into a manageable size. At a *portage*, a carrying place, a voyageur regularly

carried two *pièces* at a running pace that left the clerks, who had little to carry, far

behind, panting for breath. The voyageurs often carried three or four bundles, and

Pierre Bonga, a particularly large, black voyageur, carried six bundles at one time.

That’s five hundred and forty pounds!

Put in terms of modern transportation, the voyageur was not just the loader and driver of

the canoe but also the motor. The birch bark canoe was the truck, the rivers and lakes

were the highways, the paddles were the tires and steering wheel, and the fuel was pea

soup, pemmican and bannock, a pan-fried flat bread. Like modern truckers, the

voyageur had little time to prepare meals or to hunt for food. The voyageurs who

traveled between Montreal and Fort William (Pork Eaters) had salt pork to add protein

and calories to their pea soup. For the voyageurs who travelled northwest (North Men)

of Lake Superior (Gitchigaming) it was pemmican.

**THE FUEL**

Pemmican was obtained through trade with the natives of the plains and later, the Métis,

the children of natives and voyageurs or traders. It was meat from the buffalo killed in

the annual fall hunt, cut in strips and hung in the sun to dry, much like beef jerky. Then it

was pounded and mixed with melted buffalo fat and wild berries, usually Saskatoons.

The congealed mass was rolled into palm-sized balls and placed in a buffalo hide sack.

The sack was sealed with more fat and tied tightly. Meat prepared this way would last

for long trips and could be cached in pits along the way to be recovered on the return

trip. One cache, dug up twenty years later, was still edible!

When the river was clear of falls or rapids, the voyageurs paddled at the rate of forty

strokes per minute or, upriver, often sixty strokes a minute. Because of the terrific

amount of paddling and portaging in their sixteen to eighteen-hour days, with only a

five-minute break each hour, the voyageurs needed about seven thousand calories per

day just to keep going! By contrast, an athlete today consumes around three to four

thousand calories a day when in training. You would have to eat an awful lot of pea

soup and bannock to consume seven thousand calories. So the pemmican was an

essential part of the fur trade. Each ounce was packed with muscle-building protein and

fat calories which were quickly burned in action. The berries protected the voyageurs

from scurvy by providing them with vitamin C. They made the perfect fuel additive for

the best fuel for the times.

**THE VEHICLE**

The Montreal canoe, forty feet long and six hundred pounds wet, carried four tons of

merchandise and six to fourteen men from Lachine, southwest of Montreal, to Grand

Portage and later Fort William at the western end of Lake Superior. These freighter

canoes navigated not only the great rivers, but also the Great Lakes Huron and

Superior. The North canoe, twenty-three to thirty-three feet in length, transported over

six thousand pounds of furs and four to ten men to the rendezvous at Grand Portage in

early July and then brought merchandise back to the trading posts of the vast

northwest, as far as the Rocky Mountains.

The voyageurs would try every way possible to avoid portaging the canoe and its

goods. When encountering rapids, they would first check out the possibility of navigating

or “shooting” the rapids. If that proved impossible, then they would try lightening the

load and steering close to shore around the rapids. If the river was impassable at that

point, they would take everything out, wading in the river to avoid scraping the fragile

canoe on the rocks, and portage all four tons of goods and the canoe itself, all forty feet

and six hundred pounds, over what was usually rocky, slippery, rough terrain.

Whether or not they managed to avoid scraping the canoe, voyageurs had to spend

time repairing their canoe. A new canoe might need repairing an average of one day in

two on its first trip. Often the voyageurs would be examining the exterior surface of their

canoe by firelight, looking for tiny new holes in the bark or around the pitch, while fresh

pitch was boiled up for sealing the holes found.

**THE REASONS**

The fur trade existed because of the quirks of fashion and the needs of the natives.

During the time of the coureurs des bois and then voyageurs, from roughly 1650 until

1850, there was a huge demand for furs in Europe. Beaver fur was particularly

important because of its unique qualities, useful in making felt for hats. The coarse, oily

guard hair was separated from the fine, soft underfur, each hair of which had tiny hooks

which interlaced with others, forming a down-like insulation for the beaver and making a

firm felt for the milliner. Beaver pelts became the standard against which all trade goods

were measured. One beaver was worth five hunting knives, for example. Blades, traps

and other items of steel were highly prized among the natives.

As for why the voyageurs signed and re-signed three-year contracts for their hard life of

stormy lakes, risky rapids, backbreaking burdens, lack of food, exposure to the

elements and a few nasty natives, a former voyageur can say it best: “*For twenty-four*

*years I was a light canoe man... No portage was too long for me; all portages were*

*alike. Fifty songs a day were nothing to me, I could carry, paddle, walk and sing with*

*any man I ever saw.... No water, no weather, ever stopped the paddle or the song.... I*

*wanted for nothing, and I spent all my earnings in the enjoyment of pleasure. Yet, were I*

*young again.... I would spend another half-century in the same fields of enjoyment....*

*There is no life so happy as the voyageur’s life; none so independent; no place where a*

*man enjoys so much variety and freedom as in the Indian country*.”