The Great Hall at Old Fort William

The main square of reconstructed Old Fort William at Thunder Bay, Ontario. The newly built Great Hall is on the left.

The 'state and grandeur' of the North West Company in the early 1800s was evident in the lavish feasts and revels held at rendezvous time in the original Great Hall. Here, the cherry-wood table where the company directors were seated is once again in place.

By Bryan Eddington.

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IN THE SUMMER of 1803, the first rendezvous was held at the inland headquarters of the North West Company. Here, at Fort William on Lake Superior, the wintering partners with their furs met agents with provisions from Montreal. After their long journeys from the west and from the east by canoe, and after the business meetings and decision making, the leading Nor'Westers relaxed in the dining room of the Great Hall.

Gabriel Franchère described the Great Hall after his stay at the fort 14 July 1814: 'In the middle of a spacious square rises a large frame house elegantly built and painted, raised about five feet above ground, with a verandah in front. This house is used as a mess or dining hall, about 60 feet long and 30 to 40 wide. At each end there are two small rooms used by the company's agents. The dining hall is hung with paintings and pastel portraits of a great number of the associates. Behind and adjacent to this hall are the kitchen and servants' quarters. It is in this hall that the agents, partners, clerks, interpreters, and guides take their meals together at different tables.'

'Together at different tables' symbolizes the rigid social structure of Fort William; not for these 'lords of the lakes and forests', the democratic liberties of the newly born American republic to the south.

The principal director of the North West Company, William McGillivray, sat with other company officers along one side of the long, head table set with Irish linen, English crystal and Chinese porcelain, while the butler served wine and fine food prepared by a cook who had travelled by canoe from Montreal. From behind this elegance, the officers could look over the clerks, interpreters and guides who ate at trestle tables more appropriate to their lower station.

Following the dinner, the tables would be stacked quickly aside so the Nor'Westers could dance to the skirl of Scottish pipes and French-Canadian fiddles, whirling 'country' women in the candlelight.

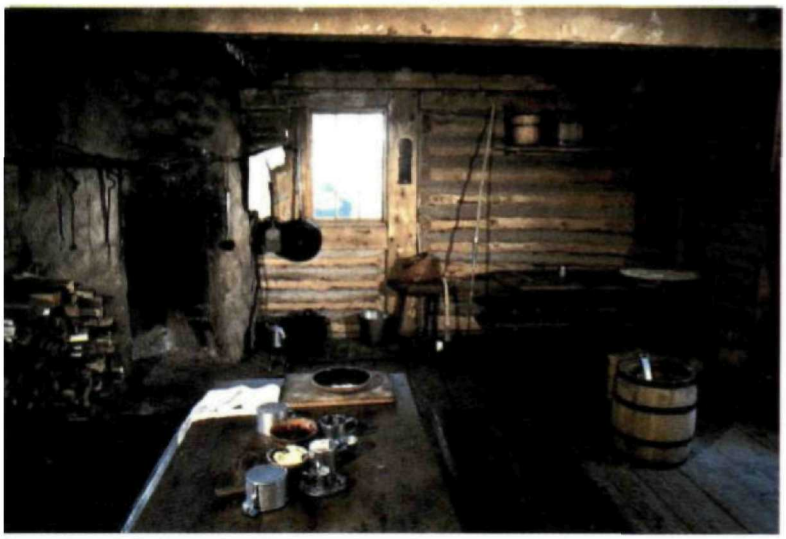
Three years after Franchère's visit, the Irishman Ross Cox described that main room with awe: 'The dining-hall is a noble apartment, and sufficiently capacious to entertain two hundred. A finely executed bust of the late Simon M'Tavish is placed in it, with portraits of various proprietors. A full-length likeness of Nelson, together with a splendid painting of the battle of the Nile [Battle of Trafalgar], also decorates the walls. . . .

'At the upper end of the hall there is a very large map of the Indian country, drawn with great accuracy by Mr David Thompson, astronomer to the Company, and comprising all their trading posts, from the Hudson's Bay to the Pacific Ocean, and from Lake Superior to Athabasca and Great Slave Lake.'

This summer for the first time, the replica of the Great Hall in reconstructed Fort William is open to visitors. Its building is based on years of research; and its furnishings were chosen in close consultation with antique dealers. It was recognized from the beginning that the Great Hall was the focal point of the inland headquarters. It symbolized the grandeur of the North West Company and its accomplishments; exploring to the west coast and beyond, establishing trade routes through wilderness territory, and gaining the status of a business and political power in the new land of Canada. Its wintering partners spent their profits in New York with what Washington Irving

The scene inside the reconstructed blacksmith's shop.

A reconstruction of the house and trading centre operated by Jean-Marie Boucher. He made substantial profits, selling liquor and provisions to the voyageurs.



called 'a gorgeous prodigality'.

'To behold the Northwest Company in all its state and grandeur, however, it was necessary to witness an annual gathering at the great interior place of conference established at Fort William,' he wrote.

