

By Marc Hequet

Illustrations by Stan Fellows

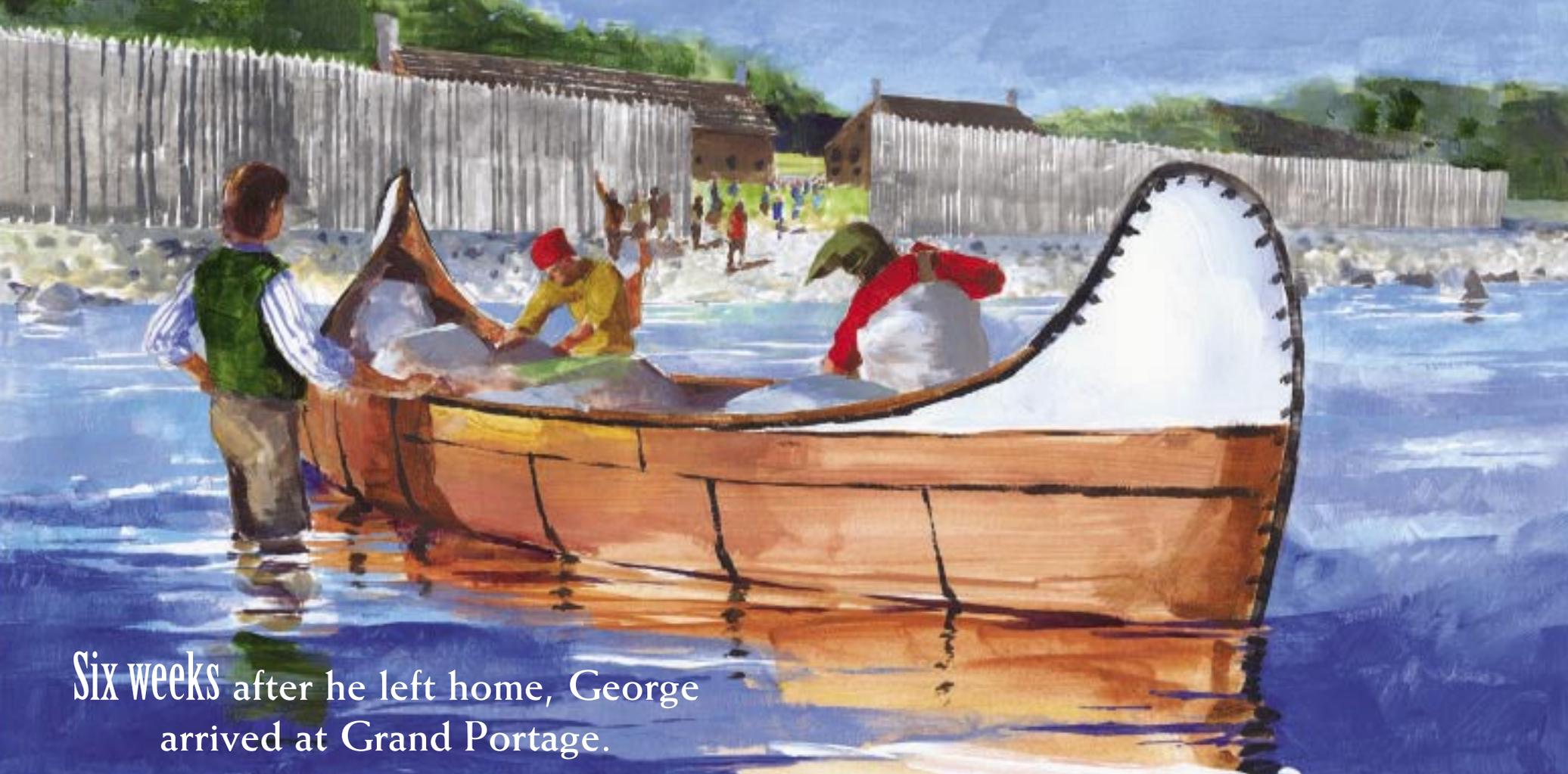
George and the Voyageurs

*In 1802 a teenage boy set off across Lake Superior
to live as a fur trader in the wilderness.*

George Nelson was 15 years old and living in Canada when he got a job in the fashion industry. But he wasn't going to work in the city. He was going to work in the wilderness, in what is now Minnesota.

