



Incredible Journeys

The life and travels of fur trader David Thompson, the first white to explore and map today's northwestern Montana and western Canada, were nothing short of remarkable.

BY DAVE WALTER

Because Meriwether Lewis and William Clark never ventured into today's northwestern Montana, the region received little fanfare during the recent Corps of Discovery festivities. But residents there will soon be celebrating the bicentennial visit of another hero, a contemporary of the American explorers who was equally important to the opening of western North America and arguably even more resourceful and accomplished. Canadian David Thompson, a little-known explorer, surveyor, cartographer, and naturalist, accomplished for Canada what the Lewis and Clark Expedition did in this country. And he did it on his own.

Starting as a teenager, Thompson worked for nearly three decades as a trader and surveyor for Canada's two preeminent fur companies: the Hudson's Bay Company from 1784 to 1797 and the North West Company from 1797 until his retirement in 1812. He explored, surveyed, and mapped much of the Canadian plains, the Canadian West, and what was called the American "Inland Empire" (eastern Washington, northern Idaho, and western Montana). He covered an estimated 55,000 miles in a lifetime of travels and, most important, left a detailed record of his many years of field work. Though he rose to prominence in the fur trade and discovered new lands, rivers, and trade routes never before mapped, Thompson died impoverished and virtually unknown. His story is both heroic and heartbreaking.

EDUCATED IN VIRTUE AND PIETY

Thompson was born to Welsh parents in London, England, in 1770. His father died two years later, leaving the family destitute. In 1777, when she no longer could support all of her children, Thompson's mother sent him to the Grey Coat School in Westminster, a charitable church institution that raised and educated poor children. The school shaped young Thompson's character and formed the

SURVEYOR ON STEROIDS Through the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Canadian explorer and fur trader David Thompson surveyed some of the most inhospitable terrain in North America, covering more than 55,000 miles during 28 years. A writer in *National Geographic* wrote: "He made Lewis and Clark look like tourists."

DAVID THOMPSON TOOLS, MAPS, AND JOURNALS BY TODD GIPSTEIN/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC IMAGE COLLECTION



LUKE DURAN/MONTANA OUTDOORS

INTREPID EXPLORER After being sent by his widowed mother to a church school as a young boy, Thompson began his apprenticeship with the Hudson's Bay Company at age 14. A few years later, while still a teenager, he began exploring the continent. During the next 28 years, he traveled from the Saint Lawrence River to the Pacific Ocean and northern Saskatchewan. In 1808 he made the first of several visits to today's northwestern Montana.

basis of his sober, Christian adult life.

At school, young Thompson learned mathematics, navigation, surveying, geography, and penmanship. A sharp student, by age 14 he was detailed to the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) to serve a seven-year apprenticeship. The fur conglomerate immediately put him on a company vessel to Churchill Factory, the firm's northernmost trading post on the western shore of Canada's Hudson Bay.

As a clerk at Churchill Factory, Thompson learned the rudiments of fur-trade marketing. What really captivated him, however, was the surrounding Canadian wilderness and its native inhabitants. The next year Thompson moved to York Factory, 150 miles south along the shore of Hudson Bay, where he served as both a clerk and a hunter, supplying the outpost with meat.

At age 16, Thompson was outfitted with a handkerchief, shoes, shirts, a gun, powder, and a tin cup and sent inland into the Saskatchewan drainage with a brigade of trappers. For the next several years, the teenager traded with the local Indians for furs.

During the winter, Thompson lived with

a band of Piegans (members of the Blackfoot Nation) near the current site of Calgary, Alberta. While trying to persuade his hosts to trade furs for goods with the Hudson's Bay Company (rather than with the North West Company), Thompson learned much about native customs and character—information he used successfully for the rest of his trading career.

A turning point in Thompson's life came in 1788 when he fell down a steep creek bank and shattered his leg (for the rest of his life he walked with a slight limp). He spent the next year recovering at Cumberland House, a trading post. There he met Philip Turnor, the HBC's top surveyor, who taught Thompson how to take latitudinal and longitudinal readings using a sextant, compass, telescope, and watch.

Thompson's apprenticeship with the Hudson's Bay Company ended in 1791, when he signed a three-year contract with the firm. Although his primary responsibility was trading furs, his passions were for exploring and surveying. That didn't sit well with his superiors, however, who considered surveying a distraction from Thompson's fur-trading duties and forbade him from further exploring. When his second three-year contract with the HBC ended in 1797, Thompson quit and signed on with the Montreal-based North West Company, chief

rival of his previous employer.

North West Company officials appreciated Thompson's surveying skills. They directed him to pinpoint the location of company trading posts along the 49th parallel, find the source of the Mississippi River, and visit the Mandan villages on the upper Missouri River. For the next 15 years, Thompson followed well-defined Indian trails to explore and map previously undocumented territory from Lake of the Woods to the mouth of the Columbia River and from northwestern Montana to northern Saskatchewan.

