

# **Edmonton House Brigade Re-enactment Camp Revised 2018**

## *Who and what are we enacting:*

Our objective is to provide an accurate representation of the fur trade in “the Northwest” between 1795 and 1820. With regard to clothing fashions and equipment, that aspect allows a tolerance of 25 years. The styles of that period were pretty much the same through the Napoleonic war period but styles carried on for a while.

We tend to have quite an accumulation of material in our camps so we are portraying a free mans camp. This would be company officers, tradesmen, labourers and boatmen/canoe men who have decided to stay in the Northwest after expiration of their contracts. They had to live outside the Fort and would possibly be in wedge type tents in the summer.

A trade company brigade traveled extremely lightly. Their tentage was minimal as were cooking equipment, guns etc. so in order to have an abundance of materiel the free man camp is more appropriate and comfortable for us to portray. In reality we are probably far more equipped than they would have been.

So that is what we are intending to portray but we also have lots of equipment that would have been found in the latter stages of the trade or in very well established posts. Cast iron kettles were found in all Montreal canoes ( 1 @ 15 lb and 1 of 8 lb), even in the French era, so we know they were as far as Fort William and sold for 1 MB per pound. Whether they made it over Grande Portage is a question. However things like caldrons and Dutch ovens add to the experience for us and the public. So when we are talking to people about our camp, it is good to point out some of these things and why they are there. It actually enhances their overall experience as well.

## *The People Costumes and accoutrements:*

We are portraying the Canadian/British fur trade companies in the Northwest. That primarily included people from the British Isles, Quebec, Aboriginal and Métis people. If you are not of Métis or Aboriginal origin then you should not portray those cultures.

The personality in the fur trade where the primary British and Canadian companies operated is far different from what is commonly portrayed by the movie industry, buck skinning or mountain man type groups. The latter have no reality in the Canadian scene during the time of the fur trade or, no doubt, anywhere the Bay or Northwest companies were operating. In fact much of what is portrayed by those sources probably has questionable reality. So do not use magazine articles/pictures and movies as a basis for your costume. Re-enactor supplier’s web sites should also be subject to question.

Every one in the club has probably got stuff they wish they had never bought. Before you start putting together a costume or buying equipment visit one of our demos and talk to your mentor and the more senior club members about it.

Putting together a costume can be very simple, as the basic trade items are what were worn by the trade company employees. However the higher a person was in the ranks of the companies the more prosperous and sophisticated they became, hence the clothes reflect that.

A basic costume would be a trade shirt, silk neck scarf, corduroy pants (shirt worn over top), a sash, moccasins or shoes with a rounded toe and low heel that can be unnoticed under the pants. That would portray a millieus (middleman in a canoe).

The personality was much different than the American movie industry would portray and it still very much exists in Canadian society. These people were a long way from home in a very uncivilized land and they carried the attitude of the British Empire and the French. **They would keep up appearances no matter what.**

The canoe brigades stopped when they were close to a post and they shaved, cut their hair, and cleaned themselves, their clothes and their kit. They dressed in the clothing style of London or Montreal (the outside) to the greatest degree possible. They arrived in good order so that it appeared that the journey was no big deal for them! Having adversity not show and achieving the objective, that was how they got bragging rights and reputation. You didn't have to say anything, your achievement and appearance said it all!

Higher ranks had more formal clothes and they intended to be as in style in the Northwest as they would have been in Montreal, London or Edinburgh

They would use native clothing style or equipment where it was efficient to do so but they would not be dressed as a native. That was frowned upon and the person would have been ostracized. Intertribal wars were a very real danger and when the shooting and chopping started, "if it looks like a Duck, then close enough! They deliberately set themselves apart from the aboriginals.

Men who took aboriginal wives dressed them as Europeans to the extent that they could afford to do so. Europeans and aboriginals alike knew that hides were not healthy clothing and tended to avoid leather except when it was the obvious practical choice.

There was a tendency to keep the traders and their families distinct from the aboriginal groups and this was probably important in keeping their neutrality amongst the aboriginal society.

Getting involved in the politics or affairs of the aboriginal society could be deadly. This lesson was learned from what happened to the Coureur de Bois in the early days of the trade. They lost many people because they interfered in the aboriginal society and encouraged fighting. The Bay and NWCo were just the opposite, they promoted peace with the aboriginal people and in the case of the Bay demanded that their personnel treated people with "civility", even if it was a dangerous situation, and they disciplined those that didn't.

