

Week One  
History of the Boreal Forest and Its People



Sometimes while we're dreaming up adventures, someone will ask, "Why would you want to do that?" They mean to ask why we would dream of bringing on the physical hardship of fighting the cold, being away from home, and overall tent-living. The truth is that it is difficult to be away from home for a long time, it does get cold, and some days aren't as much fun as others. But, I like to think back to when this area was home to many individuals. The men and women who have lived in this region for thousands of years have left a significant impact and have helped to shape the world in which we now live. On most days while we're paddling, Dave and Eric can hear the voices, songs, hopes, and dreams of people from the past echo throughout the trees and waters.

There have been people who have lived in this area for a long time. **The Anishinabeg, or first people, are thought to have lived in this region for over 10,000 years.** No one is exactly sure when people may have first arrived in the boreal forest, but artifacts and other archeological findings have shown that people have made this area home for a long time. And while their customs and traditions may have changed, their overall appreciation for the wilderness has remained intact. Or in other words, they think that this is the greatest place to live.

The physical environment of the boreal forest has undergone drastic changes.

## **The Ice Age**

Beginning about 2,000,000 years ago, during what is called the Pleistocene Ice Age, the area in which Eric and Dave are paddling was covered by huge sheets of ice. These sheets of ice, or glaciers, buried much of Canada and the upper one-third of the United States under ice that was over a mile deep.

Over time (about 1,980,000 years!), the glacier began to build strength and size. **About 14,000 years ago, when the glacier was its biggest, it was thought to cover about 45 million square miles!** The glacier became so big, and buried under so much snow, it actually became softer. Imagine putting wet snow between your two palms, like when you're making a snowball. The heat from your hands begins to melt the snow into water, right? But before the snow turns to water, what occurs? The snow becomes ice. This is exactly what happened to the huge glacier. The ice that was once super-hard started to become soft under its own weight. Once the glacier became softer, it gained the ability to move on its own, or as Ron Morton states, it "could move like pancake batter spreads out when poured onto an iron griddle."

In order for a glacier to grow, the temperature must never get above freezing. 365 days of pure freezing. Now, I know what you're asking, "How could that be? Canada isn't *always* frozen. I've been to Minnesota, and it might be cold, but they have summer too." You have to remember that this was a long time ago, and the earth has the ability to change temperatures over long periods of time. **If you were to land in North America during the Pleistocene Ice Age, you'd find it very different than today. This was before the time of the woolly mammoth. There were no forests like today, so finding firewood would be quite difficult.**

So, the glacier starts to move. "So what, who cares?" you ask. As the glacier moved south, it was so heavy that it ran over everything in its way. While it was running over the land, it also dug itself into the ground, creating huge flat plains, rugged mountains, and deep valleys.

Glaciers can change the course of rivers and they have the strength to cut new rivers. However, it's not really the ice that cuts deep into the earth, but what the ice picks up as it moves. While the ice moves, it picks up huge rocks, and the rocks act as giant drills. These big rocks can carve and cut and shape the earth's landscape.

Of course, all things must change, right? Once these glaciers had done their fair share of shaping the land they began to melt. And what does ice become when it melts? Water! They let out a lot of water. So much water that the holes the glaciers had spent so many years carving out were filled, becoming lakes and rivers. Many of the holes they dug overflowed with water.

The glaciers carved out much of the geological map of North America. The Mississippi River, the Great Lakes, Lake Winnipeg are all examples of the enormous power that glaciers have.

About 12,000 years ago, when the Pleistocene Ice Age was coming to an end, a huge lake was formed. Now referred to as Lake Agassiz, this lake covered about 50,000 square miles, much larger than Lake Superior. However, this was a period of tremendous change in the environment. Temperatures were climbing, glaciers were melting, and the water was running out of places to go. Before too long, there was too much water for Lake Agassiz to handle. It flooded, causing tremendous impact to the newly warming landscape.

