

The voyageurs were roving French-Canadian frontiersmen who traveled the watercourses of the Canadian and northern United States wilderness by canoe and dog sled bartering trade goods with the American Indians for furs. These hardy adventurers opened many areas to later settlement. Earning a flat wage, the voyageurs rarely shared in the profits of the lucrative fur trade made by their organizers. A spirit of adventure animated the men. The following conversation with Ray Clemens is not an oral history "per se" but rather a historical interview on a subject inaccessible to many. The interviewer felt the nature of the subject and Mr. Clemens's scholarly approach to it merited the inclusion of this tape into the oral history collection. The interview was conducted on the evening of August 28, 1978 at Mr. Clemens's home in Michigan City. The interviewer was Jerrold Gustafson.

JG: My first question, Ray, is if you could describe what type of men the voyageurs were, and perhaps give a little background as to what years they principally made their travels.

RC: I suppose basically they were of French peasant stock background who came to Montreal, may have tried farming, often times they did farm between trips. They are often described as being very vain, picturesque in their attire and almost always they get credit for having a very cheerful disposition in spite of the unbelievably hard work that they really were subjected to. Their singing is a kind of outward example of their inward personalities, as opposed to descriptions that you see of the mountain men who was often times a very cantankerous, pretty hard to get along with fellow and preferred to live a great deal by himself as a contrast to this voyageur who was basically rather gregarious. Being confined to a canoe for 16 hours every day, I guess they had to kind of get along with each other. So they were generally picked for their small size in spite of the 2, 3 and there are even stories of 490 pound packs being carried over a portage by one man. And it was a matter of pride with them on how many packs they could carry and how far they could carry them. They were very competitive, really, and this was all to the advantage of the company who would hire them, these fellows knocking themselves out in competition with each other. That was all for the eventual benefit of the "bourgeois" or the company. They claim that there was one black voyageur who stood over 6 feet and his size was tolerated in the canoe because of his exceptionally good singing over 6 feet and his size was tolerated in the canoe because of his exceptionally good singing voice. And it was also true that the best singer was actually paid a bonus to encourage this sort of thing when the going got a little tough. They were vain; they took a great delight in ribbons and sashes, colorful capotes, feathers. As a matter of fact, one of the most common routes that they traveled was from Montreal to the "Grand Portage" on the western shore of Lake Superior and it took about 2 or 3 months to get there. In spite of all their eagerness to get to shore, there was a rivalry between the men who had come down from the high country to pick up the supplies to take back up to the Great Slave Lake, Rainy Lake and so forth, why the voyageurs, there was an island where they would deliberately stop and clean up and put on their best clothes and all their gee-gaws so that when they came in to the docks at the portage- I think at Fort William- they made it a point to stop and get all frilled out and come around the corner of the William- they made it a point to stop and get all frilled out and come around the corner of the island and they were singing and shouting and firing their guns to let the rest of the people know they had come in.

JG: Were they normally educated men?

RC: No. And that's unfortunate because there are practically no first-hand accounts of what any individual voyageur may have thought and consequently written about. We must assume that none of them knew how to read or write because nothing has come down to us. I believe there is one exception, one quote. Something about "I have been 40 years a voyageur, I have had 6 wives and 8 running dogs. I've run the rapids and saved 6 men from drowning." I think that's the only direct quotation that's credited to a voyageur. So I think it's unfortunate that there are no direct quotation that's credited to a voyageur. So I think it's unfortunate that there are no other first-hand accounts of a voyageur by a voyageur. We have to piece a lot of things together from, generally, the explorers and fur traders. Fur traders themselves who may have made few and far between comments about the voyageurs.

JG: What were the reasons these men went out in these canoes all across North America?

RC: Well it probably wasn't too bad a paying job. It probably beat farming.

JG: Did they share in the profits from the furs they traded for?

