

**The Fur Trade in *Nouvelle France*:
Coueurs de Bois and Voyageurs and Engagés
Suzanne Boivin Sommerville**

I can hear some of you wondering, as you read: “Where are the footnotes?” Well, this time you are going to have to trust me. The following is my condensed understanding of a very complicated topic. I will be glad to cite my sources for any part of the following article, if you ask, but for now I will refrain from interrupting your reading with references. [Editor’s note: Please refer to Suzanne’s previous articles in *MHH* for many of her sources.]

I do not know what image you carry in your mind of the fur trade in *Nouvelle France*. I know some people believe Frenchmen struck out on their own as intrepid adventurers, cut free from the restraints of society and Church, trapping animals themselves or joining the Indians on their hunts. Those who believe this do not explain how the furs thus acquired somehow made their way to the markets in New France for shipment to Europe. In reality, the fur trade was not only an adventure but a highly organized business, and the French did very little of the actual trapping.

An understanding of the fur trade in New France requires an explanation of its different phases. To describe the fur trade of the 1690s using the rules in effect in the 1650s or any other period is not valid, nor is it accurate to apply the provisions of a much later period under British rule to the earlier period under French rule. Yet this is what I see some historians doing. I doubt they would try to understand the society of the United States in the twentieth century by applying the laws, events, and attitudes of the 1930s to the 1960s or 1990s, or vice versa. This would result in very strange conclusions.

It is important to realize that the rules of the fur trade were not always the same in the more than 150 years of the existence of New France; and it is equally important to know that there were rules! Most of the published accounts of this trade concentrate on the later era, after the British were in control of Canada or the Americans in what became the United States. Little attention has been paid to the earlier period. What follows is, of necessity, a brief discussion. I will not consider the situation in *Acadie* / Acadia or in the Hudson Bay region, nor the illicit trade with the English.

In its beginnings, the fur trade was run by private companies. The Indians came down to trade at the centers established by the French at Tadoussac, Québec City, Trois Rivières, and a place called Cap de Victoire (Sorel). Etienne Brulé may have been the first “legal” *coureur de bois*, literally, runner in the woods, traveling as far as the Great Lakes by 1610, but most Frenchmen remained close to the settlements on the St. Laurent and traded with the Indians when they delivered the furs and *pelleteries* they had acquired, often from far distant lands. The Indians themselves did not want it any other way. The term *pelleteries* refers to any animal furs, skins or hides, not just those from *castors*, beavers. Although the beaver was the major pelt sent to France for use in manufacturing hats, there was a brisk trade in other *pelleteries*.

In 1627, a *fermier* (often translated as farmer but really a contractor, sometimes one based in France), *La Compagnie des Cent Associés*, the Company of One Hundred Associates, was officially in charge of trade. The Indians, mainly Montagnais, Algonquin and Huron, brought their furs down the rivers and lakes each summer to trade at the *magazins*, store houses (not weapon storage!). Again, few French strayed from the settlement. Jean Nicollet voyaged as far as the country of the *Puants* (Winnebago, at Baye des Puants, Green Bay, Wisconsin) by 1634-35.

Montréal was founded in 1642, and it was not too many years before it became the center for the fur trade because of its geographic location near access to the Ottawa River (previously named the Algonquin River after those Indians who had controlled the fur trade for many years). This river was the route to and from the *pays d'en haut*, the country up river, the territories of the Algonquin and the Huron (Wendat). In 1645, *La Communauté des Habitants de la Nouvelle France*, obtained the monopoly on the fur trade for the profit of those in the colony. Unfortunately, rivalries among the Indian Nations would soon cause the fur trade to almost come to a complete halt.

The Jesuits set up their mission, Sainte Marie among the Huron (Wendat), in Huronia, at its modern-day reconstructed site, Midland, Ontario. From this location convoys of Indians carried their furs to the markets in the mother colony. The Jesuits ministered to the Wendat for about ten years, until, by 1650, the Wendat and, shortly after, the other Nations inhabiting what is now Ontario, were driven away, killed, or adopted by the Iroquois of New York. This destruction of Huronia opened the way for the Ottawa / Odawa and other Algonkian speaking Nations from farther west on the Great Lakes to become the middle-men in the fur trade, replacing the Algonquin and Huron who had been dispersed or defeated; but, again, for the most part, the Indians came down to trade during the summer, whenever it was safe to do so.