However, archeologists have learned that people were living on the shores of Lake Agassiz when it flooded. They know this through digging up the past. They've found bones, and fossils that prove that people were around during that time.

### **The Anishinabeg (The First People)**

Little is known about the native people of North America before the European explorers and traders used the Canadian waterways to head west. Some people think that the first people walked over to North America across the Bering Strait about 12,000 years ago. Others think that there were people who were living here long before that. Every Native American civilization has its own story about how they came to live where they do. According to the Ojibwe people, the Great Spirit created a first world called Ca'Ca, but that world was destroyed by a huge flood (sound familiar?).

So, as the world was re-built, the people who lived in it became more aware of their surroundings. This way, they could know if it was going to flood again. **They found that the more they paid attention to their surroundings, the more they learned.** They learned to hunt bison and other animals. They learned how to farm, and what plants in the forest were good for food and medicine. They learned how to fish from their birchbark canoes. And generally they learned to feel at home in the forest and on the lakes.

The Ojibwe civilization was not unlike today's society. The Ojibwe, and most other North American tribes, lived communally. They established villages, and other than during the winter when families moved away from each other, lived in harmony together. Most tribes formed loose governments that were ruled under communal law. **Since everyone had to live together, everyone's opinion counted.** Think about your extended family and how everyone gets along. This is similar to the ways the Ojibwe clans and other northern tribes governed themselves. The people who lived in Ojibwe communities knew that everyone had to deal with

the same, harsh weather patterns, and so therefore everyone looked out for each other. In fact it was considered immoral to allow anyone to go hungry if food was available.

The Ojibwe respected the land, and became the protectors of their home. It is thought that the Annishabeg, or Ojibwe, lived this way for thousands of years.

## Early European Contact and the Rise of the Fur Trade



In the mid-1600s, Europeans, mostly English and French, had already been in North America for well over a hundred years. However, since there were no maps, not many Europeans really knew what lie to the west. However, people have always had the curious desire to see what's out there. Not only would it be an adventure, but it could also make the adventurer rich. And becoming rich has always been a motivator for people to take risks.

But first, let's back up a step. The Ojibwe were not the first Native Americans to encounter the English and British. Civilizations like the Iroquois, Seneca, Wendat, and Mohawk had been trading their furs for European goods since Jacques Cartier sailed from France to the mouth of the St. Lawrence River in 1535.

The first Europeans to start exploring northern North America were not looking for people or furs. They really weren't sure what was out there. Keep in mind that they didn't have the whole world mapped out yet. The English and French were in competition to find the riches in the New World that Spain had "discovered" in South America, Central America, and Mexico. Of course the Spanish were not the first to "discover" the gold of Latin America, either. Huge, massive, intricate, and intelligent civilizations like the Aztec, Mayan, and Incan, had been there long before the Spanish. The French and English saw all the wealth the Spanish were bringing back to Europe, and became a bit envious. So, the English and French decided that they wanted to explore the northern region to look for a quick way to China, or better yet lots and lots of gold.

However, these first attempts at finding the Northwest Passage, the quick route to China, or finding gold were un-successful. The only things that Cartier, Champlain, and other explorers brought back to France were a handful of small artifacts and numerous pelts of fur. The explorers were also not known as the most friendly of folk, and they also kidnapped a few Iroquois people.

But things were changing in Europe. A new style of hat was becoming all the rage. Men had to have one; in fact it became as necessary as a shirt to most gentlemen. During the Thirty Years War (1618-48), many English and French encounter Swedish soldiers wearing wide-brimmed hats, and they simply had to have one. These hats were made out felt from the beaver's fur.

But the beaver population in Europe and Scandinavia was not very big. And since everyone needed a beaver to make a hat, almost all of the beavers in Europe were trapped and made into hats. By the early 1700s, only 50 years later, Europe's beavers were on the brink of extinction.

