

WEEKEND VOYAGEURS

A Saskatchewan canoe tour revisits a dark day in fur-trade history



BY CANDACE SAVAGE ~ PHOTOGRAPHY BY COURTNEY MILNE



A flotilla of canoes carries the author (third from front in first canoe) and other voyagers flying the flags of the Hudson's Bay Company, the North West Company and the province of Saskatchewan. A plaque (LEFT) tells the story of the HBC's South Branch House outpost. Voyageurs used the sash (ABOVE) to carry loads, count the days (by knotting strands of the fringe), bind wounds and, of course, hold up trousers.



Jo-Anne Grayson (BELOW, at left) and Al Ross savour the South Saskatchewan River's shoreline, punctuated by ruminating cattle (FAR LEFT) and point-of-interest markers (BOTTOM) placed by the St. Louis Historical Society. Number 16 marks an old snowmobilers' warm-up shack; South Branch House is number 12.



THE STORM ROLLS IN under cover of darkness, unleashing torrents of rain and bringing me bolt upright in bed with its flash and fury. Only a few hours till morning, I think uneasily. Only a few hours until I am scheduled to set out on a two-day journey by car and canoe with a dozen other outdoorsy types from storm-lashed Saskatoon to the village of St. Louis, 130 kilometres northeastward down the South Saskatchewan River.

Call me naïve, but bad weather has not figured into my plans. All I want is a lazy weekend paddle, full of sunshine and

bonhomie, and a chance to bask in the romance of fur-trade history. And then, of course, there is Cliff Speer's reputation for spectacular camp cooking. Speer runs Saskatoon's CanoeSki Discovery Company, a purveyor of fresh-air-and-adventure outings and the organizer of our excursion down the river.

When I had talked to him about the trip earlier, it had sounded like so much fun. We would drive from Saskatoon to Batoche National Historic Site, launch the canoes, then paddle for three or four hours to the location of South Branch House, an old

Hudson's Bay Company trading post that had been in business just over two centuries ago, from 1786 until 1794. What's more, the famous fur trader and surveyor David Thompson spent the winter there when he was a lad of 16, so we would enjoy a vicarious brush with celebrity. Best of all, once we had settled into camp for the night on a meadow across the river, there would be bannock and buffalo stew and saskatoon pie for dinner. The next day, another leisurely paddle would take us to St. Louis, where vans would be waiting to drive us back to the city.



LEFT AND OPPOSITE: DOMINIQUE HURLEY; MAP: STEVEN FICK/CANADIAN GEOGRAPHIC



The travellers (FAR LEFT) make lunch on the riverbank. Raccoon-capped Harvey Brown (FAR LEFT BELOW) multi-tasks, taking close-up photos while eating a wrap. A canoe is tucked into the river grass (LEFT) at

the landing below South Branch House. The convoy (BELOW) heads downriver after visiting the historic site. Photographer Courtney Milne (BOTTOM) sneaks in a pre-lunch catnap.

If Speer said anything about a massacre, I didn't take it in. But lying awake in the dark, my ears are alert to the rumble of the thunder.

MORNING BREAKS GREY and queasy, but at least the downpour has eased. The windshield wipers slap fitfully on the hour-long drive to our put-in point at Batoche's East Village. By the time we hit the water, the clouds have begun to lift and the day begins to fill with a tentative, grudging kind of promise.

Speer, the indefatigable Mr. CanoeSki, has done his best to brighten up the scene. In homage to the voyageurs, each of the paddlers is outfitted with a jolly Metis sash, and our small fleet of boats is flying the historic red, white and blue ensigns of the HBC and its arch rival in the fur trade, the North West Company.

One of the boats is even bedecked anachronistically with the cheerful yellow and green of the Saskatchewan lily.

"My paddle's clean and bright," I croon to myself, as the current catches hold of the canoe and sweeps us along. The watery world around us is a study in silence and silver. Cattle grazing along the shore raise their heads to watch us pass. Now and then, small flights of pelicans lift up in unison with their shimmering reflections. Lulled by the river, I feel the anxieties of the night begin to fade.

Following a shore lunch of sandwiches, fruit and homemade cookies — voyageurs, eat your hearts out! — we paddle along until, in mid-afternoon, Speer stands up in his canoe and points to our destination, a high bluff on the east side of the river. Someone is up there waving and I suddenly recall that we are

Life is easier on a full stomach, and Speer pulls out all the stops to make sure that his voyageurs are happy campers. Dinner surpasses even its advance billing.



Bonnie Hamilton (BELOW) of the CanoeSki Discovery Company makes large objects fit into small spaces and bags gear so that it stays dry. Rubber boots (RIGHT) prove helpful for tramping the soggy path from river to campsite.



to be treated to another burst of local colour. Speer has arranged for a party of experts — archaeologists and history buffs — to meet us at the trading post site, show us around and explain what, apart from Thompson's cameo appearance, makes South Branch House noteworthy.

Sure enough, once we beach the canoes and scramble up to the top, we find ourselves surrounded by a welcoming party of a couple of dozen people, with a kettle of tea on a camp stove and large boxes of Tim Horton's finest. Apparently, we have come the hard way: these folks drove up by land. But when terror struck at South Branch House, it came on horseback.

