

Fort to Fort 2017
Brigade Paddling and Reconciliation
By Jeffrey Dinsdale



In 2016 it wasn't a brigade, it was a flotilla. Over 200 canoes and kayaks, all with one goal, to Paddle For The Peace and to stop the construction of that dam. Ours was the only voyageur canoe, I was excited. In planning for this paddle I had vacillated about just which fur trade company standard to fly from the stern of the Wannabe. We were paddling within sight of Simon Fraser's Rocky Mountain Portage so I decided to celebrate with the NWC flag for all to see.

As we were making our way down the spectacular Peace River, we were overtaken by a cedar strip solo canoe being paddled by a striking looking First Nations man, he was using a unique hand carved wooden paddle featuring First Nations artwork. As he passed us, he uttered only one word, "Colonialists". My confused reaction was one of disbelief, followed by anger but very quickly by dismay. Despite what the eight of us in the canoe may have felt as individuals, to this man our canoe was making a statement. To First Nations we represented just one of the influences that had impacted his life and those of his people in a profoundly negative way.

This experience has haunted me and it was front and centre as we prepared to take part in the 2017 Fort to Fort Brigade from Fort St. James to Prince (Fort) George British Columbia. Eight friends came together, travelling from Ontario, the Northwest Territories and British Columbia to take part in this special brigade. Once again our boat was the Wannabe.

We actually started our 2017 'brigade' journey in Quesnel B.C., at a place on the Fraser River known locally as Voyageur Rock. This is the exact spot described by both Alexander Mackenzie (1793) and Simon Fraser (1808) in their journals. Travelling in Fraser's canoe was his clerk, 21 year old Jules Quesnel and in his journal, dated August 1, 1808, while on his return trip back to Fort St. James, having already paddled to the ocean, Fraser casually mentions "...Debarked at Quesnel's River where we found some of the natives....". The Quesnel River enters the Fraser at this spot, this is how our city got its name! We drove from Quesnel to Fort St. James using the 'back way', following the routes of both the Collins Overland Telegraph and the Yukon Telegraph lines. We stopped to hike for a short distance along Mackenzie's 1793 'Grease' Trail. We were thrilled to be able to actually make our camp inside Stuart's Lake Fort, a place where fur trade history appears with every turn of the head and where the view down Stuart Lake, with its fabulous sunsets was riveting.

What is a Voyageur Brigade, why do we paddle? As brigade members we remember the history of the early day voyageurs paddling 50 - 60 stokes a minute for 12 or more hours at a time, sleeping on the hard, wet ground with minimal shelter eating whatever was shot that day and put in the pot. As re-enactors we try our best to (sort of) duplicate the accomplishments of these incredible men. Being part of a group of large canoes is thrilling and exciting. Paddling in a brigade is a true living history event, we can re-enact and relive what has gone before us and commemorate part of our nation's history.

But what should we celebrate?

The canoe is an enduring symbol of wilderness and freedom throughout North America. Hand-made vessels moved people and goods for centuries before Europeans arrived, providing an excellent and practical mode of transportation that developed to serve the needs of Indigenous peoples.

Canoes were used by hunters, travelers, traders and warriors. When the French arrived in North America in the early 17th century, they quickly adapted Native canoes to their own use. The canoe is a product of First Nations ingenuity and skill; the voyageur canoe is a product of the fur trade. Canoes grew longer and wider, soon 36 foot Montreal canoes were being paddled by crews of voyageurs across hundreds of miles, laden with beaver pelts bound for European markets.

The Europeans were interested in exploration, but also in exploitation. The North American fur trade became a huge commercial venture that expanded across all of the continent. Unfortunately with this growth of commercialism came the need for more of everything; more furs, more land and territory and with this came the need for more power and control and the beginnings of colonialism.

As a country with the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission fresh in our minds, Canadians are now only too familiar with the lingering, pervasive, negative impacts of colonialism on First Nations and First Nations people.

In 2017 we celebrated the 150th anniversary and all that is good and special about Canada. In her forward to Sanford Osler's book *Canoe Crossings* Sheila Rogers lists other opportunities to celebrate. "Osler says the canoe is a symbol of healing. I believe he is right. Canada has an opportunity to tell a fresh story about the partnership between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. The canoe is a symbol of reconciliation, of people pulling together, of people 'all in the same boat'...carrying freight.....navigating obstacles, and moving forward – together. It's a symbol we can rally around to build a new relationship."

All who have paddled in a voyageur canoe know that everyone must paddle together in cadence and in the same direction if they are going to get to their destination. Paddlers learn how to support one-another, how to work as a team. Osler states "all who sit in the canoe set aside differences and focus on pulling together for the greater good of the journey with one heart, one mind and one spirit." This speaks to relationships with First Nations people and all others in our country.

This is what all who take part in Voyageur Brigade paddling must celebrate!

In preparation for our Fort to Fort experience, I had been thinking about asking a First Nations artist if they would create a drawing of a fish or a whale or an eagle or perhaps a bear, and then give me permission to place their artwork on the bow of the Wannabe. Then quite unexpectedly, just prior to our Fort to Fort journey, a friend, who is of Haida heritage gifted me with a print of her original artwork. She knew of my long standing involvement with sled dogs, particularly with dogs known by their Inuit name Qimmiq, dogs that have survived and evolved in the Arctic for over 4,000 years. In her drawing, the dog, with an accompanying inukshuk are detailed with the distinctive shapes and colours that would normally be associated with West Coast First Nations artwork. Haida artwork.

She gave me permission to have her artwork made into a beautiful flag. During the Fort to Fort Brigade, this was the flag that proudly flew from the stern of the Wannabe. This is our reconciliation flag. The image was proudly shared as a gift to First Nations that welcomed us to their territories as the journey of the Fort to Fort Brigade unfolded through the unceded lands of the Dakelh First Nation.

Our journey began in the home of the Nak'azdli Indian Band of Fort St. James and area. We travelled through the territory of the Stelat'en First Nation of the Omineca country of the Central Interior of British Columbia, stopping at the sacred site of Chinlac located near the confluence of the Stuart and Nechako Rivers. Our journey ended in the lands of the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation whose traditional territory includes the City of Prince George. It was with a big lump in my throat that the Wannabe took its place along with all of the other canoes in a quiet lagoon located just off of the Fraser River. This very spot is the true home of the Lhedli T'enneh First Nation, it is the place where their ancestors are buried, it is also the place from which they were evicted when the railway was built over their land in 1914.

Rising in the stern of his canoe and addressing a Band Councillor who was on a walkway looking down on our Brigade and representing the Lhedli T'enneh, our gouvernail spoke. He pointed out that the members of this brigade had actually journeyed from all over North America to get to this place. He pointed out that we had been paddling for three days to get to this spot, experiencing both adventures and misadventures along the way. He asked for permission to come ashore at this place and this was granted. The two groups warmly greeted each other, one step along the important journey of reconciliation.

The Canoe a Living Tradition by John Jennings

Canoe Crossings by Sanford Osler