George's employer, the XY Company, was in the fur-trade business. Because George knew how to read and write, he was sent to the wilderness to trade goods for furs.

George kept journals, where he wrote about his first years in the fur trade. His life as a fur trader began in 1802. By then, the North American fur trade had been dressing Europe's wealthy people for two centuries. Since the 1600s,



Six weeks after he left home, George arrived at Grand Portage.

fur had lured European fur traders to the so-called New World. In Europe, many fur-bearing animals were near extinction.

But in the United States and Canada, furbearers were plentiful. Ojibwe and other Indians hunted and trapped beaver, fox, mink, otter, marten, wolf, deer, buffalo, and muskrat.

They brought the furs, called *pelts*, to trading posts inland from Lake Superior. There, fur traders exchanged beads, wool blankets, axes, hunting rifles, and other goods for furs.

The fur most in demand was beaver. Its stiff, waterproof hair was just right to make into a cloth called *felt* for making hats. In 1800 a well-made beaver top

hat cost 1 pound, 10 shillings, 6 pence in England—about \$125 in today's U.S. currency.

Travel to Rendezvous

On May 3 in the town of Lachine near Montreal, Canada, George climbed into a 36-foot, 600-pound canoe loaded with trade goods, food, and other

supplies. He watched a dozen men called *voyageurs* take their places in the big Montreal canoes—five paddlers on each side, a steersman standing in the stern, another man at the bow to guide the canoe. George's fellow passengers most likely included a Scottish clerk and fur-company agents from London or Montreal.

George's canoe and five others pushed off for Lake Superior. Ashore, people waved and called out goodbyes. Then the travelers heard only the splash and spray of the paddles and the silent forests along the Ottawa River.

Meanwhile, in the wilderness to the west, fur traders at trading posts bundled the pelts they had acquired during the winter and loaded them into birch-bark canoes. Then the traders and their voyageurs pushed their 25-foot, 300-pound canoes into ice-cold streams and set out for Lake Superior. Ojibwe Indians also traveled

hard work of the French-Canadian voyageurs. They were the freight haulers of the fur trade. A voyageur was strong but small—ideally, 5-feet, 4-inches because long legs wouldn't fit well in a crowded canoe.

Voyageurs paddled 30 miles or more a day—55 strokes per minute for 14 hours. They paddled before dawn and sometimes long after dark. They stopped every hour or so to smoke their pipes, but breaks were brief because the voyage was long and summer was short in the north.



Trade route and Grand Portage trail (inset): 8 1/2 miles post to post.