THE PLACE WHERE the post once stood is now a grassy clearing on the edge of a farmer's field. A modest stone monument and a pair of plaques bear witness to its bloody history. The inscription recounts that on June 24, 1794, at a time when most of the HBC employees were away on their annual trip to

York Factory on Hudson Bay, the post was attacked and burned by Gros Ventre Indians. The marauders destroyed the buildings and "savagely massacred old women and children and three of the company's servants, W. Fea, H. Brough, and M. Annal." Several younger women were taken captive. The only person to escape unharmed was trader John Van Driel, who survived by cowering in a cellar for eight hours.

Maybe I'm hypersensitive, but I'm not prepared for this. We have come to visit a place where people were murdered? Who were these Gros Ventre Indians? What kind of barbarians were they? And the women and children — all nameless. Why had they not been accorded the same recognition as the company's other "servants"?

Some of the answers I need are close at hand in the person of David Meyer, an archaeologist with a long-standing interest in South Branch House. The group stands in a circle and listens as he retells the story of that tragic day, drawing out more of its sadness and complexity.

By his telling, the trouble really began years earlier, in the 1780s, when the HBC and the Northwesters, impelled by their rivalry, had pushed south and west into the Saskatchewan River country. South Branch House was one result of that strategy. Tragically, this intrusion disturbed long-standing relationships among the Woodland Cree and plains nations such as the Blackfoot and Gros Ventre. The result, in the 1790s, was what some historians have described as all-out war. The attack on South Branch House was one skirmish in a conflict that claimed the lives of three white men and dozens of aboriginal men, women and children.

As for the women at South Branch House, Meyer could only tell us that there were five or six of them. One was the

LEFT: DOMINIQUE HURLEY



In voyageur regalia, guide Cliff Speer reads from the journal of fur trader Duncan M’Gillivray, which describes the Gros Ventre attack on South Branch House. The voyageur-style canoe (BELOW) needs bailing after overnight thundershowers.

Assiniboine wife of the post manager (killed with her two youngest children) and two of the others were Cree. The women who were abducted likely shared in the fate that befell the entire Gros Ventre nation: starvation, sickness, and an eventual straggling retreat south from the Saskatchewan to the Missouri.

LIFE IS EASIER ON a full stomach, and Speer pulls out all the stops to make sure that his voyageurs are happy campers. Dinner surpasses even its advance billing, with cabbage salad, two kinds of stew, and the juiciest, flakiest berry pie I’ve ever tasted. Yet even after we’ve eaten and all the dishes are washed, I still find myself troubled by what I’ve learned. Everyone else seems to be doing fine. “I don’t get into this stuff the way you do,” a fellow paddler says. But it occurs to me that there might be at least one member of the CanoeSki team who understands how I feel.

Bonnie Hamilton had first caught my eye earlier in the day with her elegant paddling technique. Then at dinner time, she had cooked up a batch of fried bannock — toasty and brown

despite a shortage of dry wood — to complement the baked variety that she had made earlier and brought along. She was clearly at home on the water and in camp, but at South Branch House, she had become quiet, even withdrawn.

Just before bedtime, we sit together on a little rise overlooking the camp. It turns out that Hamilton knows the fur trade from beginning to end.

“I come from one of the last few families that was raised on the land” in northern Saskatchewan, she says. “The Lower Foster — that’s the map sheet for where I grew up.” The descendant of a long line of trappers and traders, she speaks with the authority of experience.

“The fur trade for me isn’t a romantic, fiddle-playing-in-the-fort kind of thing,” she says. “I think of it as work, turmoil, displacement. Rapid change. It brought technology to aboriginal people that made their lives easier, but at a great cost.”

On June 24, 1794, that cost was paid in lives. Immediately after torching South Branch House, the Gros Ventre party pressed its desperate attack against a neighbouring North West Company fort. Five Gros Ventre warriors died and nine others were wounded, bringing the casualty list on that horrific day to 20. As for the fur traders, the HBC and the Northwesters both abandoned their South Branch posts and retreated upriver to Nipawin, never to return.

As Hamilton and I say our goodnights and walk down to our tents, I untie the sash from around my waist and carefully fold it. After the visit to South Branch House and everything I’ve learned while playing voyageur, I have a newfound respect for the hardships and sacrifices endured by those affected by the conflicts of the fur trade era.

Saskatoon-based writer Candace Savage is the author of more than two dozen books including, mostly recently, Prairie: a Natural History and Crows: Encounters with the Wise Guys of the Avian World. Photographer Courtney Milne is based in Grandora, Sask.



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BATOCHÉ AND BEYOND

Getting there

Batoche National Historic Site is roughly halfway between Saskatoon and Prince Albert. Take Highway 11 — the Louis Riel Trail — northeast out of Saskatoon, turn east onto road 312, then north onto road 225. You can drive to the site of South Branch House on the unpaved road 782.

Staying there

For information about hotels and B&Bs in the Saskatoon area, go to www.tourismsaskatoon.com and click on accommodation.

Playing there

Batoche National Historic Site includes a visitor centre, with a museum and multimedia show, as well as a restored church, rec-

tory and battle grounds. It is open from May 8 to Sept. 30. For information, phone (306) 423-6227 or visit pc.gc.ca/batoche.

For information about canoe tours on the South Saskatchewan River, contact Cliff Speer of CanoeSki Discovery Company at (306) 653-5693 or visit www.canoeski.com.