Safety was an issue because the Iroquois continued their incursions on New France, mainly aiming at the Huron who had taken refuge among the French, and also disrupting the fur trade of those Indians attempting to bring furs to trade with the French. For several years, no Indians came down. In 1660, Radisson returned from a voyage that had reached the Upper Mississippi, bringing with him many Indians and canoe-loads of furs. Adam Dollard des Ormeaux, with his band of sixteen unmarried men and some allied Indians, had lost their lives in repulsing the Iroquois at Long Sault, helping to insure the arrival of this convoy, but the attacks on the colony by the Iroquois continued.

The situation had reached critical status when, in 1663, Nouvelle France was declared a Royal Province and came under the control of King Louis XIV and, for trade, *La Compagnie des Indes*. In 1665, the Carignan Regiment was sent to subdue the Iroquois, with many of its officers and soldiers deciding to remain in New France when the regiment returned to France in 1668.

With a peace established by the Carignan soldiers, the era of exploration, new evangelization, and a revival of the fur trade then began. Jesuits were at Sault Sainte Marie and Michilimackinac by about 1679. Jolliet, Marquette, Cavalier de La Salle, Dulhut, and others not-as-well-known, made their voyages of discovery in the 1680s. With them on their journeys went hired men, **voyageurs**, some of whose names we will never know because the records have not survived. The Western Indians allied with the French continued to descend to the colony to trade. La Salle's Fort Frontenac (modern-day Kingston, Ontario) and Illinois territory settlements even included settlers granted land (including a woman, Madeleine de Roybon d'Allonne, who traded at Fort Frontenac). In this time of peace with the Iroquois, trade with the Iroquois took place there at Fort Frontenac until new hostilities broke out, especially with the Iroquois attack on La Chine in 1689, encouraged by the English.

Coueurs de Bois and Voyageurs and Engagés

Coueurs de bois (runners in the woods) is the term used to identify those who left the mother colony on the *Rivière St. Laurent* to travel into the interior to explore and also to trade with the Indians, mainly illegally. Large numbers of men are reported as being absent from the colony in the 1670s, after the Iroquois were subdued, and even into the 1690s. Some lived among the Indians and married Indian women either "according to the custom of the country" or before a representative of the Catholic Church where missions were established. Not all of the records of these marriages survive. At times, so-called *coueurs*

de bois failed to return to the mother colony because they were unable to repay the debts they officially and legally incurred to the merchants who financed their legal voyages. The Indians were not always prompt in repaying advances in merchandise given to them before they went on their winter hunt. Outbreaks of violence among the Indians themselves and occasional famine conditions also hampered their ability to meet their debts. I have read that some *coureurs de bois* made the voyage to the outskirts of the Laurentian colony to find out whether a new pardon might have been issued, only to have to depart and remain outlaws. (By the way, the spelling *coureurs des bois* appears to have begun to be used regularly only in the nineteenth century. I see it spelled most often on the old documents as *coureurs de bois*. The change in spelling may be an example of modern writers “correcting” our ancestors, just as modern writers hyphenate compound first names, e.g., Marie-Anne, something I do not see in the extant New France documents.)

The government of France periodically and several times issued pardons to the *coureurs de bois*, if they would return to the mother colony, sometimes after they served in a military engagement. This was particularly true in the 1690s, when some came down with the Indians allied to the French to join in the initiatives against the Iroquois in New York. In 1716, the *coureurs de bois* were asked to join the Indians allied to the French in the conflict against the Renard / Fox / Mesquakie Indians in the *pays d'en haut*, the country up river, now the Mid-West. In return, they would be pardoned and could return to the St. Lawrence valley settlement.

At first, in the official correspondence between France and New France, the *coureurs de bois* are considered a detriment to the colony and to the evangelization of the Indians. The priests and government leaders, in particular, complained often about their *libertine* practices; and the point of view of these officials is the one usually cited and preserved in the published histories. Eventually, however, the *coureurs de bois* were recognized for the positive contributions they made in exploration and for their knowledge of the Indians allied with France. The friendships and families they established were crucial for the continuation of the fur trade, and the fur trade was essential for the survival of New France.

Voyageurs is the term usually given to those who voyaged legally, either for exploration or to man the canoes traveling to the *pays d'en haut*. They were free agents granted permission by the 1670s or hired by those who, especially after 1681, received one of the legal 25 **congés**, permits to trade.

