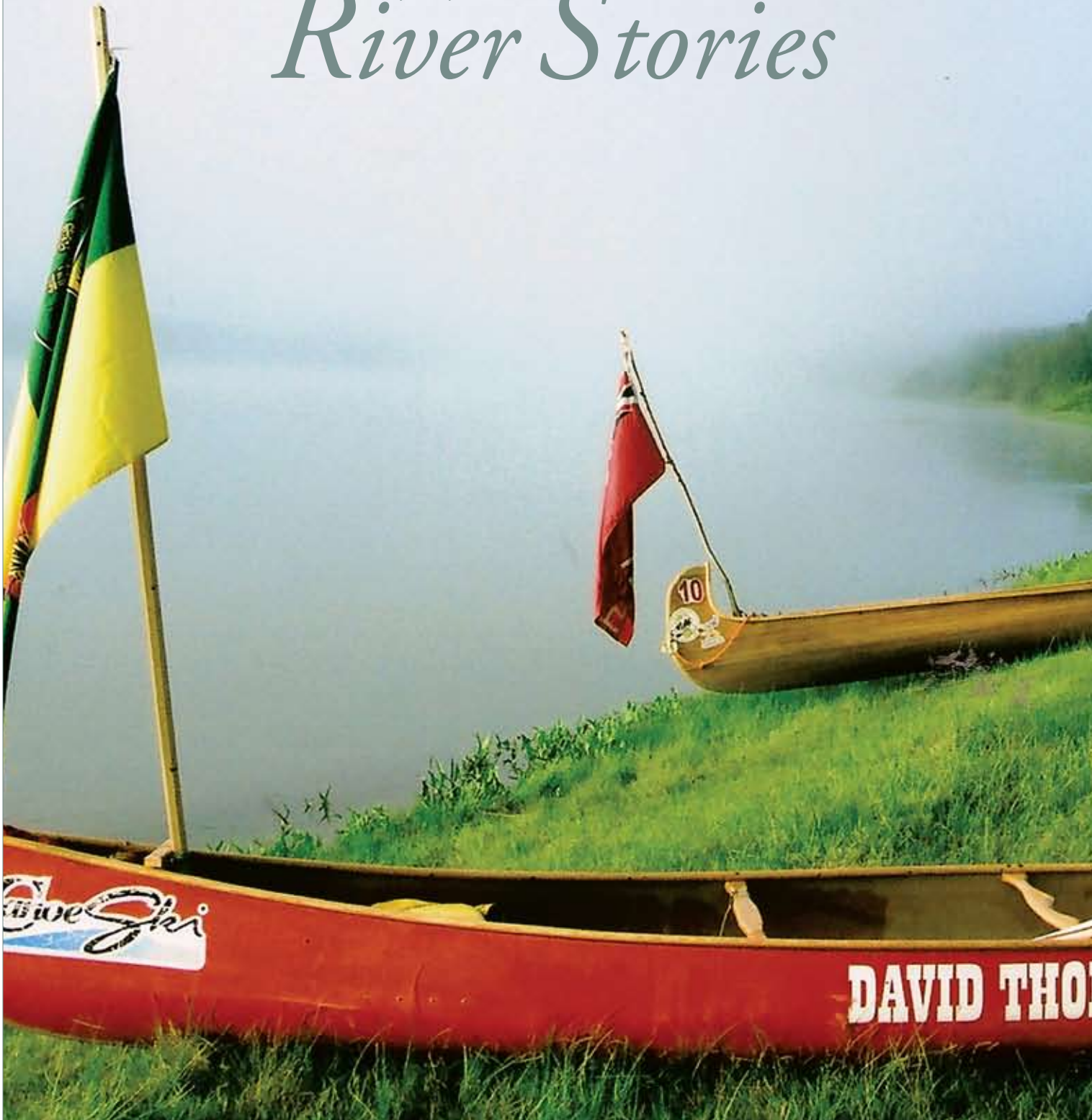


# *River Rhythms*

story Amy Jo Ehman

# *River Stories*



Shrouded in mist and mystery, the South Saskatchewan invites the author and fourteen other adventurers to discover its hidden layers of human history.

Along the banks of the South Saskatchewan, fifteen paddlers seek clues to a long-forgotten past. They are propelled by the same current that carried geographer and explorer David Thompson centuries ago.

**E**very canoe tells a story and this canoe is whispering to me with every stroke. Dip and pull. Dip and pull. Ride the current. Feel the wind. Share the load. Never quit. Face the future. Hear the past...

It is a soft summer morning. The packs are loaded, our bellies are full, the river is swift and we are travelling through time in a voyageur canoe—the same type of canoe that brought the fur traders down this river more than two centuries ago.

Our journey is short (just 60 km over three days) but the layers of history on this stretch of the South Saskatchewan run wide and deep—vestiges of Métis villages, fur trade posts, battlegrounds, hunting grounds, old ferry crossings, weathered homesteads and ancient camps.

