

“A VERY FINE DAY”
“Off On Discovery” with
David Thompson
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The LSAW Historical Society, together with the Surveyors Historical Society, is hosting Rendezvous 2005 at Spokane House on September 31st through October 2. Spokane House has the significance of being the first white settlement built in Washington State.

This event is timed to coincide with the grand opening of a special exhibit at the Museum of Art & Culture in Spokane. Honored in this exhibit is the North American (okay, Canadian) surveyor, explorer and mapmaker David Thompson.

To both prepare for this event and perform research on the man and his journeys, Delores and I flew to Calgary, Alberta. In preparation for the above event and in order to perform research on the man and his journeys, Delores and I flew to Calgary, Alberta to retrace a portion of David Thompson's 1807 first crossing of the Rocky Mountains into what is now British Columbia, Washington, Idaho & Montana. Ironically, it was the killing of two Peigan Indians by Lewis & Clark's Corps of Discovery in July of 1806 that helped Thompson to make this 1807 trip. The Northwest Company (and Hudson's Bay Company) had been plagued by the warlike Peigans (Sioux/Blackfoot tribe) since their arrival in the area; camping around Rocky Mountain House and generally intimidating the other tribes. Most tribes welcomed (or at least tolerated) the fur traders. The Peigans, who generally preyed on their Indian neighbors, resented the white man giving the other tribes trading goods and weapons to defend themselves. Thompson later wrote:

“...the murder of two Peigan Indians by Captain Lewis of the United States, drew the Peigan to the Missouri to revenge their deaths; and thus gave me an opportunity to cross the Mountains

by the defiles of the Saskatchewan River...”

We arrived in Calgary on August 23rd, rented a Chevy Trailblazer (name was kind of appropriate) and began retracing some of Mr. Thompson's travels. Our destination for that night was the town of Rocky Mountain House (RMH) near the location of the original Rocky Mountain House established by the Northwest Company in 1799. On our drive north from Calgary we traveled the side roads (mostly Highway No. 22) in order to give us the opportunity to follow a portion of David Thompson's 1800 travels between RMH and the vicinity of Calgary.

NOTE: While checking into our motel for the night, I was surprised to be handed the business card of Bob Haagsma, a local Alberta land surveyor in and councilman for RMH. On the evening before we left, I had emailed my friend Ken Allred and asked if he had any recommendations for contacts when in the area, not expecting that he would get it in time, let alone be able to arrange for someone to meet us. What a tremendous effort on Ken's part). I gave Bob a call and he was nice enough to re-arrange his schedule for us to have lunch together the following day.

Early the next morning, we took the 4 mile drive to Parks Canada's Rocky Mountain House National Historical Site for their annual celebration of “David Thompson Days”. Featured events included a voyageur bed race, David Thompson Run, canoe race etc. Both the Northwest Company and their rival, the Hudson's Bay Company, shared the area (building their forts next to each other) until their closure in 18xx. After a thoroughly enjoyable day at the Park (and lunch with Alberta surveyor Bob Haagsma) we spent another evening in the town of Rocky Mountain House.



PICTURE OF NORTHWEST COMPANY'S FORT AT ROCKY MOUNTAIN HOUSE HISTORICAL SITE

Early the next morning, after bacon, eggs, hash browns and French toast (no dried dog meat or powdered moose (a Canadian delicacy) for us) we headed up the David Thompson Highway (Highway No. 11) on our retracement of David Thompson's 1807 journey.

May 10, 1807, Sunday: "A very fine day. At 9 ½ Am sent off Mr Finan McDonald & 5 men in a Canoe with Goods & Necessaries to the expedition across the Mountains... At 10 Am I set off with Bercier on Horseback..."

Earlier in 1806, Thompson had sent Jaco Finley and some voyageurs up the North Saskatchewan River, over Howse Pass and down the Blaeberry River (Thompson's "Portage River") to where it emptied into the Columbia River (at the time, Thompson called it the Kootanae River) near the present town of Golden, BC. Finley's job was to cut out a trail, cache supplies and build canoes at the mouth of the Blaeberry for Thompson's 1807 push to build a trading

house on the West side of the Rocky Mountains.

