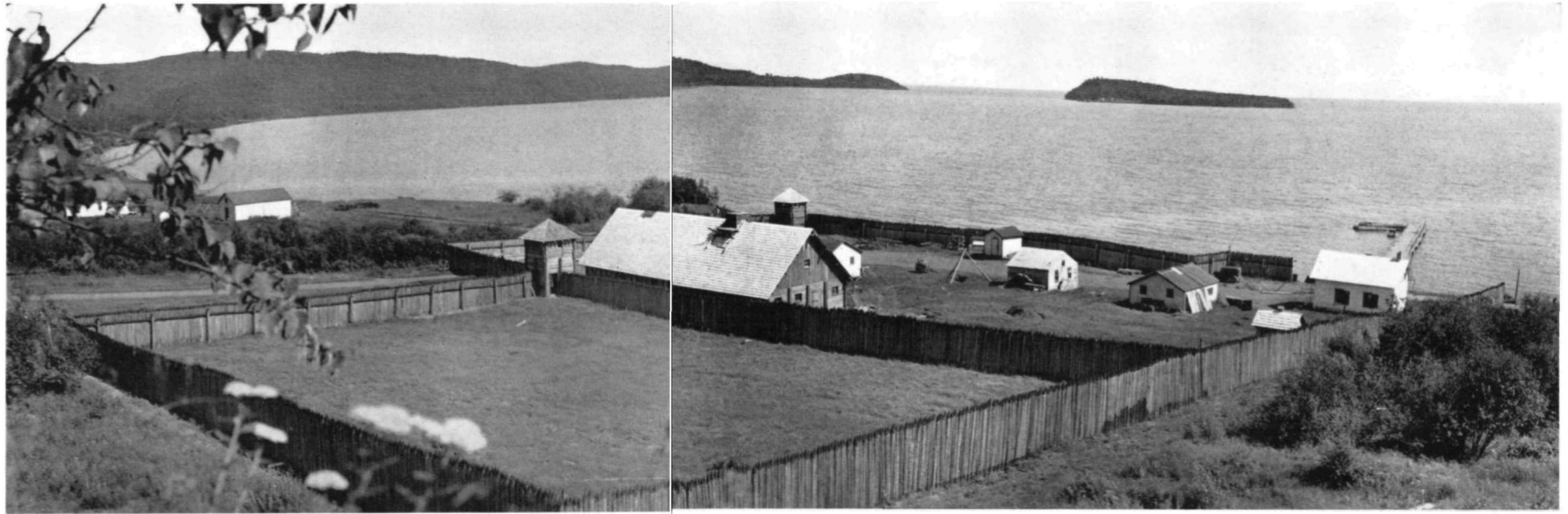


Grand Portage Rises Again

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The reconstructed North-West Company fort at Grand Portage, Minnesota, on the shore of Lake Superior. The large building is the main trading hall. The small ones used for construction have now been removed.

GRAND PORTAGE lies on the shore of Lake Superior, in the extreme northeastern corner of Minnesota, approximately one hundred and fifty miles northeast of Duluth, and some five miles below the mouth of the Pigeon River. Today it is a sleepy little Chippewa Indian community forming the administrative centre for an Indian reservation of about 50,000 acres. The population of the Grand Portage Chippewa reservation is about four hundred persons, and there are perhaps a dozen or two of white residents scattered over a considerable area.

The "town" of Grand Portage consists of a post office and general store, a small lodge with cabins, an Indian co-operative store, a school, a community building, a Catholic chapel, and a ranger station. Indian cabins are scattered along the lakeshore, along the high bench overlooking the lake, and along the trails leading back into the brush.

A hundred and fifty years ago, however, this peaceful spot on Lake Superior was the great western distributing point for the North-West Company of Montreal. Here at the eastern end of the nine-mile Grand Portage Trail leading around the rapids and

These trenches outlined the stockade in the fall of 1936.



falls of the lower Pigeon River, the company partners from Montreal each summer met the wintering partners and traders from the interior and transacted the business of the concern.

