

What is critical for a successful Canoe Brigade?

I am now looking back to 2005, to when I was first exposed to the idea of an historical re-enactment of a canoe brigade across much of western Canada. I have often thought, what were the critical requirements and events that allowed us to stage the successful David Thompson Brigade of 2008? I've been involved in a good many brigades since then, and the key elements vary for each brigade, but the 2008 brigade was the first big event for our community of paddlers, and I believe there were lessons that are worth recording.

1 – Committed Volunteers with a vision. Our initial visionary for 2008 was Andy Korsos. Andy was asked to speak about the fur trade, voyageurs and David Thompson on an evening CKUA radio program in the early '00s. The program stimulated much interest, and a follow-up meeting was organized. As I heard it, only Andy and Don Galloway were in attendance. They agreed to meet again when there was more interest and more supporters. In 2005 Andy was an observer to a Canoe Brigade organized by Vic Maxwell, that paddled from Rocky Mountain House to Edmonton over the May long weekend. During this event Andy met Ted Bentley, and in June I was invited out for a beer by Ted, to meet Andy and give consideration to his vision. From this session a meeting was called, Don was invited, and an organizing committee of about 8 - 10 was formed. In the early stages of planning there were some disparities, and some argued that it could only be accomplished as a race. Andy did his best to stick to a full re-enactment: period correct dress, paddles, maybe even birch bark canoes.

2 – Compromise & Flexibility. During the winter of 2005 and into 2006 the vision was tuned. The size of the brigade (we had considered upwards of 60 canoes at one point) balanced for available facilities along the way (we maxed out at 17 canoes for the start and finish and as low as 10 canoes at some points in 2008). We settled on a non-competitive event that would allow a wider variety of participants, with only a modest level of re-enactment. We were flexible from the early planning decisions, right through to decisions made daily during the brigade. The route, who paddled, and how the canoes were organized were adapted to meet the various environmental condition, supporters' timelines, and the physical condition of the participants as we progressed across western Canada.

3 – Time. At some time in '05-'06 Andy came to the realization that the trip we were trying to recreate - David Thompson's first return trip from the Columbia River basin - occurred in 2008, not 2007 as we had originally thought. This allowed us the time to better organize ourselves, our participants and our supporting communities. I often think that many brigade organizing crews do not start early enough. An early start means that the work is spread out, better accomplished, and the "pressures" do not build up.

4 – Expanding Support & a Distributed Structure. In the fall of 2006, we had two ladies from Saskatchewan Parks and Historical sites (Fort Carlton) attend a planning meeting in Edmonton. They came on board early, and they came on board "in spades." As the Brigade developed, these Saskatchewan Park folk arranged for us to camp at the former Borden (Hwy.#16) bridge campground, and arranged both camping at Fort Pitt, with supper (a very fine chicken supper!) support from the local Hutterite Colony. Once we could report that Saskatchewan Parks were "on board," other key supports such as Old Fort William and Rocky Mountain House parks signed on. In fact, our list of brigade supporters continued to grow right through to the final wrap-up!

An early decision was made to distribute the workload. The organizing committee set the route, schedule, booked the facilities and coordinated between the paddling crews and the community supporters. Community supporters organized the local events, provide facilities and often meals - in 65 days nearly 40 community meals were provided. A critical issue was Crew Leaders organized each paddling crew, their registration, their boats, gear, food, cooking and transportation.

5 – Scouting the route, Contacting communities and local organizers. From earliest stages members of the committee were planning the route and timeline, adapting both from the 1967 Centennial Pageant. Leanne lead our phoning, often cold calling, local organizations along the route to determine support, available facilities, resources and potential local hazards. In 2007 myself and John, and for part of the trip my wife Lois, toured the whole route. We scouted campgrounds, met with supporting organizations and organizers, and scouted the route, including some long, overgrown portages. This confirmed for the local folk that we were real, not just a voice from the phone line with an e-mail address. And, of course, it gave us the on-site vision of what could, or had to happen, and where!

6 – Funding – I often think that this event would not have happened if one dedicated volunteer, and canoe crew organizer, had not offered to provide his crew’s registration deposit nearly two years in advance of the event. This allowed us to meet the early “bills.” This 2008 brigade and most others have essentially been self-supporting, and all have come in “under budget” leaving a legacy fund for future brigades... check out our “Seeding Policy” on our website. I would be remiss not to note that in February 2008, the morning the provincial election writ was dropped, we received a very nice provincial grant. By this point we had already planned the brigade as self supporting, and deposits and fees were rolling in. These additional funds allowed us to hire Brooke as a short time staffer to help with final arrangements and registration. And we hired Jay, a Videographer to shoot, and edit what became *Digging Water*, our story of the brigade. This video has inspired new big canoe paddlers and brigade organizers. Some of these funds allowed for better support for our volunteers, and some even became part of the legacy fund we now use to further develop brigades and big canoe paddling across Canada.

7 – Participants and communicating with participants. We used connections within the paddling, surveying, and historical sites communities to market the brigade. Norm Crear, of ’67 Centennial Pageant fame, organized short brigades on the Columbia River in 2006 and 2007, these very much helped to spread the “word.” Much communication was by e-mail. We held paddler meetings both the fall prior, and in the late winter of 2008 to communicate the brigade arrangements, schedule, details and to answer participants questions. Most of the 15 or so canoe crews that were with us for all or most of the brigade had representation at these meetings. When we packed my local community hall (that seats about 50) in October 2007, I knew we were going to have a successful event!

Yes, there is much more to organizing a successful canoe brigade. Past routes and schedule details, budgets, safety plans, registration forms and much more are now available on the [Canadian Voyageur Brigade website](#). Future brigade organizers can access these for planning our next brigades, as well as modest financial support too.

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