RC: Not really, not really. They were pretty much paid a flat fee. And that's about it. There were some small bonuses, perhaps "challenges" put up by the bourgeois if they got to a certain place by a certain time. It was not like the whalers who shared in the take of the ship, it was not like that at all. I guess to a certain extent you have to go back to the personality of the person. It was a life that they just plain loved. I guess it's like us: if you have a job that you like, you enjoy going to work. If they absolutely hated it, probably no amount of money could have driven them to it. They loved the freedom, they loved the country. They took a personal delight in doing this kind of thing, in spite of all the discomforts. And the discomforts were plenty: the mosquitoes, the heat, the hard work, the food doesn't sound too good to us today but they must have grown accustomed to it.

JG: What would you say would be the main era of the voyageur groups?

RC: Well, it covered almost a 300 year period, there were voyageurs as late as, I s'pose 1875- they were still a recognizable "breed" and it was still a recognizable occupation. So that gets it started around 1575 and they probably already had been established as canoe men when La Salle took his trips. The voyageur learned his trade from the Indians of the area, meaning the St. Lawrence area and northern New York and lower Canada, and in a very short time far exceeded the Indian at his own game, or obviously the Indians would have been used for this kind of thing.

JG: Was there much change in their lifestyles and general ways in those 300 years?

RC: Probably not. 1875 you already had mining beginning in lower Canada. As a matter of fact there are still routes of the voyageurs that you can travel today by canoe that are essentially unchanged. I do have a book with pictures of routes of the voyageurs showing some of the portages unchanged even today. Their dress probably would have changed somewhat. Our styles change a great deal, theirs probably changed somewhat over a 300 year period but they still relied on the "matee," the leggings, good sturdy canvas pants. And of course in the wintertime there's still "matee," the leggings, good sturdy canvas pants. And of course in the wintertime

there's still no good substitute for wool. The synthetics still cannot better wool in any respects. I'm sure in that 300 year period the advantages of wool would not have changed; the form of manufacture may have, but not a great deal.

JG: Could you describe some of their equipment, say the canoes?

RC: well there are 2 sizes of canoes. Starting with the largest, which would have been about 36 feet long, possibly 6 to 8 feet wide, 2, 2 1/2 feet deep and these were capable of carrying loads of tons of trade goods on the way up and furs on the way back. Then there was a sort of an intermediate canoe that ran 26 to 28 feet. I think there was a nickname for it that began with "b" but I don't know if I should say it on tape. The large 36 footer was called the "master canoe," in French the "canoe de maitre." And then the other most popular canoe was a 20, 21 footer, this was called the "canoe du nord," "canoe of the north." Then there were express canoes, say when the owners wished to send messages or medicine or light supplies to another post they would use 2 voyageurs in one of these express canoes, they were extremely light and extremely fast. They could make many, many miles in one of those. So those were about the sizes, the 17 - 20 footer, this unmentionable at about 26, and the "canoe de maitre" at about 36. That was their mode of transportation. In the wintertime they used snowshoes and dogsleds. Their dogsleds were without runners, they generally used a toboggan style sled. It was quite long, up to 20 feet long, and narrow, maybe 18 inches wide. The dog teams were hitched in line for going through the woods whereas in Alaska they use a lot of the fan type harness. In Alaska and the Arctic there are no trees for the dogs to get tangled in. Other than that they didn't have much equipment. As a matter of fact when they went on a trip each man was allowed 40 pounds of personal gear. All this was carefully weighed because the owner didn't want to deprive himself of any of his precious cargo, so each voyageur was allowed 40 pounds of gear. This could be in clothes, equipment or if he wished he could even include some trade goods in that and do some trading with the Indians on his own if he wished. So he did make some extra that and do some trading with the Indians on his own if he wished. So he did make some extra money. That was about it. 40 pounds is not a great deal. If you've ever backpacked it's not a great deal when you get to assembling it. Here again one thing I have never heard of is did the trader carry extra wool, extra blankets or material? Surely he had to replenish 40 pounds of equipment over a 6 month's journey. One thing I should point out is that there were 2 kinds of voyageurs. You had the "manger du lard," the "pork eaters." They were the ones who started the trip in the spring from Montreal and went to the "Grand Portage." he met another kind of voyageur who had come down from the high country, the "hivernants," the "winterer." And they stayed in the wilds for years at a time. Maybe after 6 years or 8 years they would get a leave of absence to go back to Montreal to see their family or for whatever reason, maybe just to see a town again. And when I said they were a very friendly lot, each group was within itself, but at the rendezvous there was a great deal of rivalry between these 2 groups. Each considered themselves to be superior to the other. One of the badges of the "hivernant" was the black crow feather; that was how he distinguished above the pork eaters.