During Governor Frontenac's first term (1672-1682), the freer “system” of permits to trade led to much abuse and resulted in limiting the number. Voyageurs also carried provisions and supplies for the priests, soldiers, and *commandants* in distant missions or posts. They carted the merchandise or supplies on the upward journey, unloading it and hauling it on their backs over the many portages, places where the water was too rough to allow canoes to proceed. There were at least 30 portages on the Ottawa River route. On the return journey, they did the same with bales of furs and *pelletteries* obtained from the Indians in trade. At night, they slept under their overturned canoes. Sometimes the voyageurs who were hired by the priests or interpreters sent to distant posts were required to trade merchandise for food or for canoe repairs before they could return, as it was impossible to carry sufficient supplies for a round-trip voyage of several months. They were constantly suspected and accused of trading illegally for furs. There is no evidence the Jesuits themselves were guilty of such trade, although some of the voyageurs or *coureurs de bois* did sometimes take advantage of the situation.

Another individual, the **marchand voyageur** or merchant voyageur, may have obtained or purchased one of the 25 **congés** granted to “poor” families or religious groups in the colony between **1681 and 1696, 1716 and 1720** (actually to 1723), and **1726** to the end of the French Régime. The holders of **congés** could not always transact these permits by themselves. “Poor” here usually meant noble or semi-noble families and former military officers or their widows, whose earnings or pensions were insufficient for them to maintain

the lifestyle expected of them. It should be noted that permission was granted to “nobles” or “semi-nobles” to engage in the fur trade after 1681, an activity that would not have been considered “proper” in the mother country. Commandants and other military officers also engaged in trade, at times illegally and at times only accused of doing so illegally.

Each *cong * allowed **three** men in one canoe to travel to the *pays d’en haut*. Larger canoes did not exist in any numbers until about 1725, when four and five-man crews are often mentioned, and six-man canoes began to exist after 1740. The elaborate designations of who would sit in what part of the canoe, often cited in the published literature, appear to be a much later development, as is the requirement for short, stocky men. For information about the canoes themselves, see Tim Kent’s several recent books.

A voyageur hired by a holder of a permit, *cong *, often borrowed funds or merchandise from merchants or wealthy individuals in the colony to finance his voyage. He had contracts of indebtedness, *obligations*, drawn up before a notary, contracts that included a statement that he had mortgaged his possessions to insure repayment of the debt. The due date for the loan to be repaid was also indicated. A voyageur sometimes hired his own voyageurs or *engag s*, hired men (not indentured servants), to man the canoe, and usually traveled with them. Some contracts include an endorsement indicating the successful repayment of debt, at times at a much later date than originally stated. Often several men (and even some women) would enter into a *soci t *, a society or association with each other, to exploit a *cong *, all of them contributing assets and all sharing the hoped-for profits. Several women, usually widows of deceased merchants or military officers, were among those who loaned money or merchandise to voyageurs. The wives of commandants in distant posts arranged to have supplies and merchandise sent to their husbands.

Voyageurs began to be called simply *engag s*, or hired men. They contracted for their wages and the conditions of their employment before they left the mother colony. Thousands of these hiring contracts, *engagements*, survive in the notarial records of New France, and copies of these documents can be ordered by mail from the **Archives du Qu bec**.¹ The many I have examined stipulate that the hired man would be fed during the voyage and indicate to what extent an *engag * could trade for his own profit. Most often he was forbidden to do so. If it were to be found that he traded illegally (and there are several court cases I have seen), the *pelletteries* would be confiscated and he would lose the salary he had been promised in his hiring contract, a salary that was most often not paid until he had returned. Sometimes, as in the early years of the founding of Detroit, 1701-1705, he was allowed to turn in to the *magazin*, store house at the post, any *pelletteries* he obtained from animals he killed. The profits from the eventual sale of these *pelletteries* once back in the mother colony would be shared half and half between him and the Company of the Colony, then in charge of the trade in those first years.

The contracts stipulate the items an *engag * was allowed to carry with him, the number of shirts, *etc.*, at times a small amount of merchandise to trade for his personal needs, and the amount of *eau de vie*, brandy, for his own consumption only. The rivers and lakes were cold, and brandy warmed more than the spirits, but he was forbidden to sell *eau de vie* to the Indians. The terms of employment also stipulated whether the individual would be paid an additional sum if the convoy could not return at the appointed time. Those who left after the spring thaws, usually in June, were most likely to return by fall. Some who left in mid-summer, July or August, also were to return that year. September and October hiring contracts usually indicate the return would take place the following year, or whenever a convoy came down. Do not think

¹ Now Biblioth que et Archives nationales du Qu bec (BAnQ):
http://www.banq.qc.ca/portal/dt/accueil.jsp?bnq_resolution=mode_1280

these individuals traveled alone in one canoe. There was comfort and safety in numbers, and not merely because of any threat of Indian attack.