So now England and France had a reason to continue to explore North America. Although beaver furs may not be as glamorous as gold, there was still money to be made. And on top of that, there were many people willing to venture into the wilderness to trade their European goods for the beavers that Native Americans had trapped.



So, a new breed of French-Canadian men was born, the *coureurs de bois*. The *coureurs de bois* spoke native languages and were comfortable for months or even years in the remote and often dangerous Interior of Canada. The men were often farmers during the summer and then during the fall and winter, traveled into Algonquin, Ojibwe, or Nipissing camps to purchase furs.

The only problem with this arrangement was that the French government didn't care for the rough image of the *coureurs de bois*. They also didn't like the fact that these men were getting rich without paying taxes back to France. The French government developed laws that said if you wanted to trade in furs, you needed a permit. The *coureurs de bois* were not issued these permits, and so they had to trade their furs illegally. But, more often than not, they were caught and arrested. Their furs were confiscated.

This obviously wasn't what the *coureurs de bois* had imagined. So they had to look elsewhere for people to sell their furs. Two men in particular, Medard Chouart de Groseilleirs and his brother-

in-law, Pierre-Esprit Radisson, had been arrested one too many times for trading without a permit, and had their expensive furs confiscated by the French. In 1662, the two men traveled south to Boston to search for some help. The English were colonizing Boston at that time, and jumped at the chance to make more money. Grosseilleirs and Radisson traveled back to England and entertained Prince Rupert with stories of a huge lake that was to be the key to the fur trade. This huge lake would later be called Hudson Bay.



In the Hudson Bay, the English would establish the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) in 1670. The giant, government-owned company that began to trade in furs was also setting up forts along the southern shore of the Hudson Bay to keep the French from wandering up. For the next 100 or so years, the Hudson's Bay Fur Company traded with the Native Americans. Since they were the only European traders, the Assiniboine, Cree, and Ojibwe had to trade exclusively with the HBC.

Over in Europe, things were not going smoothly. In 1756 fighting broke out and lasted until 1763, primarily due to the French and English not getting along in North America. Since everyone was competing for the same territory, fighting was bound to occur. The war in Europe, later known as the Seven Year's War, would eventually end France's occupation of any North American territory. The French did not have the military or the money to be fighting wars in both Europe and New France (North America). So by 1763, France was forced by the British to give up all of its colonial possessions in North America.

After losing the Seven Year's War in 1763, the French fur trade in the Great Lakes region was a free-for-all. The pesky process of obtaining a permit to trade furs was no longer a threat to the *coureurs de bois*. More countries began to get involved in the North American fur trade. Montreal became the fur-trade epicenter, with English, Scottish, and American colonials all creating partnerships with Native Americans.

In 1784, things were about to change. Simon McTavish, the head of a Scottish mafia, and the rest of his clan could be considered the first North American entrepreneur. Together, they formed the North West Company (NWC).

Within four years of establishing the North West Company, McTavish was the wealthiest man in Montreal. The NWC had grown by leaps and bounds by traveling deep into the Canadian Interior and establishing trade posts up the Mackenzie River, named after the famous explorer Alexander Mackenzie, to the Arctic Ocean. MWC men had also crossed the western Rocky Mountains via the Peace River all the way to the Pacific Ocean.

So now there were two major fur companies all working to get rich off of the same furs. The North West Company in Montreal, and the Hudson's Bay Fur Company on the Hudson Bay. Both of these companies established partnerships with the Native Americans. The North West Company quickly gained the reputation of bringing high quality goods far into the Interior of Canada. Often Native Americans would have the opportunity to own the finest silks from China, the finest glass from Germany, and new and interesting spices from India. North America had truly become an international trade community.