I had often been drawn to the river for its beauty and serenity, but knew very little of its human history before joining this guided expedition organized by CanoeSki Discovery Company of Saskatoon. Together, we are fifteen people in five canoes in search of the past.



Cliff Speers



Amy Jo Ehman

One of five canoes launch under the Hudson Bay flag at Petite Ville, the ruins of a Métis wintering village. Traditionally built of birch bark, the voyageur canoes that traversed narrow lakes and shallow rivers were wide and flat for strength and balance, with a tall curl at the bow to cut through rapids, and seats for two paddlers side by side.

I am watching the tips of my fingers ripple in the reflection of the girders on the water below. For three days, this river will be my world ...



Amy Jo Ehman

Voyageurs likely roasted game on their spits, or boiled a mixture of lye-soaked corn (to remove the shells) and pork fat until it was mushy. Bagels and coffee work for modern-day river-runners.

Participant Cam O'Bertos (left) and the author ply the current also paddled by geographer David Thompson in 1786. Historic voyageurs were required to be lean, short, exceptionally strong—and under 5'11" (180 cm).



Cliff Speer, Cmoeski Discovery Co.

In 1786, a lad by the name of David Thompson came down this river in a voyageur canoe. A poor fatherless boy from London, England, he was apprenticed by the Hudson Bay Company and sailed to British North America to work as a clerk in the fur trade. In the fall of that year, he was sent to help build a trading post on the South Saskatchewan River not far from present day St. Louis, Saskatchewan.

He kept the post's journal in his beautiful succinct penmanship. Oct. 16, 1786: "Monday Wind NW with Cloudy weather. People employed in getting Stones up the bank for building the Chimneys, fitting in the beams and other Sundry Jobs. Traded with an Indian 2 Red Deer."

Three years later, while mending a broken leg at Cumberland House, Thompson met the Hudson Bay Co. chief surveyor and astronomer. He taught the teenager how to calculate the latitude and longitude of any point with a sextant, a watch and a firm understanding of the stars. It would become the passion of Thompson's life.

Over the next five decades, he mapped almost 4 million square kilometres of wilderness from Lake Superior to the Oregon coast, one fifth of the continent. His maps were used by American explorers Lewis and Clark, and helped establish Canadian claims to the western lands and set boundaries with the United States. Today, he is celebrated as one of the greatest geographers in history, honoured in events across the continent during the Thompson Bicentennials 2007–2011, thanks to a trade he learned on the banks of the Saskatchewan.



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**left: Metis Senator John Boucher, in the tradition of his forebears, prays for a safe paddle for tour participants. Stretches of rough water easily caused voyageurs' canoes to flip, spilling valuable cargo and men. Few early voyageurs knew how to swim. top right: The paddlers pitch their tents overnight in a clearing in the Nisbet Forest, shunning frequent voyageur tradition of bedding directly on the ground or under meager shelter of their overturned canoes, covering the open space with a blanket. bottom right: Volunteer archaeologists sift for artifacts at South Branch House, seeking solid evidence of a busy fur trade and the violent upheaval caused by members of the Gros Ventre tribe in 1794.**

As the voyageur canoe drifts beneath the Gabriel Dumont Bridge, I hear the traffic overhead but I am watching the tips of my fingers ripple in the reflection of the girders on the water below. For three days, this river will be my world....

## Day 1

We launched the canoes this morning at Petite Ville, the ruins of a Métis wintering village on the South Saskatchewan River east of Hague where the remains of cellars and stone chimneys are still evident in the grass. In the 1860–70s, as many as 50 families wintered here. When the buffalo hunt dwindled, they moved to permanent communities downriver at St. Laurent.

At the stern, the flag of the Hudson Bay

Co. hung limp on its pole. Steersman Ron Bernardin tells us the canoe was handcrafted by his son, Martin, in two pieces in a garage in Saskatoon. Two pieces because, at 26 feet (8 metres), the canoe was considerably longer than the garage itself. He built it following the traditional design of the voyageurs' birch bark canoes—wide and flat for strength and balance, a tall curl at the bow to cut through rapids, and seats that accommodate two paddlers side by side.

The canoe was built for the Saskatchewan Centennial Canoe Quest in 2005, a trip of more than 1,000 kilometres along the historic Churchill River. The following year, it placed second in the challenging Yukon River Quest, breaking a race record

for voyageur canoes. Our present journey is considerably more relaxed, paddling and drifting under the prairie sun.

This afternoon we docked below Batoche and walked the old Carlton Trail through woods and meadows to the historic battle site. At the visitor centre, I nodded off during a video of the 1885 uprising, to be woken by the blasts of the battle scene.

Tonight, after supper and campfire songs, I lie alone in my tent listening as a ferocious thunderhead lashes our camp.

