

RADIOGRAMS OF MINNESOTA HISTORY

THE VOYAGEUR¹

Every section of the United States is rapidly becoming interested in the folklore peculiar to itself. This condition is an evidence that the nation has passed the hurry of its youth and, settling into maturity, is now looking back with tender affection on the scenes of its childhood. The Indian is no longer a pest to be exterminated as speedily as possible, though our pioneering ancestors regarded him as such. He had habits, traditions, and customs that make him worthy of study by every section of the country. In similar fashion, the South is finding more than a beast of burden in the Negro, whose "spirituals" and tales are taking a high place in the folklore of the world. Thus far we in the Upper Mississippi Valley have overlooked, in large measure, the outstanding figure among our makers of folklore, if we except the Indian. Like much of the northern part of the United States and practically all of Canada, we have the *voyageur*, one of the most colorful figures in the history of the continent.

We might translate the name and call him a canoeman, but he would never recognize himself in the new word, for he spoke no English; and those peculiar impressions which the very utterance of the French term call to mind would be lost if we were to call him by any other name than that by which he designated himself. Yankees and Scotchmen could be canoemen, and sometimes were; only French-Canadians could be *voyageurs*.

The origin of the *voyageur* goes far back into the days when the French settlers about Montreal and Quebec followed the redskin farther and farther up the lakes and streams into the distant West, hundreds of miles away, hunting the beaver.

¹ This paper, in abridged form, was given as a radio talk on March 17, 1925, from the Twin City broadcasting station WCCO.

For many years the chief wealth of the North American continent lay in its furs and skins. At first the Indians from the West came to the eastern seaboard, bringing their pelts. The French settlers could not long remain content with this arrangement and soon we find them accompanying or following the Indian up the Great Lakes and beyond into the plains of the West. They searched out new routes; they became expert in building and handling canoes, Indian fashion; they learned the best methods of eliciting furs from the Indians; they gave French names to the physical features of the country through which they passed; in a word, they originated the system which fur-hunters were to use for over a hundred years.

Then came the conquest of Canada by the English in 1760. The French fur-traders who were left in Canada after that event were mainly of the lower classes about Montreal and Quebec. The English with their more modern business methods assumed control of the trade and firms came into existence whose chief concern was the procuring of furs through the instrumentality of these French-Canadians whose fathers and grandfathers had hunted the beaver almost to the Pacific Ocean. The majority of the men who formed the new companies were Scotchmen and their headquarters were at Montreal, which became the center of the fur trade for three chief reasons: seagoing vessels could bring fur-trade supplies thither from England; the main thoroughfare to the fur country lay along the St. Lawrence, the Great Lakes, and the rivers entering the lakes from all directions; and the men who knew most about the fur trade lived in its vicinity.

The fur trade now became an organized system. The men who formed the companies were called the partners, some of whom remained in Montreal to take charge of the business of securing supplies from England and shipping them to fur-traders at their posts in the interior and marketing the furs received therefor while others assumed charge of the departments into which the fur-trading areas of the interior were divided. Below them in rank were the clerks, young men

entering business, one of whom represented the firm at every fur-trading post. Next came the interpreters, who were experienced hunters and knew English, French, and the particular Indian dialect of the region about the posts where they were stationed. Finally, at the bottom, were the *voyageurs*, the canoemen who performed the physical labor for all those above them. If we accompany a squadron of canoes as it leaves Montreal, bound for what is now Minnesota, we shall get acquainted very easily with our *voyageurs*, who are friendly folk, and shall learn much more about their ways than if we were to adopt any other method of studying them and their peculiar habits.

It is a bright May morning in the year 1793. Just above the Lachine Rapids in the St. Lawrence at Montreal all is bustle and confusion, for the annual squadron of canoes for the Grand Portage leaves today, word having been received that at last all the streams and lakes on the route are free from ice. The squadron consists of thirty canoes and is divided into three brigades, each with its guide or pilot, who knows the intricacies of the long route. The canoes are frail birch-bark structures, but each carries eight to ten men, besides some three tons of merchandise — the provisions for the interior and goods to be exchanged for furs. As we step in, we notice that the water is up to the gunwales and, were our *voyageurs* not such experienced hands, we should fear for our lives. These men have been laboring hard for several days, making up the goods into bales of ninety pounds each — *pieces* they are called. Each canoe carries, besides the men's personal effects, fifty-five packages of goods, six hundredweight of biscuit, two hundredweight of pork or grease, three bushels of peas, two oilcloths to cover the goods, a sail, an axe, a towline, a kettle, a sponge with which to bail out water, and a quantity of gum, bark, and watap (or roots) for repairing the canoe.

