

Fur Trade in a Box

Interactive Script



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Rocky Mountain House National Historic Site of Canada

Fur Trade In a Box Interactive Script

Part 3: Life on the Rivers

“Heave Ho!”

Main Messages:

- The life of a Voyageur.
- How a portage worked.

Props needed

Tyson the buffalo puppet
Gerry the beaver puppet
Assomption sash for NWC
Plaid shirt for NWC
Vest for HBC
Neckerchief for HBC
Small wooden logs (4)
York boat (small toy boat)
Tumpline

Teacher: Pick four new students. One student gets the neckerchief and the vest (Hudson’s Bay Company); one student gets the plaid shirt and Assomption sash (North West Company); the other two students are new puppeteers for Gerry the Beaver and Tyson the Bison. Tyson the Bison is the first to speak.

Tyson: The buffalo puppet is a “know-it-all bison” - he is very smart and thinks a lot of himself.

Gerry: The beaver puppet is an “eager beaver” - would like to learn but is easily confused.

Hudson’s Bay Company: Wears the vest and wraps the neckerchief around the neck. The HBC character is very proper and snobby. He is also a “ghost” from the past, who is still in the fur trade era (200 years ago).

North West Company: Wears the plaid shirt and wraps the Assomption sash tightly around the waist. The NWC character is easy going and fun. He is also a “ghost” from the past, who is still in the fur trade era (200 years ago).

Part 3: Life on the River “Heave Ho!”

Tyson: Now, where were we? Oh yes, we had just met the fur traders from 200 years ago. We had also talked about the importance of the beaver.

Gerry: And we were very important!

Tyson: Yes, but so were the bison, of course, along with many other animals who were traded for their fur. Anyway, we learned about the two fur trade companies, the Hudson’s Bay and North West Company, including some of the differences between them. Oh yeah, the Voyageurs. Special or crazy?

Gerry: Hey! Are you trying to insult me? You and your big fancy words, what is a voy, what you said, anyways?

NWC: *(Point to yourself and the HBC character.)* We are the Voyageurs - the men who travel the rivers to trade for furs - and like I said before, we are very strong! When there are rapids or we have to travel over land to get to the next river or lake, we carry everything including our canoes on our backs. This is called a Portage.

Gerry: Cool, so Voyageurs are a type of turtle!

Tyson: *(Shake your head at Gerry.)* No Gerry. Please listen!

HBC: *(Talk to class.)* When our brigades portage, the York boats are too heavy to carry on our backs. We have to clear a path through the bush and lay down logs to roll the boats along.

Puppeteers and actors can break while teacher continues.

Teacher: *(Line up the four logs and have students roll the toy boat along them.)* Can everyone see how the logs help the boat to move along? Almost like the wheels on a car. They had to work quickly moving the logs from the back up to the front. Do you think you could do this?

Continue after demonstration.

HBC: We are very strong men. We travel across the country on the rivers to bring trade items to the fur trade posts by fall. We then trade for items such as furs and food with the Aboriginal peoples during the winter.

NWC: In spring we return east with the furs packed tightly into rectangular bundles called bales. Each bale weighs 41Kg (90lbs) and during a portage every man must carry two. Some even carry more to earn extra money.

Actors can break while teacher continues.

Teacher: *How much does everyone weigh? (Show the students how many of them it would take to make two 82Kg (180lbs) bales.)*

Continue after class determines weight.

Gerry: Wow! Can you imagine carrying that! These Voyageurs must have been like the Arnold Schwarzeneggers of the fur trade.

Tyson: Sure, so picture this. Arnold has eight heavy boxes in his car. He really needs to get across town but the roads are under heavy construction so he can't drive. He has to carry the boxes on his back, two at a time across town.

Gerry: Okay, so that's four trips, no big deal it's ARNOLD!

Tyson: I wasn't finished. He then has to go back one more time and push or carry his car across town!

Gerry: Sweet! I'd like to see that. We should make a Voyageur movie starring Arnold.

NWC: I don't know any Voyageur named Arnold, must be a Bay man. Enough about Arnold, let's show them how to carry a bale. (*Pat HBC character on the back.*)

HBC: Sure, we carry the heavy bundles using a tumpline, a leather strap that goes across the forehead and wraps around the bales. Can we get a volunteer to show how the tumpline works?

Puppeteers and actors can break while teacher continues.

Teacher: *(Demonstrate the use of a tumpline on a student using a book or bag as a bale. Refer to the "Using a Tumpline to Carry Loads" handout for examples.)*

Continue after tumpline demonstration.

Tyson: *(Talk to class.)* Now all this weight on their backs was hard on their bodies. Many Voyageurs died young from injuries related to the work. It is rumoured that most Voyageurs didn't live longer than 35 years. How many people do you know today who are older than 35?

Gerry: *(Talk to class.)* What about your teacher over there? He/She must be REALLY old!

Tyson: *(Cover Gerry's mouth.)* Easy Gerry, we don't want to get kicked out of class, so knock it off!

NWC: *(Talk to class.)* Some of us are smart though. We wear a sash tightly around our waist to help our bodies support the weight of the bales. *(Point to the sash around your waist.)*

Gerry: Kind of like the belts weight lifters wear today. But does it work?

Tyson: Well, no one knows for sure but it was quite the Voyageur fashion.

NWC: Well, if it doesn't help with the strain they are still very useful. You can use the folds as pockets or the sash for a tumpline.

HBC: Right, so we can carry even MORE heavy loads! The strain on our bodies isn't the worst of it. There are the mosquitoes, the cold, the bad food and all the water.

Tyson: And no life jackets! Can anyone guess what the leading cause of death was amongst the Voyageurs? *(Pause for a moment to see if anyone can guess.)* If you guessed drowning give yourself a pat on the back.

Gerry: Gees, didn't they offer the Voyageurs swimming lessons? Man, it must have really sucked to be a Voyageur!

NWC: Well it's a tough life but full of adventure! Travelling the rivers through untouched wilderness, singing songs to the rhythm of the paddle or telling the time by the number of times you smoke your pipe.

HBC: Sleeping on the cold hard ground, getting eaten by mosquitoes, eating dried buffalo meat day after day after day. Yes, that's what I call an adventure!

NWC: Well, you should have stayed up at your little York Factory then. You wouldn't have been missed! *(Stick your tongue out at the HBC.)*

Tyson: Okay enough; let's get back to the North Saskatchewan River, shall we?

Gerry: By canoe or York boat?

Tyson: Either way, the fur traders came across the same obstacle, RAPIDS! There were lots of rapids between them and the Rocky Mountains.

Gerry: Sweet, were the traders on holidays? Doing a little white water rafting? Going to soak in the Banff Hot Springs?

Tyson: No Gerry, this was over 80 years before Banff was even considered as a tourist hot spot.

NWC: We, the North West Company, were looking for a way through the mountains to trade with Aboriginal peoples west of the Rockies. Those stinky Bay guys were just trying to stay afloat, travelling in a big York boat. Hey, I'm a poet and didn't know it!

HBC: Oh, and a very funny one too! Ha! Ha! Ha! I think I just wet my trousers from laughing so hard.

Tyson: Okay, Okay, take it outside you two. (*Talk to class.*) So there you have it. The two fur trade companies were both looking for beaver and other animal pelts. They used different boats and traveled different routes, but both hired strong adventurous men to work for them. The question that is left is, whom were they trading with? Let's leave these silly fur traders for a while and talk to someone else.

End of Scene.