



# Voyageur Canoe

## Program Purpose:

The purpose of this program is to introduce students to the fur trade era and the lives of some of its most colorful participants, the voyageurs. Students will engage in a role play by paddling a Voyageur canoe and learning about the Voyageur way of life.

**Length of Program:** 1½ - 3 hours (1½ minimum)

**Age:** Grades 1st - adult

## Maximum Number of Participants:

20 (19 youth + 1 adult)

## Objectives:

After completion of all activities, students will be able to:

- Describe the rugged life of the Voyageur
- Identify the four major players in the fur trade era: the *bourgeois* (rich European investors), the voyageurs, (the “truck drivers” of the fur trade), the Native Americans (the trappers and guides through the new territory), and the beaver (the “plu” or pelt being the standard of currency), and describe their roles.
- Interpret the role the fur trade had on the exploration and development of the North American continent.
- Trace the flow of goods from Fort Michilimackinac across the Great Lakes to the Wisconsin River.
- (Voyageur on Land only) Demonstrate fire starting techniques using flint and steel.

## Preparation:

Before the class arrives:

- Take the cover off the Voyageur Canoe and bail if necessary.
- Unlock the boathouse, canoe paddles, and Voyageur canoe.
- Set up materials including trunk and contents, wool blanket, beaver pelt, basket backpack and l’Avant paddle on a picnic table.
- Don Voyageur garb and character.
- (Voyageur on Land only) Collect the fire starting trunk from the Nature Center and set up by the campfire ring.
- (Voyageur on Land only) Get additional birch bark from the wood shed and bring to the campfire ring.
- (Voyageur By Land & Sea only) Make sure orange crate is in the canoe.

## Basic Outline (Voyageur Canoe):

- I. Introduction (25 minutes)
- II. Prep for Departure (20 minutes)
- III. Loading the Voyageur Canoe (10 minutes)
- IV. Paddling the Canoe (25-60 minutes)
- V. Unloading the Canoe (10 minutes)
- VI. Conclusion (10 minutes)

## Basic Outline (Voyageur on Land):

- I. Introduction (25 minutes)
- II. Flint & Steel fire starting (25 minutes)
- III. Voyageur Games (25 minutes)
- IV. Conclusion (15 minutes)

## Basic Outline (Voyageur by Land & Sea):

- I. Introduction (25 minutes)
- II. Prep for Departure (20 minutes)
- III. Loading the Voyageur Canoe (10 minutes)
- IV. Paddle to Black Hawk Island (25 minutes)
- V. Unloading the Canoe (10 minutes)
- VI. Farewell (5 minutes)
- VII. Welcome new Voyageurs (20 minutes)
- VIII. Loading the Voyageur Canoe (15 minutes)
- IX. Paddling the Canoe (35 minutes)
- X. Unloading the Canoe (10 minutes)
- XI. Conclusion (15 minutes)

## Materials:

Beaver pelt

Trunk - containing pot, dried peas and corn, Voyageur mess kit, hatchets, woven ribbons, knife and sheath, seashells, and iron spear point)

Wool blanket

Top hat

Toques

Voyageur dress components (linen shirt, leg and waist sashes, silk scarf or toque, clay pipe)

L’Avant canoe paddle

4-H flag (summer only)

## Introduction:

### Greetings

You are a gruff, bossy Voyageur whose name is your choosing. Immediately yell at and intimidate your new *engages* (employees). Tell them they do not look like Voyageurs to you. Ask them what they can do for you as a Voyageur:

“Can you sing? Show me. Can you do this: la, la, la, la? I’ll pay you more for a good voice.” (*When you find*

someone with a good singing voice, preferably an adult, tell them to hold l'Avant paddle.)

"Are you strong? Show me your muscles. Pick me up. Pick him/her up. Your muscle feels like a wet noodle." (When you find someone sufficiently strong, throw them a toque.)

"Are you smart? If you were, you wouldn't want to be a Voyageur."

"You are so short. I like short voyageurs, they take up less room in the canoe." (When you find someone sufficiently short, throw them a toque.)

"Do you like frost bites? Mosquito bites? Black flies? You'll learn to love them."