NOTE: Jaco Finley was very prominent in the history of the northwest fur trade. He was a sometime employee of the Northwest Fur Company and shows up quite often in Thompson's reports and narrative. Jaco was the man that actually constructed Spokane House just northwest of the city of Spokane in 1811 and the site of this year's Rendezvous 2005. Jaco's grave was just recently discovered on the site and plans are being made to perhaps contribute to the placement of a commemorative plaque there in October.

First stop for us was Shunda Creek {Thompson's "Jaco's Brook"}. Besides our exploration of the NW Company's fort at the Historical Site, this was the first time we could be sure we were where Thompson actually walked in 1807.



PICTURE OF SHUNDA CREEK WITH BEAVER AMNS

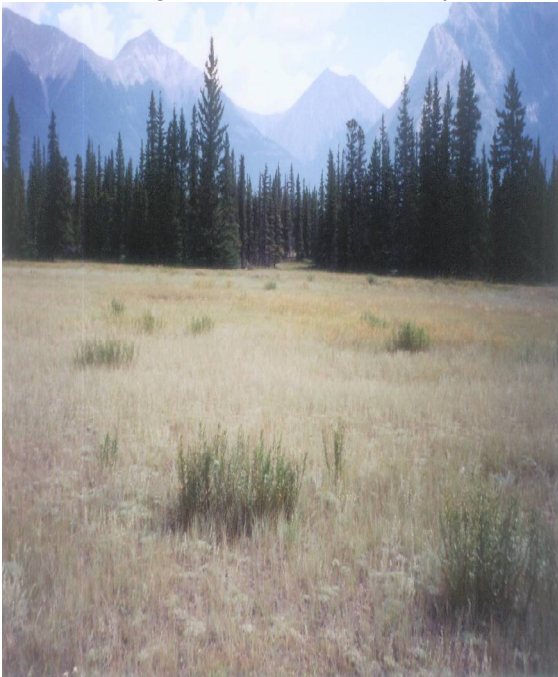
May 16th, 1807, Saturday: "A very fine day... We now turn to the right {from the North Saskatchewan River} to go up along the Brook - our Co[urse] will be

ab[out] S 70 W, that of the Canoe between the 2 Mountains ab[out] S 25 W and the Mountains may be about 6 or 8 M distant.”

It took Delores and me two hours to reach Kootanae Plains, an open area that offered the first good grass for Thompson’s horses. It had taken Thompson and his men 3 weeks.

June 3rd, 1807, Wednesday: “A morning of small Rains, but a fine day. ...Co[urse] S[outh] 22 E[ast] 4 M[iles] thro’ the Kootanae Plains, where we put up near the Canoe & People at 1 Pm - we came fast on, often at a sound Trot. The Valleys... are pleasant, & one might pass an agreeable summer in such places as we have come...”

The Kootanae Plains are now an ecological reserve because of its unique environment and another good “coffee” break stop.



PICTURE OF KOOTANAE PLAINS

On June 6th, Thompson had reached “The Forks” at the junction of the North Saskatchewan and Howse Rivers “the Forks; we take the So[uth] branch... Our Co[urse] S 80 W 1 M[ile] s 20 E 2 M - I lost my compass for the present...” This is near the

point where the David Thompson Highway comes to an end at Saskatchewan Crossing where you have the choice of turning north up the Icefields Parkway (Highway No. 93) toward Jasper, Alberta or south toward Lake Louise and Banff. Thompson did neither, he continued westerly across Howse Pass and then down the Blaeberry “Portage” River. Delores and I headed to the village of Lake Louise for a nice lunch and ice cream cones.