'. . . grave and weighty councils were alternated by huge feasts and revels, like some of the old feasts described in Highland castles. The tables in the great banqueting room groaned under the weight of game of all kinds; of venison from the woods, and fish from the lakes, with hunters' delicacies, such as buffaloes' tongues, and beavers' tails; and various luxuries from Montreal, all served up by experienced cooks brought for the purpose. There was no stint of generous wine, for it was a hard-drinking period, a time of loyal toasts, and bacchanalian songs, and brimming bumpers.

'On these occasions . . . the aristocratical character of the Briton shone forth magnificently, or rather the feudal spirit of the Highlander. Every partner who had charge of an interior post, and a score of retainers at his command, felt like the chieftain of a Highland clan, and was almost as important in the eyes of his dependents as of himself. To him a visit to the grand conference at Fort William was a most important event; and he repaired there as to a meeting of parliament.

'The partners from Montreal, however, were the lords of the ascendant; coming from the midst of luxurious and ostentatious life, they quite eclipsed their compeers from the woods, whose forms and faces had been battered and hardened by hard living and hard service, and whose garments and equipments were all the worse for wear. Indeed the partners from below considered the whole dignity of the company as represented in their persons, and conducted themselves in suitable style. They ascended the rivers in great state, like sovereigns making a progress: or rather like Highland chieftains navigating their subject lakes. They were wrapped in rich furs, their huge canoes freighted with every convenience and luxury, and manned by Canadian voyageurs, as obedient as Highland clansmen. They carried up with them cooks and bakers, together with delicacies of every kind, and abundance of choice wines for the banquets which attended this great convocation.'

The Great Hall with its symmetrical Georgian proportions provided the focal point for a neatly planned and thoroughly commercial community.

'On either side of this house are two others equally long but not so high,' wrote Franchère. 'They are

divided lengthwise by a corridor and each contains twelve attractive bedrooms. One is destined for the wintering partners, the other for the clerks.'

On the east side of the main square was another lodging house and a building where furs were inspected and repacked for shipment to Montreal. Behind the packing store were two fur warehouses and a stone powder magazine; behind the lodging house was a rough dormitory for guides, and a somewhat primitive hospital.

Franchère continued: 'On the west side is seen a range of buildings, some of which serve for stores and others for workshops; there is one for the equipment of men, another for the fitting out of canoes, one for the retail of goods, another where they sell liquors, bread, pork, butter, & c., and where a treat is given to the travellers who arrive. This consists in a white loaf, half a pound of butter, and a gill of rum. . . .

'Behind all this is another range, where we find the counting-house, a fine square building, and well-lighted; another storehouse of stone, tin-roofed; and a *jail*, not less necessary than the rest. The *voyageurs* give it the name of *pot au beurre* — the butter tub.'

To the north of these buildings were those of the tradesmen: carpenter, cooper, tinsmith, blacksmith, armourer, tailor and canoe-builder, as well as their living quarters.

Along the south side of the main square were stores for corn and other provisions. Further south of this line, and on either side of the main entrance from the river, were apartments for the wintering partners and the ship's captain to the west; and to the east, the doctor's house and apothecary. Further west, along the river front, was the house of the fort superintendent, Mr Taitt, and a large shed where lake boats were built and repaired. East along the river front was the Indian shop, although in truth there was little local trading.

'As the river is deep at its entrance the company has had a wharf constructed, extending the whole length of the fort, for the discharge of the vessels which it keeps on Lake Superior, whether to transport its furs from Fort William to the *Saut Ste. Marie* or merchandise and provisions from *Saut Ste. Marie* to Fort William,' wrote Franchère. 'The land behind the fort and on both sides of it is cleared and under tillage. We saw barley, peas, and oats, which had a very fine appearance.'

Ross Cox noted: 'The kitchen garden is well-stocked, and there are extensive fields of Indian corn and potatoes. There are also several head of cattle, with sheep, hogs and poultry, etc, and a few horse for domestic use.'

Today, at the reconstructed fort, in the tradesmen's area are carpenters, tinsmiths and coopers plying their old crafts. In the counting house clerks use goose quills to write in heavy ledgers; at the farm a family sits around a rough table eating a hearty stew.

Hudson's Bay Company

This impressive life-sized portrait of Lord Nelson attributed to William Berczy, adorned the Great Hall before 1816. When Fort William was abandoned, the portrait and the painting of the Battle of Trafalgar were placed in the HBC Archives. This year the Hudson's Bay Company presented the paintings to Old Fort William, and they hang again in the Great Hall.

To simply list the buildings within the fort ignores the beautiful symmetry of the whole. Buildings either side of the Great Hall balance each other, as do the houses beside the main gate to the river. Within the tradesmen's area and the farm this symmetry is continued. Someone lovingly and painstakingly planned the exact location, size and appearance of each building so that this symmetry was maintained, long before the land was even drained. Unfortunately this planner is unknown but it is possible that McGillivray himself had a hand in it.

