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# **EMERGENCE AND EVOLUTION**

## The Physical Feats of the Voyageur

RONALD S. LAPPAGE

Lakehead University

Thunder Bay, Ontario P7B 5E1

The voyageurs, most aptly described as “Knights of the Waterways” by historian Grace Lee Nute, were amazing men, performing physical feats that would tax the endur-

ance of the fittest of modern day athletes. Without voyageurs, the fur trade in North America could hardly have been carried on as it was over the vast expanse of woods and waters between the Atlantic and Pacific. Waterways were the only feasible routes for reaching the interior of North America until roads and railways were built, and hence the birch bark canoe and dog sled were the vehicles by which the great fur trade of the northern part of the continent was conducted.

Voyageurs were divided into two classes, the *mangeurs de lard* (pork-eaters) and the *hivernants* (winterers). The pork-eaters paddled the big Montreal canoes up to the inland headquarters (Grand Portage until 1801, Fort William thereafter) and returned to Montreal the same season. The winterers or Northmen, on the other hand, were the experienced voyageurs who traveled west of Lake Superior and spent the winters at forts in the interior. Although the pork-eaters were subjected to a great deal of ridicule by the winterers for their relatively easy lifestyle, a modern day wilderness traveler would have had great difficulty in keeping up with either class of voyageur and enduring the excessive hardships that these men faced.

The voyageurs' daily routine was arduous, to say the least. Generally, on well known routes their day began at approximately 2:00 or 3:00 a.m. and continued until about 8:00 p.m. The voyageurs stopped for breakfast at dawn, for lunch around 2:00 pm., and supper came after camp was set up for the night. While they were on the water the voyageurs paddled steadily (forty to sixty strokes per minute) at five to six miles per hour, and about once an hour they stopped for a pipe of tobacco. Distances covered per day varied considerably. The frequency of portages, the direction of the current, the weight of the cargo, the type of canoe and number of paddlers, the number of daylight hours, and weather conditions were all determining factors. However, it was not uncommon for voyageurs to travel eighty miles in a day. When one compares this with the fact that a moderately difficult day of canoeing presently is considered to be about twenty miles, one appreciates the durability of the voyageur.

Undoubtedly the most strenuous part of the voyageurs' daily routine was the portage. When a set of rapids was too treacherous to shoot or line, it became necessary for the voyageurs to portage their canoes and cargo around the rapids. Each voyageur (except those portaging the canoe) was responsible for carrying six bundles or pieces weighing approximately ninety pounds each and his own personal gear amounting to an extra forty pounds. An average load was two pieces or about 180 pounds, but exceptionally strong men carried as many as three, four, or even five in one load—an extraordinary feat considering that the average height of a voyageur was five feet six inches! The voyageurs dogtrotted across the portages at a rate of a half mile in ten minutes, a pace which kept their unburdened passengers running. However, the bearing of such heavy loads took its toll as hernia was very prevalent among voyageurs and frequently caused death.

The voyageurs were highly competitive and delighted in their physical prowess. They were known to paddle for forty-eight hours without stopping simply to beat another canoe in an informal race, and a bowman would sulk for days in shame after his canoe hit a rock. Indeed, in the world of the voyageur the value of a man was measured in terms of his physical prowess and his ability to endure hardship.