The traders could not afford to get into a fight. They maintained their position and discipline with people but could not risk a fight on a large scale. They just would not win! On the other hand the Native leaders knew that plundering a post would lead to longer travel distances to trade in the future and they may be refused when they got there. So a balance was struck. You have to admire the strength of the native leadership and the control that they had over their people, all exercised through persuasion.

The clothing was primarily cloth of the types they were selling. In fact as cloth and trade clothes became available to them, the native peoples changed to it as well. Cloth clothes were expensive so if they were doing heavy work leather pants may be used. A leather top coat or parka over wool capote, to break the wind, would definitely be used in winter and possibly in the other three seasons. Don't get heavily into fringing as that came later.

Leather makes poor clothing. You can't clean it and when it gets wet it is cold clammy, heavy and is slow to dry. "You do not stay healthy in leather" as was written in one journal. The biggest exception to that was footwear. Virtually everyone wore moccasins. As their shoes and beef shoes wore out, moccasins were all that was available. In fact many probably went to moccasins as soon as they arrived at a post, as moccasins were the most appropriate footwear to use. They outperformed European footwear in almost every way. The European stuff would have been prestigious though for dress occasions.

The company employees were not trappers or hunters. The Aboriginal people did those tasks. At times the employees hunted with the aboriginal people as helpers or as a diversion to their normal work but it was not their job per se. The trade companies made some exceptions if a person went on an exploration but in general employees were only allowed to trade in feathers. As free men however these tasks would become a major part of what they would do for a living in addition to cutting fire wood. The Métis men were noted for wearing black corduroy (cord do roi) pants, embroidered or beaded vests and blue capotes.

### *Tentage:*

We use wedge tents. They are well documented as being used at the time and are easily transported. The canvas used at the time was white and they didn't have smoke holes or stoves in them. Pegs would have been sharpened sticks. We have concerns in using them. Instead use steel pegs/pins that can be driven flush with the ground so there is no tripping hazard and they aren't noticed. Don't use coloured plastic ones as they stand out as not appropriate.

Tents should be of white fire proofed canvas. We are near fires and have candles/lanterns in our tents, so there is a definite fire hazard! Check in with those that own tents before you buy one.

Tepees are also very appropriate but more difficult to transport and manage. They are excellent in virtually every other way though.

Wall tents of the outfitter type came much later. Marquee type tents existed at the time and were commonly used by the military but are not documented as being there but not a common thing in the trade.

Military round peaked tents are mentioned as being used around the Hudson Bay area. They cut smoke holes in them so that they could be used in cold weather.

The traders established themselves in buildings before the winter set in. Their travelling after that tended to be from establishment to establishment travelling on snow shoes with carioles (toboggan with skin or canvas sides) pulled by dogs. They slept in the open. They scraped away the snow and banked it to windward, then placed the carioles on their side on top of that. If available they made a bed of spruce bows on which they placed two buffalo robes. Wrapped themselves in four blankets and placed a robe on top. Their heads were to the carioles (windward) with a good fire at their feet. There was a belief that you should have your head oriented North to have a good sleep so that may also have had some influence but primarily the wind direction was the concern. You had to have a fire so you wouldn't be using a wedge tent in severe conditions.

Hunting camps were established by aboriginal people with the intent of a stay so they were probably using tepees, most likely of birch bark strips. Other shelters like a lean-to or even just sleeping with their back to an evergreen tree with a fire at their feet would have been used.

Don't let the public in your tent unless you are there to supervise them. Children can get into things they shouldn't and they can't be seen. It also reduces the potential for theft.

### *Furnishings:*

**Beds are hard to portray** if you are actually going to sleep in your tent overnight. If available they used cut spruce boughs as the mattress and placed their oil cloth and blankets on that. Of course a canoe brigade may not have even had that. They slept on the ground under the canoe or in the York boat covered by the sail. There also would have been situations where spruce boughs simply were not available. Straw mattresses (palliasse) were also common in those days and used by the army due to their portability. The military ones covered the whole floor of the wedge tent with 5 people sleeping on it. We haven't heard of the traders using them but that was the sort of day to day thing that just doesn't get mentioned in journals. Oat straw was the best stuffing as it doesn't mildew. Northern bed straw is a native weed also.

These people weren't any stronger or more immune to cold or discomfort and health hazards than we are. Granted they were more acquainted with adversity and were likely mentally tougher. They suffered though as is evidenced by their mottos "**Strength in adversity**" and "**Perseverance**". The mission statement of their time?

So, as is normal to intelligent people, you don't suffer for suffering's sake. People who prosper in remote places are innovative and creative, so they would have done whatever they could to improve their situation and comfort. It is fundamental to preserving your health and surviving!

