

On the Frontier

Newsletter of the Frontier Living History Group

Date – Dec 2009

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The Fur Trade Companies
Company Men & their Clothing
issue



Important information

Victorian Police's –
Re-enactors Guide Booklet
http://www.police.vic.gov.au/retrievemedia.asp?media_id=36984&status=active

The Fur Trade Companies



Hudson Bay Company:

formed in 1670 the HBC is granted exclusive trading rights in the watershed of the Hudson Bay; initially Indians brought furs to posts along the Bay; competition from the North West Company forced them to extend trading posts into the interior.

North West Company:

formed by independent "master pedlars" in 1784, the NW C was based on direct trading with Indians in the North Country; partners were intimately involved with the trade and nearly all had spent time in the country; merged with the HBC in 1821 after several decades of bitter and often murderous competition

XY Company:

formed in 1798 by disgruntled Nor'Westers to compete directly against the NW C; located small posts adjacent to NWC posts including Grand Portage; upon the death of Simon McTavish, head of the NW Co, in 1804 it merged with the Northwest Company.

American Fur Company:

formed in 1808 by John Jacob Astor, the firm comes to dominate the US industry

Southwest Company:

John Jacob Astor and partners of the NW Co formed this firm in 1811 to allow joint operations in what is now the United States (operated former NW Co posts in Minnesota); Astor bought out the NW Co partners in 1817 and then merged company with the American Fur Company

Company Men & their Clothing issue

Both The Hudson Bay Company and the North West Company, set up and ran Trade Posts, in which men lived at and worked from. And both had a similar social structure of **Officers & Servants of the company.**

Company Officers

–The Merchant-Traders, or Managerial Class which was divided into three main groups.

- **Agents**
- **Wintering Partners**
- **Clerks / Bourgeois**

The Agents

These wealthy men controlled the company. They ordered the trade goods from all over the world and shipped them to the supply depots. They sold the furs in European markets. And they worked with the government to create the laws governing the trade. And they held the controlling interest in the firm

Officers in the fur trade – agents, partners and clerks – dressed as gentlemen in Montreal or London, the agents most elegantly of all, with partners and clerks much like merchants and office staff elsewhere

The Wintering Partners

They were part owners in the company and lived year-round in the interior. Partners managed the trading activities in a region. They negotiated directly with the natives, supervised the traders in their districts and watched the activities of rival companies and were in command of a Trading Post

Wintering Partners received one or two shares in return for their services; they also had the right to attend the annual meeting at Grand Portage and vote on the basis of one vote to one share.

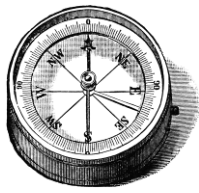
Like company agents, partners were wealthy men. Partners were also gentlemen. They were well educated, could read and write, and demonstrated correct and proper behavior.

No one could become a wintering partner without first serving as a clerk in the interior.

According to company policy, no one could become a partner without serving time in the wilderness.

It is established as a rule that every partner must take 2 years out of 3, to winter in the Northwest, managing a Post. The managing Partners of the Montreal House are the only persons excused; any other, when they are no longer inclined to serve this duty must resign. —Thomas Douglas, Fifth Earl of Selkirk, 1804

Each wintering partner was in charge of a huge area known as a district. Each district was divided into several departments. Each department included several wintering posts.



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Company Clerks or bourgeois,

Company Clerks or bourgeois, who kept the records and they managed small fur posts, directed and motivated the men and kept records of the actual daily trade.

Clerks were probably the most important men in the company. Because there were four times more wintering posts than wintering partners, clerks were assigned to supervise most wintering posts.

They were in charge of the actual trading -ensuring the success of a wintering post became their responsibility. While some clerks saw a position with the company as a life of action and adventure, others joined as a way of making their fortune. Although partnerships were not always available, clerks were eligible for promotion at the end of their apprenticeship.

All clerks served an apprenticeship of five to seven years.

If not voted to full partnership after this period, they could continue with the company as clerks until such time as they might become partners.

Clerks usually “kept the books.” They maintained the “Indian shop” and recorded information about customers, credits and debts. They also supervised the hired men and gave them jobs to do.

Apprentice / Junior clerks were often younger than the men they supervised. Many clerks found that managing the men was their most difficult job. Sometimes the men were not interested in cooperating

Often at a trading post there would be a senior clerk, a junior clerk, and an assistant clerk. If left in charge of the post, the senior clerk would be known as a commis (co-mee).