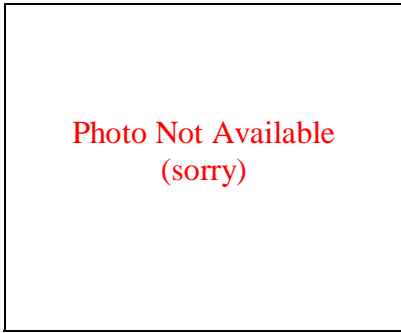
# IDEAS FOR THE CLASSROOM

## Explore the Explorers

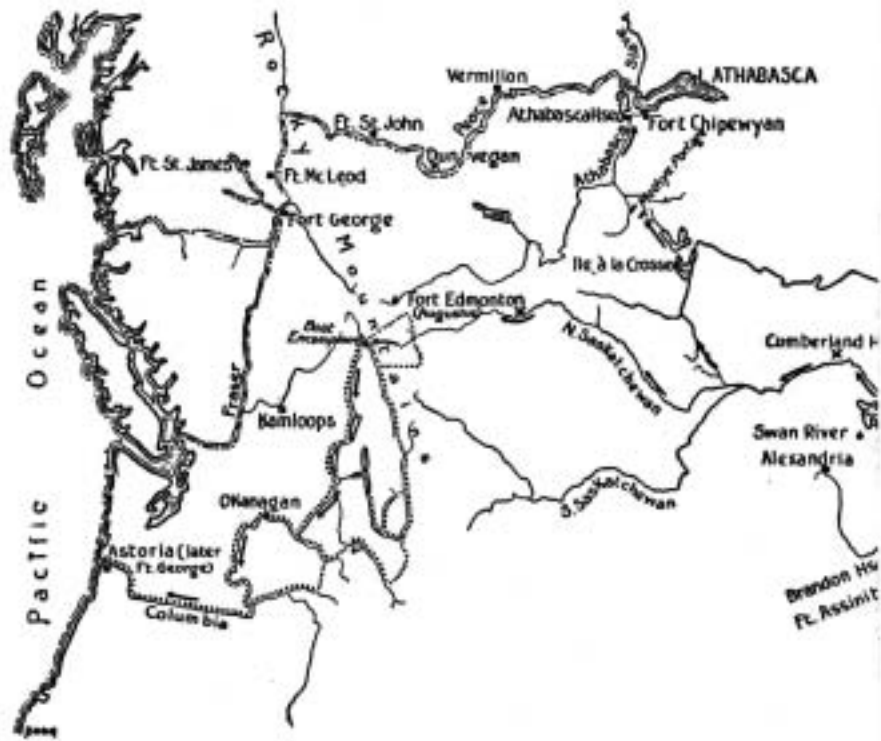
Peter Pond, Alexander MacKenzie, and Simon Fraser were explorers who played a very important part in opening up the west to the North West Company. Without these men, furs from the northern Athabasca region, the Canadian Rockies, and Artic region would have never made it back to Europe. And if that were to happen, lots of gentlemen would be walking around without their heads covered! Use a map of North America to highlight these important routes. Use a different color for each explorer.

Your job is to write biographies according to the table below to match the explorer with the explored region.