## Day 2

Several more canoes joined us today for the paddle to South Branch House, the fur trade post built by Thompson and his companions in 1786.



Amy Jo Ehnman



Lynn Stewart



courtesy Cliff Speer, Canoeski Discovery Co.

left and top right: The church and a bedroom in a restored home at the historical site of Batoche. The site depicts the lifestyles of area Métis between 1860 and 1900. The village was selected in 1885 by Louis Riel as the headquarters of his “Provisional Government of Saskatchewan,” and became the site of the Battle of Batoche, May 9–12, 1885. bottom right: Senior archaeologist Butch Amundson recounts his discovery of skulls from extinct species of bison (*Bison antiquus*). The remains were found at St. Louis in 2002, while archaeologists were assessing the impact of developing the area for a new bridge.

We pulled the canoes to shore below a high bluff and hiked a steep pathway to the top. The St. Louis Historical Society had arranged a welcome party including fiddlers, speeches and bannock with homemade jam. Volunteers under the eye of the Saskatchewan Archaeological Society were on their hands and knees sifting through the earth for artifacts from the fur trade days.

Did Thompson really set foot here? According to historical records, the fur trade post he helped construct was attacked and burned by a war party from the Gros Ventre tribe in 1794, killing everyone inside. To date, archaeologists have found few artifacts that indicate a busy fur trade post or a violent upheaval,

leaving some to question if this was indeed the place.

I spoke with Bob Legare, whose father donated this land for historic designation, who steadfastly believes the stories of his childhood that connect this site with Thompson and the Hudson Bay Co. However, there are ruins of other fur trade posts on this stretch of river that may one day shed light on this chapter in the history of Saskatchewan.

We camped downriver on a sandy hill. While supper was cooking we put on our bathing suits and cooled off in the water, clutching at river rocks in the fast current.

Later, our guide Cliff Speer, dressed like a voyageur, emerged at the campfire and

read to us accounts of life in the fur trade. We sat by the fire until midnight, a full moon rising through the trees and wolves howling in the distance.

### Day 3

A still and foggy morning. After breakfast the trek archaeologist Butch Amundson led us on an exploration of the area around our camp. Fresh wolf prints dot the sand not far from the tents. He stooped to pick up a shard of stone—a flake chipped away long ago while making an arrowhead or a stone tool.

We followed him down an overgrown path into a densely wooded coulee where vines of hops twirled in hazelnut trees and raspberries grew near the ruins of

a chimney. Was it a Métis home? Another fur trade post? Someday, if time and money permit, the site may be excavated and its story told. Or maybe not. Amundson tells us, “There are no answers, only more questions.”

Today I switched places and paddled in the stern of a fiberglass canoe flying the ensign of the North West Company. In 1797, Thompson shocked his masters at the Hudson Bay Co. by switching to its bitter rival, the North West Co., because it supported his aspirations to travel and chart maps.

We paddled hard in the hot sun to St. Louis, pulling ashore beneath the replica of giant *Bison antiquus*, ancestor of the modern bison. Amundson discovered the remains of this extinct bison in 2002 while assessing the site for a new road. Digging down, he found nine layers of habitation, in between 22 major floods, dating from approximately 9,000 to 5,000 years ago. “This is fascinating stuff,” he said. “Conventional wisdom says the *Bison antiquus* was extinct 8,000 years ago but people were still hunting it at the St. Louis site.”

In later afternoon, we loaded the canoes onto their trailers, bought ice cream cones and settled into a van for the drive back to Saskatoon. From the blacktop we had no glimpse of the gentle, green river valley we had known for three days.

**I**t’s amazing to have this history right in our back yard,” said John Guselle, who joined the trek with his wife Tracey. “We want that sense of being connected to the land and to immerse ourselves in the stories it has to tell. We definitely want to share this with our children.”

For many generations, people were drawn to the rivers for shelter and sustenance, transportation and exploration. Today, we live “up top” on the plains with views of the horizon not the shoreline, where the highways are human-made and the pace is fast. We have forgotten that rivers are the ribbons that tie the present to the past.

*Paddlers on the river can follow the path of history with an annotated historical map covering 50 kilometres of the valley between Batoche and Sugar Island. Thirty-four sites of interest are described on the map, each one corresponding to a number staked into the riverbank. The map was compiled by Larry Hodgson, president of the St. Louis Historical Society. Laminated maps in two sizes are available by calling (306) 422-8632.*



Amy Jo Elman

The party beaches their canoes below South Branch House, believed to be the site of the trading post built by Thompson and his companions in 1786.

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Ron Bernardin, NorthVids.com

Valued not only for their aesthetic appeal, the Métis sashes worn by voyageurs served practical needs: a warm cover, a tote for belongings, or a rope. Modelled here by the author (right) and Elaine Unrau, assistant camp cook, at South Branch House

