



George Nelson (1858-1910)

When George Nelson visits your classroom, he will take you back to his fur trading days with the XY, North West, and Hudson's Bay Companies.

Biography

George Nelson was born on June 4, 1786 in Three Rivers, Quebec, Canada and grew up in Sorel, Quebec. His father was a schoolmaster originally from England and his mother was a Loyalist who relocated to Canada from New York during the American Revolution. Upper and Lower Canada were British colonies until 1867, when the British North America Act created the Canadian federal government. Nelson considered himself a British subject, and remained loyal to the crown throughout his life. His younger brothers Woolfred and Robert, however, were leaders in Canada's Revolution of 1837. Their efforts, although failed, to create an independent republic made them heroes in the eyes of French Canadians and others who longed for separation from Great Britain. These political differences, among other things, helped create the divisive conflict that characterized Nelson's family. He remained estranged from his brothers for most of his life.

George Nelson received an excellent education from his father. He studied English, French, Greek, Latin, writing, bookkeeping, mathematics, geography and navigation. He could have followed any number of career paths with such an education, but the stories of the "adventurous voyageurs" and the western wilderness lured him into the fur trade. In 1802 he signed a 5-year contract with the XY Company to be an apprentice clerk. Due to the XY Company's lack of experienced officers, Nelson was put in charge of a small fur trade outpost at the age of 16. His lack of experience would create many conflicts between him and the men at his post, but the fact that he could read and write made him qualified to perform the job.

In 1807 Nelson was severely burned when a keg of gunpowder exploded in his camp. The next year he married "Maryann," the cousin of his superior's wife. Maryann was a member of the Ojibwe Loon Clan from the north shore of Lake Superior. She and Nelson had eight children together and remained married until her death in 1831. Nelson had hoped to retire in 1816 at the age of thirty, but he returned to the fur trade only two years later for financial reasons. Over the course of his career, he served three different companies, starting with the XY Company in 1802, the North West Company in 1804, and ending with the Hudson's Bay



Company from which he retired in 1823. He spent almost 20 years in the fur trade.

Unfortunately, Nelson never moved up in the ranks in the fur trade. Many other apprentices eventually became “wintering partners,” which gave them authority over whole districts in a fur trade company. Nelson, however, never rose above the rank of clerk. One of the reasons may have been that he had no “connections.” The fur traders were a tight bunch of people, and whom someone knew was as important as what someone knew. Also, he twice found himself working for a smaller company when a larger competitor bought it out. Not only did his status as a former employee of the smaller company put him at the back of the line for promotions, but he thought it “manly” to speak impertinently to his new superiors who had previously been his competitors. This behavior further limited his potential to make the connections necessary for moving up in the ranks. Nelson’s inability to advance caused him much frustration, and he labeled his whole career as “wretched.” After retiring from the fur trade, Nelson returned to Sorel with his wife and children. During 1825-36 he ran lumber, potash and farming businesses, but all were failures. When he died in 1859 at age 73, only one daughter, Jane, survived him.

One of George Nelson’s duties as a clerk was to keep a daily journal. His record of transactions, as well as his personal reminiscences and observations, have helped us understand more about fur trade life. He was a dynamic individual who cared enough to listen, record, and, over time, appreciate what the people among whom he lived and worked for twenty years had to say.

Time Period Overview

In 1640, the Great Lakes region was a complex patchwork of areas belonging to the Iroquois, Cree, Ojibwe, Menominee, Huron, Ottawa, Potawatomie, Nipissing, Winnebago, Fox, Miami, Assiniboine, and Dakota. Despite tensions between some of these communities, trading amongst the Great Lakes Indian nations flourished, and a firmly entrenched set of trading customs, strategies and routes existed.

By the mid 1600s, French explorers began traveling west from Montreal. They wanted to trade with the different American Indian communities for furs, to find a western route to China, and to expand the territory claimed for France. The American Indians they encountered taught them how to build and use birch bark canoes and how to navigate the trade route terrain of both land and water. Pierre Radisson and the Sieur de Groseilliers explored Lake Huron and traded with the Huron and Ottawa. As they traveled even farther west to Lake Superior, they traded with the Dakota. When the two men returned to Quebec with many furs, they tried to



persuade the French government to send a fur trade expedition to Hudson Bay. The French government declined.

Radisson and Groseilliers then took their idea to England. The British founded the Hudson's Bay Company, which made its first trading expedition in 1668 and brought back a shipload of furs to London. American Indians started traveling from all over central and western Canada to trade their furs at the bay. Because of this, French fur posts in the Great Lakes region were losing business. To compete with the Hudson's Bay Company, the French sent traders out into the country west of Lake Superior to trade directly with the Indians who had been going to Hudson Bay. They set up posts at Rainy Lake, Lake of the Woods, Lake Winnipeg, and along the Red River. These posts brought thousands of pounds of fur to Quebec for export to France.

In 1670, the king of England gave the Hudson's Bay Company the right to trade in all the land where rivers drained into the Hudson Bay. English traders went up the rivers to build forts and gather furs from the Indians. Soon, the English traders pushing south and east were competing head on with the French traders moving west and north. The Seven Years War, also called the French and Indian War, decided the contest. The English won the war and in 1763 gained control of Canada and the Great Lakes.

Independent English traders established themselves in the territory not controlled by the Hudson Bay Company. They took over many of the old French posts and hired the French workers. They made Montreal their eastern trade center. Detroit, Mackinac and Grand Portage became the centers of exchange in the west. In 1763, many of the traders using this trail banded together to form the North West Company. In 1798, the XY Company was formed by disgruntled Northwesters to compete directly with the North West Company. They located small posts adjacent to the North West Company posts, including the post at Grand Portage. The XY Company merged with the North West Company in 1804.

After the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, the Great Lakes and Minnesota area, including Grand Portage, became American Territory. When the United States threatened to tax foreign fur traders, the North West Company moved its headquarters across the Canadian border to Fort William (near present-day Thunder Bay). Many traders had to become American citizens in order to stay in business, and some went to work for the newly formed American Fur Trade Company. This firm soon controlled the great lakes fur trade, and its owner – John Jacob Astor – became America's first millionaire.

By the 1840s, much of the beaver population had been depleted in the Great Lakes region. Traders had to travel farther north up to the



Athabasca River in Canada just to get quality beaver fur. As the fur trade died out in this area, the United States started buying up American Indian land so that it could be opened up for white settlement. However, many fur traders untruthfully claimed that the American Indians still owed them thousands of dollars for trade goods that had been issued on credit. The government settled their claim by giving much of the money for American Indian lands to the fur traders.

When George Nelson died in 1859, Minnesota had just become a state the year before. Its first governor, Henry Sibley, was a former employee the American Fur Company who had been present at the 1851 signing of the Treaty of Traverse des Sioux, in which the Dakota ceded their land west of the Mississippi River to the United States. The unfavorable terms of this treaty created great hardships for the Dakota people and paved the way for the Dakota Conflict of 1862.

