

**The David Thompson Explorers Club Flag #51 Expedition -
Phase II July 20 - Aug 4, 2013**



In Phase I in June and our search for Bedford House on Reindeer Lake Speedboat Doug Chisholm and I thought we had struck out.



But before we left, we swept low to shoot high res aerial photos of the site. Later studying them, neither of us could spot anomalies ashore. However, premier fur trade researcher Dale Russell could be right - the post could be underwater because of the dam built on the Reindeer River during WW-II.



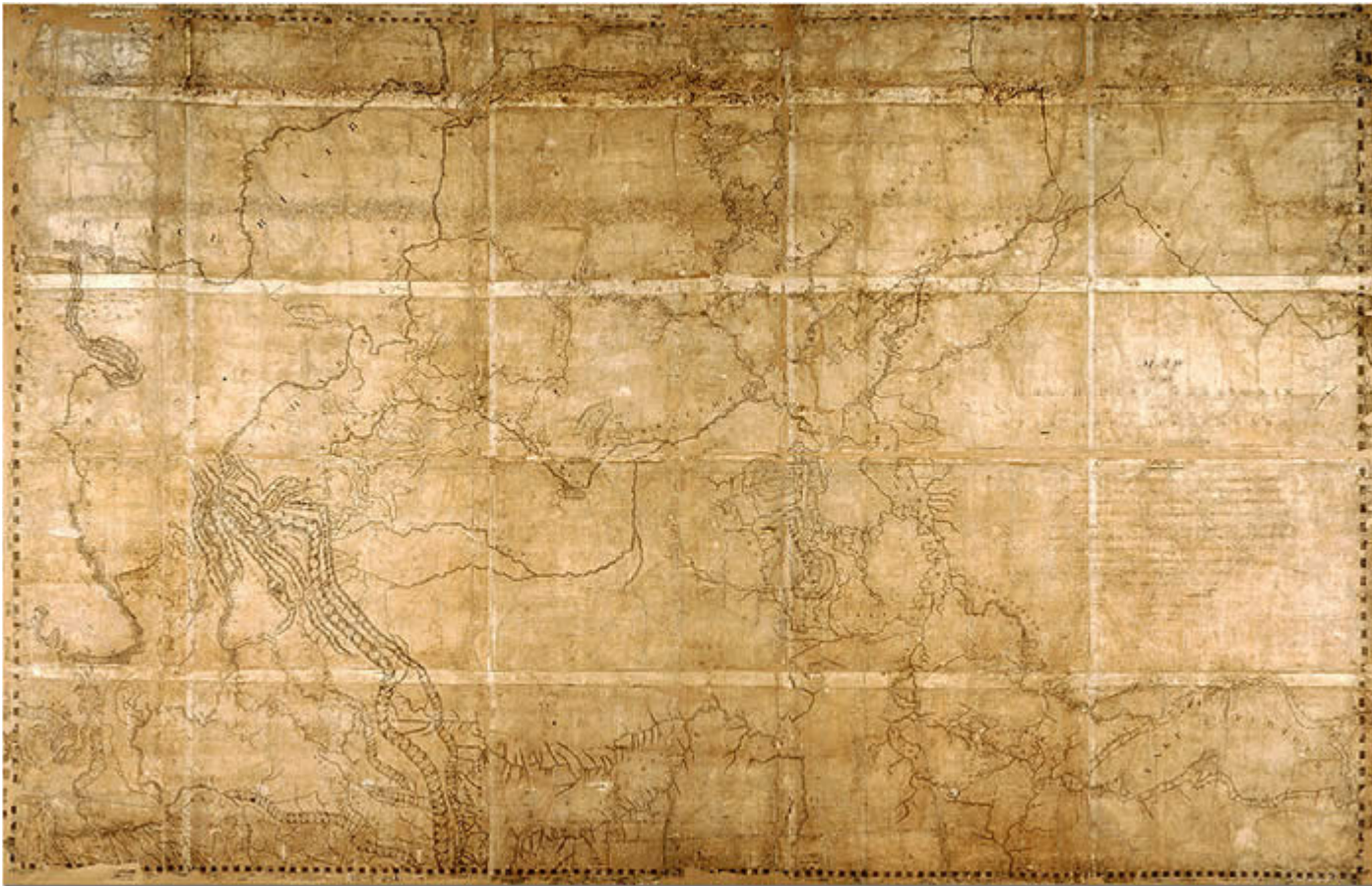
This rectangle just offshore bears further investigation. Coincidentally, it borders on the tiny beach where we docked our boat!



In any case, in Phase II I'm delighted to report we whacked a Mickey Mantle style home run right outta the park. We found Fairford House - and more.

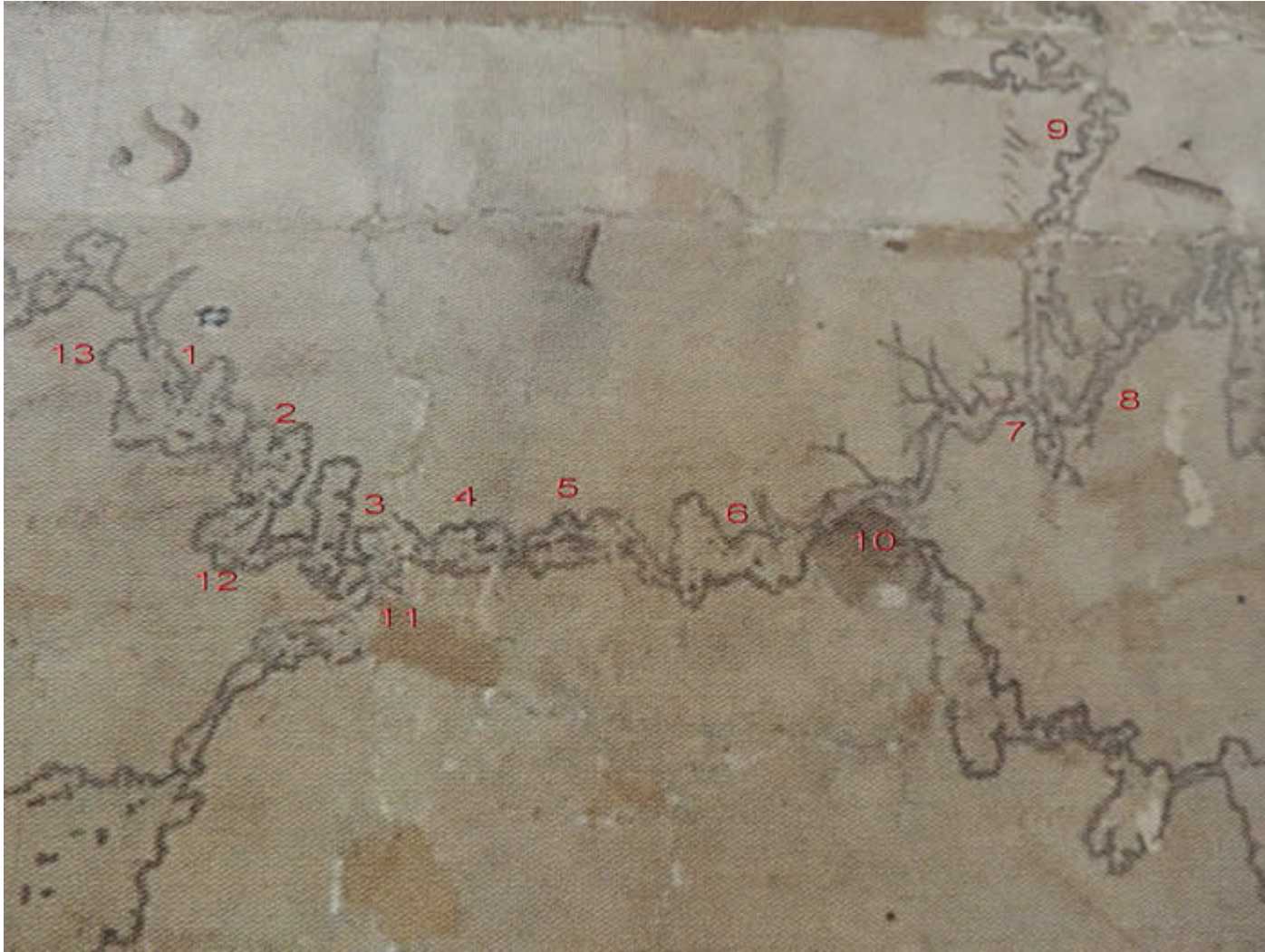


We were searching for the last two Hudson Bay Posts - simple structures, similar to these, or even more primitive - that explorer and mapmaker David Thompson stayed at before jumping ship to the HBC's bitter rival, the North West Company, in 1797.



