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,
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.

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

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.
“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
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.

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ATTENTION TEACHERS!
To find an online teachers guide for this article, visit www.dnr.state.mn.us/
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