



Artwork by George Gingras

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The **voyageurs** are an important part of Canadian and Métis history. From the 1770s until 1821, voyageurs paddled **canoes** from Montréal to Fort William (now Thunder Bay, Ontario), and then deep into the interior of present-day Western Canada. Few man-made roads existed, making the rivers the best way of connecting communities. The voyageurs used the river systems to haul furs and goods for trading purposes. Most voyageurs were French Canadians, **Iroquois (Haudenosaunee)** and **Algonquins (Anishinabeg)** from what is now Québec. In 1821, the **Hudson's Bay Company** and the **North West Company** combined to make one company. The Métis then became the largest workforce in the **fur trade**. After 1821, the Métis carried on the voyageur way of life. They manned transport canoes and York Boats in the northern parts of the present-day Prairie Provinces. They also unloaded freight canoes and York Boats.

Métis boatmen worked for several months at a time. They often endured a great deal of hardship. In some places, the river had too many rapids. Often the river was too narrow for boats to travel upon. The Métis boatmen would then carry, or **portage**, their boats on their backs until they reached another lake or river. Those who were not carrying boats hauled two heavy packs of trade goods on their backs. These bundles often weighed as much as 90 kilograms. This heavy weight was held in place by a strap or a **tumpline** around their head. They often did this for a few kilometres through tangled underbrush, slippery rocks, and clouds of black flies. Today, the Métis honour their ancestors by holding "**Voyageur Games**" in events such as **Back to Batoche**. These events test the strength, accuracy, and endurance of the participants.

Other Resources:

Barkwell, Lawrence J., L. Dorion and D. R. Préfontaine, eds. *Metis Legacy: A Metis Historiography and Annotated Bibliography*. Saskatoon: Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2001.

Dorion, Leah Marie. *My First Métis Lobstick*. Saskatoon: Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2014.

Roy, Zoey. *The Voyageurs: Forefathers of the Métis Nation*, Saskatoon: Gabriel Dumont Institute Press, 2019.

The Virtual Museum of Métis History and Culture (www.metismuseum.ca).