Once he had done so he continued on to map an incredible 52,000 miles of paddling, all of the major waterways from Lake Superior (bottom right) and Hudson Bay (top right) to the Pacific (left) after descending the Columbia River, the first white man to do so. He literally put Canada and the Pacific Northwest on the map, his life's work culminating in

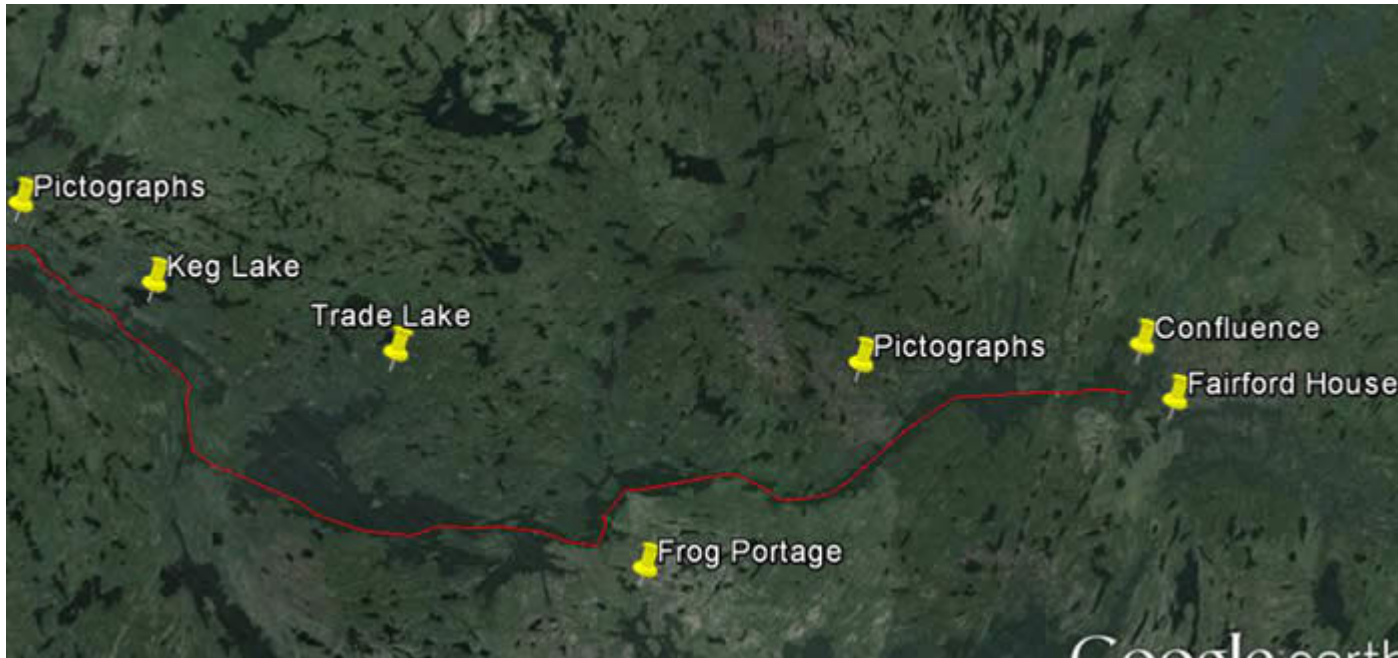
this, his Great Map of 1814. So accurate was that it was used by the Canadian government for a century. It made him the great terrestrial mapmaker in history...but in typical Canadian fashion he's relatively little known outside of the BC river named in his honour. And he didn't even paddle that.



Although our primary focus was the confluence (right - 7) of the Reindeer and Churchill Rivers where Fairford House stood, we chose to paddle the 90 miles along the "Main Highway of the Fur Trade and Exploration" to reach it, along this all important sector which Thompson had mapped. I wanted to study how accurate his map was from the field, and to get closer to Thompson and his experience. An important point to understand about the Churchill River is that it's not a typical river; rather, it's a series of beautiful lakes, each with individual character, joined by rapids or portages. Thus, one finds themselves paddling through a series of lakes. Some of these, like back-to-back Drinking, Keg and Trade have names that ring with the fur trade. 1. Otter Lake 2. Mountain Lake 3. Nistowiak Lake 4. Drinking Lake 5. Keg Lake 6. Trade Lake 7. Confluence Reindeer and Churchill Rivers 8. Iskwatam Lake 9. Reindeer River flowing south 10. Frog Portage 11.

Jim's Camp/early NWC post on Rapid River leading to Lac La Ronge 12. Stanley Mission, site of Holy Trinity Church 13. Missinipe launch site





Comparing Thompson's map with the Google Earth image, one cannot but be impressed. Every famous explorer from Sir John Franklin, Simon Fraser, Alexander Mackenzie, Peter Pond to Peter Fidler and thousands of colourful, singing Voyageurs and natives in their birchbark canoes have paddled this liquid highway. And it's virtually unchanged.



The David Thompson Expedition Brigade L-R: Drunken Joe, Capt. Hook, Tiny Tush, Ostrich Legs, The Dragon Lady, Capt. Magnus Twat, Agent Orange and Tree Stomper. We had 12 booked but in the last two weeks before launch five had to bail (for very legit reason), but we were able to replace one. All those who aren't already Explorers Club members - Capt. Hook, Tree Stomper and myself - are in the process of being sponsored as all, having been on an Explorers Club Flag Expedition, qualify. Some have been on several. This shot was taken by our outfitter in Missinipe, Ric Driedeger, who very generously dealt out Robin and Arlene Karpan's brilliant book *Northern Saskatchewan Canoe Country* with 230 colour plates.



As always at our first campsite, we toasted to the success of the expedition with champagne.



We started out with the usual beef tenderloins and wine the first night, but the second is always a favorite too - good ol' hot dogs and beans, just like when we were kids. Which, really, we all still are. Other nights we had the usual venison stew with bannock, and fish chowder. We eat well. Very well.



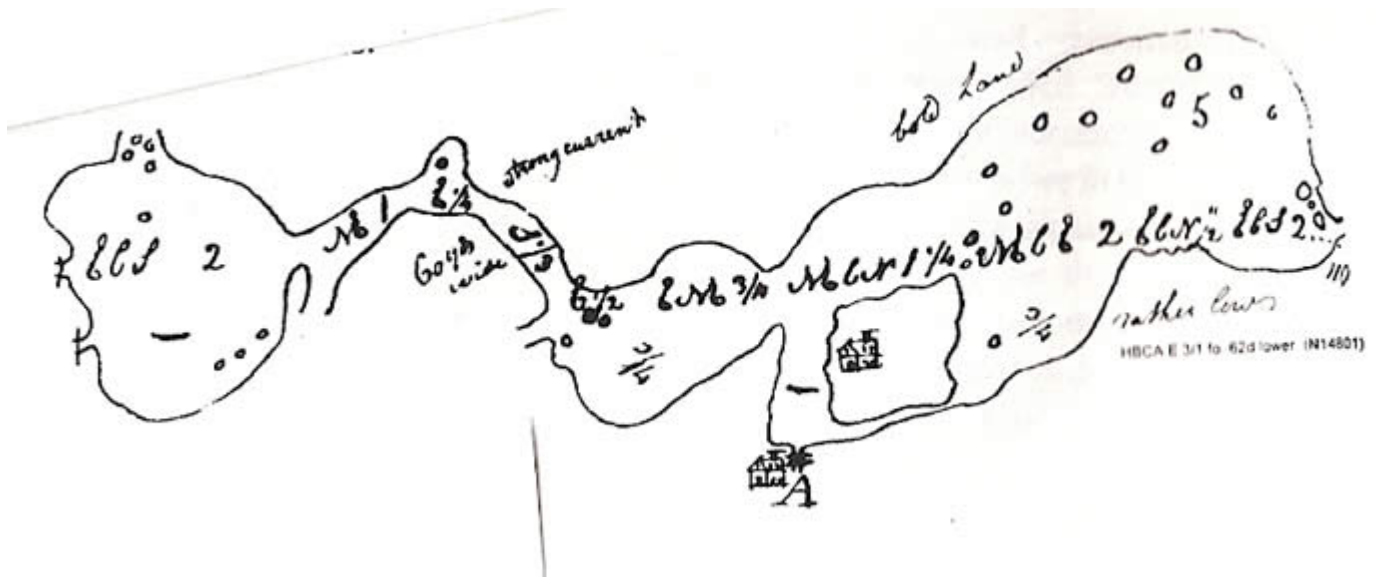
It's great to be back up north. I suffer from Nature Deficit Disorder if I don't get back with at least one brigade, or a solo, each summer. The peace, tranquility and beauty are magic - and perform magic on the soul. I'm immensely happy that The Dragon Lady loves this world as much as I do.