"Are you afraid of hard work? Let me see the callouses on your hands. Your hands are as smooth as a baby's butt." (When you find someone with rough hands, throw them a toque.)

"Do you like to get up before dawn and paddle all day 'til after dark? You'll have to if you are going to be a Voyageur." (If someone says yes, throw them a toque.)

"Do you want to be rich? If you do, then go away. No such thing as a rich Voyageur."

"Can you read and write? If you can, why would you want to be a Voyageur? Get a real job. Go be a clerk or something."

"Are you a whiner? Go away, I hate whiners!"

"Can you swim? Swimmers are no good to me, they take too many risks with the rapids. Better to be afraid of the water and not abandon the cargo." (When you find someone who cannot swim, throw them a toque.)

"What is 2+2? Mathematicians make lousy paddlers, go away!"

"Are you in trouble with the law? Fine with me."

"Are you vain and uncouth? You'll fit right in."

"Can you cook? I'll pay you more money if you can cook." (When you find someone who can cook, give them the metal pot to hold.)

"Let me see your feet. I hate Voyageurs with big feet, they take up too much cargo space." (When you find someone with small feet, throw them a toque.)

"Will you obey me? I want obedient Voyageurs. Stick your finger in your ear. Stick your finger in her/his ear."

"Are you religious? It helps to trust in God, you'll learn not to trust in me."

"Do you know any French? You need to understand French my friend since that is the language we all speak."

"Can you shoot a rifle? Are you a good hunter? You can help the cook put game into our food."

### Who We Are

"*Bonjour, Messieurs* (bon-zhoor, may-sieur)! I said *BONJOUR!* That means hello, now you say it back to me. Ah, *tres bien* (tray bee-en), that means very good. *Je m'appelle* (zhe ma-pell) (insert name here.) My name is \_\_\_\_\_. My new *engages* (en-gauze-zhay), welcome to the brigade! That means that you all now work for me. You are employees of the same fur trade company as me, and I am your *gouvernais* (goo-ver-nigh). That means I am the boss and you do what I say. My friends, it is the enlightened year of 1762, and we work for the best fur trade company in the world, the Northwest Company, *Vive la compagnie* (vee-vah lah com-pahn-nyee)! I can see you are a little slow, so we'll try it again. When I say 'Northwest Company, you shout, '*Vive la compagnie!* Okay? We work for the best fur trade company in the world, the Northwest Company, *Vive la compagnie!* (This time the kids should shout with you. And we hate the Hudson Bay Company, stinking English pigdogs, (spit)! Whenever I say Hudson Bay Company, you should shout, 'Stinking English pigdogs!' and spit! (Try not to spit on anyone's shoes.) *Tres bien*, very good, my voyageurs. If you are going to be a voyageur, you must act like one. We are loud and proud of our life and work as voyageurs. We are French, *metis* (mixed Indian and French blood), or full-blooded Indian. We practice the Catholic faith, we gamble, work like beavers and sing like larks! Later on I will teach you one of my favorite songs about a lark, *Allouette.* "

### The Route

"Since you are new, I will explain how your life will be with the brigade. Our route travels between Fort Michilimackinac (mee-chee-mackinaw), through the Great Lakes, down the Fox and Wisconsin River to several Indian encampments along the Wisconsin River. We are called *hivernants* (e-ver-know), or "winterers," because we live and trade with the Fox, Sauk, Kickapoo, and Mascoutin, who live along the Wisconsin River, during the winter. Then, as soon as the ice is free from the rivers, we paddle up the Wisconsin River to Portage, named for the great *portage* (poor-tozsh) that takes place there. We must leave the river, unload all the cargo, and carry it and the canoe over land to the put-in at the Fox River. Then we paddle up the Fox to Lake Michigan. We must paddle up Lake Michigan to the strait that joins Lake Michigan with Lake Huron. That is where Fort Michilimackinac is located. We will arrive there

sometime in June. Before you arrive at the fort, you will take your one bath for the year and put on your finest clothes, and we will join in the celebration of the *rendezvous* (rahn-day-voo)! PARTY! We will stay there about two weeks while we unload our furs, traded to us by the Indians, and load up our new cargo of trade items for the Indians. Then we will say *au revoir* (oh ri-vvahr) to the fort, (wave goodbye) and retrace our path back down Lake Michigan, down the Fox River to the portage, onto and down the Wisconsin to your Indian encampments by the fall.”

