

# Travelling the wake left by Thompson

□ A group of canoeists, led by Cliff Speer, explore history by water

By Peter Wilson  
of The StarPhoenix

BATOCHÉ — Seated at the steering end of the eight-meter-long voyageur canoe, Cliff Speer, along with his crew, made good headway, especially considering they were paddling back in time.

Speer and his fellow canoeists were riding in the slipstream of Canadian history, retracing the path of legendary explorer David Thompson. Paddling the same stretch of the South Saskatchewan River as the illustrious fur trader, surveyor and map maker, they were heading back to the 1780s.

Just a little behind schedule, Speer and his clients beached their flotilla of colourful canoes at South Branch House, the site of a former 18th century Hudson's Bay Company's (HBC) trading post that Thompson helped build.

Sometimes called the "greatest land geographer who ever lived," Thompson combined his surveying skills with a keen talent for astronomy to map almost four million square kilometres of North America.

The adventurer, who died in 1857, made many epic journeys by canoe, mapping the wilderness while expanding Canada's valuable fur trade. His travels took him to the South Saskatchewan River, explains Speer, owner of the Saskatoon-based adventure company CanoeSki Discovery Company.

"He was an amazing man, an incredible Canadian explorer right up there with Sir Alexander Mackenzie and Simon Fraser. Today we're paddling the same waters he did," Speer says.

This past weekend, these modern adventurers were part of the North American David Thompson Bicentennials, continent-wide celebrations honouring the famous explorer that began this year and continue until 2011. Departing from Batoche, the 18 canoeists paddled north, scheduling visits to the locations of two former trading posts and camping overnight near the site of one of the long abandoned historic sites.

A two-day expedition, the David Thompson Voyager Trek was organized by Speer. It's the newest addition to the series of canoeing adventures his company runs annually. Designed as a celebratory trip for aficionados of history, archaeology and Canadian heroes, the trek's first stop also brought out a contingent of local

people happy to share their perspectives on the history of the area.

For Louise Tournier, watching the five canoes pull into shore was an emotional experience, stirring up thoughts of her great-great-grandfather, Jean Baptiste Boucher. Her Metis ancestor fought alongside Louis Riel in the 1885 Northwest Rebellion at nearby Batoche, the canoeists' departure point.

Tournier, and her husband, Claude, still own a parcel of the original river lot settled by Boucher in the 1800s. She says even before they settled here permanently, as Metis traders her ancestors would have often travelled up to the area from their Red River communities in Manitoba.

"It is probable they would have visited these two forts on their journeys and possibly even knew Thompson. The ties to this place are very special to me," Tournier says.

Now the site of an archeological dig, South Branch House has a cairn describing a battle between the European fur traders and Gros Ventre Natives. The devastating attack on the stockaded post in 1794 resulted in it being burned to the ground by the Native people.

Equally intriguing, says Speer, are the still visible remains of the nearby North West Company fur trade fort that Thompson visited during his clerk's apprenticeship. Just a short paddle from the HBC post, the site was also part of the CanoeSki itinerary.

The group's overnight stay was to be highlighted with campfire readings by Speer of early explorers' journals, including extracts from the journal Thompson kept at the post in 1787.

"We're trying to give people an authentic feel of life back then. It's called giving a sense of place.

Adding to the authentic experience is the expedition's menu. Pemmican appetizers, bison stew and platters of wild rice, followed by saskatoon berry pie, should satisfy, says Speer.

What will not be included in creating that sense of place, however, is any time spent gazing up at the night sky. That's too bad, considering Thompson's skills in astronomy were even recognized by the Native people, who went so far as to honour him with the name Stargazer.

"By the time the stars come out, so do the mosquitoes, so we'll be hitting the tents right about then."

*"We're trying to give people an authentic feel of life back then . . ."*

—Cliff Speer



—SP Photo by Peter Wilson

Cliff Speer and his crew bring the lead canoe toward the banks of the South Saskatchewan River at the site of a 1786 Hudson's Bay Company fur trading fort built by Canadian explorer David Thompson