Amuchiwespimiwin Cliff - the "shooting up place" - is a historic site dating to pre-contact. Nearby Stanley Mission has for centuries, if not thousands of years, been a summer gathering place for the Cree and/or Dene. In the fall, upon dispersing, the strongest archer from each group would attempt to shoot an arrow over the 60m high cliff. If successful, it heralded that hunting would be good. An early missionary found numerous arrowheads atop. Thompson would have known its history.



Just a mile down is the oldest structure in Saskatchewan, Holy Trinity Church built between 1854-60. It's kept in excellent condition.



The next and important site visited was the NWC post at the bottom middle of Peter Fidler's sketch of June 20, 1792. Fidler - to whom I'm allied by family, which amazes me - was a major explorer himself and took over Thompson's duties for the HBC after the latter had jumped ship. They certainly knew each other, particularly as both were mentored in sextant use by Philip Turnor. The HBC post is on the island just above the NWC one. It's interesting to compare their very different styles of mapping.



Jim's Camp - at the site of the NWC post. Thompson visited in 1798 - while mapping the river - reaching the "*River aux Rapid where I found Roy by himself.*" The Rapid River flows down from Lac La Ronge and is home to the highest waterfall in Saskatchewan, Nistowiak Falls. While the brigade trekked the half mile up to view the falls, I stayed and had a coffee with Annie McKenzie, the Native wife of the late Big Jim. Both had managed the camp since about 1980. To my amazement, she had no idea that a trading post was situated here! Such is the Canadian level of interest in our own history.



Nistowiak Falls with Capt. Hook and The Dragon Lady.



Finally escaping boat traffic after several days we took our first day off at Island Portage, separating Drinking and Keg Lake which is beyond the line of #3 rapids. Here I was very disappointed that the river levels were at a high not seen since 1942, according to one Native woman. They were up three feet, and it was unseasonably cool, harkening back to the 1990s which saw a long spell of cool weather. Note the island just left of centre.



I was disappointed because these incredible potholes were underwater and I wanted Su and the brigade to see them. There's several but this is the largest and the one Fidler wrote about. This shot was taken when I was last through in 2010. Cousin Pete, the next day, June 21, 1792, after paddling 12 miles downstream from that Rapid River post, was also fascinated by them. *"Carry over an island (Rocky) in the middle of the river, good carrying, called the Kettle carrying place - on account of several very round holes of a cylindrical form, from 1 to 5 feet in diameter, perfectly smooth & round, some with a stone within loose - that has served to make the excavation by the falling waters and strong current moving the stone, and by its friction causing those kind of stone kettles above mentioned, these have been formed when these places have been the bottom of the river, now the rocks are above the surface 4 to 5 feet...."* Clearly Cousin Pete was experiencing a very low water year when he wrote that.



Something's obviously funny. Probably Drunken Joe cracking a joke; he has an incredible sense of humour. As always on a canoe trip, that fabulous "group high" rocketed everyone's spirits into the sky and they stayed there for the entire two weeks.



Taking the Inman Channel towards Keg Lake we stopped at a pictograph and I pondered what Thompson made of them, for surely he had seen others. To the left is a hunter with a bow and, above it, what appears to be a snake, though I've never known of even a garter snake at this latitude. To the right is a well drawn moose cow with its calf.



You'll note that one canoe is heading in the direction it's supposed to be going in, he laughs. You can guess who is paddling that one. Actually, it was a damned efficient brigade and often The Dragon Lady and I were lagging.



Winds were the most favourable in years and we got to pop up the sail.



Half way across beautiful Keg Lake we were taken aback to see a massive blowdown along the north shore, so bad it reminded me of the 1908 Tunguska asteroid explosion over Russia.



I couldn't imagine the sound and fury as his enormous plow wind, generated by a massive thunderstorm, smashed into the land and lake. And it would be bloody dangerous too. The poplar leaves were still quite fresh. It had to have taken place in the last two weeks, even week.



As I feared, it extended as far as the 600 meter Grand Rapids portage six miles down, and we had to drag our gear through this enormous field of pick-up sticks, feeling like ants. 400 meters of the portage was blown down into this nightmare. Normally a portage this long would take about 1:15 hours but it took us an exhausting three hours.



Damage was spread along a 20 mile path, the last 10 of which it appears to have skipped and dropped down here and there, and as far as famous Frog Portage where the "Main Highway" turns south. Frog is one of the three most famous portages on the entire Montreal to Athabaska fur trade and exploration route, the others being the 12-mile Methye (also in Saskatchewan) and the 8.5-mile Grand Portage on Lake Superior. On the right is the railway trolley for portaging boats the 340 meters into the Saskatchewan River watershed, which leads to the once key HBC post at Cumberland House and on to the Hudson Bay itself.



So high was the water that it was overflowing the banks into this watershed itself, a rare event. We had camped on an island a half mile distant the night before and the roar of the new rapids was something to behold.



PORTAGE M. AGUEVILLE
 « P.P.A.L. »

Le portage de Agueville, sur le lac Beauport, fut construit en 1878 par le gouvernement fédéral. Il fut le dernier et le plus grand portage de la route de la route de la Saguenay, construite par le gouvernement fédéral en 1878. Ce portage fut construit par le gouvernement fédéral en 1878. Ce portage fut construit par le gouvernement fédéral en 1878.

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Historic Sites and Monuments Fund of Canada
 Le Centre des sites et monuments historiques du Canada



A well shot up plaque on a cairn marks the portage. Obviously the Natives aren't fans, for some reason, for every calibre from .303 to .22 to shotgun pellets is represented. I'm surprised there's not an arrow sticking out of it.



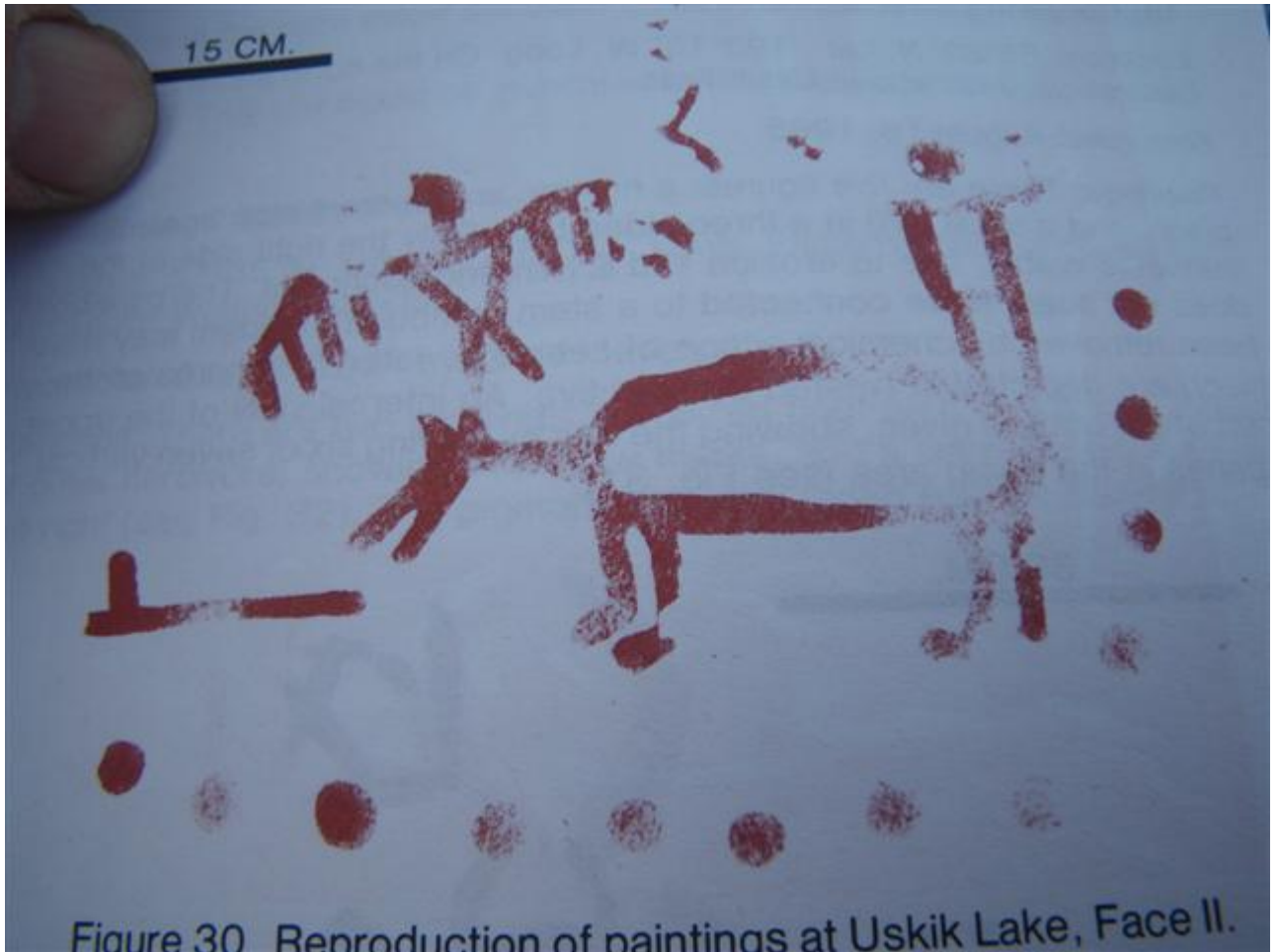
Here we left the "Main Highway" and continued northeast and downstream towards the confluence. So high was the water that #1 rapids sometimes turned into 2s, 2s into 3s, or obliterated them altogether, replacing them with turbulent, boiling water that threatened to sweep the canoe over. Capt. Hook was in his glory. Although 84, he's fearless and damned disappointed when we have canoe expeditions with few rapids. This wasn't one of those. We had lots of great runs and he was in his element. As usual, he flew out in his Cessna 172 from his home in Massachusetts, a three-day jaunt.