A voyageur or *engagé* leaving for a distant destination might also file a last will and testament to name the person(s) who would inherit his property should he lose his life on the journey. It was mainly unmarried men who filed documents of this sort, because the husbands and fathers who were voyageurs were covered under the terms of the *Coutume de Paris* / Custom of Paris in the event of their deaths. [Editor's note: See *MHH*, Vol. 26, #3, July 2005, pp. 135-38, Suzanne Boivin Sommerville, "The Marriage Contract in New France according to the *Coutume de Paris* / The Custom of Paris." This may be read and copied on the FCHSM web site: www.habitantheritage.org under the Resources Tab. A *procuration* or power of attorney document might also be filed to allow someone else to conduct the individual's business during his absence. Often a wife served this function.

A Major Change in the Rules of the Fur Trade – 1696 - 1716: All trade in the upper country was suspended by royal edict in **1696** because of a glut of beaver furs that would eventually rot in store houses by 1715. The distant posts were ordered closed and the soldiers recalled. This edict created so many outcries, however, from French and Indians alike, that the posts of Fort Frontenac (Kingston, Ontario), Michilimackinac (St. Ignace, Michigan), St. Joseph des Miamis (Niles, Michigan), and places on the Mississippi were never totally vacated, although some soldiers were withdrawn and the rules for trade were modified. In this interim period, individuals were even granted the permission to return to the *pays d'en haut*, especially Michilimackinac, to retrieve *pelletteries* that had not yet been brought down because of dangerous war conditions before 1701.

The Great Peace Treaty of Montréal in 1701, signed 4 August, just weeks after the founding of Detroit, insured that the fur trade would be conducted without too many interruptions because of skirmishes among the Western Indian allies of the French —the Huron, Ottawa, Miami, Potawatomi, *Saulters* or Ojibway (Chippewa), Illinois, *etc.*— and the Iroquois, the Haudenesaunee, People of the Long House. The shorter route into the upper country via Lake Ontario, portage at Niagara Falls, Lake Erie, and then the strait of Detroit became open for voyageurs, and it is this route *Mesdames* de Lamothe Cadillac and de Tonty took in the fall of 1701 when they journeyed to join their husbands at Fort Pontchartrain.

By mid-1701, another important development happened: word arrived in the colony that new trading rights had been granted to a group of New France entrepreneurs called *La Compagnie de la Colonie* / Company of the Colony. It was in existence for the first years of the founding of Detroit. Although the king financed the first convoys of 1701, the Company contracted to repay some of that initial investment. The Company had so many financial difficulties, however, that it was phased out before all but two of its shareholders contributed their promised shares. By 1706, because of the Company's financial problems and definitely because of political matters (war broke out between England and France in 1702), Antoine Laumet *dit* de Lamothe Cadillac was permitted to take over the management of trade at Fort Pontchartrain. Cadillac was to reimburse the Company for some of their costs. Trade at Fort Frontenac returned to the king for a time.

Until 25 *congés* were reestablished in 1716, trade permits were sometimes granted to *commandants* of the distant posts. The one I know best is Antoine Laumet *dit* de Lamothe Cadillac at *Fort Pontchartrain du Détroit des Lac Erié et Lac Huron*. King Louis XIV granted him full control of Fort Pontchartrain, officially in 1704. As word of this permission was lost when an English ship pirated a French one (*La Seine*), a duplicate document did not arrive until 1705; and Cadillac did not return to the fort (he had been under house arrest for alleged mismanagement at Fort Pontchartrain since summer of 1704) until August of 1706, with slightly less than 150 soldiers and several families, including at least sixteen recently-married soldiers, and other individuals, all planning to settle there. This 1706 convoy is truly the first settlement of

Detroit; the fort before then was mainly a trading post. Cadillac was then in charge, meaning he was required to pay for the upkeep of the fort and soldiers, until he received word in 1710 that he had been appointed to go to *Louisiane*. Cadillac granted permission to his settlers to trade in return for carrying merchandise to him, including brandy, *eau de vie*. Subsequent commandants at Detroit, such as François Daupin de Laforest (appointed in 1710, but not arriving until 1712, to his death in 1714), Jacques Charles de Sabrevois (1715-1717) and Alphonse de Tonty (1717 to his death in 1727) also had control over the trade at this post. Tonty basically turned the trade over to Charles Nolan de La Marque, his second wife's son. [Editor's note: through her first marriage to Jean Nolan, who had served as a *commis*, clerk, in Detroit in 1702] Meanwhile, Michilimackinac continued to function as an important outpost, with the Indians there repeatedly demanding, beginning as early as 1710, that a commandant be assigned to them.