Company Clerks were paid more than canoe men, voyageurs and labourers. Their starting wages were about 20 £s per year, or \$150 in US dollars. As they advanced to more senior positions, their salary was raised.

The company also provided them with provisions, clothing and traveling equipment.

Both companies considered Clerks to be gentlemen and they were expected to dress and act the part.

North West Clerks clothing had their clothes supplied by the company cordur

- 1 gray cloth jacket,
- 2 pairs of gray cloth trousers,
- 1 fine corduroy jacket,
- 1 pair fine corduroy trousers
- 4 fine cotton shirts
- 2 cotton pocket handkerchiefs
- 2 black silk handkerchiefs (probably for stocks)
- 2 pairs of worsted hose (wool stockings)
- 2 pairs of fine imported shoes
- 1 London plated hat
- 1 cap (if appropriate)

Servants of the Company or The Engagés / Laborers which was divided into three main groups

- **Tradesmen / Craftsmen**
- **Voyageurs**
- **Guides and Interpreters**

Men signed on for a five year term of service and had no living expenses during this time as the company provided both food and housing and some clothing.

But As Servants of the Company they usually would be in the post and have relatively free access to the grounds, but would need to seek permission of a Company Officer to enter such buildings as the Company Store and bourgeois / Clerks or the Wintering Partner quarters

Tradesmen / Craftsmen

Skilled workers were much need at posts for many special tasks

Trades such as

- **Blacksmiths,**
- **Coopers,**
- **Tailors,**
- **Carpenters ,**
- **Boat Builders.**

Tradesmen were paid more than canoe men or labourers.

In the North west Company they received a little less pay than the guides, who ranked highest amongst the engagés.

The tradesmen's wages ranged from several hundred livres a year for the carpenter to one thousand for the blacksmith, about what a guide received. (As the French Canadians preferred the form livre currency of New France, the North West Company adopted the livre as the standard of exchange for paying engagés, even though no actual coinage in this currency existed.)

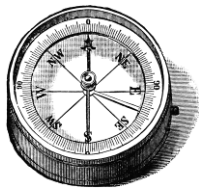
Tradesmen were dressed similarly to voyageurs,

- two pairs of trousers,
- two shirts,
- two handkerchiefs,
- two blankets

but they would also of have had a

- workers apron which may be made of leather, or linen / hemp
- a frock / smock
- or both to protect their clothes





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The Engagés or Laborers

The vast majority of engagés were **voyageurs**, the labor forces which powered the canoes and carried trade goods and furs over countless portages.

There were two classes of voyageurs:

- mangeur de lard, or “pork eaters,”
- and hivernants, or “winterers.”

Canot du Maître: Montreal canoe, up to 36 feet long, capable of carrying 4 tons of goods plus 7-12 men with gear and provisions; hauled goods from Montreal to Lake Superior

The Montreal canoe carried eight to ten men called **mangeurs de lard** (porkeaters), hired for the Montreal-Grand Portage and return trip.

Canot du Nord: North canoe, 24-27 feet long, carries 1½ tons plus up to 6 men with gear and provisions; used from Lake Superior into the North County

The North canoes carried five to six men known as **hivernants** (winterers) or hommes des nord (northmen), who brought the canoes from the Company's posts to Grand Portage and back.

There was a "strict hierarchal structure based on position occupied in the canoe, which again was based on experience and skill. The lowest position was that of the

- **milieu** (middleman) then came the
- **gouvernail** at the stern / steersman
- captaining the canoe was the **avant** or **devant** in the bow.
- The highest ranking of all was **the guide** who headed the brigade, a group of three or more canoes."

While at Grand Portage or later at Fort William, all voyageurs, except guides and interpreters, would stay and sleep outside the palisade. However, at inland posts, the voyageurs lived within the confines of the post.

Voyageurs were free to wear what they wished, but by 1801 almost all their clothing came from a single source—their employers.

Voyageurs wore the clothing of the French Canadian habitant with certain refinements related to the hierarchical structure of the canoe brigades. While buckskin trousers were sometimes worn, especially in the west, at Fort William [Grand Portage] cloth prevailed.