Along this stretch we stopped at this pictograph Cousin Lube Al Schoonover and James Tipper Anthony discovered when we were last through here in 2010 - and which doesn't appear in Tim Jones' landmark study [Aboriginal Rock Paintings of the Churchill River](#). It consists of several spots semi-surrounded by a line capping, giving the impression of perhaps a head. Tim confirmed to me when I had emailed him the jpg that it was a new find, and the only new one discovered since his study in the late '60s. I expected him to be excited - I certainly was by this original discovery - but he was non-plussed. Hell, I'm still excited by it.



The boys had discovered it while actually looking for this (in)famous one only 100 feet further down. Lichens have played havoc with it since Tim was here.



Tim's rendition clears the picture. He would tape cellophane over the pictographs and then stencil. For obvious reasons we call this, and the nearby island we camped at, Wolfy Style Island. You gotta admit, those injuns were a tough lot, having their way like this with a timber wolf.... Coincidentally, it was while camping on this island that we heard a lone wolf howling plaintively for a long period that night. It sounded like it might have been loved and left.



Fishing was good to excellent. Here Drunken Joe - some call him Echo Joe for his own howling one night - nails another one.



His river name is my fault, though Hook gave it to him. I had sat phoned Speedboat Doug to fly in a couple 26-oz jugs of vodka for the last night, as there'd be a dozen of us and we'd be hosting dinner on shore. Well, Speedboat brought in two 40-ozs. And Joe stayed up after our guests left echoing everyone's names off the horizon. A significant jock, he went for a swim, and coming out he slipped - and tried to dive back in..... Ostrich Legs, one of our two docs, sewed him up by flashlight. And, dammit, I slept through the whole thing, the only one to miss the drama. But we're getting ahead.

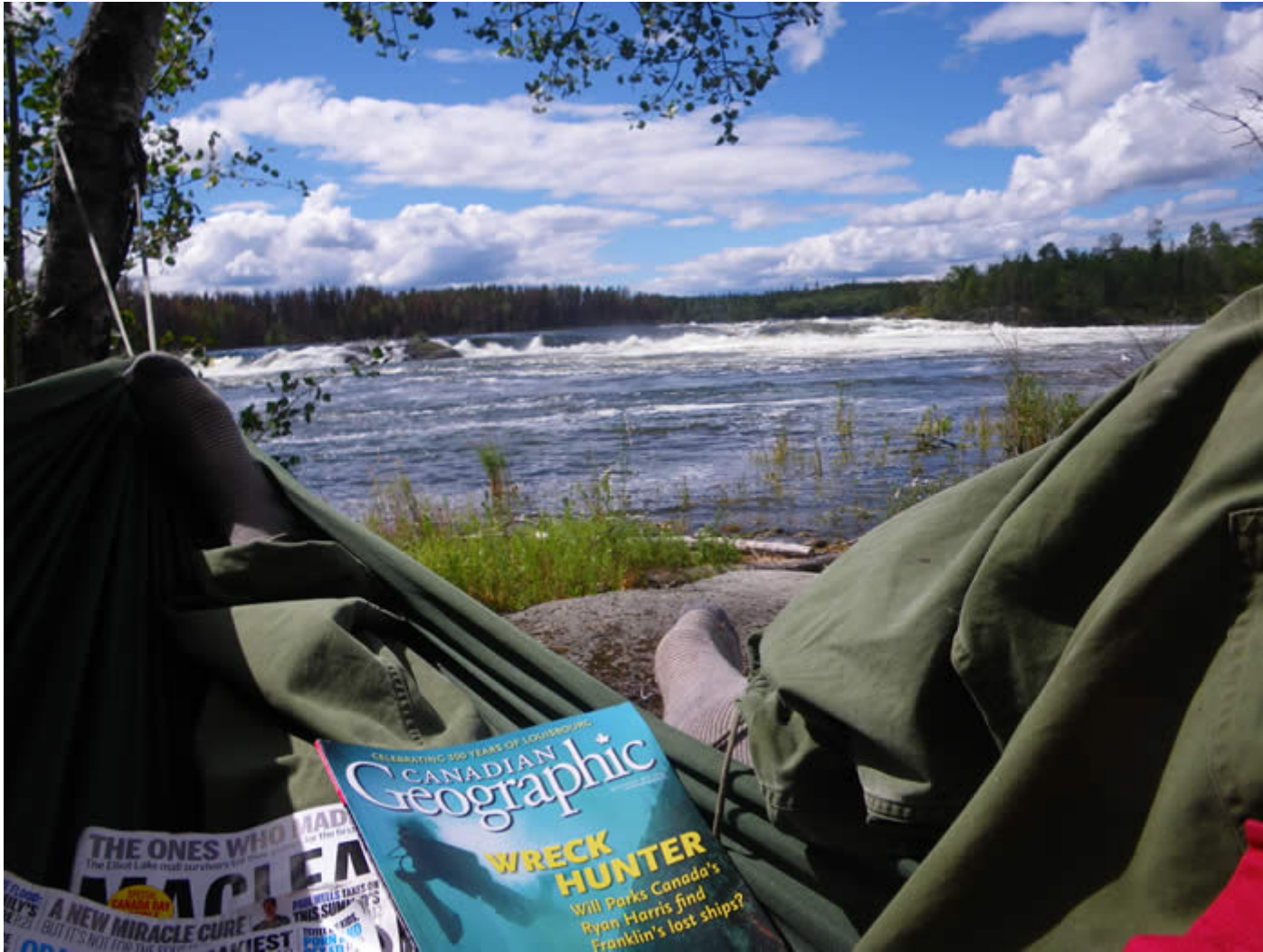


Tree Stomper was in charge of keeping our Explorers Club pennant flying at each site. He did a conscientious job.



Reaching gorgeous Kettle Falls - the most beautiful site in northern Saskatchewan that I know - and being ahead of schedule, we happily settled in for four nights and three days. We weren't due to meet Speedboat Doug, and Archaeology Professor David Meyer whom I had engaged to join our expedition, until that time. They would be flying in in Doug's floatplane.





I'm honestly never more content, relaxed and at peace anywhere in the world than I am each year in my Thai hammock up north with something good to read. We needed a good break anyway after that much paddling. I certainly did coming off a three-week road trip to Vancouver which took me away from the gym. I admit to being a bit soft.