JG: Could you describe the construction of the canoes and also tell how many men each size would carry?

RC: Well the crewmen is easy. The "canoe de maitre" had 8 paddlers and a "gouvernor" who was the steersman in the stern and an "avant" who was the bow man. Now they traded control of the canoe. The "gouvernor" commanded the canoe under ordinary circumstances. But when they got into rapids it was the "avant" who said, "That is the way we will go." He commanded the canoe. He put the bow where he wanted it and it was the "gouvernor's" job to see that the rest of them did what was needed to keep it there. Then I don't know what your 28 footer used, they probably varied between 6 and 8. Your "canoe du nord" I know had 4 paddlers, and your "avant" and "gouvernor." Anything less than that, 2 men would have been sufficient. Construction of the canoes is very difficult to describe. They of course had no nails, it was all generally laced with elm root, called "wapiti." And gum of the spruce tree mixed with lard and soot, or ash and that patched the seams. Canoe patching was a constant job. Every night there were men assigned just to do that work. The construction is a story in itself. There is a book in the library by Shippell where this is gone into in great detail, just exactly how this was done. One important thing, though, that might be of interest is that in reality the pretty black and white of the birch bark was put on the inside of the canoe. It was the inner rind of the bark that became the outside of the canoe. This is something not many people are aware of- the bark was turned outside of the canoe. This is something not many people are aware of- the bark was turned inside out, the pretty white and black became the inside of the canoe.

JG: How about the frame?

RC: Well after the bark shell was made there was a sheathing of cedar that lined the inside of the bark, so that when you knelt in the bottom of the canoe your knee didn't go through the bark. These were generally of a tear-drop type of shape and they were layed in an overlapping fashion. They were quite thin, shaved down to about 1/8 inch thickness and they looked like a willow leaf -long and thin. The planks might each be 6 feet long and pointy; these then were held in place on the inside of the canoe by ribs that were so closely fitted that when the top ends of these ribs were snapped in notches under the gunwale they would hold those planks against the bark of the canoe. And that's all that held it together. There were no rivets, there were no nails, other than the sewing of the bark one piece to the next. And of course there is the romantic picture you get of the voyageur canoe with the high, sweeping ends and in spite of the fact that there's a high end on any canoe it's a real curse in high winds. These were put on deliberately so that when the canoe rested on those high ends and was laying over at such a 45 degree angle, it provided a shelter for the voyageurs to sleep under. So that was the only reason for those high ends, they didn't part the waves or anything like that. It was just to make the canoe a better shelter.

JG: Was this an Indian design, was it copied from Indian outfits?

RC: Yah, it was probably an evolvment. Here again to talk about the canoes is quite involved, it can get quite complicated. I'd have to recommend this Shippell book for anyone interested.

JG: What kind of distances could they cover in a travel season?

RC: I can't really tell you by miles, except that they traveled, say from Montreal to the "Grand Portage" right after the spring ice break-up which occurs around April in that area and they would arrive at "Grand Portage" probably the latter part of June and they had then 2 months to,

well actually only a few weeks while supplies were repacked and furs that had been brought down were packed. They probably left in July, and got back to Montreal in September. I'm really at a loss to say what the distances would be like to some of the outposts say from like the Red River all the way up to the Fraser River. A lot of fur traders got interested in exploration; you had MacKenzie's trek to the Arctic. These voyageurs, aside from walking across the mountain passes in the British Columbia region, made the first crossing of the continent by water. All they walked would have been from 50 to 75 miles.

