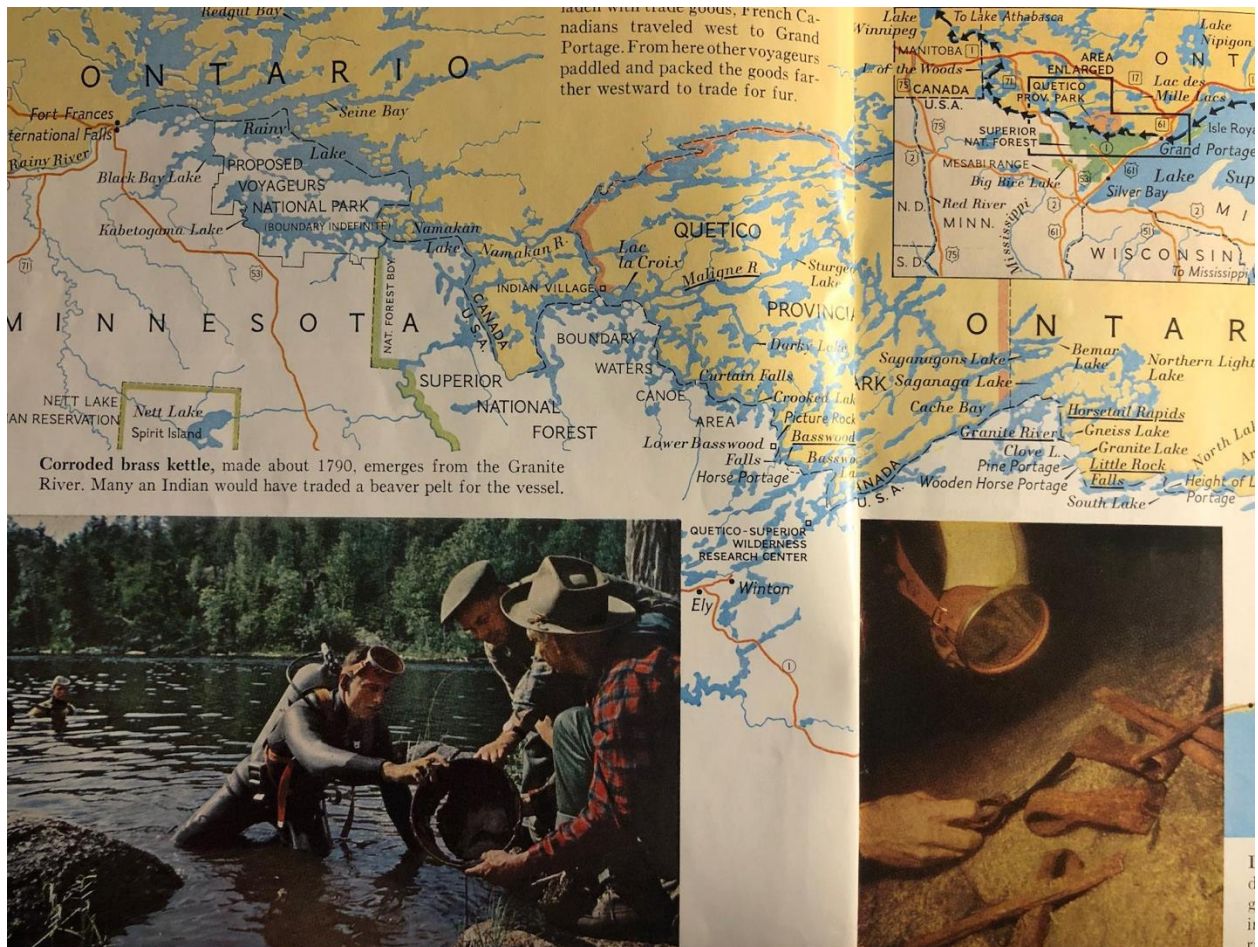


THE VOYAGEURS

Dedicated to the Ely wilderness canoe guides and Bill and Barb Rom who founded Canoe Country Outfitters.