The walleye/pickerel fishing was incredible, so good we kept them alive and fresh in this natural holding formation.



We gorged twice a day on fish so fresh, sauteed in butter, it was still kicking going down the tubes. What a luxury.



Well, it was good fishing for everyone but Capt. Hook, here frustrated and hooked again, and who was given his river name for his prowess hooking Saskatchewan. (Actually, he reeled in a ton of fish and has caught onto freshwater fishing so well, he rarely gets hooked anymore. And he's a fishing fanatic. He'll stand casting for three hours at a time.)



When Speedboat Doug buzzed our camp three days later we were ready with a high kicking chorus line for him. Time to meet the rest of our expedition, we loaded up our wagons and got them rolling towards the confluence five miles down.



The confluence from the air, looking west. The Churchill flows in from the left and continues towards the bottom of the picture. The Reindeer flows in from the right, around that big island. Then both massive rivers join and surge through 1300 meter-long Capt. Hook Chute.

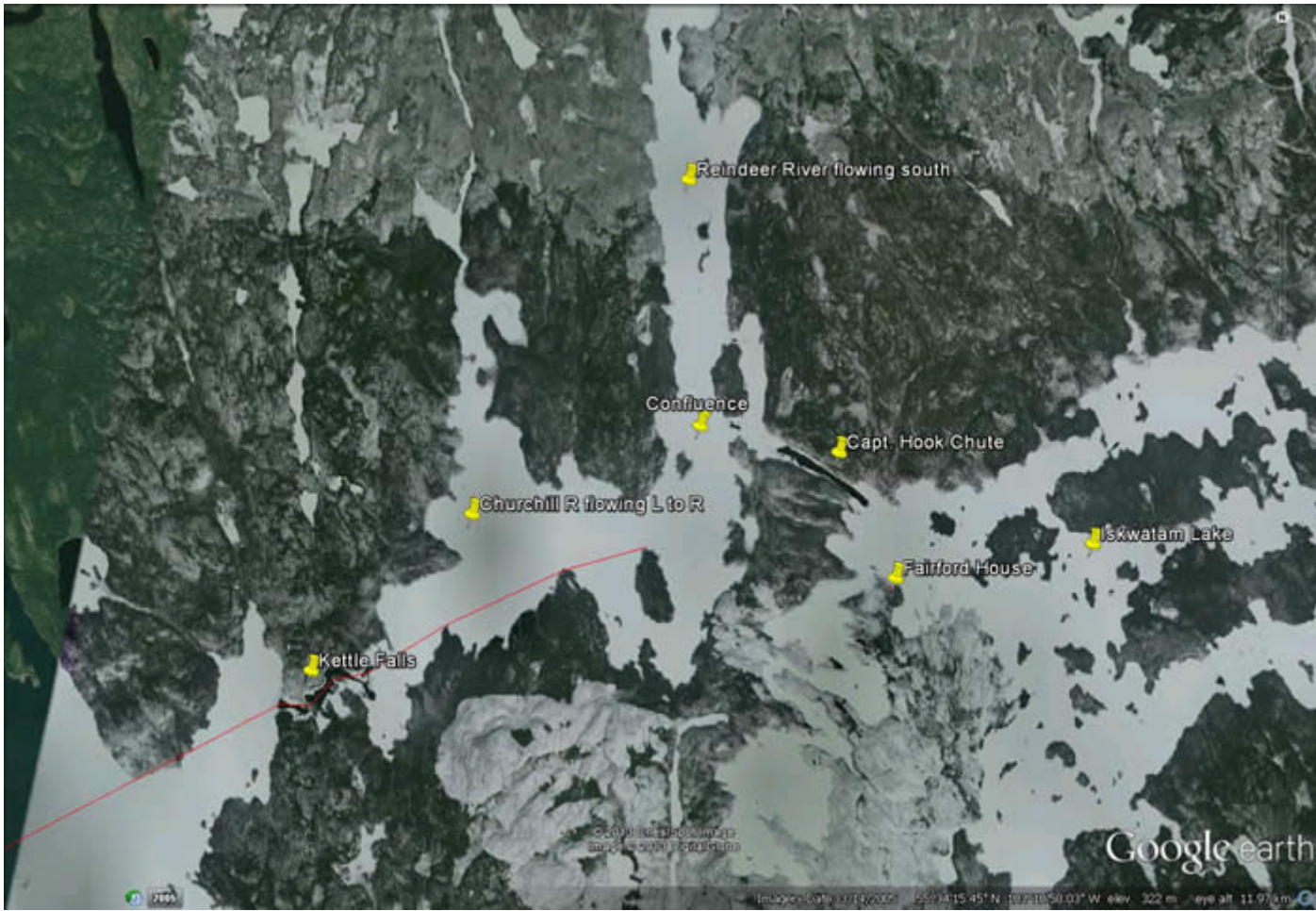




Image © 2008 DigitalGlobe

Google

Pointer 55°34'09.47" N 103°09'31.51" W Streaming ||||| 100%

Eye alt 4655 ft



Hook Rapids on Hook Chute with its namesake, Capt. Hook who, in 2008 with bow Sandi Woods, got caught sideways in it. And guess what? They had an early morning bath. I had then pulled alongside Hook and chortled to him on the bouncy ride all the way to the bottom, before we towed both to a nearby island for a fire and dry out. Hook was non-plussed by the dunking, but poor Sandi was shaken. We'd just started a two-week trip from the confluence on down two miles before. But she stuck it out and had the trip of a lifetime.



Hook's used to getting wet. Here he is on his knees trying to repair the reed boat *Ra* as it sinks off Barbados in 1969.



Then (and on *Ra-II* and *Tigris*) he was First Mate, celestial Navigator and Radioman for Thor Heyerdahl. Really, best friends.



He can't count the expeditions he's been on, but this is our eighth together, including three official Explorers Club Flag Expeditions. He's on the Board of Directors. Six were here in Saskatchewan and two in Thailand.



Here Madame Su and I feed into the chute, in the less turbulent rapids alongside Hook Rapids. Madame Su's a helluva skilled bow, with a perfect paddling style, and I have complete confidence in her cool, competent head and quick responses. I couldn't ask for a better partner.



The Churchill comes in from the top left, the Reindeer top right - both surge down the chute into beautiful Iswatakam Lake, our final destination.



And the end of the large peninsula sticking out of the left middle.



Speedboat Doug Chisholm was at the Fairford House landing site to greet us.



He got his river name because of the toy 4-HP motor he carries in his Cessna. (Besides recently retired University of Saskatchewan Archaeology Professor David Meyer, Speedboat flew in Les Ostryk, a retired conservation officer with a long term interest in these matters, and Jeff Russell, Dale's brother. It had been Jeff, while Speedboat Doug and I were searching for the Bedford House site on Reindeer Lake in June, who had generously done a day trip to Winnipeg's HBC Archives to search out information which we needed in the field, and which Dale passed on to us by sat phone.)



His motor pushes a boat so slow that our lads, Tree Stomper and Agent Orange, beat them the next day in a half mile race to the last of three archaeological sites we investigated - and despite Speedboat cheating! Prehistoric archaeologist Professor David, along with fur trade historian Dale Russell, are the two top scholars in fur trade and exploration history in the province. Both both have contributed to the *Atlas of Saskatchewan* and *the Encyclopedia of Saskatchewan* on these matters in their fields. David had searched unsuccessfully for the site in 1973 but had found it the following year. He said he had been standing beside what he thought was a large erratic covered in moss before he realized it was a chimney, the largest he had seen. Having found it on that occasion, the search thankfully didn't take two years again this time around. We successfully located the second last site that David Thompson was at before jumping ship.



The chainsaw and handsaws came out and the site was cleared. From Prof. David's 1974 field notes: "*It was built in the fall of 1795 by Malcolm Ross but appears to have been used for only the winter of 1795-96 (Dale Russell, July, 1974, Personal Communication). Two very large chimney heaps were found as well as several cellar depressions.*" This is where Thompson recovered after nearly drowning, then almost starving to death that summer of 1796 after dumping in his canoe in what is now Thompson Rapids on the Fond du Lac during his first attempt to reach the Athabaska country. He and Kasdaw and Paddy, his two young Natives assistants, had been left without provisions (though he recovered his sextant, and had a flint and steel). It was only by meeting a Native family while making their way back that they were able to procure powder, balls and food. After an amazingly short period to recover at this post, he had then set out a second time with his boss Malcolm Ross for a renewed attempt on the same route. His drive to return to the route that almost killed him is remarkable; this lad could get back on the horse! But the late season had turned them back to Reindeer Lake and resulted in the construction of Bedford House, his last post, to wait out the winter. But, of course, they didn't continue north in the spring because Thompson then jumped ship. But this post, his second last -

Fairford - would have been a lifesaver for him. It meant food and rest and one can only image the scene upon his arrival.