#### The Portage

“Sound good? You see why you have to be strong and a good paddler. You will be expected to paddle 40-60 strokes per minute, and paddle 12-15 hours a day. Oh, and I did I tell you how much you are expected to carry over a portage? You must each carry six 90-lb packs of cargo over a portage, two at a time. So you are carrying 180 lbs, balanced on your back by a head strap.”

“You are allowed to stop to rest, called a *posé* (poh-szay) every 1/3 or 1/2 mile. Then you will run back, get 2 more bundles, and carry them to the *pose*, put them down, and run back for 2 more. Understand? Then about 4 of you must run back and carry the canoe! I once heard from a friend about a 45 mile long portage that required 122 *posé*!”

#### The Cargo

“What is all this cargo we are carrying? Well, it depends on what season it is. In the spring, when we are traveling toward Fort Michilimackinac, we are carrying all the fur that the Indians trapped, prepared, and traded to us over the winter. The most important, of course, is the beaver pelt (show stretched pelt.) The beaver pelt is the most valued of all pelts because it is used to make something every rich *bourgeois* (boozh-wah) or gentlemen in Europe needs. A top hat, of course! (Put the top hat on someone’s head). A gentlemen cannot go anywhere without his top hat. But you look ridiculous- you are a voyageur, not a gentlemen! Instead we wear a *toque* (tuke), and if you are very experienced, like me, you may wear a silk scarf. But we carry other furs as well:

- Coyote
- Mink
- Fox
- Marten
- Fisher
- Muskrat
- Skunk

At the end of the rendezvous at the fort, we load up all the cargo that the Northwest Company (check to make sure they shout here!) has brought from Montreal for us to trade to the Indians. Some items may be (hold up the examples, if available):

- Tobacco
- Kegs of rum and wine

- muskets
- bars of lead and bullet molds
- gunpowder
- flint
- iron spear points
- hatchet heads
- knives
- wool blankets
- colored cloth
- boxes of needle and thread
- silk ribbons
- awls
- clay pipes
- beads of colored glass
- metal pots

Without these items, the Indians must rely solely on the bone from animals, and pots or baskets made from wood or bark. It is much easier and faster to cook over a fire using a metal pot!”

#### The Food

“If you are lucky enough to be the cook for our canoe brigade, you will get paid more. You will make us a delicious and filling breakfast called *rubaboo*! Sound tempting? The cook will boil dried peas or corn, and mix in a lot of pemmican (dried pounded buffalo meat mixed with lard and Saskatoon berries.) You know it is done when the spoon sticks straight up in the pot. You will consume 4000-5000 calories a day! Is anyone here a good shot with a rifle, or good with a fishing line? If possible, we’ll add fish, turtle, muskrat, wild bird eggs, and beaver tail to the *rubaboo*.

#### The Daily Routine

“Voyageurs wake up to shouts of “*Levez, levez!*” (la-vay) or “Get up!” at about 3 or 4 AM. You will load the canoe and paddle for 5 hours or so, then have breakfast at about 9 am. You get back into the canoe, paddle all day, maybe *portage*, until sunset, when you will have dinner (more *rubaboo*). We usually skip lunch unless you have endured a particularly challenging *portage*. To sleep, you will unload the canoe, overturn it on shore and sleep underneath it. Tomorrow, you get up and do the same thing.”

#### **Prep for Departure:**

“Before we can leave, you must take the Voyageur oath and pledge your life in service to *la compagnie*. Raise your right hand and repeat after me:

‘On my honor as a voyageur, I pledge to serve, obey, and faithfully carry out all that the *bourgeois* require me to do, to work to their profit, to prevent losses, to inform him if I have any knowledge of such losses, and to do all that a good hired man should and is obliged to do without being allowed to do any personal trading.’

*Tres magnifique* (tray mag-nif-eek), my voyageurs!  
Now you are ready to receive your most important tool  
as a voyageur – your paddle.’