SEVERAL "WORST" DAYS

Thompson endured amazing hardship. On one midwinter overland trip in 1797 to what is now central North Dakota, he often recorded temperatures near 40 below zero. He called three separate days during this trip "the worst day I ever saw in my Life," due

He Who Looks at the Sheep?

Named for the name the Salish Indians gave to David Thompson, the KooKooSint Sheep Viewing Area is located roughly 10 miles east of Thompson Falls. The highway pull-off provides visitors with a view of KooKooSint Ridge to the north, as well as close views of bighorn sheep in spring and late fall.

The late Dave Walter was an author, lecturer, and Montana Historical Society research historian. A version of this article originally appeared in Montana Magazine in 2004.



ARCHIVES OF ONTARIO, (1814) F-443-6 DAVID THOMPSON FONDS

60 SQUARE FEET After retiring, Thompson spent three years working on a map of the North American West. From his field journals and partial maps, he crafted an amazingly accurate chart of travel routes and trading posts. The finished map (above) was more than 10 feet long by 6 feet high and depicted nearly 2.5 million square miles of land. Upon completion in 1814, it was hung in the board room of the North West Company at Fort Williams.

TRUE LIKENESS? No confirmed image of David Thompson survives. Canadian artist Alice Saltiel-Marshall recently painted the portrait at left using written descriptions of Thompson such as this one: “His figure was short and compact, and his black hair was worn long all round, and cut square, as if by one stroke of the shears, just above his eyebrows. His complexion was of the gardener’s ruddy brown, while the expression of his deeply-furrowed features was friendly and intelligent, but his cut-short nose gave him an odd look.”

both to the cold and lack of food. On January 22, he was reduced to eating “the Marrow Bone of a Buffalo which had been pretty well Knawed by a Wolf.”

The explorer was known for his indomitable will, strict self-discipline, and tremendous physical energy. Whether on foot, in a canoe, behind a dog sled, or on horseback, the man was a dynamo who would forge on in the most severe blizzards or sweltering summer temperatures. Despite developing blindness in one eye, he kept explicit journals, making daily entries on location, topography, native customs, wildlife, and flora. He was also deeply religious. His journals are replete with such phrases as “May Kind Heaven send me Peace, Health & Plenty in my new dwelling” and “Pray good Providence to keep us well.”

Thompson treated native people with respect and honesty. He refused to use alcohol as a trade item because he’d seen the harm it could do to native trappers and their families. Though a devout Christian, he respected the Indian’s spiritual beliefs. “The Cree believe that the earth is also a divinity, and is alive,” he wrote. “The forests, the ledges and hills of rock, the lakes and rivers have all something of the manito [spirit] about them.”

Many Indians considered him a friend, and some bands believed he held supernatural powers because he was constantly looking

up to the heavens (standard procedure for a surveyor). The Salish called him *Koo-Koo-Sint*—“He Who Looks at the Stars.” His fellow traders considered him an expert on Indian customs and culture.

In 1799 the 29-year-old Thompson married Charlotte Small, a 13-year-old Métis daughter of a Cree woman and Scottish fur trader. Unlike most other fur traders, Thompson remained devoted to his young wife throughout his life. She helped him understand various Indian dialects and bore him 13 children, the first five of whom were born at various fur-trading posts in the Canadian West. Whenever possible, Thompson’s entire family traveled with him on his arduous surveying and trading trips.

Thompson became a partner in the North West Company in 1806. The following year, accompanied by his family and a crew, he crossed the Rocky Mountains for the first time and descended to the Columbia River. The party reached Windermere Lake in July. Nearby, Thompson built the Kootanae House trading post, giving his company a firm hold on the upper Columbia River fur trade.

DOWN INTO MONTANA

In spring 1808, Thompson and his men descended the Kootenai River into what is now Montana and Idaho. As on all his trading expeditions, he also surveyed the route.

The following year on Idaho’s Lake Pend d’Oreille, Thompson began building Kullyspel House—the first trading post west of the Rocky Mountains in the United States. In November, he ascended the Clark Fork River and, near today’s Thompson Falls, built Saleesh House—the first Montana trading post west of the Rockies.

Over the next few years, Thompson and his family spent several months at Saleesh House. One winter he ascended the Clark Fork and on horseback reached the site where Missoula now sits. Here he climbed Mount Jumbo, from which he sketched the countryside. His journal entry for February 26, 1812 notes: “A rainy Night, fine Mornng—at 5-1/2 AM set off, came into fine Plains & Hills—went up a high Knowl, from whence I had a fine Prospect of the Country...bad Weather gathering prevented me from going farther & the Country is rapidly thawing, the Horses sink deep every step & fatigue much.”