There were two collapsed fireplace mounds. Recognizing them in the thick jungle undergrowth was something else, for they appeared to be little more than low mounds. It's the flat stones chosen (so that they stack well) that really gives them away.

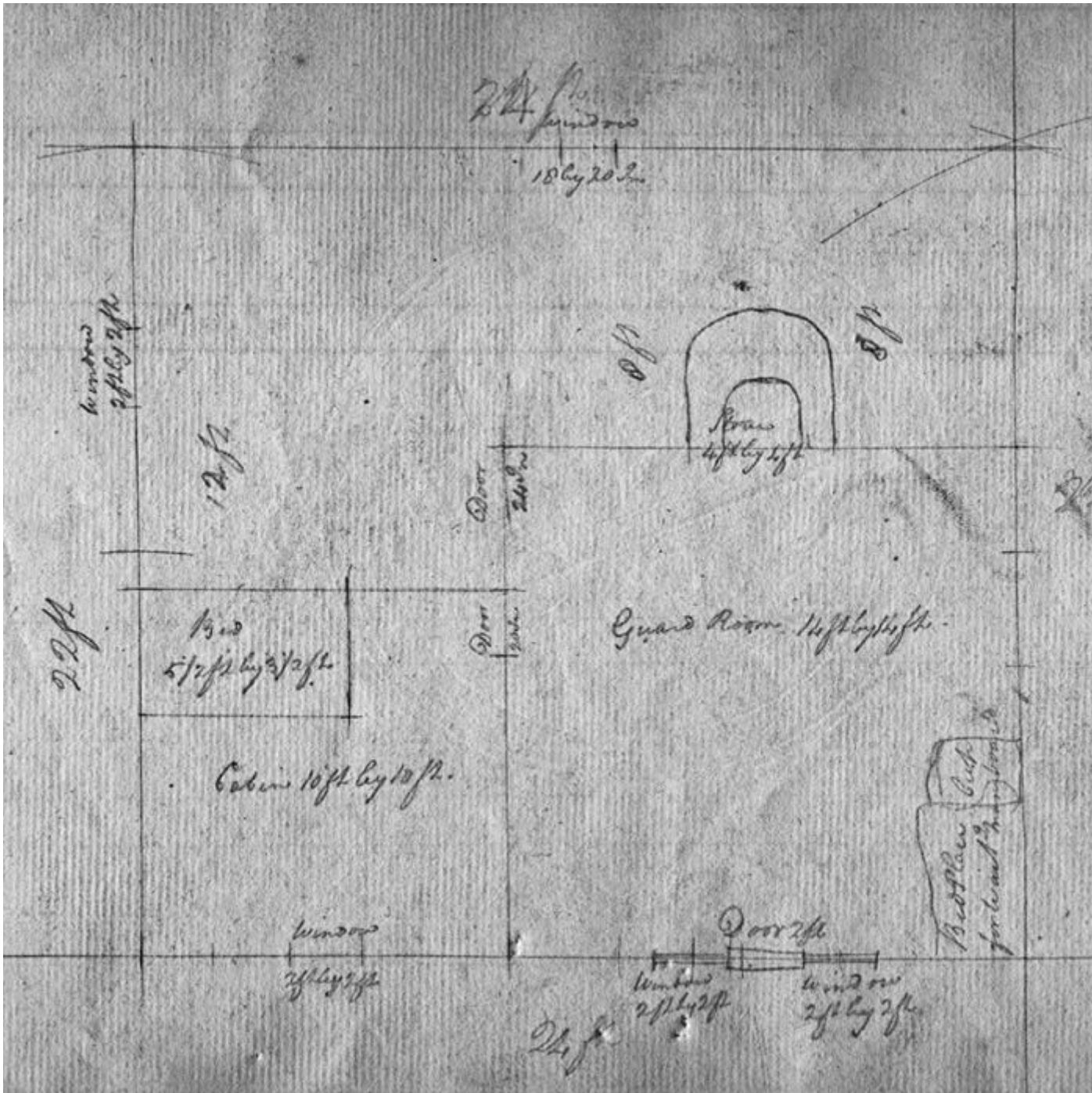
The largest one had collapsed - or been knocked down - since David's last visit in 1974, as we found clear evidence of illegal excavation because of this trench. What they expected to find in a fireplace, I don't know. David estimated it was done about a decade ago. Behind David a few feet is a depression from a cellar. Cellars are a clear sign of a trading post for this was where trading goods were secured: under the floor. David - as he did on all three sites we worked on - prepared and/or updated field reports.



Remains of the fireplace and the illegal excavation. Whatever they found - if anything - is now lost to archaeology.



Professor David and I have a long history - we were in the same grade and high school graduating class in Carrot River, population 1000, in 1964. Only he wasted his youth stacking up straight As while I was the hottest pool player of our generation. I dug into our old yearbook (you gotta love a high school that named their yearbook *The Climax*...someone finally caught on and unfortunately changed it....) for our grad pictures but the b/w photos are so grainy I couldn't recognize him, not even from his giant zits, the size of ripe tomatoes. If one would have exploded they would have had to have hosed down the whole class. Hell, and the walls and ceiling too. And the school would have had to have been evacuated. And burned down (yes - especially burned down.). I could only recognize my photo because I was a beanpole with ears sticking out of it; I was so skinny I didn't even cast a shadow. A fascinating activity he did back then - that I didn't know about - was canvassing many of the local fields and putting together a giant collection of projectile points and hammer stones. In the thousands, he donated it to the University of Saskatchewan. He told Madame Su that the first time he found an arrowhead he was hooked. He should have been in my *Adventurous Dreams, Adventurous Lives* book as a great explorer, which he is. This was the first time we'd seen each other in 39 years and it was a great reunion of two (truly) old classmates.



This remarkable blueprint of what is believed to be Fairford House was discovered by Dale Russell: "The sketch is in one of David Thompson's Notebooks in the Archives of Ontario. It is untitled so it is not known what post it is. However, I suspect he must have drawn it at Fairford in one of his two stopovers in the summer of 1796, the only times he was there. Either in June, on his trip to the Athabasca, or July /Aug while waiting for Ross to come from York Factory so they could go north." I compared the handwriting with photos I have of it (see Phase I) in Thompson's journals and it matches.



We shot the requisite shot of the expedition with The Explorers Club Flag (#51 which has been from the South Pole to Baffin Island to Panama and beyond) on the shore at Fairford House. L-R: Freckles, Explorers Club Student Member Nathanael King-Cormier, Les Oystryk, Joe Strasser, Expedition Co-Leader Doug Chisholm, Professor David Meyer, Explorers Club Fellow Capt. Norman Baker, Explorers Club Fellow and Expedition Co-Leader Jason Schoonover, Susan Hattori, Frank King, Dr. Lorrie Hansen, Dr. Martin Stockwell, Jeff Russell.



While the mamby-pambys borrowed a cabin to sleep in, we camped on site. But I suppose Speedboat needed a secure place to park his air force.



One could see why this was chosen for the Fairford House site - the shore offered an ideal place to draw their huge - delicate - birchbark canoes up onto. And, note, that the lake is three feet up so the shelf would have extended further. It was while setting up our camp that a highly inquisitive local couple with a summer home motored over, wondering what all the action was about, and the small plane zooming around. We tried to keep our mission quiet, to protect the site, but it leaked out. This proved to be

propitious. They surprised us by informing us that they knew of another old chimney site a couple miles away! (That crack half way up was caused by Drunken Joe's head.)



It was a gorgeous day - the best we'd had - as we paddled to the Mystery Site. It was on a peninsula. While standing in the middle, one can see water on both sides. It consisted of three - three! - collapsed chimneys. Each was about 50 yards apart.



#1 consisted mostly of several stacked rocks still in place, although fallen over.