"The Grand Portage," wrote John Macdonell in 1793, "is situated in the bottom of a shallow Bay perhaps three miles deep and about one league and a half wide at its mouth from *Pointe aux Chapeaux* to *pointe a la Framboise* having a small Island just opposite the fort about half way from one of these points to the other: on a low spot which rises gently from the Lake. The pickets are not above fifteen to twenty paces from the waters edge. Immediately back of the Fort is a lofty round Sugar loaf mountain the base of which comes close to the Picket on the North West Side."

Macdonell continued his account by stating that "All the buildings within the Fort are sixteen in number made with cedar and white spruce fir split with whip saws after being squared, the Roofs are covered with shingles of Cedar and Pine, most of their posts, Doors, and windows, are painted with spanish brown. Six of these buildings are Store Houses for the company's Merchandize and Furs &c. The rest are dwelling houses shops compting house and Mess House—they have also a warf or kay for their vessel to unload and load at."

At Grand Portage the packages of goods which had come up the lakes in the big Montreal canoes were sorted and made up into the outfits for the interior. The ninety-pound "pieces" were then portaged by the voyageurs over the old trail to Fort Charlotte on the Pigeon River.

"The transportation of the goods at this *Grand Portage*, or *Great Carrying Place*," commented Alexander

Henry, the elder, in 1775, "was a work of seven days of severe and dangerous exertion, at the end of which we encamped on the river Aux Grosseilles. The Grand Portage consists in two ridges of land between which is a deep glen or valley, with good meadow-lands, and a broad stream of water. The lowlands are covered chiefly with birch and poplar, and the high with pine." According to Macdonell the portage was divided into sixteen *poses*—that is, stages where the voyageur deposited his load and returned for another.

At the upper end of the Grand Portage Trail the packages of goods were loaded into North canoes about half the size of the Montreal canoes, manned by four or five canoemen, and having a carrying capacity of about one and a half tons. Alexander Henry the younger, bound for Red River in 1800, loaded his canoes with twenty-eight pieces of merchandise each, in addition to the equipment for the voyage consisting of four bags of corn of one and a half bushels each and half a keg of grease and four ninety-pound packages of personal property for the men and their families per canoe.

While no statistics of the actual traffic over the Grand Portage Trail are available, an indication of the tonnage may be obtained from the fact that a single brigade bound for Red River in 1793 numbered fourteen canoes with an average of one and a half tons apiece. There were many other outfits bound westward the same season. In the aggregate, thousands of tons of goods and furs passed back and forth by sheer man power over the trail.

Some of the posts in the Athabasca country were so remote that those wintering there could not make the round trip to Grand Portage in a single season, and came only to Rainy Lake for their outfits.

Extra crews of "pork eaters" transported these goods from Grand Portage to Rainy Lake and then returned to Lake Superior for the trip back to Montreal. Daniel Harmon, clerk for the North-West Company in 1800, left Grand Portage on July 15, and did not reach his wintering post, Alexandria on the headwaters of the Assiniboine River in latitude 52°N and longitude 103°W, until October 23.

Just when the Grand Portage route to the interior was first used has not been ascertained, but La Verendrye's account seems to indicate that the portage was well known at the time of his arrival in 1731. His parties, of course, used the trail for years in maintaining communications with the Montreal base of supplies.

Near the close of the French and Indian war, probably in May 1762, the first English traders guarded by a party of British ranger troops made their appearance at Grand Portage, and by 1767 it was a regular meeting place for the traders bound for the interior. Unrestricted competition developed among these traders, to their own injury and that of the trade. By 1778 a memorandum of General Haldimand reported that the trade carried on through Grand Portage amounted to about £40,000 sterling, and employed nearly five hundred persons. In order to guard this trade against possible raids during the American Revolution, a lieutenant and twelve soldiers of the Eighth Regiment of British Foot were sent to Grand Portage for the summer of 1778 and application was made for similar protection in 1779. The record does not show whether troops actually came for the second season.

