

Lobstick

The lobstick was created by cutting off most of the lower branches of tall pine or spruce trees. The remaining tuft on the top would make the tree conspicuous from a distance. Occasionally, other trees surrounding the lobstick would be cut down to further improve its visibility. In some instances, the bark was removed and names were carved on the wood. The usages could be both practical and symbolic. Lobsticks would mark trails or portages, sources of food, or hunting grounds. They were also used as cultural markers, to signify meeting places, burial grounds, ceremonial sites, personal totems or to honour someone. Explorer Warburton Pike wrote in the 1800s: “In giving directions to a stranger it is hopeless to describe the points and bends of a monotonous river highway, but a lopstick does the duty of a signpost and at once settles the question of locality.”

First Nations communities used lobsticks since pre-history to mark trails and hunting grounds. Explorer Alexander Mackenzie found lobsticks on his travels and wrote that they “denoted the immediate abode of the natives.” In 1790, trader Peter Pangman created a lobstick at Rocky Mountain House to mark the furthest extent of discovery along the Saskatchewan River. In the 1820s fur trader Alexander Ross found a lobstick marking the mouth of the Berens River.

Caroline Podruchny, in her book *Making the Voyageur World: Travelers and Traders in the North American Fur Trade* (University of Nebraska Press, 2006), documents the physical creation and the symbolic meaning of the lobstick tree for voyageurs in Canada’s north. In that version, all the branches would be removed (except the very topmost), leaving a tall tree often called a ‘maypole.’ Sometimes the bark would be removed, leaving a smooth surface to cut names, dates, or symbols, or simply to shoot patterns into the tree with gunshots and powder. A particularly cheerful version was created for Frances Simpson, wife Hudson Bay Company governor George Simpson, with feathers and streamers for decoration. A lobstick, according to Podruchny, was created to honour a new leader, particularly if it was his first trip into the northland. To repay the voyageurs for the honour of making a maypole/lobstick tree, the leader was expected to offer presents, or at least a generous measure of rum. It seems clear that in the voyageur world, the trees were created for their symbolic meaning – and, of course, to have a party.



Indian tracking past a lobstick, Hayes River (circa 1910, A. V. Thomas Collection)



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