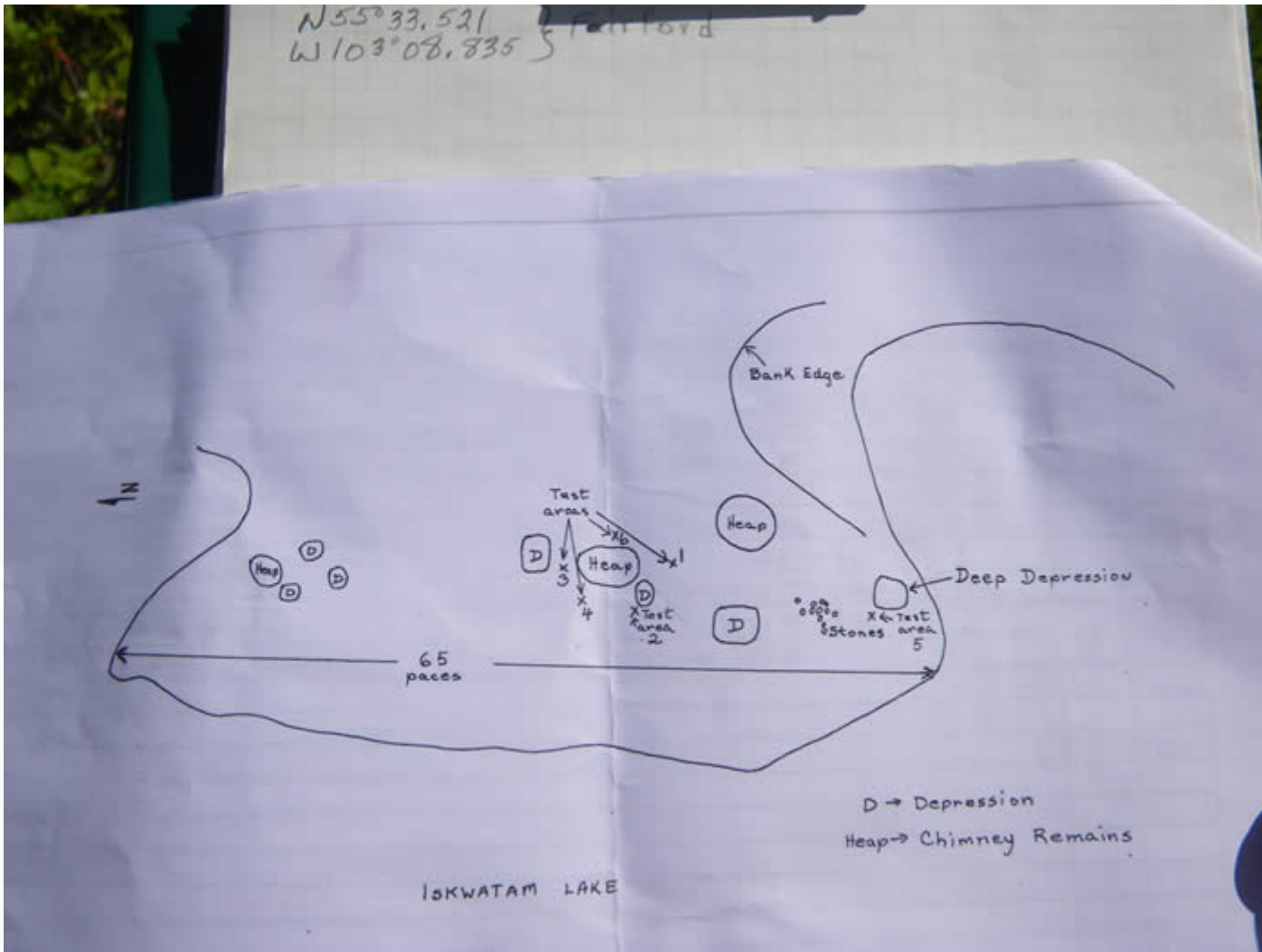
#2'.



#3. David estimated the sites date from the early 1800s but they didn't appear to be trading posts because there are no cellar depressions. He explained that natives adopted the European manner of building log cabins by then, although their chimneys weren't as elaborate, they making use of more mud than stone in the upper levels. But without an archaeological permit, we couldn't dig to find out - and we didn't have time or prep anyway. Excavation was beyond the scope of this expedition. The best guess is that the three were trappers' cabins, perhaps an extended family group and, certainly, Natives traveled and hunted in the winter in small groups.



The third and final site we investigated was Raymond's House on this small peninsula that looks like a turkey vulture's head. Prof. David's 1974 notes again: *"In 1974 a second trading post was discovered, this on (sic) on the southwestern corner of Iskwatam Lake. This house was built by Raymond around 1804 for the H.B.C. (Dale Russell, July, 1974, Personal communication). Named "Deer River House", this establishment was more extensive than Fairford House as three chimney heaps were found, all associated with cellar depressions, plus one hole deep enough to have been used for potato storage."*



David's original 1974 field map. We trekked the whole thing, with David updating his notes, and we were pleased to find it unmolested. It's entirely possible that the NWC post was situated here as well, to account for all the buildings. The rival posts often built right next to each other. To contact Professor David Meyer or Dale Russell for research information, please email me and I'll gladly pass things along.



I'm standing up to my waist in the potato storage pit, on the very south and sunny side of the peninsula and the only place where there was dirt deep enough to dig into, the rest having a bedrock of Canadian Shield. The pit would have been two feet deeper originally but is filled in somewhat due to accumulated leaf vegetation.



David said a highlight of the expedition for him was tracing the path of the ancient portage from Raymond House south which Les and Jeff (below two pics) initially sussed out.



Raymond House on the peninsula at bottom. The portage trail leads to the narrow lakes right top.



It's in surprisingly good condition for being at least 200 years old (and it's probably a few millennium old). It's clear that it's had use, even a few decades ago. Considerable post-expedition debate and research followed.



We know it was used by PG Downes, the young Boston myopic school teacher who came up here and to the Barrens between 1936-1947, some trips which culminated in his canoeing cult classic, *Sleeping Island*. He was the last white explorer to enjoy it in its original state: after WW-II floatplanes landed and the north was never the same. He described this portage in less than flattering terms. This is from *To Reindeer's Far Waters: P.G. Downes' Journals of Travels in Northern Saskatchewan, 1936*, from the *Journal of Polar Studies* 2, 1984, edited by R.H. Cockburn. "The first portage, ¼ mile, is,

I must say – though I don't like to use profanity in writing or in the bush – simply indescribable, a son of a bitch. You climb up a rock slide over a height of land. We lost the canoe here, and it went crashing down in the bush and rock, fortunately doing no damage, though how come I do not know." David couldn't say with confidence he had found this particular treacherous stretch though. It would also have been used as a game trail and by trappers, back when the price of furs made that endeavor worthwhile.



