

A Traveling Day for Voyageurs

“*Lève, lève nos gens!*” “Up, up folks!”
Or the short way: “*S't r lever!*” “Get up!”

- 3:00 a.m. Wake, load canoes, depart

 Paddle, with stops about every hour for a short *pipé*, or break to smoke
- 7:30 a.m. Stop for breakfast on shore, leave by 9:00 a.m.

 Paddle, with stops about every hour for a short *pipé*
- 2:00 p.m. Stop for lunch in the canoe (on shore only if they were at a portage); maybe only a chunk of pemmican, dried meat mixed with fat, or “biscuit” to chew on

 Paddle, with stops about every hour for a short *pipé*
- 8:00 p.m. Stop canoeing for the day to make camp, eat supper and sleep

Each voyageur worked at least 14 hours a day, paddling 40 to 60 strokes a minute (about 4-6 miles an hour). They had to paddle faster than that to maintain control when they were going with the current, and especially when there were boulders in the river. Sometimes they raced to relieve boredom.

The pause for a *pipé* became known as a distance — voyageurs calculated lake lengths by the number of *pipés* it took to cross it. For example, a lake might take 3 *pipés* or about 3 hours (12 miles). The number of miles traveled each day depended on the wind, current and number of portages.

Voyageurs also had to carry *pièces*, or packs weighing 90 pounds apiece, across the portages — the normal load was 2 *pièces* per trip (180 pounds), and they were responsible for about 6 *pièces* of their cargo. A ½-mile portage might take 2½ hours to unload, cross and reload.

Each night, canoes were unloaded, carried ashore and turned upside down. The seams of the canoes might also be “gummed” and repaired, as needed.

Supper, which had been precooked the night before, was warmed and served. And the next day's meal would be begun — a kettle was filled with 9 quarts of peas and water and hung over the fire, with strips of pork, if they had any, added to it. The kettle simmered until morning when the cook added 4 “biscuits.” When the voyageurs loaded the canoes, they'd load the full-to-the-brim hot kettle. The porridge was so thick that a stick would stand upright in it.

The men slept on grass, moss or beach with their heads under the canoe, as shelter from rain.

By contract, at the end of the 1,200-mile trip from Lachine (Canada) to Grand Portage (Minnesota), voyageurs had to carry an additional 8 *pièces* across the almost 9-mile portage, which required 4 trips each way.