The standard published histories give the impression nothing happened at Detroit and at Michilimackinac after Cadillac left these areas, at least not until the British took over in the 1760s or the Americans in the 1790s. The hundreds of *engagement*, *obligation*, and other contracts that survive demonstrate this is a gross error of omission. The post on the Saint Joseph River (Niles, Michigan), Saint Philippe aux Miamis (Fort Miami, now Fort Wayne, Indiana), Fort Ouiatanon (Lafayette, Indiana), Baye des Puants (Green Bay, Wisconsin); Vincennes, Indiana; and definitely the Mississippi and other posts were all destinations for French and French Canadians during the remaining years of the French Regime. My studies have not included the expansion of the fur trade into the Canadian interior as a result of de La Vérendrye's explorations, so I cannot comment on this dimension.

The fur trade was a business requiring hard labor, loaning and borrowing of capital funds, and friendly relations with the Indians who did most of the trapping of animals and preparation of the pelts, often in increasingly distant locations. After Detroit and other posts were founded in the interior, the Indians no longer had to make the long journey to the mother colony of New France. The hired men, our ancestors, Teamsters of their day, saw to the delivery of the furs and *pelletteries* to the markets that would send them to their ultimate destination in Europe, and, in the process, earned a living for themselves and their families.

Finally, I will share a letter I wrote to the Detroit *Free Press* during the celebration of the Detroit Tri-Centennial, with my subsequent corrections. (Thanks to Al Trudeau for originally noticing my math error!)

July 27, 2001

To the Editor of the Detroit *Free Press*:

Thank you for Shawn Windsor's July 25, 2001, article, "Without the voyagers [*sic*], there is no Cadillac, Today's counterpart also a special breed". I am glad the men who manned the canoes for the re-enactment received this recognition.

Many of the speeches given at the birthday celebration on July 24 praised the contributions of ALL of the workers who made Detroit a great city; but, as you say, "They were [and are] invisible." The *voyageurs*, especially the re-enactors, also never had their moment on the stage at the celebrations, a serious oversight, because, as you also say, "Cadillac would've been [invisible] too without them." I am thankful that Gail Moreau-DesHarnais and Jim Meloche, from the French Canadian Heritage Society of Michigan, acknowledged the importance of the voyageurs and the original settlers in their speeches, but that didn't make it into the media coverage.

Your front page article by Dan Shine even called the voyageurs "a disheveled group of men". Ah, yes, honest work does tend to muss the clothes.

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Speaking of honest work, the Shawn Windsor article gives the impression that the original voyageurs in the convoy of 1701 were adventurers, "young and stout," without "mortgages and their children's college tuition." That is a simplification, although it is true the modern terms "mortgages" (as such) and "college tuition" do not apply. The men of 1701 had much more basic living expenses.

Of the 51 known voyageurs and other workers hired for that convoy, only six were 18 to 20; thirty-two were 21 to 30 (twenty of these 25 and older); seven were 31 to 40; and four were 41 to 58, among the latter, two interpreters, ages 41 and 51, and a gardener, age 58. [One of the] oldest *voyageurs* hired on 27 May 1701 to go to Detroit was about 43 [*sic*, actually 37], and he and his wife, also 43 [*sic*, 37], had 5 surviving children, with another three to be born by 1709. He left his wife in Québec City with an outstanding debt of 150 New France *livres*. She was forced to sell some of their possessions on May 7 to satisfy the debt. The creditor was, evidently, unwilling to wait for the return of her husband with the 400 New France *livres* (300 French *livres*) he would earn for his labor. As far as I can now tell, this was his only venture into the world of the voyageurs. [I have since found two other hiring contracts.] Cadillac was paid 2,000 French *livres* (worth more than money of New France) that first year and all expenses for him and his family and servants. According to historian W. J. Eccles, one *livre* was worth about \$10 in 1982 Canadian dollars.) [Of course, that value is approximate, and must be adjusted to obtain current values.]

Sixteen of the men hired were married; and, among them, they had 56 children, with at least one child on-the-way. Another six apparently found it financially possible to marry within the next three years. Not all repeated their 1701 voyage in subsequent years, although some did make this their basic career as long as they could survive the brutal labor. Several died within a few years.

So, please, do not call them adventurers. At least nine of them are my x-generation grandfathers, uncles or cousins. Unfortunately, only my spirit is likely to be around for the next major birthday celebration to set things straight. I nevertheless promise to haunt the next generation of reporters to get it right!

Suzanne Boivin Sommerville

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Take the time to sample the articles published in the journal and also the items under the Research button. They can be of real assistance to those who are not familiar with the historical development of genealogical information and other aspects of the history of New France as they have been refined over the years. Many of the older published sources are in desperate need of revision.