Everyone is dressed in the peculiar manner of the class, in garb most gay and becoming to such an animated, vigorous race. A capote, or surcoat, made of a blanket, is the most con-

spicuous item, unless it be the many-colored sash at the waist, topping the cloth trousers and leather leggins and suspending the knives, tobacco pouch, and many other small articles which dangle from it. A striped cotton shirt testifies to the civilized instincts of this child of a mixed tradition, and the moccasins on his feet tell of his feeling of kinship with the Indians. Many tearful farewells are being said with anguished gesticulations, for our *voyageur's* tears and laughter lie close to the surface and for the moment life is a vale of tears as he says farewell to his *femme* and his numerous progeny.

Now we proceed. But first we must conform with the long established custom of the *voyageurs* and cross to the church of St. Anne, the last church we shall see. Here the men take up a voluntary donation among themselves, in order to have prayers said for the prosperity of the voyage and a safe return to friends and families. St. Anne is the patron saint of *voyageurs* and no one would dream of beginning a trip to the interior without securing her blessing.

The men consider this point the beginning of the expedition and, lest we be "baptized," as the *voyageurs* call the ducking we should receive if we, the only novices in the canoe, did not treat them, we give them a few bottles of porter. The sorrows of the leave-taking are soon forgotten and the *voyageurs* are now the merriest, most light-hearted persons in the world.

To reach the Sault de Ste. Marie as quickly as possible, our brigade proceeds up the Ottawa River and down the French River to upper Lake Huron. This route is full of rapids and falls, which require the *voyageurs* to carry on their backs around these obstacles the merchandise and frequently the canoes. Two *pieces*, sometimes three, are carried at a time by each man. If the distance is short one load is carried the entire distance before another is taken up. If a rest becomes necessary all the goods are transferred to the resting point before the remainder of the portage is undertaken at all. A resting place is called a *pose* by the men, who practically never

speak of the length of a portage by feet or rods, but usually as so many *poses*.

The rapids do not always prevent navigation, but they are always dangerous. Though the *voyageurs* are usually miraculously dexterous in guiding a canoe and shoot the rapids with consummate skill, now and then one makes a mistake and finds a watery grave. For every such lost companion, whether his body is recovered or not, the men erect a small cross on the bank nearby. In one spot we count thirty such crosses. Whenever a cross is sighted all the *voyageurs* pull off their caps and make the sign of the cross while someone in the canoe repeats a short prayer. The same rites are observed whenever we pass from one stream into another. In fact the *voyageurs* have evolved a whole set of rules which they observe scrupulously. For example, at a certain portage in the route, all parts of which have been given French designations by the men, the setting, or propelling, poles become no longer necessary for navigation and all the middlemen, or those in the body of the canoe, go through a regular ceremony of casting away their poles. This performance is accompanied by a loud huzza.

The middlemen, or *milieux*, as they designate themselves, receive on leaving Montreal what they call an equipment. By this term they mean two blankets, two shirts, two pairs of trousers, two handkerchiefs, ten pounds of tobacco, and some trifling articles. Besides these things, they receive at one time or another four hundred livres for the season. The bowman and the steersman, being more important *voyageurs*, receive twelve hundred livres and a similar equipment with four extra pounds of tobacco.