Hivernants

(winterers in English) were paid more than pork-eaters (summer men) , and got as part of their wage

- two pairs of trousers,
- two shirts,
- two handkerchiefs,
- two blankets

He wore the moccasins his wife made for him and his pipe bag and shot pouch may have been decorated by his wife’s beadwork or quillwork. (The Mandan Journal of Mr. Charles McKenzie – July 1806)

Wintering men not only received clothing and blankets as part of their contract, they were issued credit in the “company store.”

Sometimes other items, such as tobacco, knives, beads, and vermilion, were also included in these 'equipments' They were also given goods they could trade with the natives directly.

"The clean-shaven look was almost universal; most gentlemen kept their hair fashionably short; voyageurs wore their somewhat longer.

Just before arriving at Grand Portage, canoe brigades stopped to allow passengers and crew to shave and 'spruce up'

Mangeur du Lard

The 'pork-eater' was usually a French farmer's son who signed up to work for a summer as a voyageur. They usually did not go farther west than Rainy Lake (Lac la Pluie), and returned to Montreal before winter set in. They were called pork-eaters because they subsisted on rations provided by the company :

- salt pork,
- hardtack biscuits,
- and some dried peas.

In the North West Company, voyageurs' wages included 'equipments' as well as money. A pork-eater was equipped with

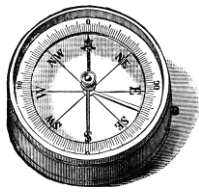
- a pair of trousers,
- a shirt,
- and a blanket (Mackenzie, 83).

The shirt and trousers would be the usual sort worn in Lower Canada at this time.

As well, pork-eaters would supply any additional clothes they wanted or needed.

- Shoes might be home-made moccasins or stout ox-hide shoes.
- Handkerchiefs,
- a waistcoat,
- belt,
- hat,
- and additional shirts and trousers might be brought along.





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Guides and Interpreters.

Their special skills and long years in the interior made them very important to the company managers above them

Guides held the highest position of authority in a brigade during a voyage. They were responsible for steering, guiding and tending the canoes. They made the decisions during the trip and chose the route. They also acted as “foreman” and directed the work of the voyageurs. They were responsible for the safety and well-being of all of the canoes and cargo. They insured that nothing was lost due to mishandling by the voyageurs. If any losses occurred, the guide could have the value of the goods lost deducted from the men’s wages.

Because they knew the routes and could often speak several native languages, guides earned as much as many clerks.

They also were issued special equipment such as

- a hat,
- winter coat,
- pair of trousers,
- 20 pounds each of biscuit and pork,
- 15 pounds of white sugar
- and 1 gallon of rum.

As important as guides and interpreters to the safety of the canoe brigade, they were still inferior to the partners and clerks. During the voyage or at the wintering post, they were still “servants of the company.”

Canoe Builder

As a craftsman, the canoe builder ranks above the voyageurs in pay and status. He would likely paddle as a member of the mileaux but be paid more than the bouts.

Orkney Canoe Man

The HBC had little success recruiting Canadians to paddle their canoes. Instead of voyageurs, the men paddling HBC canoes were 'canoe men', mostly recruited from the Orkney Islands north of Scotland. (The Orkney port of Stromness was the last port of call for HBC ships before crossing the Atlantic.) Life in the Orkneys was tough and cold, and the Orkneymen proved themselves more suited to the conditions in Rupert's Land than Londoners. Orkneymen were considered more sensible and hardworking by their English employers than the rash and indolent French Canadians. Orkneymen were also seen as likely to smuggle and too prone to protect each other from the Company.

An Orkneyman was recruited for a five-year term of service, and had no living expenses during that period, since food and housing were provided by the HBC.

A canoe man might start out his first term of service with the firm intention of saving every penny of his modest salary and coming home with a nest egg. He would often start out at a post on Hudson's Bay. When he had more experience, he might move to an inland post. He would try to pinch every penny he could. He might fall in love with an Indian or mixed-blood woman and get married (with or without the blessings of the Company).

At the end of his term, he could return to the Orkneys with his nest egg. If he decided to stay on, he would get a bonus for signing on for another five-year stint and could build up enough money for a comfortable retirement back home.