**PETER POND**



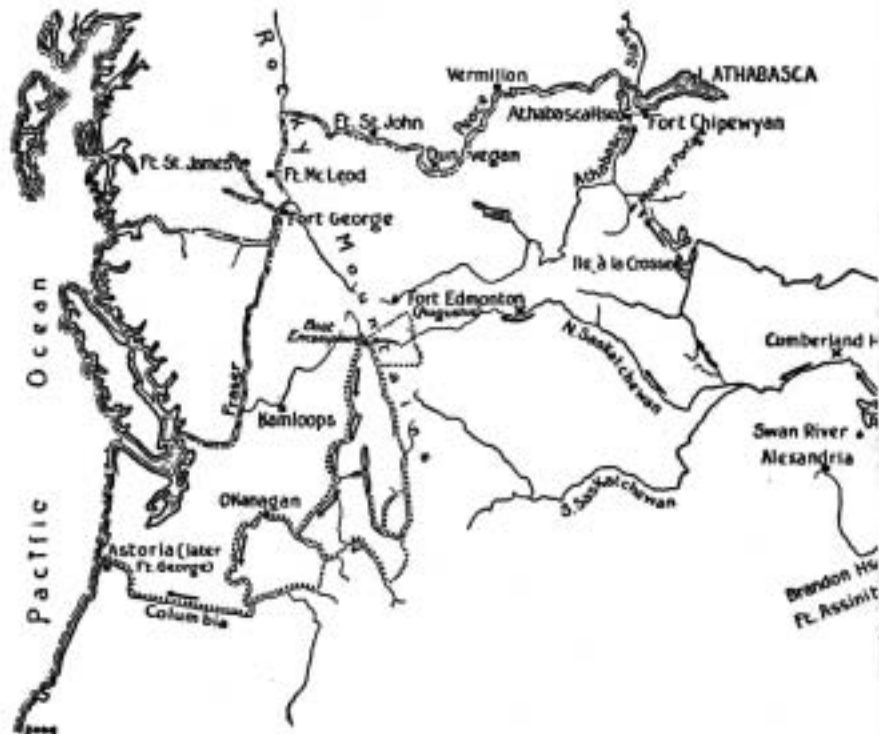
COUNTRY/YEAR BORN	RIVER/YEAR EXPLORED	WHERE DOES THE RIVER FLOW?	WHY WAS THIS EXPLORER IMPORTANT TO THE FUR TRADE?



## ALEXANDER MACKENZIE



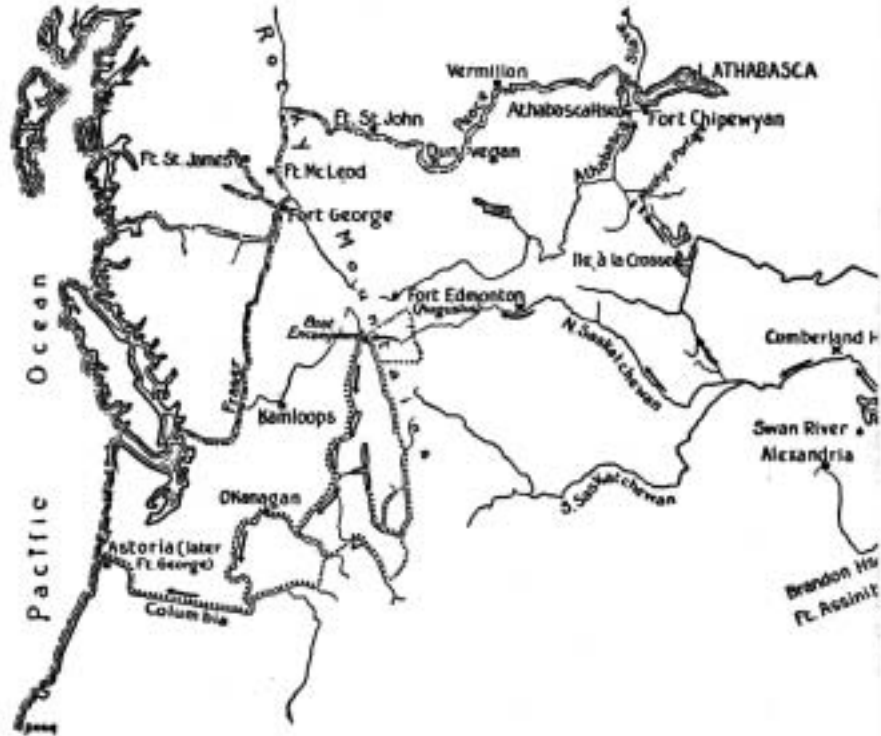
COUNTRY/YEAR BORN	RIVER/YEAR EXPLORED	WHERE DOES THE RIVER FLOW?	WHY WAS THIS EXPLORER IMPORTANT TO THE FUR TRADE?



