

The Portage La Loche Brigade

Men from the Red River Settlement recruited by the Hudson's Bay Company formed the first Portage La Loche brigade of 1826. The brigade consisted of seven York boats with Laurent Cadotte as guide.

The guide in 1833 was Alexis L'Esperance (he retired in 1866). In 1848 two Portage La Loche Brigades were formed. Each brigade had seven boats, each with a guide. One brigade was still guided by Alexis Bonami Lesperance, the other by Jean Baptiste Bruce.

In 1866 the HBC increased the Portage La Loche Brigades to three with seventeen boats in total. The last Portage La Loche Brigade arrived at Norway House in the early 1870's.

Many of the men of the Portage La Loche Brigades of 1862 took part in the Red River Resistance of 1869. Michel Dumas, Baptiste Boucher, Jean Baptiste Bruce (mentioned by Father Petitot) and most of the men were Metis from the Red River Settlement. Many of these men also had close family ties to residents of the North-West.

A few years after the Metis Resistance of 1869 the Portage La Loche Brigade route was broken up into smaller shorter sections.

The trip from the Red River Settlement to Portage La Loche would begin around the 1st of June and end around the 8th of October. This famous brigade traveled 4000 miles every year.

James Hargraves¹ writes:

The greatest and most important of the brigades organized at Red River Settlement is that commonly known as the Portage La Loche Brigade. The chief objects of this organization are to convey inland the English manufactures intended for barter with

the Indians in the remote and valuable districts of Athabasca and Mackenzie River; to bring out the furs already ready traded in these districts for shipment to England from York Factory; and to transport from the latter place to the settlement as much of the freight deposited at the factory for conveyance to that part of the country as the boats can carry.

Of late years this brigade has subjected the Company to considerable loss and inconvenience through mutinous conduct. The description I shall give of it refers less to what it has now become than to what it was so recently as 1866. Till that year, from 1826, when first organized, it served its purpose in a satisfactory manner.

It consisted of about fifteen boats arranged in two minor brigades, each of which was under the charge of an experienced guide, whose boat, sailing at the head of the line guided the rest through rapids, shoals and other obstacles to the navigation of the route. Daring the first week in June, the ice in Lake Winnipeg having disappeared and spring completely set in, the leading brigade of seven or eight boats usually starts. About a week afterwards it is followed by the second brigade. The interval is allowed with the object of preventing the brigades meeting and creating undue bustle and confusion at any of the halting places along the route.

¹ James Hargrave. *Red River*. Montreal: J. Lovell 1871: 159-162.

The first of these halting places is Norway House, to which depot is conveyed a vast quantity of agricultural produce from Red River Settlement. At Norway House there waits the arrival of the boats the outfit of English goods previously brought from York and stored there to be taken onward by them for the use of the trade in Athabasca and Mackenzie River districts. Having discharged their Norway House freight, and shipped that intended for the north, the boats resume their journey. Their new route runs in a westerly direction across Lake Winnipeg, up the River Saskatchewan, and northwards past Forts Cumberland and Isle A la Crosse, to Methy Portage, called also Portage La Loche, referred to by me in a previous chapter as the Height of Land separating the waters flowing into the Arctic Sea from those draining into Hudson's Bay.

This is the extreme limit of the course traversed by "the Portage Brigade." Here it is met by brigades traveling south from Mackenzie River and bringing the furs already traded. The Portage is about twelve miles in length. Efforts have been made to facilitate the transport across it by means of oxen and carts; but the men [rowing] the boats are often necessarily employed here, as on all the other Portages, in carrying the packages on their backs. When the latter course is adopted it is usual to make the Red River men take their "pieces" half way across the Portage, where they deliver them over to the men from the North, receiving in exchange the fur packs brought to meet them by the latter. The new cargo shipped, they retrace their course downstream and, passing Norway House, run eastward to the Bay, with the object of delivering at the factory for shipment to England, the furs they have brought from Portage La Loche. Should the Company's ship have arrived at York before them, they immediately return to the settlement, but, if not, they wait for her and receive what freight she brings for them to transport to Red River.

Besides the goods, the Portage La Loche brigade carries a packet. The opportunities offered by it in summer and by the "Northern Express," whose course has been already traced in winter, are the only two available to parties living north of Portage La Loche for communicating with the civilized world.

The time occupied by the trip just described is about four months, the boats starting early in June and returning to the settlement early in October, thus being employed during all the summer. Detailed average rates of travel may be taken as follows: The boats leaving the settlement on the 1st of June may arrive at Norway House on the 10th of June, leave it on the 12th, and pass Cumberland on the 24th of June, and Isle A la Crosse on the 9th of July, reaching Portage La Loche on the 17th of the same month. Leaving the Portage on the return trip on the 1st of August, they will pass Isle A la Crosse on the 5th, Cumberland on the 15th, Norway House on the 21st, and arrive at York Factory on the 31st of August. Leaving York on the 10th of September they will reach Norway House on the 30th of September, and Red River Settlement about the 8th of October...

On the Portage La Loche brigades, being those now specially under consideration, the pay of a guide for the entire trip occupying the four summer months, has been £35, of a steersman £20, bowsman £18, and middleman £16. When efficiently performed, the work done, though of a healthy nature, is extremely severe.



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