JG: What would a typical, well I guess there would have been no typical portage, but would it be a long distance?

RC: No, there's no such thing as a typical portage. Some of them would be long-there was one that was 8 miles long, but not many were like that. Others might have been 100 yards long.

JG: That's the kind they liked.

RC: Well, I don't know if you've ever traveled in that country - too many of those can be a little aggravating when it comes to loading and unloading. Of course an 8 mile portage, they didn't do it in one day. They had what they called "poses" which are rest stops along the way and they claim that even today you can find trees with limbs at just about the right height so that you can rest a canoe. Travel was not really measured in miles by the voyageurs. Traditionally travel was measured by pipes, and this was the distance you would paddle before you would stop travel was measured by pipes, and this was the distance you would paddle before you would stop and have a smoke. So a lake might be 4 pipes long and that was the way, well, everybody knew what you meant. Now if somebody had a watch, the bourgeois for instance, and allowed a smoke every hour, every 2 hours, I don't know. Anyway to the voyageur distances on the water were measured by pipes. On the portage it was measured by "poses."

JG: That brings up another question: How did they keep track of their movements? There you are in the wilderness, if you have a definite goal in mind, how do you find it?

RC: Well of course the voyageur traveled pretty well established highways, and followed pretty much the same route most of the time. Now the explorer ventured into new areas that no one had seen before, but he was always somewhat versed in navigation. Their navigation was not always real good. I think it was MacKenzie who, after having been a fur trader for many years, actually went back to England to study navigation before he made his trip. They kept very careful records of how far they went in that. If you read their accounts you will find they were very meticulous, they would give so much distance by this compass direction, so much by that. And you don't have to be on the ocean to shoot a star. You can be on the shore of a lake and catch the reflection of the star in the water. This is what they call an artificial horizon. You can determine just about where you are. One of the problems they had, though, and this was La Salle's problem too, by the way, is their navigation was almost always off in a westerly direction. Look problem too, by the way, is their navigation was almost always off in a westerly direction. Look at some of the early French maps and everything seems to be slanted toward the south-west. They don't really know why this happened. This was the undoing of La Salle on his last trip when he sailed around the

Gulf and missed the mouth of the Mississippi, overshot it by several hundred miles and in working his way back up the coast ran into the problems with his people and with the Indians until it finally reached a point that they were so perturbed with him they shot him and threw him in a creek. But they were able to chart the Canadian wilderness fairly well, well enough for other people to follow them. The voyageur himself could care less, it was only the leaders on the trips, the explorers, that took their bearings.

JG: What other kinds of equipment, camp equipment and arms, would they take with them?

RC: Well when you say "they" you have to first of all kind of think of this as expedition equipment and then personal equipment. Expedition equipment consisted of all sorts of trade goods that the Indians would covet. Cooking gear was community type equipment, the individual didn't have to bring his own. Probably had a knife, probably had a flint, a striker, his pipe, some tobacco. Probably not a great deal more than that.

JG: Would they carry any weapons?

RC: The voyageur, probably not very many would have owned their weapons. Maybe a tomahawk. The expedition would normally supply the arms if they had been needed and of course they were carrying arms to trade with the Indians so they always had access to the trade guns. They wouldn't have had much need for it, now they did have assigned hunters, sometimes. Most of the time they did not hunt because they didn't have time to spend that way. But when it was possible and when it was necessary they would have a couple fellows who, say were better shots, were armed and they made some attempts at hunting. As I said they carried a "possible" bag which carried anything you might possibly need. Course if a man got lost the need to make fire was important, so I imagine they would have a flint striker, not much else, it would have been excess baggage.

JG: How about their food, what did they eat?