The best option for comfort and correctness, other than sleeping on the ground, is to use a low cot (6 inch high) and cover it with your blankets so that it can't be seen. Another option would be an air mattress concealed in the same way. The problem is that some people can't get in and out of low beds. If you have a full height cot in your tent, conceal it with your blankets, so that it goes unnoticed or keep your tent closed. If someone notices, tell them "good catch" and explain why. They will usually appreciate your position. Better yet remove the cot or air mattress during the day when visitors are around. They will marvel at your toughness!

**Tent floors:** Tent floors were probably the oil cloth used to wrap the blankets. It would help control bugs and keep you dry from the ground. It has been documented that one trader ( John MacDonald of Garth) had a Persian rug for his tent floor. That would have been wool, so good choice for bugs that crawl.

**Lanterns:** There were a number of lantern types used. A punched tin lantern was probably relatively common. It is cheap and could be made from other items being recycled like burnt out kettles. Glass was at a premium in the Northwest so if it was used in lanterns is a question. Lamps may have been present but they would have been very small and compact. In a summer camp it is questionable if lamps would have been used. People in the homestead era basically went to bed when it got dark so that was probably the same in the fur trade, especially in the long light of summer. However lanterns that are correct in design, materials and construction are acceptable.

**Chairs:** We use a number of chair types but in reality there would have been very little other than cargo boxes. The two board chair may have some authenticity as it was used in the crofts in Scotland as evidenced by some period pictures. Cargo box lumber would be available to build them. They are also used in many parts of the world. It is a logical solution to a problem. Other types should be judged on the basis of "was the material available and did they have the tools and skill to do it"? When it comes to skill there is no doubt that they had many. The canoe men were Quebec farm boys and the trade companies had trained carpenters at the posts. So if it is a logical solution to you then it may have been and probably was then.

The public isn't to be invited to use the chairs, especially the two board type. If one person is allowed to try then they all can and not everyone is fit enough to do so. A three hundred pounder can easily break a two board chair and how do you say "no"? Also people can roll forward out of them.

**Cargo containers:** Trade goods were crated in sturdy wooden boxes, kegs and canvas covered bundles called pieces. They were marked with a code for the destination, piece

number on the manifest, weight and sometimes the year of shipment. The wood from the crates (clap board) could be used to make whatever fit typical crating dimensions. Pieces as they were called, weighed approximately 90 pounds each. Using modern crated mixed freight loadings at 20lb/cf would give a crate volume of 4.5 cf. They would have worked in full dimension lumber and probably in even or fractional foot dimensions. A crate 1.5 x 1.5 x 2 feet is 4.5 cf in volume (very close to tea chest dimensions). However their goods ( for the HBC) contained a great deal of metal so their mixed weight might have been a bit higher resulting in smaller pieces. 1.25 x 1.25 x 2 foot crates would have been very handy. Gun crates would have had 4 foot boards in them. Just right for 2 board chairs? Their personal cassettes were 1.25 x 1.25 x 2.25 feet. That is also a clue as to what would have been considered a practical packing size.

Kegs for liquids were about 9 gallon. Smaller kegs could be used for goods that needed to be kept dry. A cluster of 4 kegs bound together was called a Macaroon. Powder kegs may have had brass hoops.

The boxes themselves are very useful. Be sure to cut the corners on a 45 to blunt them. You wouldn't want to hole the canoe. The canoe bottoms had a set of poles laid lengthwise on them to distribute the load but pieces could contact the sides of the canoe.

### *Cooking utensils:*

*In a period correct camp there would have been copper trade kettles with few other metal cooking utensils. Maybe a copper tea kettle and possibly some iron pot hooks. When we open a camp to the public we need to be aware and minimize items that are non compliant. Especially heavy metal items like caldrons and Dutch ovens. Store them in a closed tent. However if we are cooking and need them then we should explain their context in the time line of the trade. In reality people are very interested in the cooking and all the utensils so it actually enhances their experience and our dinner.*

**Fire irons:** We use fire irons in our camps. In reality they would have been rare even in the forts/houses. However they are safe around a crowd as compared to using a pole frame. Some people question the weight and figure it out but most are just intrigued by cooking over a fire.