Having entered Lake Huron, we proceed quickly to the Sault, where we portage and launch our canoes on the broad surface of Lake Superior. The *voyageur* tells a story in an inimitable way and to catch something of the flavor of his style, we will let one describe this portion of our trip.²

² Paul Beaulieu (1820-1897), the author of an excellent paper on the fur-trade methods used in the Lake Superior region, from which this

[During storms on the lake] the voyagers takes a rest which is soon to be supplemented by as much Labor during calm weather working day and night stopping only long enough to cook their daily rations to last until the next night. during this stoppage each man wraps himself in a Mackinaw blanket which constitutes his bedding and is soon in the embrace of Morpheus, while the cooking is being done by the women. 3 hours was the allotted time of stoppage and then could be heard the cry of the man in charge of the march, as he was called — Hup Hup Hup Embark Embark Embark. A scene of confusion would follow, each person competing with his neighbor as to who would get through first with his meal, and then the packing and carrying Large kettles full of corn & broth steaming, Mess Baskets, Tea Kettles, and tripods for hanging kettles with chains appended, Fry Pans used in baking bread for clerks only & in fact the turmoil witnessed in any nomadic camp is here duplicated with the exception that the means of transportation is not an elephant nor a camel, an Indian pony or a Red River dog, But a full fledged Mackinaw Boat which is shoved off from shore the prow once more headed towards the setting sun, the oars are shipped each person occupying the same place he did the day before splash goes the Oars. A Canadian boat song is struck up by a leader (*solo*) which is responded to in chorus by the crews of all the boats and keeping perfect time with the dipping and pulling of the Oars. So one league (3 miles) is reached according to rough calculations the oars are suspended in the air in the leading boat and bridled by a raw hide thong fastened to the poles laid across for the feet of the rowers to rest on, and all the other Boats follows suit by doing the same thing. this is called a pipe — otherwise a rest.

extract is taken, was a well-known *voyageur* and Chippewa interpreter. The sketch printed above is among the Beaulieu Papers in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society and has never been published. While it describes conditions and customs as the author knew them after 1830, it applies fairly accurately to the *voyageur* and his habits at the close of the eighteenth century. Customs among this class of men changed slowly, and the only reference in this extract that needs explanation is that to Mackinac boats, which to a large extent had supplanted canoes on Lake Superior by the year 1825.

Tobacco sacks & pouches are pulled out pipes are lit, a smoke is enjoyed for 10 minutes. Oars are again in motion, and the same routine followed up unless by a special interposition of the *vielle* or old woman of the wind a slight breeze is felt from the right quarter which the voyager thinks that he encourages by throwing small pieces of tobacco or other insignificant articles in the lake as a sacrifice with the accompan[y]ing words *souffle souffle le vielle* (or blow blow old woman) and when their prayers are heard and their sacrifices are accepted by the old woman or the She Neptune of Lake Superior the masts are fastened & keyed in position the canvass is spread the rudder being shipped as soon as preparations are made to plant the masts, as it is termed. With a mild breeze these boats will sail from 60 to 70 miles per day, while they cannot be propelled with oars more than one half that distance. during these sailing spells the contentment and happiness is depicted in every feature, and sleeping is the order of the day.

We pass along the rocky north shore and twelve days from the Sault arrive at the Grand Portage, the great summer rendezvous for all the traders and *voyageurs*. While on the lake and also at times on the streams, the *voyageurs* sing lustily. The steersman ordinarily sets the pace, and all join in these old French songs, which usually have a most romantic flavor. One, especially, seems to be a great favorite, "A la claire fontaine." The first stanza as sung by the *voyageurs* in French runs:³

A la claire fontaine
 M'en allant promener,
 J'ai trouvé l'eau si belle
 Que je m'y suis baigné.
 Lui ya longtemps que je t'aime,
 Jamais je ne t'oublierai.

³ The French version is given entire, together with the air, in Ernest Gagnon, *Chansons populaires du Canada, recueillies et publiées avec annotations*, 2 (Quebec, 1894). The translation is taken from William Douw Lighthall, ed., *Songs of the Great Dominion: Voices from the Forests and Waters, the Settlements and Cities of Canada*, 74 (London, 1889).

William D. Lighthall translates the *chanson* thus:

Unto the crystal fountain
For pleasure did I stray;
So fair I found the waters
My limbs in them I lay.

Long is it I have loved thee,
Thee shall I love alway,
My dearest;

Long is it I have loved thee,
Thee shall I love alway.

So fair I found the waters,
My limbs in them I lay;
Beneath an oak tree resting,
I heard a roundelay.

Long is it, etc.

Beneath an oak tree resting,
I heard a roundelay,
The nightingale was singing
On the oak tree's topmost spray.

Long is it, etc.