Take the group to the boathouse. Assign an adult to do the check-in/check-out procedure. Say to the voyageurs that in this enlightened year of 1762, since none of them can swim, all are required to wear PFD’s, or personal flotation devices. Give every student and adult an appropriately sized PFD, then send them to the adult in charge of check-in/check-out. Afterwards, demonstrate the correct use of a paddle. Rules for the paddles are:

- 1) The blade should never touch the ground. If they want to rest, they should place the blade on top of their foot.
- 2) When you hand them a paddle, they should respond “*Merci beaucoup*”, (mayr-see bow-coo), or thank you very much.
- 3) Only 14 can paddle at a time, but voyageurs may switch paddlers during travel.

#### **Loading the Canoe:**

Have all the students line up facing the canoe while you introduce it. Our canoe is a *Canot de Maitre* or Montreal Canoe. It is 35 feet long and capable of carrying 4 tons of cargo, yet it weighs only 300 lbs (600 when wet). When fully loaded, the gunwales of the canoe are only 6 inches above the surface of the water. There is another type of canoe that is sometimes used for traveling shorter distances, the *Canot du Nord* or North Canoe. That canoe is 25 feet long, but still capable of carrying 1 ½ tons of cargo.

The canoe is made solely of materials found in the forest: the bark of yellow birch trees, cedar ribs for the frame of the canoe, pine logs for the gunwales. The birch bark was sewn together using *wattape* (the roots of the spruce tree), and the seams were sealed with pitch. Birch bark was the ideal material because it is waterproof and very lightweight. But canoes were notoriously easy to capsize. One *bourgeois* wrote after riding in one, “You really had to keep your tongue in the middle of your mouth; otherwise the canoe would capsize.”

Canoes were so fragile that they were never loaded on land, and were sometimes sunk to the bottom of lakes for the winter, to prevent the canoe from snapping in the cold winter air.

Stress to the students that when entering the canoe, the following procedure must be used:

- 1) grasp the *gouvernais*’s forearm,
- 2) step onto the seat,
- 3) step onto the floor of the canoe,
- 4) sit and slide.

They should never sit or stand on the thwart of the canoe. It is not meant to bear weight and will break. In 1762 this canoe costs \$100 (about \$9,000 currently).

Load the middle of the canoe first, then go to the ends and work toward the middle. The *Avant* sits in front and has special duties – they must lead the songs, set the paddling cadence, and watch for rocks, logs, and other hazards. The *gouvernais* sits in back and steers. Once all the students are seated, tell them that they must kiss the canoe (see how many do). Then say, “You silly voyageurs, I knew you were not so smart! Don’t kiss the canoe with your lips, kiss with your hips!” Have the students slide to the edges of their seats so their hips are near the gunwales. Ask them which is the bow (front), stern (back), starboard (right), and port (left) on the canoe. Untie the ropes, hop in, and paddle away. (In summer, place the 4-H flag in the stern).

#### **Paddling the Canoe:**

Let the students flounder for awhile, then teach the following commands:

*En avant* (on-ah-vohn) – paddle forward

*Arretez* (ah-reh-tay) – stick the paddle blade into the water, blade perpendicular to the canoe. This will stop or ‘arrest’ the canoe.

*En arriere* (ohn are-ree-air) – paddle backwards

*Reposez* (ray-poh-say) – rest or repose

*Saluez* (sal-you-aye) – give the voyageur salute.

Quiz them on the commands. Practice turning the canoe. Then head around Beaver and Blackhawk Islands.

Encourage the *Avant* to lead songs. Teach them a few of the French songs (see Appendix 1). Practice paddling to a cadence (one, two, stroke, one, two, stroke, etc.). Once in awhile, *reposez* and take out your pipe. Voyageurs could rest 10 minutes every hour to smoke a pipe. In addition to the cargo, voyageurs also carried a large oil cloth in the canoe. In periods of high wind, the voyageurs would rig the oil cloth to form a sail, and shout, “*Souffle, soufflé, la vieille* (vee-aye)!” (Blow, blow old women of the wind). Use this time to point out natural features and allow them to ask questions about their lives as voyageurs.

To dock the canoe, you must paddle past the dock, then turn the canoe around, and dock bow first.