Sculptor Vic Payne

Donated by Dr. William and Holly Rom

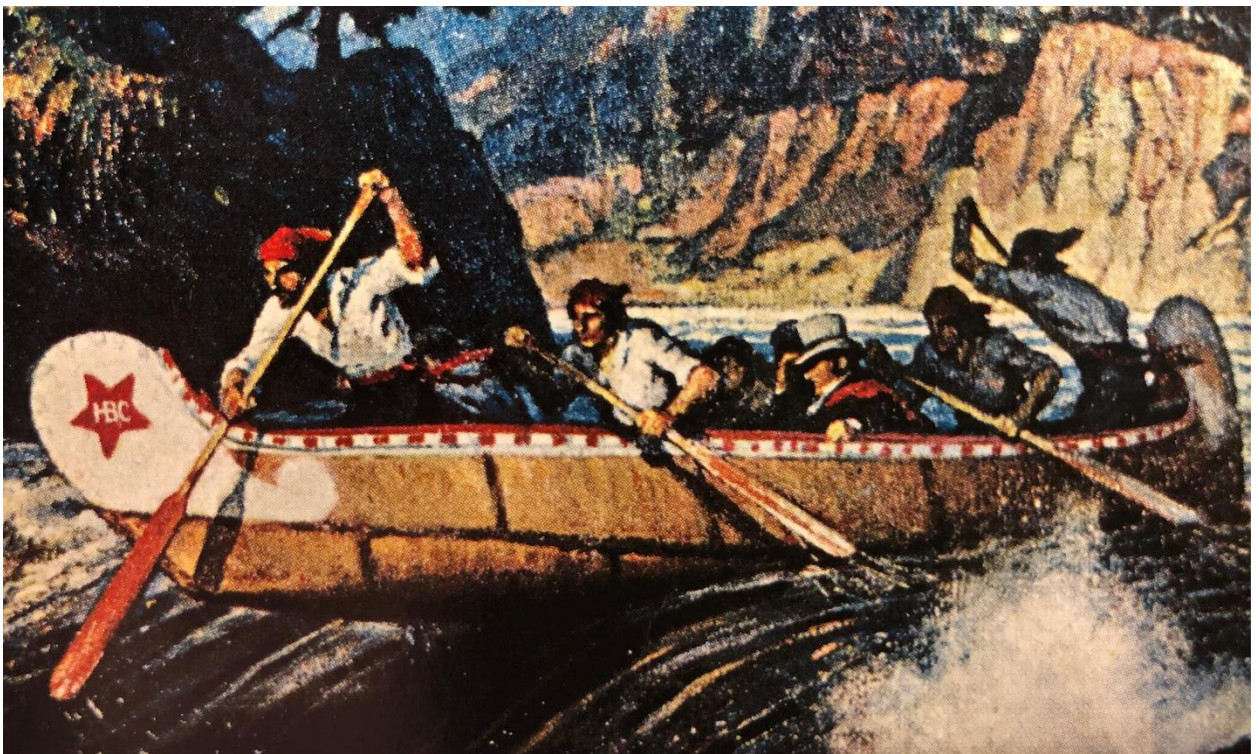


Adapted from "Relics from the Rapids" by Sigurd Olson National Geographic January 1963.

From the late 1600's to the mid-1800's the Voyageurs had paddled from Montreal deep into the unknown vastness of North America to seek out furs for the European market. The Voyageurs' highway stretched 3,000 miles along a network of rivers and lakes that snakes from the St. Lawrence River in the east to Lake Athabasca in the northwest. The passage was always perilous, and the voyageurs paid a terrible toll in capsized canoes and lost lives.

Sigurd Olson, author of The Singing Wilderness, Listening Point, and The Lonely Land, was an Ely guide and canoe outfitter. Sig, Frank B. Hubachek, and Dr. E.W. Davis (inventor of taconite) led a diving expedition to the rapids on Basswood River near Ely to search for voyageur relics. As Sig stared at the white water snarling and thundering among the rocks; his imagination framed a 25-foot birchbark North canoe edging nervously into those churning rapids. Its painted bow looms high; the eight paddlers tense as the craft knives toward a narrow gap between massive boulders. The current takes hold. The red-capped voyageurs shout-in exultation? In fear?-as the fragile canoe shoots forward. The divers found 36 axes of various sizes, 24 chisels and

spears, more than a thousand musket balls, black and white beads, vermilion paint, brass buttons, gunflints, a flat piece of pewter, 18 brass kettles (dated about 1790) and two sections of an Indian-style pipe that fitted perfectly together. These goods had begun their ill-starred journey at Montreal. Carefully stowed in large canoes, they had passed up the St. Lawrence River to the Ottawa River and thence into Lake Nipissing. The main westward route traversed the rapids of Sault Ste. Marie into Superior, the greatest fresh-water lake on earth. Four hundred miles along its north shore, the canoes beached at Grand Portage. Here the voyageurs left their canoes, shouldered their goods, and trudged northwest nine tortuous miles to the Pigeon River. There they exchanged their loads for furs brought from the interior by other traders. This was the most difficult carry on the continent; even the tough voyageurs spoke of it with awe.



Grand Portage (now a National Monument) was the scene of the famous rendezvous where each summer hundreds of canoeemen, traders, and Indians gathered to exchange furs for guns, ironware, trinkets, and rum. It was a vital funnel for all trade with the Northwest until the early 19th century. And from this isolated spot, expeditions sallied forth to Rainy Lake, Lake of the Woods, Lake Winnipeg, and by way of the Churchill River to Fort Chipewyan at the west end of Lake Athabasca, 2,000 miles away.

After 1763, the Hudson's Bay Company dominated the fur trade with their fort at York Factory on Hudson Bay, and gradually the French-Canadians served the English-Scottish Northwest Fur Company which moved further north to the Kaministiquia route at Fort William (now in Canada). Finally, the Voyageur's Highway became the international border between the United States and Canada in 1842. The Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness and Voyageur's National Park were created in their honor.

For two centuries these wiry little French-Canadians--seldom more than five feet six in height, rarely weighing more than 150 pounds--literally carried the fur trade on their backs. They paddled their great canoes from dawn until dark, packed enormous loads, faced storms, wild uncharted rivers, hostile Indians, and ruthless rivals with joy, abandon, and pride in their calling. A breed apart, they wore a distinctive, colorful costume--moccasins topped by high leather leggings, a breechcloth, a shirt belted with gaudy sash, a pouch, a blue hooded cloak, and a red cap sporting a feather. These were the men who sang as they fought gales in their fragile canoes.

More than a century ago Canadian fur trader Alexander Ross talked with one of the last of the voyageurs. "I have now been 42 years in this country. For 24 I was a light canoe man; I required but little sleep, but sometimes got less than I required. No portage was too long for me: all portages were alike. My end of the canoe never touched the ground till I saw the end of it. 50 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. 500 pounds, twice told passed through my hands; although now I have not a spare shirt to my back, nor a penny to buy one. Yet, were I young again, I would willingly spend another half-century in the same fields of enjoyment. There is no life so happy as a voyageur's life; none so independent; no place where a man enjoys so much variety and freedom as in the Indian country. Huzza! Huzza! pour le pays savage!"