RC: Well, their food was rather constant. They relied a great deal on pea soup, salt pork, again the 2 different kinds of voyageurs, the ones that left Montreal had access to some civilized foods. Corn, pea soup, mush, an oatmeal kind of thing, the pork as they had access to the farms around Montreal, that's why they were called "manger du lard," "lard eaters," "pork eaters." Your voyageur from the north country relied a great deal on things like pemmican, the dried buffalo meat. The fur companies used to actually maintain posts on the plains and trade with the Indians for buffalo meat and their sole purpose was to make pemmican. This was all put up in hide bags and that was in turn distributed to the other posts. Then the other posts didn't have to waste time collecting food for the winter, they relied on these posts that had access to the buffalo. Pemmican was the main staple.

JG: Could you describe how pemmican is made?

RC: Ah, well first of all you start by cutting the buffalo meat up into strips, big strips, which was dried on rocks or racks of limbs, suspended over a smoky fire. It was not cooked, it was simply dried and about all the smoke provided was protection from the flies. Then after this meat was

hard, rock hard, it was pounded into a powder and then various portions, depending on the maker's preference, I s'pose, of this powder was mixed with melted fat and oftentimes berries were added, oh just about anything else you felt you wanted to throw in because once were added, oh just about anything else you felt you wanted to throw in because once everything became encased in the lard after it had solidified it was well protected. Water would run off it and it couldn't get wet, it didn't spoil. And then this was eaten raw, as is, or chunks of it could be thrown in water to make a soup and it was a great filler for stews. It was the C-ration of its day, men could exist on it. About 2 pounds would keep a man working hard in the coldest weather when they would be burning calories like crazy. They claim that up north it the coldest weather when they would be burning calories like crazy. They claim that up north it would take 6 to 8 pounds of fish per person to keep them going, so it was the "iron ration" of its day.

JC: Is there any way to know about the general health of these men? Did they come down with things? It sounds like a pretty monotonous diet.

RC: Yah, I've never read or seen anything where the diet itself was the cause of any problem. As I mentioned earlier the weights that they carried, probably their biggest problem was hernias. There is some speculation that the sashes they wore were to help prevent this. Then again some of the sashes may have been used as tump straps, and as a handy place to keep things. The packs that they carried were merely wrapped in tight bundles of hide, so this tump strap had a wide band that fit across the forehead and then at about the shoulders separated into 2 tails on each side and these tails were in turn tied to the pack. They had no shoulder straps as we know of, say on a backpack. Then what they would do, they'd get that one 90 pound pack hung in this tump strap then they'd take another one and set it on top of that one. So they were fairly well doubled over as they would make a portage. The diet, while monotonous and coarse, was adequate. I suppose tooth care would have been a problem. But then I've never read that they lived to be 60, 70 years old either. Here again documentation is lacking; we really don't know how long a man would be able to maintain this way of life.

JG: Is there any way to reconstruct the daily routine of a group of voyageurs in the travel season?

RC: Yah, that has been pretty well documented, I suppose because the leaders, the bourgeois, kept records. They would generally get up before daybreak and break camp, be on the water just in advance of daylight. They would paddle till about 10, when they would stop and have breakfast and then they would paddle again until dark and then they would set up camp, prepare the food and they generally prepared a new pot of food at night and what they didn't finish was covered over and finished for the next day's breakfast. They didn't waste too much time at that morning stop. So 14 hours a day of paddling was not unusual and there is one story about 2 brigades meeting in one of the lakes-now the boundary waters-and so the story goes: they paddled 40 hours straight in a race. It's a little hard to believe.

JG: How about wintertime, if they were on the move, what would their routine consist of?

RC: I would suspect still probably 2 meals a day with probably later starts, earlier evening stops to gather wood. If you've ever camped in the wintertime everything moves just a little slower, including the human body at some of those temperatures. And I don't think they had the urgency

on their back in the wintertime as they had in the summertime to get things in and out before everything iced again. Life was a little less pressured in the winter, more a case of waiting it out.

JG: Would they move much in winter, or hole up?