When Thompson ended his trading and surveying career in 1812, he had spent 28 years exploring central and western Canada and the northwestern United States. He was awarded his full share of company profits for three years, during which time he was to produce a single map of the region he had surveyed during his career. The final map he drew for the North West Company covered an area of nearly 2.5 million square miles and meas-

ured more than 6 feet tall and 10 feet long.

After severing ties with the North West Company, he worked for the British Boundary Commission surveying the U.S.–Canada border. Though he retired relatively wealthy, he invested poorly and made large loans that were never repaid. He and Charlotte moved to Longueuil, near Montreal, to live first with a son and then with a daughter. Although he continued to occasionally work as a surveyor, he finally was forced to pawn his surveying equipment and even his overcoat to buy food for his family.

During his last years, Thompson worked on a personal account of his travels that he called the Narrative, based on his 77 field journals. The Narrative made for compelling travel literature, conveying Thompson's keen observations, strict regard for the truth, and a complete absence of egotism. Unfortunately Thompson could not find anyone to publish his work. To make matters worse, he became blind in his second eye.

Thompson died in poverty, obscurity, and darkness on February 10, 1857, at the age of 86. His wife survived him by only three

Helena Conference to Feature Thompson and Fur Trade

On June 15-16, the Montana Historical Society (MHS) is sponsoring a two-day teachers' conference on David Thompson and the North American fur trade. For more information, contact MHS reference historian Rich Aarstad at raarstad@mt.gov or (406) 444-6779.

months, and both were buried in Mount Royal Cemetery in Montreal. No headstone marked either grave.

Thompson was an explorer of the highest rank. He produced the first reliable map of the Canadian West, he located the U.S.–Canada border in many places, he plotted the full course of the Columbia River, and he made some of the first written observations of the region's native people.

Nevertheless, those unparalleled achievements might still be unrecognized were it not for Dr. Joseph B. Tyrrell, a Canadian geologist. He unearthed the Thompson journals

and papers and saw to their publication in 1916, which then led to Thompson memorials at Lake Windermere (Kootanae House), Lake Pend d'Oreille (Kullyspel House), and Thompson Falls (Saleesh House). (Montana has also named the Thompson River, Thompson Prairie, and Thompson Lakes in the explorer's honor.) In 1927, Tyrrell placed a headstone topped with a sextant at Thompson's gravesite. It was a long overdue tribute to a man many now consider the world's greatest land geographer. 🐻

*This year is the bicentennial of Thompson's first trip across the Rocky Mountains and the 150th anniversary of his death. Commemorative events will continue through 2012. Go to davidthompson200.ca for more information. For original transcripts by David Thompson, look for his *Travels in Western North America, 1784–1812*, published in 1971 by Macmillan Company of Canada, and David Thompson's *Narrative of his Explorations in Western America, 1784–1812*, published originally by the Champlain Society and reprinted in 1968 by Greenwood Press of New York.*

Montana conservation easements protect wildlife habitat and Thompson's route

When David Thompson entered today's northwestern Montana in 1808, he could not have imagined that the pristine wilderness could someday be threatened by excessive human development. Yet in recent years, growing numbers of cabins and second homes have been carved into the forested landscape, damaging fish and wildlife habitat, restricting public recreational access, and reducing timber production.

To help protect the wildlife-rich lands and waters in the Thompson and Fisher river corridors, Montana FWP teamed up with the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and other agencies and conservation organizations to purchase permanent conservation easements from Plum Creek Timber Company on 142,000 acres from Libby Dam south to Thompson Falls. Completed in 2003, the massive conservation project dovetails with a previous FWP acquisition of 500 acres around the Thompson Chain of Lakes, halfway along what Thompson called the Kootenai Road. The projects protect Thompson's entire route from the Kootenai River to the Clark Fork River from residential development.

The conservation easements preserve habitat for elk, moose, mule and white-tailed deer, bull trout, and westslope cutthroat trout. They also provide year-round access for hunting, trapping, fishing, floating, and wild food gathering. A key element in the project is that the land will be sustainably managed as a "working forest" that supplies wood for local and regional forest products businesses. "What's so significant about this project is that it sustains forest management while protecting nat-



More than 142,000 acres surrounding Thompson's route through Montana are now protected.

ural resources and the public's opportunity to enjoy those resources," says Alan Wood, FWP Wildlife Mitigation Program coordinator in Kalispell and a member of the department team that worked on the project.

Three-quarters of the funding for the \$34 million project came from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Forest Service, with the balance coming from the state of Montana (\$6.5 million), Bonneville Power Authority (\$1.5 million), and private donations (\$2 million). ■