The nightingale was singing
On the oak tree's topmost spray:—
Sing, nightingale, keep singing,
Thou who hast heart so gay!

Long is it, etc.

Sing, nightingale, keep singing,
Thou hast a heart so gay,
Thou hast a heart so merry,
While mine is sorrow's prey.

Long it is, etc.

For I have lost my mistress,
Whom I did true obey,
All for a bunch of roses,
Whereof I said her nay.

Long is it, etc.

I would those luckless roses
Were on their bush to-day,
And that itself the rosebush
Were plunged in ocean's spray.

Long is it, etc.

Another song which enlivens the *voyageur's* toilsome way and which reveals a certain class consciousness in this group of men is translated rather literally thus: ⁴

THE WAY

The river that we sail
Is the pride of our country;
The women that we love
Are the fairest upon earth.
Row, then, row! Row, then, row!

Toilsome is our way,
Dangerous is our way;
But what matter?
Our trust is in Providence.
Row, then, row! Row, then, row!

The river that we sail
Is the pride of our country;
The women that we love
Are the fairest upon earth.
Row, then, row! Row, then, row!

Three pipes before we reach Grand Portage we put ashore and the men shave and clean themselves in order to make a good appearance at the end of the journey, for your *voyageur* has many of the characteristics of his French forbears, among which is the desire to make a good impression. Then we start on the final lap of the Lake Superior journey. We round *Pointe au Chapeau*, or Hat Point, and come in sight of the long-wished-for Grand Portage. The beach is covered with spectators awaiting our arrival, our *voyageurs* sing paddling songs in a vociferous manner, the canoes are propelled forward at great speed, and we push up on the beach amid calls and laughter and a perfect babel of tongues.

The fort here is twenty-four by thirty rods, built on the margin of a bay at the foot of a hill of considerable height. Within the palisades are sixteen dwelling houses, shops, and

⁴ The translation is given in Charles Lanman, *Adventures in the Wilds of the United States and British American Provinces*, 1: 115 (Philadelphia, 1856).

storehouses. The *voyageurs* have a camp outside the palisades. They number about eleven hundred and there are interpreters, clerks, and partners besides them. Here the Northmen, or those who winter in the interior, live in tents during their stay, but our more frugal *voyageurs*, or pork-eaters, as they are generally termed, lodge beneath their canoes.

The name pork-eaters originated from the food eaten here and on the journey by the canoemen. Whereas the clerks, guides, and interpreters have a variety of food, the daily ration of the *voyageur* is one quart of hulled corn with one or two ounces of suet, tallow, or grease. The corn is boiled in a gallon of water for two hours over a moderate fire. When it has boiled a short time, the fat is added and later a little salt. When ready for serving, the mixture is thick and resembles hominy. It is from the grease that the name is derived, the French name for the canoemen being *mangeurs du lard*, eaters of pork.

At this point most of the *voyageurs* who have come with us turn back to Montreal, paddling the canoes in which they came, now filled with packs of furs brought down from the numerous posts that dot the wilderness from the Grand Portage to the Pacific Ocean. We shall not return with them, but go on with those who are to pass the winter at the posts in the interior. After carrying the provisions and merchandise for the inland posts over the long portage, nine miles or sixteen *poses* in length, we launch our canoes in the river and proceed by lakes and rivers to Rainy Lake. Now our canoes are much smaller and manned by only five or six *voyageurs*. We are fourteen canoes bound for Red River each carrying about a ton and a half of merchandise and provisions.

At the height of land, the source of the streams emptying into Lake Superior, we are made Northmen by the *voyageurs*. This ceremony, performed here on everyone who has never passed this way before, consists of sprinkling water in our faces with a small cedar bough. Every person so initiated must agree to the following conditions: never to let a new

hand pass that way without experiencing the same ceremony; and never to kiss a *voyageur's* wife against her own free will. The ceremony is completed by firing a dozen shots, one after another in Indian fashion. Of course the reason for this ceremony on the part of the *voyageurs* is to claim a drink, and so we submit to the rest of the performance by giving them a keg on which they get quite uproarious. Here for the first time we see our *voyageurs* roast and eat a dog in Indian fashion. This is also the place where the men generally finish their small kegs of liquor and where, as a result, many a battle is fought.