**Caldrons and Dutch ovens:** Caldrons and Dutch ovens were commonplace in Europe and Eastern Canada in the time frame of our camps. However they were much too heavy for the aboriginal peoples and the nomadic way of life, as well as for travelling traders. However they may have been present in the Forts/Houses where things were more permanent. The women in the Forts/Houses were aboriginal or mixed blood and would have been fully comfortable with the copper trade kettles so it is not likely that there was very much cast iron until after working class white women started to arrive. They probably wouldn't leave home without their caldron! However a cast iron kettle would have been prestigious and we know they were as far West as Fort William so who knows they were probably around.

**Coffee pots:** Coffee was not sold by the trade companies. The Blackfoot had coffee at times, which they had obtained from sources in the Southern plains. However it was small amounts and rare. Tea was sold in large quantities and it was loose leaf type tea. The primary types were:

- Hyson Green tea
- Bohea Black tea
- Congou black tea

Tea bricks were not used. All tea used in Canada was bought through the London tea auction and it was loose tea.

**Eating Utensils:** Trade knives, three tine forks and soup spoons is probably as good as it got for the majority of people in the trade. Try to find something that is not bright metal or stainless. Old silverware items may be a solution. If what you have doesn't look period correct then keep it put away when guests are around the camp.

**Plates and bowls:** Bright tin ware or Britannia metal was probably the most common type of material for plates and bowls. Enamel ware was not present at that time but there was a variety of china produced in England and China. The tea ships were ballasted with Chinese blue and white china since the 1600's so it was cheap and readily available. Blue and white as well as regency patterns were common then. There may also have been pewter on the tables. Bright tin ware is not the best thing to be eating off of so we usually accept enamel ware as a substitute. Some outfitters sell a stainless steel product in place of tin, which is acceptable too.

### *Fire Safety:*

*We have to be vigilant around our fires to maintain the safety of the public and our members. In the 1800's more women died of burns than in child birth!*

The camp fire can not be left unattended. Once the fire is lit we need to have someone there to manage the fire and the people around it.

Use the chairs as a barrier or perimeter around the camp fire area. Ensure that they are far enough back from the fire to prevent a person, falling forward out of a chair, from reaching the fire.

Children and the public are not to be allowed past the chairs when people are cooking and handling hot pots and liquids.

Children are not to be allowed to approach the fire.

Period clothing can be especially dangerous around a fire, long dresses in particular. Consideration has to be given to keeping sparks off of dresses and aprons. It was common practice in the 17 and 1800's for women to dampen their hems if they were working near a fire.

Gun powder is not allowed past the chair barrier or powder horns to be worn when sitting on the chairs around or near the fire.

Water buckets are to be kept close to the fire and filled at all times.

Consideration has to be given to the potential for the fire to spread during the day and at night.

### *Camp Set Up and Planning:*

Before the tents are set up or the fire started, give some consideration to:

- How the public will flow through or circulate through the camp.
- Probable wind direction and preferred tent locations before setting the fire location.
- Where will the firing line be?
- How many people will be in camp. Leave enough room between the tents and the fire to accommodate the chairs and public path ways.
- Where will the first aid kit be and how do we contact emergency services for medical or fire emergencies.

### *Sharp Items:*

**Our camps have lots of sharp items!** Axes, hawks and knives are a great attraction to kids and there is always the potential for some adult to want to demonstrate their wood splitting prowess.

Everything should be sheathed or axes by the fire embedded in fire wood.

Don't leave hawks unattended in your tent where kids may get at them unnoticed. Knives should be on your person, in use or in a secure place.

There are sharp items around the fire as well and the public has to be kept away from them. Nobody but club members go there.



### *Chores, Food and Cooking:*

*Many of our members enjoy cooking and at times there can be a great deal of congestion around the fire. Those in attendance need to get together and work things out so that it is reasonable. Those who don't cook have chores to do as their contribution to the meals. The general concept is that many hands make light work so look for ways to contribute to the effort, don't just look!*

The water buckets around the fire need to be kept full at all times and fire wood needs to be hauled, split and piled near the fire. If you don't cook then consider these to be your tasks.

The camp area in general needs to be kept clear of tripping hazards and orderly especially in the camp fire area.

Keep an eye open for sharp things that are exposed to the public.

Be mindful of the guns and powder. Are they in a secure place where they can be watched?

The food list is circulated before our camps. If you don't cook then it is best to look at the breakfast stuff or staples like potatoes as your contribution. Maybe even Port or Wine. *Only those who contribute to the food get to eat.* The food list isn't intended to limit things but is a way of helping people to select something to contribute.

Guests are often invited but they must not be invited unless it is with the concurrence of the group at the demo. Discuss it before inviting people!

Cleanup and dishes is a job for those who didn't cook. This task tends to be a let down after a fine meal but needs to be done so step up.