Voyageurs Hats and Caps

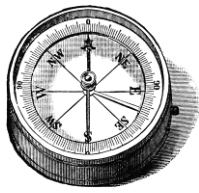
- Toque – long knitted caps, half of which are hung down the head of red, blue white or grey colours
- Summer Caps were improvised from handkerchiefs. They were folded so as to cover the top of the head and tied together on the forehead 'cleaning lady' style , or made into a headband tied with a large bow in front
- Fur Caps – of an unknown style
- Felt Hats - Artists portrayed voyageurs in crisp black top hats and battered brown top hats and Other styles of felt hats were also worn. The surviving Beaver Club medals show voyageurs wearing hats with round crowns and broad flat brims
- Jockey Cap was probably a felt hat very similar in shape to a modern jockey's cap (shaped like a baseball cap).

Voyageurs' Shirts shown in period art is consistent with the styles of shirts of a pullover shirt with short front slit going down the front of the neck, a collar, armpit gussets, and long sleeves that dropped at the shoulders. White shirts were depicted most often.

Company inventory lists which included very common items of clothing such as shirts, capots, and trousers.

Waistcoats and vests were not included on the standard NWC-issued voyageur 'equipment'. The evidence that voyageurs did wear them comes instead from artwork and fur traders' journals and memoirs.





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Other people that can be found at or living close by to Trading Posts

Country wives

For many wintering partners, wives and families were the most important helpers they had in the interior. Fur trade marriages, known as *a la façon du pays*, or “in the custom of the country,” brought Native women and company men together. For the traders, marriage offered relief from the extreme isolation and loneliness. Wives were companions who could make moccasins, tend house and and cook. They shared their knowledge of native languages and customs. And they could help negotiate business with their Native families.

Native wives also made important contributions to the economics of the trade. Many necessary tasks, like butchering meat, skinning animals and preparing hides were the results of their labor.

Despite their importance, country wives are rarely mentioned in trader’s journals or accounts. John Sayer spent the winter of 1804 with a woman he mentions only once in his journal.

Obemau-unoqua was likely with Sayer when he settled at Fort St. Louis in 1793. The daughter of the important Ojibwe chief Ma-Mongazida, Obemau-unoqua gave Sayer social importance as well as political allies among the Ojibwe. With Sayer, she raised at least three sons, one of which later became a clerk with Hudson’s Bay Company

Those native women directly associated with the post would tend to wear European style clothing and have European names. The women play the parts of cook, baker, gardener and, as occasion as wives of the voyageurs, bourgeois or clerks

They would be doing much heavy work although they enjoyed the privileges that came with their marriages or association with the post and they could anticipate that their male children would likely be sent back east for an education and come back as clerks.

Native men, women and families.

While not employed by the company, they nonetheless played important roles in the trade as interpreters and diplomats. And since the Nor’westers did not hunt for themselves, almost all their food was provided by Native men and women. Traders also depended on Native men and women for their traditional skills such as skinning animals and building canoes.

The natives also preferred cloth to leather and furs, and their dress combined Indian and European styles. Paintings of the period often depict native men in blue and red leggings, loin cloths, and buffalo robes or blanket coats. Their chiefs are seen bedecked in red military great coats and feathered beaver top hats.

Native women typically wore shoulder-strapped gowns of blue, separate sleeves, and leggings, all elaborately decorated with ribbons and laces, while blankets or shawls served for coats.

Those native women attached to fur traders dressed in the European fashion of the day."

Coureur de bois ("woods runner"): traders, explorers, adventurers who lived in the North West before the trading companies or, later independent traders who lived with the Indians.

Free Canadians / Free Trappers, an ex-voyageur or engagé who remains in the north west doing occasional contract work for the Company. They dress more like courier des bois or long hunters

Eastern Wives

Sometimes there were European women who had married the bourgeois / Clerk or Partner It should be noted that the clerks and partners did not marry prior to leaving for the north west—many were in their teens at the time. Most, if not all, would have married Indian or metis women and some would bring these wives back East when they retired. Others would marry upon their return.

Reference:

Guide to Interpreting the White Oak Fur Post by the White Oak Society
<http://www.whiteoak.org/guides/download/GuideMain.pdf>

People of the Fur Trade: On the backs of men, in the hands of women - North West Company Fur Post by the Minnesota Historical Society
http://www.mnhs.org/places/sites/nwcfp/docs_pdfs/People_of_the_Fur_Trade.pdf

<http://www.northwestjournal.ca/character.html>

Voyageurs Clothing
<http://frontierfolk.net/phpBB/viewtopic.php?t=17813&highlight=voyageurs>