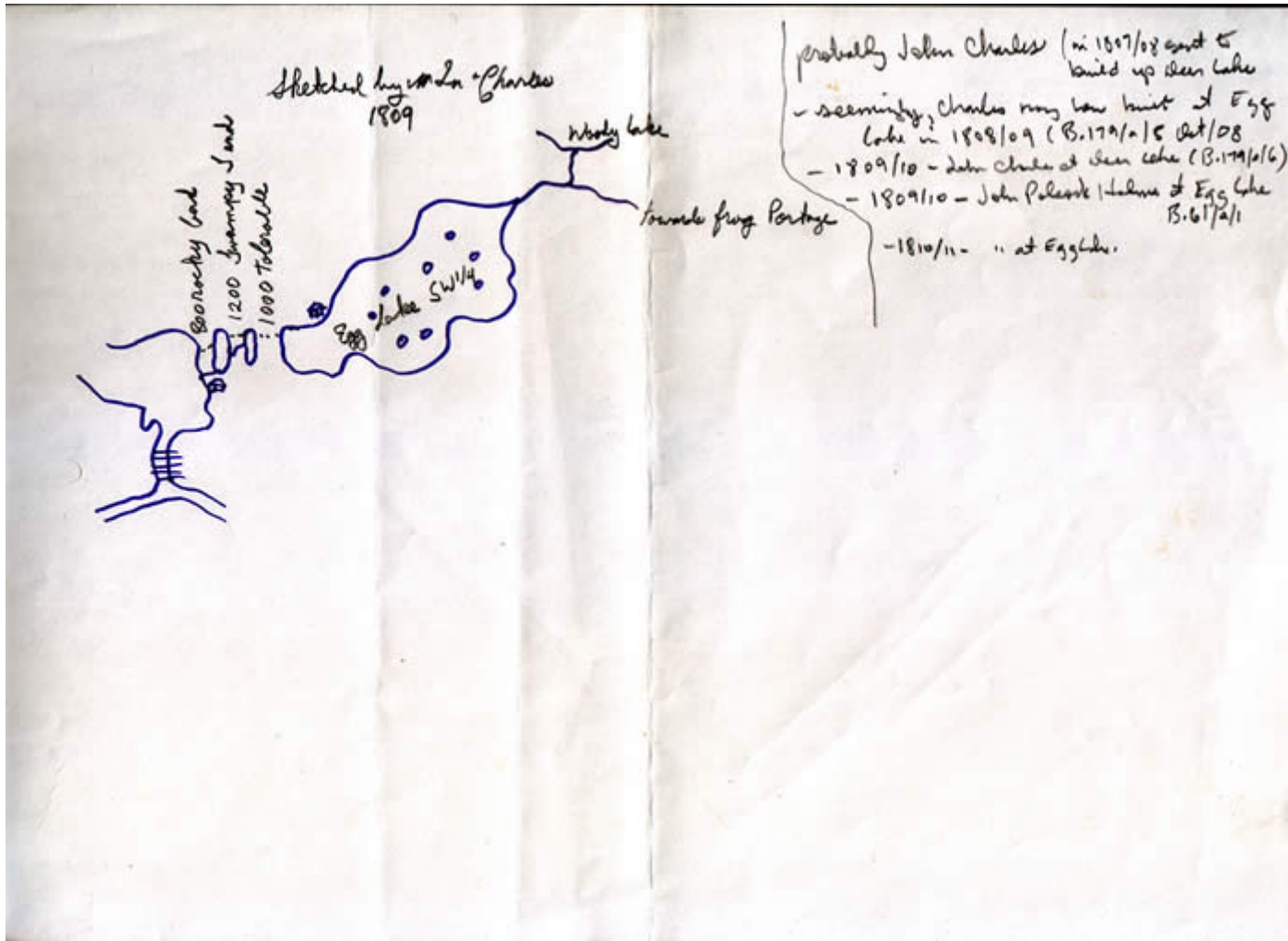
The position of Raymond House is on an auxiliary route, secondary to Frog Portage (20 miles upsteam from the confluence), onto the Saskatchewan River watershed. Both led to Pelican Narrows, a long time native settlement (and where a famous Blackfoot massacre of the resident Cree took place in the early nineteenth century), and then down the Sturgeon-Weir River to Cumberland House and onward to Hudson Bay itself or continuing on the "main highway" to the Pas, then down Lake Winnipeg and on to Montreal. It shaves off five miles.

Les Oystryk: *"I had the opportunity to call a Pelican Narrows Cree elder by the name of Gilbert Linklater. Gilbert is a good friend and turned 73 yesterday. His family has had many decades of involvement with various activities up on the Churchill River (Pita Lake) and Reindeer Lake. Gilbert's experience and recollections say that this portage from Manawan to Iskwatam Lake was essentially a bit of a short-cut that the canoe freighting brigades used to get back home a little quicker. It was shorter and much easier to do with empty loads. The canoe brigades sort of took over when the much more arduous York Boat trips started to end as the HBC could not continue to find sufficient numbers of men who wanted to work on those trips and it was getting to expensive for them to provision those large crews by the 1920's. Working on those York Boat cruises from Cumberland House to Brochet was no easy job and definitely not what working on Caribbean cruises is today!! But that is a whole different story.*

The HBC and the RF began to experiment with more local canoe brigade groups who could move goods from either Cumberland House, Pelican Narrows or Beaver Lake after the railroad got to Flin Flon in 1928. Gilbert's father Peter, was one of the men that used to do some of this canoe freighting for both the RF the HBC and later, free traders such as the Shieff brothers and the Russick brothers on Reindeer Lake. Gilbert said that the canoes were loaded going north to Southend and Brochet so they used the Frog Portage and Kettle Falls route to Reindeer Lake, but when going home empty it made sense to go the shorter route through that portage as you were not going up-stream anywhere of any significance. Although he was not involved with this personally he knew and heard about the short-cut a lot.

The larger aluminum boats of this era simply cannot go that way so it has fallen into disuse.

Besides the P.G. Downes / Solomon Merasty description of this portage in 1936 I have heard of only one other recreational use and that was in 1975. I am quite sure that there were others as well. A man by the name of Allison Connell and his canoeing partner, the late C. Stuart MacKinnon of the University of Alberta - History Department used this difficult portage in the summer of 1975 when they were part of some local protests regarding the proposed Wintego Dam."



Where does Dale find these things? He came up with this incredible period sketch of the confluence, Hook Chute, Iskwatam Lake - and the portage! I wonder if it was Charles and his extended family who built the three buildings at the Mystery Site...? Charles is a common Native surname in the region. There's actually very few full blood natives in Western Canada, so mixed did they become during the fur trade. We were business and trading partners with Natives in Canada and, while liquor and our influence ravaged their culture, we weren't out to commit genocide on them, which was the US policy. Our Saskatchewan Natives often have names like Charles, Fidler, McKenzie, McKay, Letendre and a host of other Scottish, French and Orkney names. The Twats/Twatts - from whence my river name of Magnus Twat derives - for some reason changed theirs. I think it's now Starblanket.



As I said, we hit a Mickey Mantle home run (yes, yes, I know that dates me, but we are delving into the deep past). It was a highly successful expedition and we were jubilant. Both phases deepened immeasurably my knowledge and understanding of Western Canadian exploration, the fur trade, and its present archaeological state - and David Thompson. He was fastidious, a major perfectionist, hugely disciplined, even an anal retentive. He was also a Bible thumper and wasn't known as always the most welcome company around a campfire (Voyageurs were a rowdy lot, *very* happy to be away from the tyrannically repressive Catholic Church, and Thompson was a teetotaler and vehemently against trading booze to the natives). He could be a pain in the ass, unlike that other giant of Western exploration, Alexander Mackenzie, a brilliant leader and explorer and the first white man in North America to reach the Pacific Ocean, and who enjoyed a good piss up with fellow fur traders. I hugely admire Thompson but I'd much sooner hang with Mackenzie. Mackenzie would have a sense of humour; Thompson, not much if any. Thompson, though, at other times was noted as a significant raconteur. At an 1820 dinner party he was described as having "... *a very powerful mind, and a singular faculty of picture-making. He can create a wilderness and people it with warring savages, or climb the Rocky Mountains with you in a snow-storm, so clearly and palpably, that only shut your eyes and you hear the crack of the rifle,, or feel the snow-*

flakes melt on your cheeks as he talks.” He was described as short and compact, with long black hair cut off square, and with an odd, pug nose. No painting of him exists (fergit that one on Wikopedia). In 1799 he married Charlotte Small, of mixed blood, and they had 13 children, which accompanied them on their explorations, if you can imagine. It was a solid union that lasted 58 years and he lived to a grand old age, especially for the times, 1770-1857. Unfortunately in their latter years, due to bad investments in Lower Canada (Quebec today), his sizeable stake disappeared and he was reduced to pawning his sextant. Life ain't fair.



A small point of interest. Canada's national symbol - the beaver - is featured on NWC coinage as well as our modern nickel. You gotta love a country that puts a beaver on its coins - and it rightfully ties us to our fur trade roots.



The history of Canada is much like a chrysalis that transformed into another form, so different outwardly are our two major periods. The first was during the heady days of the fur trade which much more than the US defined and shaped Canada. The second, which emerged in the late nineteenth century, particularly after the Louis Riel Rebellion of 1885, is our modern world. The roots of the latter are very much sunk into the former, though it's not always apparent. Where the twain meet is in Saskatchewan's north where the world that David Thompson knew and loved is virtually unchanged. If he woke to this same beautiful, calm morning with the mist rising he wouldn't feel out of time - for it's just that, a timeless land, a great, silent, lonely, lovely land.



Each summer I live and breath this era and I'm never happier than when I'm in a canoe. There's times when The Dragon Lady and I have been at, say, the pyramids of Giza, and she'll shake her head, "Here we are at one of the wonders of the world and what are you talking about? Next summer's canoeing..." But she loves it as much as I do. A family that canoes together stays together. But for now it was time to knock down the tent a last time for the season....



And sat phone in Osprey Airways' air force, a turbo Otter and two pristine Beavers. Gary Thompson really knows how to refurbish an airplane and he runs a first class service, as bloody expensive as it is.



I miss the sound of that lone wolf howling as it did that one night. But it's time for this expedition to fade into the mist of time, much like the early explorers and voyageurs of this most romantic of eras in Canada already have....