RC: They would hole up. About the only ones really on the move were the messengers between posts. Some of them may have gone out and done a little trapping, but to them that was Indian work. They themselves didn't do too much trapping; except maybe if a guy got too bored, he'd go out and set a few traps.

JG: Where would they camp? With the Indians?

RC: Not the voyageur himself. Working for a company they generally had a post of some kind at the end of a trip and so they had a place to stay. Indians generally camped on the outside, depending on the area and the temperament of the times. Sometimes Indians wouldn't even be allowed in the post except 1 or 2 at a time to conduct their business so that they, the whites, wouldn't be overwhelmed.

JG: Would it be a log stockade?

RC: Yah. A lot of voyageurs had other skills; during the winter they might be put to work building additions to the post. They didn't build canoes then, in fact most canoes were built around Montreal by the Indians in fact. Generally the voyageurs were travelling while the canoes were being built. You couldn't build a canoe in the wintertime, the materials weren't right.

JG: What kind of relationship was there between the voyageurs and the Indians?

RC: Generally the French are credited with getting along quite well with most of the Indians. They had trouble really only with one tribe - when Champlain went out with friendly Indians against the Iroquois and this was the first time the Iroquois had guns used against them. Several were killed. At that time hatred by the Iroquois was developed for the French that existed until the very end. The English were aloof and above and sort of used the Indian as a tool. The French became Indians. They were adopted by them, they became one of them. This contributed to a lot of their early success. Had they been properly supported from Europe we might be speaking French right now.

JG: What ended the age of the voyageurs?

RC: One of the things that the English did to overcome the hold that the voyageur had was that they brought in men from York that had a specialized boat. It was a great deal like an overgrown dory. And they were called York boats. These boats could carry 5 tons. They could only use these boats on rivers where they had no portages or short portages where they could use log rollers to move the boats, cause these boats could not be carried. That ended the voyageur in some areas. But then I said the voyageur lasted 300 years-that gets him up to about 1875 and I think one of the first railroads to cross Canada went in about 1860. He lasted until the day steam arrived. And the end of the fur traffic, of course, when the industry was done there was no need

for men to transport the furs. It got so that the fur was trapped out in this area and even in some parts of Canada, that ended the fur trade. At that point he might have elected to become an independent fur trapper. Those 3 things ended it. The voyageurs were probably on their way out from 1825 onward.

JG: Could you describe the independent fur trappers?

RC: Well, yes, not just the independent fur trappers but also the renegade or the unlicensed fur trappers. They were undoubtedly the first white men to have traveled in, around and through this our own area. Your "coureur du bois," your "bush ranger," the Frenchman who took off on his own and adopted the ways of the Indians, became one of the Indians, was actually the first to travel through this country, to live in this area. What was here on the shore of Lake Michigan? Probably not much, hardly any evidence of any Indian settlements at all. There was too good a food supply along the banks of the Kankakee swamp. They came up here to get away from the mosquitoes and to fish for whitefish. LaCrosse supposedly contained an Indian village. Where there was a plentiful supply of food there was life. There is a claim in some of the books on the history of the Kankakee that in the mid 1800's they still found the remains of what looked like French farms in the area of the Kankakee. A French farm is very distinctive; so that every- like French farms in the area of the Kankakee. A French farm is very distinctive; so that every- body could have an equally good view of the valley or equally good frontage on a river their farms were very narrow and very long. That gave everybody some frontage space and there were claims by early settlers along the Kankakee that they once-in-a-while did run into evidence of what had been that kind of cultivated fields or orchards. So perhaps there was some French settlement here in the early 1700s. The "coureur du bois" could never return to Montreal or he'd be hung or shot for being an unlicensed fur trapper. So he had to travel to the Dutch in New Albany or New Amsterdam to replenish his trade goods. And here again I have never heard of any written accounts of anyone who claimed to be an independent in this area.

JG: You might not want to make that claim.

RC: Apparently those people lived and died very quietly, very ingloriously in the wilds. How many there might have been-nobody knows. What might have happened to them-nobody knows.