Franchère went on to describe a settlement on the opposite bank of the river which gives insight into the lives of aging voyageurs: 'There are also . . . a certain number of log-houses, all inhabited by old Canadian voyageurs, worn out in the service of the company without having enriched themselves. Married to women of the country and incumbered with large

families of half-breed children, these men prefer to cultivate a little Indian corn and potatoes and to fish for subsistence, rather than return to their native districts to give their relatives and former acquaintances certain proofs of their misconduct or their imprudence.'

On either side of the main fort there were the camps of voyageurs, separated apparently because there was some rough ill-feeling between the two groups. To the west were the winterers or *hivernants*, and to the east the men from Montreal, known as *mangeurs de lard* or pork-eaters.

'One perceives an astonishing difference between these two camps, which are composed sometimes of three or four hundred men each: that of the pork-eaters is always dirty and disorderly, while that of the winterers is always clean and neat,' noted Franchère.

Between the tent camp of the northerners and the neat buildings of the main fort there was a contrasting, pioneer-style log house; lodging and trade centre for Jean-Marie Boucher. The 1814 contract for this enterprising man allowed him to sell food, drink and other provisions to the voyageurs; for this he was guaranteed an income twice the wage of a guide, or one-third of total profits. Moneys remaining went to the company. Since even during the summer rendezvous voyageurs seem to have been supplied with only corn and grease, one suspects that most of their wages were spent at Boucher's establishment.

Wooden buildings within the fort were made of logs using a construction method known as *poteaux sur sole* (posts in the sill) or Red River frame. Here vertical posts were grooved to accept the tongues of horizontal logs. Timbers were usually squared and the joints secured with hardwood pegs. Key buildings were then finished with boards while others were simply whitewashed. The council house, counting house and Great Hall were covered with clapboards. Less important buildings such as the jail had dovetail corners.

Spaces between logs were filled with a mixture of clay, mud and straw, to which sand, hair or dung were sometimes added. Buildings were often plastered with clay for insulation.

Roof framing followed the kingpost truss system. Roofs were either gabled, hipped or bell-cast, and the roof had a pitch of 45 degrees to lessen the snow load. The roofs of stone houses were covered with tin; other buildings had either cedar shingles, shakes, board-on-board or bark.

The fort was obviously built as a showplace for the North West Company and there is no doubt that when complete it succeeded sufficiently to amaze and awe wilderness travellers as they stumbled hungry and tired from Indian country into an elegant, sophisticated and well-organized community.

The first inland headquarters of the North West Company was located at Grand Portage in present-day Minnesota. When this site became part of the United States, one of its partners, Roderick McKenzie, finally found a suitable location for the new headquarters post in 1798.

Some five years after McKenzie's rediscovery of the old Kaministikwia route, the first rendezvous was held at the new depot known as Fort William. Legal problems followed, however; and it seems that although the company bought the land from the Indians they were never able to get legal title to it. Five years later the North West Company was amalgamated with the Hudson's Bay Company and although the fort continued to be occupied, it no longer had the same importance. Certainly the Great Rendezvous was finished.

'The fur trade is forever lost to Canada,' wrote William McGillivray on his last visit to the fort in 1821.

By 1843 a Captain Lefroy was writing to his mother that 'Ranges of stores and sheds are empty, and the old mess house, sixty feet long, in which so many hardy traders used to tell of their exploits, is now a shed of canoes, half a ruin.' Five years later another traveller wrote: 'We hear of traditions of banquets, and crowds of clerks, and armies of hangers-on of all kinds. But all this has disappeared. . . . The old block house behind is falling to pieces, and the banqueting hall has probably been burnt up for firewood, at least, we saw nothing there that looked like it. Even the little flower garden opening out of the stone-paved courtyard was overgrown with weeds.'

In 1971, the retiring premier of Ontario, John Robarts, announced a plan to rebuild the old fort with its Great Hall, storehouses and farm. This announcement followed three years of excavation and study at the fort's original site. Today the replica of Old Fort William stands, not on its original site at the mouth of the Kaministikwia, but on Pointe de Meuron, a well-treed and secluded area upstream, where in 1816 Lord Selkirk's mercenaries encamped. The original site is now occupied by houses and a railway cleaning yard.

Today, to experience the authentic historical atmosphere of the fort, visitors leave their cars 350 yards away at a modern information area and either walk through a wooded area to the palisade or ride in a horse-drawn wagon. Once inside the palisade they enter a nineteenth-century world peopled with gentlemen, tradesmen and merchants, Métis and Ojibwa women, and rough engagés.

The replica of Fort William opens every year with a re-enactment of the voyageurs' arrival. The season will finally come to an end this year on 4 October when the voyageurs paddle away; just as they must have done at the end of summer in the early 1800s. ◆