

Thank you to the St. Joseph's
County Parks Department
for this great learning
packet on Voyageurs/fur traders.

Paddles from the Past

Pre-visit packet

The activities in your pre-visit packet have been designed to help you prepare for your upcoming program here at the St. Joseph County Parks. The information in this packet will help you become familiar with what life was like during the fur trade era in northern Indiana.

Who were the Voyageurs?

Most voyageurs were French-Canadians. They were short men with strong arms and broad shoulders. They worked for the fur companies and paddled birch bark canoes over long distances carrying trade items and furs.

They spent about 14 hours each day paddling rivers and lakes to reach Native American villages. A clerk, who traveled with them, traded silver, beads and other items for furs, which the voyageurs transported back to the trading posts.

Portages were places where the canoe and its contents had to be carried around waterfalls or between rivers. Trade items and furs were packed in bundles called pieces. Each piece weighed 90 pounds.

The fur companies provided the voyageurs with dried peas, or corn, and flour. From this they made pea soup and galette (a flat bread), which they ate twice a day.

Voyageur Math

1. On average, a voyageur canoe would travel 17 miles per day. How long would it take to get from Montreal to Mackinac Island – a distance of 650 miles?
2. The largest canoes were called canots de maitres, and each carried two tons of cargo. If a brigade of six canots de maitres departed from Mackinac Island, loaded with freight, how many pounds would they be carrying in all?
3. The average crew for a canot de maitre was eight men. The furs and trade items were packed in bundles called pieces, each weighing about 90 pounds. How many pieces would each voyageur need to carry during portage to transport the freight?
4. Long portages were broken into half mile sections. The men carried two pieces for a half mile, set them down and returned to the canoe for another two. Those packs were again dropped at the half mile point, until all the freight was at the half mile point. Then they would begin carrying the pieces the next half mile leg. If the portage was two miles long, and there were 24 pieces and six crew members, how far would each voyageur walk to carry all the cargo?

Answers: 1. 38 days 2. 24,000 lbs. 3. 5 or 6 4. 6 miles

Who were the Woodland Indians?

A group of Indians with similar culture and language in the Great Lakes region were known as Woodland Indians. Individual tribes included the Miami, Ottawa, Ojibwa and Potowatomi Indians.

Before the arrival of the European traders, the Woodland Indians grew, hunted or harvested all their own food.

Following the fur companies' arrival the Woodland Indians traded furs for kettles, cloth, guns and other items. They became more dependant on trade items and material culture, losing many of their self-sufficient skills and art forms.

Look it up!

1. Wild ginger, sassafras, wintergreen, huckleberries, wild blueberries, walnuts, acorns, cattail roots and arrowhead roots were all gathered for food. *Using plant and tree field guides and other sources, determine in which habitats each of them is found. Which oak species was preferred for acorn harvest?*
2. Wigwams or wikiups were the dome-shaped shelters used by many of the Woodland Indians. Northern groups used birch bark to cover the frames of these shelters, while southern groups used elm bark. *Research the range of these two trees. Draw their leaf shapes. Determine what modern day uses their woods have.*
3. Animals were hunted for food, and all parts of the animals were used. Skins were worn for clothing, bones were boiled for marrow, and brains were used for tanning hides. *Contact a butcher or a meat processor to find out what happens to the skins and bones of pigs, cows and other animals that are killed for meat today.*

Who were the metis?

The metis people were part French-Canadian, part Woodland Indian.

Many metis men were hired by the fur companies as voyageurs. Some of the women were hired at the trading posts and forts to repair canoes and do domestic chores. Some metis served as guides and interpreters.

Often they were caught between cultures, not accepted by the Europeans or the Woodland Indians.

Voyageur Terms

<i>Voyageur</i>	French Canadian employed by a fur company to transport furs and trade goods in canoes
<i>Canot</i>	Canoe (French)
<i>Canot de maitre</i>	Master Canoe or Montreal Canoe (36 feet long)
<i>Canot du nord</i>	North Canoe (25 feet long)
<i>Canoe brigade</i>	Group of canoes traveling together (owned by the same company)
<i>Pays d'en haut</i>	High country in the west
<i>Bateaux</i>	Wooden boats used on lakes
<i>Engage</i>	Hired canoeman
<i>Milieu</i>	Middle paddler
<i>Mangeur du lard</i>	Voyageur traveling only from Montreal to Grand Portage (literally “pork eater” or “fat eater” in French)
<i>Hivernant</i>	Voyageur living and working from Grand Portage westward (literally “winterer” in French)
<i>Gouvernail</i>	Steersman (in stern of canoe)
<i>Avant</i>	Captain of the canoe, in the bow
<i>Bourgeois</i>	The agent in charge of the brigade
<i>Chanteur</i>	Singer who leads songs
<i>Galette or bannock</i>	Pan-fried bread
<i>Pemmican</i>	Dried meat mixed with fat and dried fruit, a staple food on journeys
<i>Chaudiere</i>	Large kettle for pea soup
<i>Castor</i>	Beaver
<i>Commis</i>	Clerk who keeps records of trades and wages
<i>Coureur de bois</i>	Illicit trader operating without government license
<i>Portage</i>	Place where canoe and all of its contents must be carried around rapids

Now test yourself...

Match up the terms listed in the left hand column with their definitions in the right hand column. The first one has been done for you.

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| <u>E</u> 1. Portage | A. Middle paddler |
| ___ 2. Galette | B. Large kettle for pea soup |
| ___ 3. Gouvernail | C. Wooden boats used on lakes |
| ___ 4. Milieu | D. Beaver |
| ___ 5. Commis | E. Place where canoe and all of its contents must be carried around rapids. |
| ___ 6. Voyageur | F. Captain of the canoe, in the bow |
| ___ 7. Chaudiere | G. Canoe |
| ___ 8. Avant | H. Pan-fried bread |
| ___ 9. Pays d'en haut | I. French-Canadian employed by a fur company to transport furs and trade goods in canoes |
| ___ 10. Bateaux | J. Steersman (in stern of canoe) |
| ___ 11. Castor | K. Clerk who keeps records of trades and wages |
| ___ 12. Canot | L. High country in the west |

Answers: 1-E, 2-H, 3-J, 4-A, 5-K, 6-I, 7-B, 8-F, 9-L, 10-C, 11-D, 12-G

Additional Resources:

Books:

Fur Trade Canoe Routes of Canada / Then and Now

By: Eric W. Morse

University of Toronto Press, 1984

The Voyageur

By: Grace Lee Nute

Minnesota Historical Society, 1987

The Michigan Fur Trade

By: Ida Amanda Johnson

The Black Letter Press, 1971

A Toast to the Fur Trade

By: Robert C. Wheeler

Wheeler Productions, 1985

Where Two Worlds Meet – The Great Lakes Fur Trade

By: Carolyn Gilman

Minnesota Historical Society

A Great Lakes Fur Trade Coloring Book

Minnesota Historical Society, 1981

The Beaver Men

By: Mari Sandoz

University of Nebraska Press, 1964

The Voyageurs

By: R.J. Andrews

Ginn and Company, 1969

Many Tender Ties – Women in Fur Trade Society, 1670 – 1870

Sylvia Van Kirk

University of Oklahoma Press, 1983

Winner Take All – The Trans-Canada Canoe Trail

By: David Lavender

University of Idaho Press, 1977

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