#### **Unloading the Canoe:**

The *gouvernais* should exit the canoe first, tie both ends, and assist the voyageurs in exiting the same way they entered. Try to have an adult exit first and grab the clipboard at the boathouse for check-in/check-out procedure. The students should hang up their own paddles on the rack. They may not take off their PFD’s until they are standing on the paved path in front of the boathouse.

#### **Conclusion:**

Once all PFD’s are hung, gather the voyageurs one last time. Ask if there are any final questions about their lives as voyageurs. Common questions are:

- 1) What is the life expectancy of a voyageur? (Usually only to mid-thirties to forties)
  - 2) Most common cause of death? (hernias, heart attacks, and drowning)
  - 3) Annual pay? (100-400 livres per year, equivalent to \$80-\$250/year)
- Bid your voyageurs *au revoir*.

**Option #1: Voyageur on Land** (*Winter/High Water option*)

Introduction is the same. You may show them the Voyageur canoe and give all related info, but they will not paddle. Instead, split the group in half. Half will practice fire starting with flint and steel; the other half will play Voyageur games with the *gouvernais*.

Flint and Steel Fire Starting

Bring all students and adults to the campfire ring. Tell them you will demonstrate how to safely start a fire using flint and steel. In the trunk are the contents listed:

- 8 tin plates
- 4 eye goggles
- tin with charcloth
- tin with 3 flint rock pieces and 3 handle shaped steel pieces
- extra steel strikers
- birch bark
- roll of jute string
- bag of tow linen

Put on eye goggles. Tell the Voyageurs that in this enlightened year of 1762, anyone wishing to start a fire or watch someone else start a fire must wear eye protection. This is because if a piece of steel gets in your eye, you don't have an eye anymore and there's nothing a doctor can do for you. (One-eyed voyageurs were not unheard of).

Place a piece of birch bark on the tin plate. Cut a piece of jute and shred it to make a mouse nest, or put a handful of tow linen on the birch bark. Place a piece of charcloth on top of the mouse nest. The tricky part is to get a spark to land on the charcloth. Show them how to strike the flint against the steel to create sparks (think "peel steel.") Remind the students that it takes practice to get the technique right, so they shouldn't get frustrated if they can't create sparks right away.

The charcloth will glow orange if a spark catches. Fold the birch bark over, hold up the bundle and blow gently. Smoke should rise up, and if you're lucky, the birch bark will ignite. If the students successfully start a fire, they should let it burn out on their tin plates.

Half the group will remain with an adult to practice fire starting. The other half will follow the *gouvernais* to a clearing for some voyageur games.

Voyageur Games

See Appendix 2 for a list of Voyageur games. You can also add in strength contests (who can you pick up?) and the "Game of Graces."

Game of Graces

The game of graces uses sticks and hoops. Every person gets two sticks. These are used to catch and throw the hoops. You can play this game in a circle, or in two lines facing each other.

When done with the games, the groups will switch. When both groups are finished, conclude the class.

**Option #2: Voyageur by Land & Sea** (*3 hour option*)

This class combines Voyageur canoeing with a Blackhawk Island Hike. Up to 40 people total can participate. Half paddle over to Blackhawk Island on the barge, led by a Naturalist. They hike across the island, explore the caves, and conclude in Indian Valley. The other half start with the Voyageur Canoe program. The introduction, prep for departure, loading the canoe, and paddling instructions are the same with one addition: the voyageurs should actually load the "cargo" into the canoe before departure. The voyageurs paddle to Indian Valley, where the Blackhawk Island hikers are waiting.

The *gouvernais* steers the canoe to the sandy beach. Using the crate, the *gouvernais* hops out and ties off the bow of the canoe. The voyageurs exit the canoe using the same procedures as loading, except that everyone exits near the bow and steps onto the crate before stepping ashore. The voyageurs give their PFD's to the Blackhawk hikers. Another introduction is given to this new group of voyageurs, showing the trade items brought along as cargo. The *gouvernais* follows the same procedure for prep for departure and loading as before. This new group of voyageurs can either continue paddling down the main channel of the Wisconsin River, or retrace their path along the original route. (In summer, **do not** enter the main channel). Unloading the canoe and conclusion procedures are the same.

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