The obvious disadvantages of unrestrained competition among the traders led to several experimental combinations, and then, finally, in the season of 1783-84 to the formation of the famous North-West Com-



Original pickets that supported the palisades.

pany. With the organization of this concern, composed of powerful Montreal merchants and outstanding traders of the far interior, Grand Portage became the key point of the business. A fort, described as twenty-four rods by thirty, surrounded by palisades of cedar timbers, with watch towers over the gates, was built between the rocky knob, now known as Mount Rose, and the water's edge.

Here in the heyday of the North-West Company, about 1790, the partners who had come up the lakes in the great canoes met the traders from the interior in a great summer rendezvous during the month of July. Accounts of the preceding year were settled, matters of policy were discussed and all arrangements as to goods, furs, and men for the ensuing year were made. In many respects, despite the hard work, the Grand Portage trip represented his annual vacation to the trader who had been isolated from other men for so many months.

Bourgeois or traders and clerks were housed within the stockade, while the voyageurs, whether "winterers" or "pork eaters," camped outside. "The proprietors, clerks, guides, and interpreters, mess together," wrote Sir Alexander Mackenzie shortly before 1800, "to the number of sometimes an hundred at several tables, in one large hall, the provision consisting of bread, salt pork, beef, hams, fish, and venison, butter, peas, Indian corn, potatoes, tea, spirits, wine, &c., and plenty of milk, for which purpose several milch cows are constantly kept."

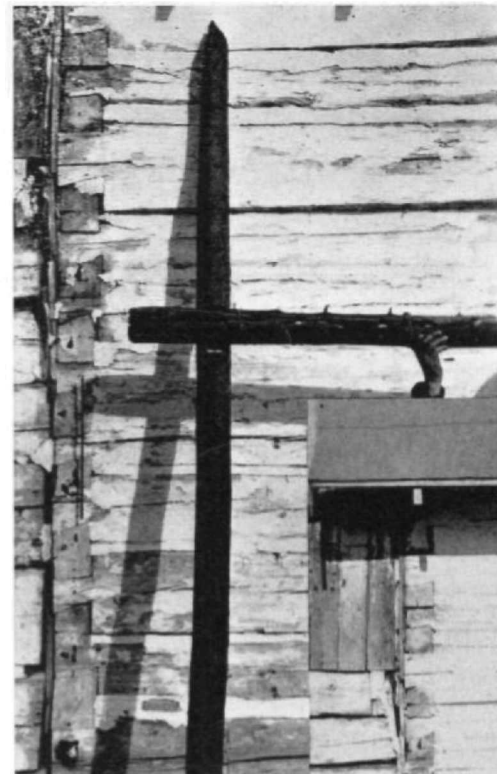
The entry in Daniel Harmon's journal for July 4, 1800, gives a glimpse of the pleasures of these annual assemblies. "In the daytime, the natives were permitted to dance in the fort, and the Company made them a present of thirty-six gallons of shrub. In the evening, the gentlemen of the place dressed, and we

had a famous ball in the dining room. For musick, we had the bag-pipe, the violin and flute which added much to the interest of the occasion. At the ball, there was a number of the ladies of this country; and I was surprised to find that they could conduct themselves with so much propriety, and dance so well."

The glory of Grand Portage, however, soon departed. Increasing fear lest the Grand Portage Trail which led through American territory should be closed by the United States, coupled with the re-opening of the old Kaministiquia River route in 1798, caused the North-West Company to begin a new post, soon called Fort William, at the mouth of that stream; and by 1804 the western headquarters of the company had been transferred to Canadian soil. By 1825 there was little if anything to remind the chance visitor of the former importance of Grand Portage.

For almost a century Grand Portage remained an historic community forgotten by all save occasional missionaries and historians of the fur trade who encountered frequent references to the trail in their researches.

In 1922 the interest of Dr. Solon J. Buck, then superintendent of the Minnesota Historical Society, was aroused, and the old trail was retraced by him, the present writer, and several others. The outlines of Fort Charlotte at the upper end of the trail were discovered and cleared of underbrush. Nothing was done with the Grand Portage post site at that time, but the reconstruction idea simmered along in the minds of various persons who knew that region.