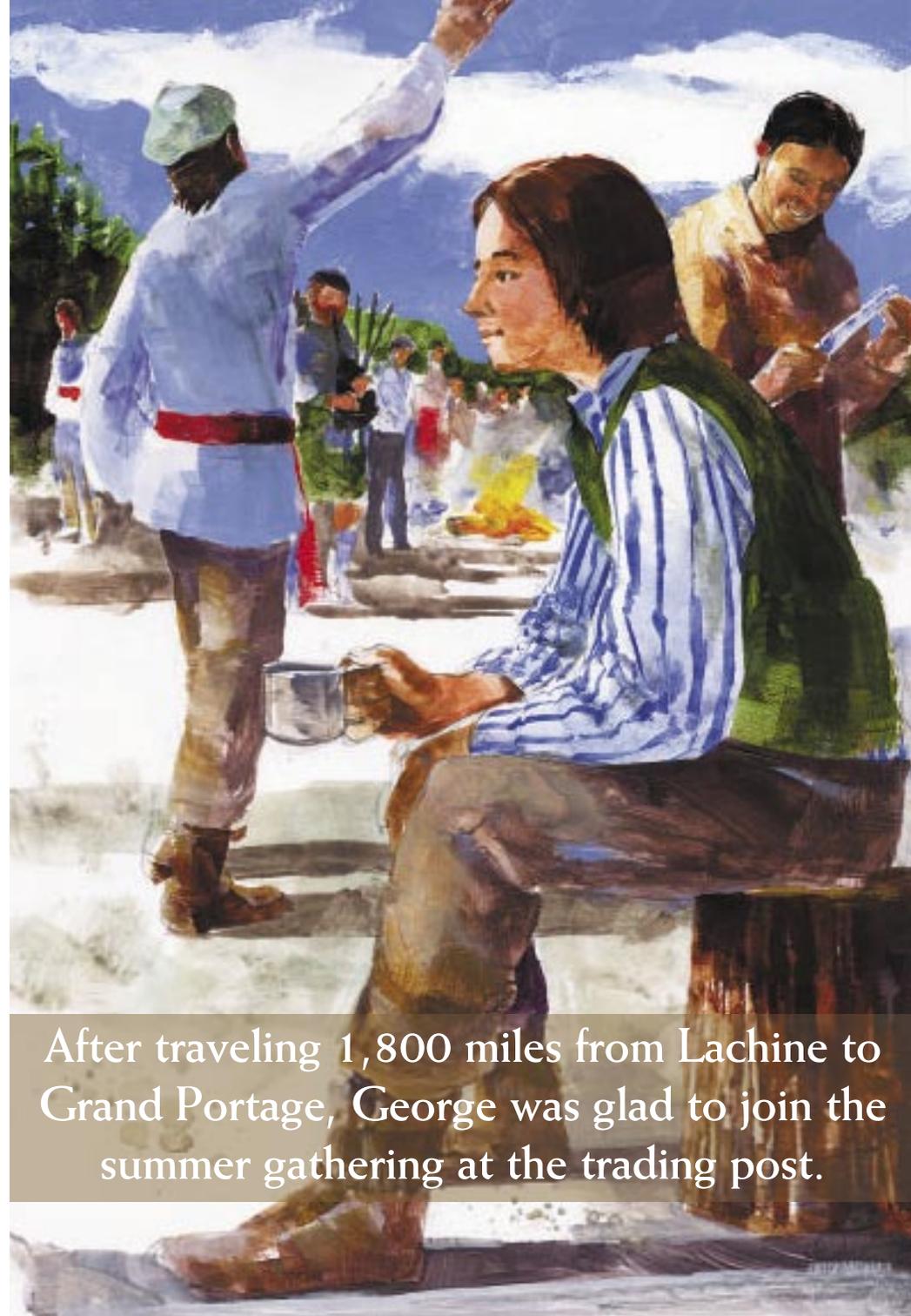
to the big lake, which they called *Gichi Gami*, where they traded furs and canoes for goods. All the travelers were bound for the same meeting place—Grand Portage—for a summer rendezvous.

Long-Distance Paddlers

George must have marveled at the

From Montreal, George and the voyageurs traveled up the Ottawa River in Ontario, overland to Lake Nipissing, down the French River to Lake Huron, overland at Sault Saint Marie, and finally onto Lake Superior.

George traveled a long way from his home and family. “My mother,



After traveling 1,800 miles from Lachine to Grand Portage, George was glad to join the summer gathering at the trading post.



To portage, a voyageur shouldered two 90-pound **packs** on his back and strapped them with a tumpline.

my father,” he thought as he tried to sleep on a cold beach at night. “My brothers and sisters! When shall I see them again?”

Sometimes he felt afraid. “It was awful to behold the immense size of

the waves,” George wrote. “We would drive down as from the top of a high hill.” Once a mighty wave knocked the steersman headlong into the canoe as he reached into a pot for corn to eat. Other men quickly steadied the boat with

their paddles, but it was a dangerous moment. The steersman could have fallen overboard into the icy water. Or the canoe could have capsized.

George and the voyageurs sometimes stopped to eat—but not for long. One traveler on the Great Lakes reported seeing voyageurs take their canoe out of the water, unload it, fix a hole, cook breakfast, shave, wash, eat, reload the canoe, and start out again—in 57 minutes!

George and the voyageurs ate corn, peas, rice, and *pemmican*—dried buffalo meat and fat, sometimes mixed with berries. They cut bites from sticks of pemmican, which tasted a little like greasy beef jerky. Once in a while they cooked pemmican in a stew.