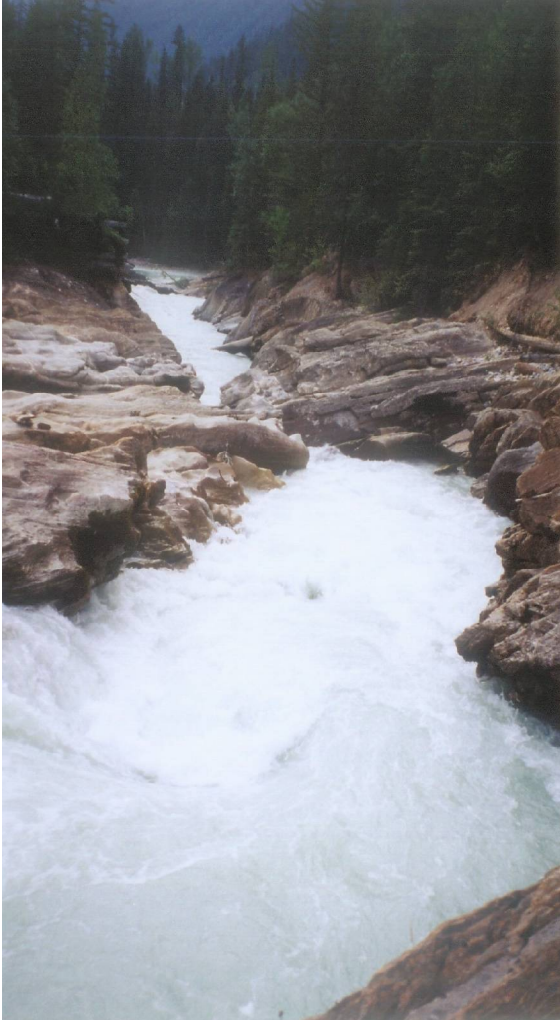
Later that afternoon we drove Highway No. 1 over Kicking Horse Pass into British Columbia down to the town of Golden and then up the Blaeberry River in order to visit Thompson Falls (which Thompson never mentions) and get a feel for the country that Thompson traversed by horse to the Columbia. The gravel road going up the Blaeberry River is very difficult to find but after finally stopping and asking directions (sorry guys, she made me do it), we finally found it and the falls.

Thompson starts down the Blaeberry:

June 26th, 1801, Friday: “A very fine day. Arose early & by 6 ½ Am got ready and set off... the rapid current... endanger not only the wetting of the Goods but also the Lives of the Men... they cross only by clinging fast to the Horses. stopped 1 ¾ H[ours] to refresh the Horses... Gave the Men a large Dog of which they made a hearty meal”.

This portion of Thompson’s trek (down the Blaeberry) must have been one of the most difficult, for he did something he rarely did; complain.

“The trees everywhere fallen down & the Moss overgrown with a kind of wild willow vine {vine maple} & very short prickly Shrubs {devil’s club}, we had to cut much wood away and widen the Path... the Horses were obliged to jump with their Loads over much wind-fallen Wood. Cut away much wood, yet the Horses were continually bucking... the Road is so very narrow & bad”



PICTURE OF THOMPSON FALLS

Later, in a report to his partners, Thompson wrote:

“From what has been said of the Road on the Portage {Blaeberry River} it is clearly seen that Jaco Finlay with Men engaged last Summer to clear the Portage Road has done a mere nothing...”

and went on to recommend that

“...Jaco ought to lose at least ½ his wages”.

On June 30th, Thompson reached where the Blaeberry River entered the Columbia River (Thompson believed it was the Kootanae River at the time).

“Visited the Canoes left by Jaco - found them unfit for carriage but handy for light voyaging”.

By July 12th “A Rainy night but fine day”, Thompson and his men had constructed new canoes and were ready to head up the Columbia River in search for a place to build the first trading post West of the Rocky Mountains and winter quarters.

July 18th, 1807, Saturday: “A very fine day... At Noon arrived at the Kootanae Lake {now Lake Windermere}. Boulard... arrived on three NW Horses, having left the others behind from the badness of the Roads & his being a complete Rogue”.



