

2017 Voyageurs Rendezvous Canoe Race

Rocky Mtn. House, AB to The Pas, MN

The Voyageurs Rendezvous was held at Rocky Mountain House at the end of June, to mark the 50th anniversary of the Centennial Voyageur Canoe Pageant, and Canada's 150th birthday. This included re-creating aspects of the 1967 Centennial Pageant, with a race in North Canoes from Rocky Mountain House to The Pas, Manitoba, July 1-23, 2017. The race was a Canada 150 Signature Project, of the Confluence Heritage Society. More information and pictures are on their website: voyageursrendezvous.ca.

Six teams entered, of 12 paddlers each, over 90% of whom were of indigenous descent. The teams hailed from First Nations/Metis communities in northern Saskatchewan and Manitoba. A minimum of two women were required per team (because it's 2017), with at least one in the canoe during all laps. The race started with a sprint at Rocky Mountain House on the North Saskatchewan River, won by the Joe Michel Memorial team (commemorating a member of the 1967 winning Manitoba team). The first lap went downriver from Rocky to Wolf Creek on July 1, and was won by team Cumberland House Cree, in 7 hours, 42 minutes. Lap times often exceeded 9 hours, with the longest being the lap into Battleford, where the winning time was 9 hr 55 minutes.

With 12 members each, teams were allowed to change out paddlers during a lap, so long as access was from shore. This was particularly valuable during the many hot days of July 2017, when some paddlers had to be evacuated from the canoes due to heat exhaustion and/or dehydration. Three jet boats from Rocky accompanied the whole race, providing safety and communications. Some lap sections were converted to brigades because of the heat. Nonetheless, all teams finished the race. Winning speeds ranged up to 17 km/hr (albeit with current) and lead canoes came in at nearly 70 strokes per minute.

Many of the paddlers brought spouses and partners, and their children and parents as well, which made for a small village for each team. With six teams plus the race management crew (and their partners+children), the whole entourage amounted to some 150 people. The village atmosphere was evident at one stop where a mother was nursing her toddler. The duty completed, she handed the youngster to grandma, hopped into her team's canoe, and raced off on the lap!

Hospitality shone at the host communities, particularly those with strong First Nation/Metis populations. As well as camping grounds and facilities, this included banquets and concerts, with jigging demonstrations and competitions. Stew and bannock was a favourite, and the Hatchet Lake team supplied fresh caribou on one occasion. Prince Albert put on a fair at the river bank, including two-person canoe sprints with a money purse. And so did Cumberland House, with the added feature of riverside bleachers for viewing. The Voyageurs Rendezvous Canoe Teams also held sprints in these communities, to go with the festivities.

Cumberland House Cree took an early lead in the race, with the Highway's Convenience, Joe Michel Memorial (both from Pelican Narrows and area) and the Hatchet Lake teams in a close battle for second. The two Pukatawagan teams (from Manitoba) contended for fifth, with Team Ma-chee-as ahead. Hatchet Lake gradually solidified their hold on second, with Highway's in third place, as the race entered Saskatchewan. But Hatchet Lake kept pushing and in the lap finishing at Turtleford, nearly 6 hours long, were a scant 6 seconds behind Cumberland House. The fight for first continued into Battleford where,

over a 10 hour day, Hatchet Lake was a mere 17 seconds behind Cumberland House. On top of the fierce competition, this reach was full of sand bars which bedevilled the leading canoe when they ran into shallow water, allowing the following canoe to pick a better channel and gain distance. But that repeated of course, and the lead changed hands more than once during these laps. Things began to shift in the Nipawin reach when Cumberland House finished fourth two days in a row, and the other top four teams gained time. Team Savage of Pukatawagan also began to finish ahead of Ma-chee-as. On the lap into Cumberland House, the Hatchet Lake team moved into first place in accumulated time and the Highways and Joe Michel teams gained significant time on Cumberland House. With a well-planned crew change, Highway's won the last lap into The Pas, moving into second place, and Team Savage moved up into fifth place.

The final positions were: Hatchet Lake (122hr 24min); Highway's Convenience (123hr 5min); Cumberland House Cree (123hr 18min); Joe Michel Memorial (123hr 50min); Team Savage – Pukatawagan (133hr 55min); Pukatawagan – Ma-chee-as (134hr 22min). Several veterans of the 1967 Voyageur Canoe Pageant were on hand in The Pas and helped with the awards ceremony. Each team received \$13,000 to finish. First place received an additional \$15,000; second \$10,000; third \$7500; fourth \$5000; fifth \$2500; and sixth \$1000. Although this might seem to be substantial dollars, this involved 3 weeks of grueling racing often in hot weather, and the money was shared among 12 members per team.

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Race Timer