

First Journey, Fort William



The fictional story of a child of the fur trade during the heyday of the Montreal-based North West Company. Meticulously drawn from historical records, the film re-creates life at a remote trading post near Lake Winnipeg, in Montreal, and at the company's lavish wilderness headquarters at Fort William near Lake Superior.

The story unfolds from the viewpoint of 12-year-old John Mackenzie, son of a Cree mother and Scottish-Canadian fur trader. To mark his entry into adulthood, John is travelling for the first time to the fabled Fort William. The film is a testament to the colorful, historical era that saw the opening up of Canada's north and west.

A film by Joan Henson
Produced and distributed by
National Film Board of Canada



**National
Film Board
of Canada**

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du Canada**

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Historical Background

Part of a series of Canadian historical re-enactment films, *First Journey, Fort William* is set in 1815, during the heyday of the Montreal-based North West Company, an enterprise that astutely profited from a European demand for furs and an Indian interest in manufactured goods. Hiring French-Canadian voyageurs to transport trade goods into the hinterland and furs back to Montreal, the company ventured deep into the continent's interior. It built Fort William by the northwestern shore of Lake Superior as its wilderness headquarters and transshipment point, beyond which the huge canoes that carried cargo to and from Montreal did not go.

The company's principal partners, called "agents," lived in splendor in Montreal, while the "wintering partners" were found in remote posts scattered north and west of Lake Superior. In order to smooth relations with the Indian nations, the company encouraged its wintering partners and clerks to marry native women. In this way it built intimate links with different Indian communities — Ojibwa, Cree, and Chipewyan among others — that enabled the company to thrive.

The Film

The year, 1815. The place, a remote trading post near Lake Winnipeg. For 12-year-old John Mackenzie, it is a year that will long be remembered.

The son of a Cree mother and a Scottish-Canadian father who is a wintering partner of the prosperous North West Company, John is ready for his passage into adulthood. To mark the occasion, his father is allowing him to journey for the first time to Fort William, the lively interior headquarters of the North West Company, to attend the important annual meeting of the partners. In following his adventures, *First Journey, Fort William* reveals the complex network of people who made up fur trade society — Scots, French-Canadians and natives.

With characters sketched from historical personalities, the film traces young John's introduction to the fur trade at his father's wilderness post, shows the importance of his native mother's values and survival skills, and captures the development of a close relationship between John and voyageur Bissonnette, his father's interpreter-guide. With John, we are introduced to the splendor and bustle of life within Fort William. Outside the fort's walls, we meet voyageurs and Indians from across the continent. Finally, we hear that in 1821 the North West Company amalgamated with its chief rival in Canada, the Hudson's Bay Company, and that our hero, John, became a clerk for the newly formed company.

Clothing styles, furniture and artifacts, as well as the class structures, social roles and customs are re-created with meticulous attention to historical detail. The film was shot on location at Old Fort William in Thunder Bay, Ontario. The Fort's re-enactment staff served as actors while other specialists created period costumes and props.

Designed to reflect contemporary approaches to the teaching of history, the film reveals the complex interweaving of the major participants in the fur trade and in Canada's development to the north and west. The social tensions, class structure, mores, customs, clothes and artifacts of those times become valuable adjuncts to understanding how people lived and felt.

Suggested Audiences

Students of Social Studies, History, and Native Studies in upper elementary, intermediate and secondary levels (grades 5-10).

Discussion Questions

1. Reflect on what life was like for 12-year-old John Mackenzie. How was his life similar to that of a 12-year-old today? Different?
2. Why was Fort William built? How did it help preserve the north and west of the continent for Canada?
3. What was the role of the Indians in fur trade society? Of the voyageurs? Of the Scottish-Canadian merchant-traders? Why was each group involved in the fur trade? What were their interrelationships?
4. What roles did native women play in this society? In what ways did marriage with native women help advance the North West Company's expansion into the north and the west of the continent?
5. Imagine what life was like for one of John's sisters. Discuss your ideas in small groups.
6. Judging from some of the artifacts and clothing in the film, what else did the Indians supply besides furs?
7. Discuss the impact of the North West Company on the development of Canada and of Montreal.

Related Films

The World Turned Upside Down (the first film in the *History Re-enactment* series); *Adventures in History* series; *The Voyageurs*.

Director:

Joan Henson

Cinematography:

David de Volpi

Editor:

Judith Merritt

Sound Recordists:

Yves Gendron

Donald Cohen

Sound Editor:

Jackie Newell

Narration:

Thomas Lackey

Gloria Demers

Voice of John:

Angelo Rizacos

Narrator:

Walter Massey

Original Music:

Chris Crilly

Scottish Small Pipes:

Hamish Moore

Music Recording:

Louis Hone

Music Editor:

Julian Olson

Re-recording:

Hans Peter Strobl

Adrian Croll

Producer:

Bill Brind

Executive Producer:

Barrie Howells

Color

Screening time:

23 min. 52 sec.

16 mm: 106C 0187 016

3/4": 116C 0187 016

VHS: 113C 0187 016

Beta: 114C 0187 016

Produced and distributed
by National Film Board
of Canada



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Office
national du film
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P.O. Box 6100, Montreal, Quebec H3C 3H5
Printed in Canada