**SIMON FRASER**



COUNTRY/YEAR BORN	RIVER/YEAR EXPLORED	WHERE DOES THE RIVER FLOW?	WHY WAS THIS EXPLORER IMPORTANT TO THE FUR TRADE?



## OPEN UP YOUR OWN FUR TRADE COMPANY

**OBJECTIVES:** Students will gain a greater appreciation for exploration and establishing a business given a set of specific historical constraints.

**SKILLS USED:** Estimation, hypothesis formation, critical thinking skills, Internet and library research skills, economic vocabulary, cooperative learning strategies, problem solving,

**PROCEDURE:** Students will form collaborative learning groups of three members each. The team will divide into three necessary roles (*royal monarch, explorer, Native American trader*). Each team member will be responsible for the following:

*Native American Trader* – You must try to lure the European explorer to your region. You must be the one who tells the Explorer why they should venture west. What types of furs are there to be traded? Why will this area become important to the fur trade. You must also negotiate the terms of trade. What will your culture receive in return for trading with the Europeans? Will it be goods, increased military support, etc. Look to the past to see how the Native Americans benefited from trading with the Europeans. What could be a negative aspect of trading with the Europeans? Historically, Europeans were known for breaking these terms of agreement and double-crossing the Native Americans. How would you keep yourself from being taken advantage of? You must put in writing the terms of a trade agreement. Include who would guide the Europeans into the Interior and what modes of transportation you would use.

*Explorer* – Your job is to rely on the suggestion given by the *Native American Trader*, and give details to the *Royal Monarch* as to why this area should be explored. You may want to research the areas that Europeans from the fur trade explored. Why did they choose this route? What made this route an ideal one for furs? Who lives in the area that you'll be traveling to? Remember that you are asking the king for money, so some details may be embellished or exaggerated. You must write a proposal letter to the royal monarch asking for a specific dollar amount, make sure that you include maps and, if possible, photos. Research how much a voyage to the Interior would cost. Where would you leave from? What type of supplies would you need? How many men would accompany you on this expedition? If you like, you can adopt the personality of a previous explorer like Mackenzie, DeSoto, Jolliet, etc.

*Royal Monarch* – Your job will be to decide if the explorer's proposed route is a good one. You must take into consideration the explorer's proposal and delegate the amount of money you feel is needed. You will be in charge of estimating your investments into the new company, and assessing your returns. What goods are you going to trade to the Native Americans? What do you think they need or what do you think they will buy? Research the possibilities. You must also research the area and decide whether this area is worthy of exploration. Remember that you're in this to make money for your country, and that to make money you have to take risks. You must trust your explorer's knowledge, because you've never been to North America and don't get out of the castle very much.

Now, collectively agree how the profits of this newly formed company will be divided. What responsibilities will you each be accountable for? This company also needs a name a logo. Where would you be centered? Would you model yourselves after the North West Company and base yourself in Montreal or the Hudson's Bay Company in a remote location with a headquarters back in London? Remember that you need to keep each other happy by not getting greedy!

## WEEK 1 Chat Room Session

**Where and When:** September 20, 2002. 10 AM-11AM CST  
Dave and Eric will be in Grand Portage, MN after  
paddling from Fort William, ONT

**Special Guests:** Students from Grand Portage Elementary School

**Topic:** Grand Portage History And Its Importance to the Fur Trade

### Suggested Questions for Students to Ask:

**What is the Grand Portage?**

Why is Grand Portage so important to US and Canadian fur trade history?

What is now at Grand Portage? Who lives there today?

What happened at Grand Portage, and why isn't it still done today?

What types of goods were brought to Grand Portage for trading?

How did the goods get to Grand Portage?

Who brought the goods?

How did people pay for the trade goods?

How did the Voyageurs get their canoes across the Grand Portage? How will Eric and Dave get their canoe across the Grand Portage?

When did people come to Grand Portage?

What's it like to live at Grand Portage? How many kids live in Grand Portage? What do you do fun?

What special things do you learn about in school?

Can you teach us some Ojibwe language?