

Our river is alive with history & archaeology

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS SUBMITTED BY CLIFF SPEER

Anyone wishing to explore Saskatchewan history need look no further than the waterway which shapes Saskatoon. An easy canoe trip downstream takes one along central Saskatchewan's original transportation route into the heart of the battle for the West, the archaeological remnants of the fur trade era and the famous explorers of that era.

The South Saskatchewan River is the premiere corridor into our natural and cultural history and the best way to discover that is to traverse the river by canoe.

A river of conflict

Singer-songwriter Connie Kaldor has a great song about a bend in the South Saskatchewan River where "a battle was won and a people were lost." It's about Batoche and the anguished story of Riel and Dumont and the 1885 uprising.

Backing up a century and moving downstream to the next bend in the river is another designated provincial historic site: the South Branch House. It began as a fur-trade post in 1786 but its life was short lived. On June 24, 1794, the rival posts for both the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and the North West Company (NWC) came under siege.

The attack on the latter was repulsed, but the HBC fort was overcome, the few defenseless occupants massacred, and the contents looted by the attackers. They afterwards set fire to and demolished the fort.

Few people know of this unfortunate event that took place in the early years of contact between fur traders and the original inhabitants. Recent and ongoing excavations at the site are uncovering the story of the forts.



Journals of fur traders also provide a glimpse into the eventful day 215 years ago. Duncan McGillivray, a NWC partner, wrote in his journal: "Mr. Vandriel was the only person that escaped the general carnage: he was lucky enough to secure himself amongst a heap of rubbish,... but at length being almost surrounded by the flames, he was compelled to abandon his asylum and rushing out through the Fire, the Smoke favoured his escape to the River Side, where he threw himself into a small canoe and committed it to the mercy of the current which soon carried him out of danger."

A cairn sketches out the riveting story of South Branch House.

River adventure beckons

An opportunity to paddle a replica voyageur canoe awaits you

Three groups have teamed up to bring the history of the South Branch House to life this July. SAS, along with the St. Louis Historical Society and CanoeSki Discovery Company of Saskatoon are planning a David Thompson-themed river trip and open house festivities at the South Branch archaeological site.

The canoeing adventure, part of the Thompson bicentennial commemoration activities, will include a chance to paddle a replica voyageur "north canoe" on a section of the South Saskatchewan River that Thompson travelled over 200 years ago. An onboard professional archaeologist will bring past events and places to life along the route.

The river trek will finish at St. Louis, taking in the archaeological site of the mammoth-sized *Bison Antiquus*, unearthed there a few years ago.

The canoe trek will start at Petite Ville, a Métis wintering village circa the 1870s, and then hike up the historic Carlton Trail to visit Batoche, and eventually take part in the open house at South Branch. Entertainment, displays, bannock and jam tasting, and interpretive tours of the archaeological dig will be part of the festivities at the fort.

The voyageurs will overnight in a wilder-

ness campsite in the beautiful Nisbet Forest and hike to the nearby NWC fort site buried deep within the forest. The river trek will finish at St. Louis, taking in the archaeological site of the mammoth-sized *Bison Antiquus*, unearthed there a few years ago.

Connect with a fur trade VIP

South Branch House is less well known for its connection to at least one VIP of the fur trade era, David Thompson.

In 1774, a 14-year-old Thompson was recruited in London to apprentice in the fur trade. After a couple of boring years at the posts on Hudson's Bay, he was sent inland to Cumberland House. There he landed a gig on a voyageur canoe brigade heading up the Saskatchewan River to The Forks and then on up the river's South Branch to build a new fort to compete with a recently established NWC post.

Now 16, Thompson was kept busy helping with construction and with keeping the daily post journal. The journal of 1786 in his handwriting is still available to read.

Thompson went on to be one of the greatest land geographers of all time, travelling more than 88,000 kilometres and mapping 3.9 million square kilometres of the country. To recognize Thompson's remarkable achievements, an international bicentennial commemoration of his life and work was initiated in 2007 and will carry through to 2011.

In Saskatchewan, Thompson spent a lot of

time exploring and mapping the waterways and land that he travelled by canoe, on foot, and on horseback. Although Thompson's stay at South Branch was brief and the post lasted only a short but eventful eight years, we still have the distinction of being able to connect this famous historic figure to a provincial landmark.

The past comes alive again

In recent years, South Branch House has been a beehive of activity. In 2005, the Saskatchewan Archaeological Society (SAS) initiated an excavation program. They've found interesting artifacts – personal items such as bone buttons, tinkling cones, a beaded necklace and pendant and tools such as a bone snowshoe needle. Buried remnants of the stockade wall have helped to produce a picture of the fort's size and location.

A thorough translation of the Hudson's Bay Company journal records of South Branch House has been completed. Once the site has been satisfactorily excavated, the SAS would like to authentically reconstruct and create an interpretive centre.

Eventually, the SAS would like to follow the clues to other fur trade posts and other related sites nearby.



The river adventure, taking place this July, is open to all.

For more information on the David Thompson Voyageur Trek contact CanoeSki Discovery Co. at 653-5693; email: cliff@canoeski.com or visit

the website: www.canoeski.com/dthompson.htm. To find out more about the South Branch Open House, contact the Saskatchewan Archaeological Society at 664-4124.