Above: Original picket and tie pole, showing method of fastening pickets together.



Right: 11½-foot picket found lying in cross trench.



Rebuilding the main hall, December 1939. Note the palisade.



Original foundation of main hall, 95x30 feet.

With the development of the relief work program about 1935, the opportunity came. Not realizing all that might be involved in the proposal, Indian Service officials inserted an item for the restoration of the Grand Portage stockade in the 1935-36 program to be carried on by the Indian Division of the C.C.C. within the Consolidated Chippewa Superintendency. When the authorization came from Washington, agency officials appealed to the Minnesota Historical Society for technical assistance. Despite the wealth of descriptive material about Grand Portage, detailed information for reconstruction purposes was sadly lacking. A program of reconnaissance and excavation was therefore worked out, but due to the lack of available Indian relief labor, it was possible only to verify the location of the Grand Portage post and determine the general outline of a part of the stockade in 1936.

The 1936 campaign, however, had given a clearer idea of the problems involved and a new and comprehensive program was worked out. After many delays, due in part to federal budgetary processes, excavation was finally resumed in mid-summer 1937 with a fair sized Indian crew. Details of the stockade were learned from the discovery of many picket butts still in place. Several partial pickets, the longest eleven and a half feet from the pointed tip to the probable ground line where they had rotted off, gave a probable total length of fifteen feet, with three feet under ground. The pickets had been sharpened at alternate ends so as to fit together, and had been held together with horizontal tie poles pinned with wooden pegs in notches in the pickets.

While exploring a low ridge across the centre of the stockade area, parallel with the lakeshore, a rough stone foundation 95 by 30 feet was encountered, and it became clear that the search for the site of the principal building and main hall of the post had been discovered. Cruder stone foundations for a slightly smaller structure were likewise located at the other end of the same ridge or mound, together with evidences of stone fireplaces in both buildings. This latter structure may have been the building to house the clerks and lesser employees. Excavation of an area adjoining the foundations of the main hall brought to light a semi-subterranean room or cellar containing fragments of upright timbers and hand-hewn planks fitted into grooves, characteristic of old-time French Canadian construction. A badly rotted but complete plank door lay on the dirt floor of this same room. A nearby well produced a typical "shake" shingle, and some fragments of kegs still showing traces of the red-brown paint they had contained.

Supplementing the archeological information with material from available records, such as a description of old Fort William, a building has now been constructed on the 95 by 30 foot foundation with a central hall sixty feet long and a smaller room at each end. Massive stone fireplaces at each end of the hall dominate the room. All accounts give the impression of spaciousness, and consequently a high, steeply pitched roof was designed with the ridge log some twenty-four feet above the floor. Heavy log trusses support the roof.

Ten-inch squared cedar timbers nine feet high were grooved and set upright at ten-foot intervals, and random width rough sawn planks reproducing an average thickness of two inches were slipped between them. Heavy log rafters hewn with the broadaxe tie the building together.

Much broken window glass of the old greenish wavy type was found during excavations and consequently medium-sized six panel windows, one to each wall section as shown in drawings of various trading posts of the period, have been used. The doors are of plank and reproduce the one found in the sunken room; and the hardware such as hinges, shutter fasteners, locks, etc., are of hand wrought iron similar to material found on the site.

Rustic museum cases, both of wall and table type to harmonize with the building, have been installed, and these will house a collection devoted to the fur trade and the cultural life of the Grand Portage Chippewa. When complications connected with arrangements for a suitable custodian have been ironed out, the museum will be formally opened to the public.

From archeological evidence it appears that the main gate of the fort was on the side of the post adjacent to Grand Portage Creek, rather than upon the lake shore, and a gate house has been erected over the entrance.

The North-West Company abandoned Grand Portage about 1803, but the record of its occupancy will be read by future generations in the old stockade as now restored and the museum collection there assembled.