We continue our route through Rainy Lake, — stopping over night at the fort there, — through the Lake of the Woods, down the Winnipeg River, and into Lake Winnipeg. Red River enters this lake, and we pass up it to the fork or entrance of the Assiniboine, where the city of Winnipeg is to stand in later years. Here our brigade divides, part going up the Assiniboine, or Upper Red River, as it is frequently called; the remainder up the Lower Red River into the country of the Chippewa and the Sioux. We shall stay with the four canoes that are to winter at Pembina River. At that place we make camp and the *voyageurs*, nineteen in number, build a storehouse and a palisaded fort, cut hay for the horses which we purchase from the Indians of the plains, and cut 120 cords of wood for fuel during the long winter months. We are to trade with the Chippewa, who are in great fear constantly of being surprised by the Sioux, who also frequent these regions.

The winter is spent in hunting and trapping, going on long journeys to Indians at Red Lake, Otter Tail Lake, and other points in the region later to be known as Minnesota and North Dakota, killing buffaloes and bringing in the meat, and keeping in the fort when the weather is too inclement for outdoor operations. On Christmas Day, New Year's, Epiphany, and other holy or saints' days, the *voyageurs* and their squaws and half-breed families, who constitute the inhabitants of our fort, all claim their drams of high wine or other liquors, and their

flour, sugar, and other luxuries reserved for such special occasions. Sometimes we have a ball, when old fiddles are produced and the fort becomes a merry place indeed.

On holidays and on Sundays the flag is raised over the fort. It is the only way our *voyageurs* have to distinguish one day from another. Frequently men return from long hunts and cannot tell the day of the week nor of the month. Often they cannot tell whether the month is, say, November or December. New Year's, however, never passes without due celebration. Even the Indians have adopted the *voyageurs'* manner of observing it; and it is ludicrous to see an old, fat squaw, face clean for once, come into the fort, shake hands, wish the clerk or one of the men *bon jour*, and put her face close to his to give and receive the Canadian New Year's kiss.

Thus is the long winter passed. In May all is bustle and commotion again in preparation for making the trip to Grand Portage with the packs of furs, 125 in number, which represent our labors of the winter. The journey down follows the route we pursued last autumn and in midsummer we arrive once more at the great inland rendezvous, Grand Portage.

Such were the *voyageurs* in Minnesota history. When the Americans took the fur trade from the British in 1816 no substitute could be found for the Canadian boatmen, and so they continued, under special dispensation from the government, to man the canoes and boats of the American traders. John Jacob Astor, president of the American Fur Company, the principal fur company in Minnesota, once remarked that he would rather have one Canadian *voyageur* than three American boatmen. After the Americans took charge of the trade the *voyageurs* usually entered the region of the Upper Mississippi by way of Fond du Lac, near the site of the present city of Duluth. Thence they spread up the rivers and lakes west and northwest, covering from east to west what is now the northern portion of the state of Minnesota. By other routes they also entered the southern part of the state.

After the failure of the American Fur Company in 1842, the fur trade began to dwindle. Gradually the *voyageurs* ceased to come. Those who were already here became occupied in other pursuits and many of their descendants are among us today. Occasionally we still run across such surnames as Lafonde, Roy, Houle, Larocque, Lafranc, Beauchemin, Langlois, and Renville, which represent the descendants of some of these old Canadian *voyageurs*. We should remember them, too, when we speak of Lac qui Parle, Lake Traverse, Mille Lacs, and other geographical features that have never ceased to be called by the names the *voyageurs* bestowed upon them.

In recounting these characteristics and customs of the *voyageurs* on their trips from Montreal to Grand Portage and on into the interior, I have made use of such authentic data as I have found in the diaries and reminiscences of clerks and *voyageurs*. Several of these documents have been preserved, some in print, others still in the form in which the clerk penned them years ago as he rested at some *pose*. They furnish extremely interesting reading and would repay anyone who might care to peruse them. I may add that an oil painting of a *voyageur* done in the fifties from life, showing his red cap and the inevitable pipe, was on exhibition recently in the St. Paul Public Library.⁵

GRACE LEE NUTE

⁵ The painting is the property of Miss Abby Abbe Fuller of St. Paul, whose aunt, Mrs. Abby Fuller Abbe, was the artist.



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