PICTURE OF KOOTANAE HOUSE HISTORICAL SITE

Thompson immediately began construction but did not like his original site for the trading post from the beginning. He was worried about being able to defend the site from Indian (Peigan) attacks but thought it the best place to catch fish. On July 28th he abandoned this first location and began construction of another. The site eventually selected by Thompson for Kootanae House is located on a knoll above where Toby Creek {Thompson’s “River of the Lakes” (?)}.

July 28th, 1807, Tuesday: “A very fine day. ...I took 2 Men with me & luckily found a place where a good House &c may be built & not easily attacked, close on the banks of a rapid Stream” {today’s Toby Creek}.

From the area of the mouth of the Blaeberry River, we traveled down the East side of the

Columbia River on Highway No. 95. Here the Columbia wanders through a broad valley with thousands of acres of wetlands, looking much like when Thompson's first visited. Upon our arrival in Invermere we contacted our friend, Mr. Cameron Berry. With his help we drove to the site of Thompson's original Kootanae House, the first trading post west of the Rocky Mountains. Here we were again assured that we were walking where David Thompson stepped 197 years ago.

NOTE: In August, 2003 the town of Invermere dedicated a very large bronze statue of David Thompson and his wife Charlotte. Both the LSAW Historical Society and the Surveyors Historical Society contributed money to this worthwhile effort. Delores and I were able to attend representing the above societies and there we met representatives from the British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan surveying organizations, together with local dignitaries, historians and keynote dinner speaker; Jack Nesbit, author of the book "Sources of the River".



PICTURE OF STATUE WITH SURVEYORS AND SURVEYORS HISTORICAL SOCIETY BANNER

By October, Thompson was satisfied enough with the progress of the trading post that he decided to go "off on discovery" to explore the region of the "Lake {Flatbow or Lower Kootanae} Indians".

October 2, 1807, Friday: "A very fine day..." At 9:50 Am set off with 2 Horses, a few scraps of Provisions & the Lake Indian Chief Ugly Head for my guide." {The chief was called "Ugly Head" because of his uncommon curly hair}. "... At 5 Pm passed... over McGillivray's Portage {now Canal Flats}, a very good road among Red Fir Trees, the first I have seen... To McGillivray's River" {now the Kootanae River}. "We have passed among clear Woods of Mountain Larch {or tamarack}, a beautiful tall straight timber Tree admirably adapted to Ship uses, now beginning to shed their foliage".

October 3, 1807, Saturday: "A very fine day". Thompson continued his trip down the Kootanae River to where the St Mary's River enters the Kootanae and in the vicinity of today's Fort Steele National Historical Site. Here he and his guide Chief Ugly Head turned aside and went up the St Mary's for a while before Thompson discovered that they were taking a "short cut" to Kootanae Lake (many miles up and over the Purcell Mtns. to the West) instead of following the Kootanae River. This he did not want to do; instead he wished to see how far the Kootanae was navigable by canoes (into present day Montana). Disgusted, he retraced his steps, returning to Kootanae House on October 6th.

The next morning I paid another visit to Kootanae House to again walk the site where David Thompson spent many months, then headed south to retrace Thompson's October travels. We traveled up the Columbia to it's headwaters in Columbia Lake, over Canal Flats and then down the Kootanae River traveling as far south as today's Fort Steele before turning around and heading back to Invermere for the night. Next morning we headed up and over Vermillion Pass to Banff, had breakfast and then retraced Thompson's 1800 trip down the Bow River to Calgary.

I have liberally borrowed information from a variety of sources, including but not limited to:

“Columbia Journals” by Barbara Belyea; an edited version of Thompson’s field books and narrative. A “must have” book.

“On the Road with David Thompson” by Joyce and Peter McCart; a very good book on how to retrace some of Thompson’s journeys on today’s roads.

“Sources of the River” by Jack Nisbet; a first person and personal account of Nisbet’s canoe journey retracing some of Thompson’s river routes including from the source of the Columbia to its mouth.