On June 4, 1802, George turned 16, huddled on a beach during a “furious storm.” A few days later, the canoeists saw their destination: the big fortlike post at Grand Portage.

Gichi Onigaming, the great carrying place, had been home to Ojibwe families for centuries. When George and the others arrived, the XY Company agents delivered the trade goods and supplies. George saw Indians, fur traders, and voyageurs from the wilderness. The air was full of the smell of roasting game for feasting, the glad cries of old friends meeting, and occasionally the angry shouts of men threatening to fight.

After a few weeks at Grand Portage, the Montreal voyageurs, agents, and

clerks headed home. But George’s job as a fur trader was to head inland by canoe with four voyageurs and set up a small trading post where they would spend winter.

Long Hauls, Wild Rides

When George and his voyageurs came to a waterfall or rocky stretch, or when they had paddled as far as they could go on one waterway and had to reach another, they stopped and carried their cargo and canoe to the next lake or river. This overland carrying was called a *portage*.

Cargo in the canoes was bundled in 90-pound packs. A voyageur shouldered one pack on his back and set another pack on top, with a *tumpline* strapped around his forehead. After a voyageur lugged his packs uphill, he sometimes just threw them down the other side of the hill.

A portage was usually a few hundred yards long. If it was more than half a mile (a 10-minute carry), the voyageurs dropped their packs at the halfway mark and went back unburdened for a second load.

Two voyageurs carried the canoe. Although the canoe was big, it was fragile. Rocks in the stream could easily puncture the birch bark.

Sometimes when voyageurs encountered *rapids*—rocky stretches of river with rapid current—they decided not to portage but to paddle. If they thought they could see and avoid all



During George's long winter at the wilderness post, **Indian friends** brought game to eat.

dangerous rocks, or if they thought the water was high enough to float safely over the rocks, then they took the fastest way down a river—shooting the rapids for a wild ride.

But sometimes canoes crashed

against the rocks and sank. White crosses marked waterways where voyageurs drowned. Archaeologists have discovered trade goods deep in the streams along the fur-trade route. For example, below rapids on

the Granite River, divers found 17 brass kettles, probably made in Great Britain between 1785 and 1820.

End of Season

During the long winter at their wilderness post, George and the voyageurs fished, trapped, and hunted for food. Indian friends also brought game to eat. But George and the voyageurs sometimes had nothing to eat but a vine called climbing bittersweet. Cut into lengths and boiled until the bark came off, one variety produced syrup they drank.

George made a career of the fur trade, but the old way of doing business was passing away. So many beavers had been trapped, they were disappearing from North America. A whim of fashion saved the beavers: Hat makers decided they preferred to use silk.

Today, the beaver population in Minnesota has rebounded. In fact, there are as many beaver in the state now as there were during the early fur trade. ●

Marc Hequet is a St. Paul journalist and Time magazine stringer.

Voyageur Footprints

You can still paddle and portage the passages once traveled by the early Indians, explorers, traders, and voyageurs. And you can follow their footprints at several places in Minnesota:

Grand Portage National Monument, a replica of the historic post, on Grand Portage Indian Reservation, where white pines reach 100 feet into the sky and 200-year-old white cedars grow. Call 218-387-2788.

Savanna Portage State Park near McGregor, home to the Savanna Portage, a voyageur highway that connected waters flowing to Lake Superior and the Mississippi River. Call 218-426-3271.

North West Company Fur Post near Pine City recreates the fur trade in 1804. Call 320-629-6356.

Sibley House in Mendota, built in 1838, home to fur trader and future first state governor Henry Sibley. Call 651-452-1596.

White Oak Fur Post and Learning Center in Deer River, interpreters portray fur-trade characters. Call 218-246-9393.

ATTENTION TEACHERS!

To find an online teachers guide for this article, visit www.dnr.state.mn.us/young_naturalists/voyageurs. To learn more about using *Minnesota Conservation Volunteer* as a teaching tool, contact Meredith McNab, meredith.mcnab@dnr.state.mn.us or 651-215-0615.