



## **An Introduction to the Fur Trade in the Manigotagan Area**

### **Manigotagan and the Fur Trade - Historic Overview**

#### **Hudson's Bay Company and North West Company – A tale of two companies Fur Trapping – Then and Now**

### **Manigotagan and the Fur Trade - Historic Overview**

Europeans arrived in the area that is now known as Manitoba in the 17<sup>th</sup> century with the intention of developing a booming fur trade. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, a group of French Canadians known as the *voyageurs* were hired by the fur trading companies to travel thousands of miles to trade for furs (1).

The voyageurs made little money and usually signed contracts for 1-3 years of work. Many signed on again as soon as their contracts expired. These men and women had a passion for adventure and the extreme rugged life; they traveled for months at a time with heavy loads on their canoes. Their journeys took them across lakes and land. Probably the greatest challenge they faced was carrying the goods across land. The overland trails they used are known as portages. Some portages were only a few yards but others were as long as 12 miles over rocky, hilly terrain. Most of the time the voyageurs had to hack their way across the portages but sometimes they came across paths cleared by the Ojibwa. (1)

Trading with people from the Manigotagan area started soon after and the first trading posts were established. The most sought-after fur was beaver, which was used in Europe to create prestigious felt hats. Fashionable people in Europe were wearing beaver felt hats, which triggered the huge trading operations in North America. The fur was traded for household items, such as iron kettles. For a long time, beaver was the most important fur for trading. In fact, the "Made Beaver" was used as the standard for currency. (A "Made Beaver" pelt was a special kind of beaver pelt. Beavers had guard hairs not desired in making things like hats. These long, coarse hairs were hard to remove. The easiest way to remove the hair was to have the aboriginal trappers wear the pelt for at least one season so the longer hairs wore away. The resulting fur was a "Made Beaver".) A martin skin might be valued at so many "Made Beaver" just as we would value it at so many dollars today. So a steersman might be paid "70 Made Beaver (MB)" a year, although this was only a credit to his account, as no beaver actually changed hands. Also, other goods were traded in MB values. For example, 2 otter pelts might have equalled 1 MB. (3, 5, 7).. For more information, see <http://www.hbc.com/hbcheritage/history/business/fur/standardtrade.asp> and <http://www.hbc.com/hbcheritage/history/business/fur/standardtrade1733.asp>

By the late 1700s, the presence of the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company, and competition between the two trading companies, was felt throughout the Manigotagan region. Circa 1793, Fort Alexander (which is also known as Sagkeeng, after Sagkeeng First Nation) was established at the mouth of the Winnipeg River by the Hudson's Bay Company to keep an eye on nearby Bas de la Riviere, a North West Company post which had been established a year earlier. Both posts served as important shipping points along the freighting route on Lake Winnipeg. However, trading was also pursued further inland and in 1801, Thomas Vincent opened a Hudson's Bay post for what was then called Anacootagan River

(now called Manigotagan River). However, the post offered little competition to the numerous already established North West Company posts in the area. The new Hudson's Bay Company post was located on Turtle Lake and only operational from 1801 to 1802. Vincent complained that the prospects for trading were disappointing and that the Albany bateaux, the canoes being used, were too small for this region. The Turtle Lake Post opened briefly in 1889. Manigotagan Post was established in 1887 near the present day community of Manigotagan. It was originally known as Bad Throat Post and established as an outpost for Fort Alexander (to find out more about the present town of Manigotagan, see "**The community of Manigotagan**"). The exact date the post was abandoned is unknown. However, it was operational until at least 1893. (3, 5, 6)

The fur trade slowed down after beavers became so heavily trapped that they came close to extinction in the north woods. Around the same time, the railway was built and with the arrival of motorized boats the voyageurs became obsolete (1, 5). Another reason for the decline of the fur trade was a change in fashion; when the beaver felt hats gave way to silk ones the market declined (3).

With thanks to the [Centre for Rupert's Land Studies at the University of Winnipeg](#).

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### **Hudson's Bay Company and North West Company – A Tale of Two Companies (4)**

The Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) traded in North America beginning in 1670, when they received a Royal Charter under Charles II of England. Until the late 1700s, the Hudson's Bay Company kept to posts around Hudson's Bay, which resulted in the nickname "The Giant that Sleeps by the Bay". Around 1784, the North West Company formed in Montreal. The various traders who came from Montreal were nicknamed "The Pedlars from Montreal." The HBC found they could not compete by operating only from their bay-shore posts, so in the late 1700s they started to move inland. This led to intense competition and rivalry that escalated into bloodshed at times.

By the early 1800's, both companies were financially stressed and there was political pressure for them to resolve the social and financial problems that were resulting from such intense competition. This led to the merger of the NWC and HBC in 1821. Under this merger the Company retained the name HBC, but just over half of its partners were from the NWC. The Hudson's Bay Company today trades under the name of "The Bay" but has had a continuous corporate presence in North America for over 300 years. In 1987, the Hudson's Bay Company sold off its stores in remote communities to their operators, along with the rights to the name 'The Northwest Company', before itself being bought by an American businessman in 2006. The names of two of the longest-lived businesses in North America continue to be inextricably entwined with the written history of Canada's boreal forest region.

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### **Fur Trapping and Trading – Then and Now**

Highly valuable fur bearing animals in the Manigotagan area include beaver, wolverine, pine marten, mink, otter, fisher, muskrat and fox, as well as bear, caribou

and moose. A lot has changed since the early fur trapping days. Before the arrival of non-local fur traders, trapping was performed for subsistence living and only animals that were required to sustain the small population were taken. During the height of the Hudson's Bay and North West fur trading days, this changed to a "clean sweep" approach, which nearly drove the beaver to extinction. Now, trapping is seen as a part of wildlife management and trappers focus on species that have high population numbers.

*"Currently we are trapping pine marten, beaver and muskrat... all species that are in abundance. If we concentrate on one species, the system gets out of balance. Good trappers can assess population numbers and adjust to that."*  
(2)

Trapping devices have also changed. Trapping has become more humane and traps now have to conform to international regulations. For more information on trapping visit the [Manitoba 2006/2007 Trapping Guide](#).

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**Sources:**

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