

# On the Frontier

Newsletter of the Frontier Living History Group

Date – April / May 2010

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### Important information

Victorian Police's –

Re-enactors Guide Booklet

[http://www.police.vic.gov.au/retrievemedia.asp?media\\_id=36984&status=active](http://www.police.vic.gov.au/retrievemedia.asp?media_id=36984&status=active)

## UP COMING EVENTS



In 2010

### September

#### **Southern Cross Free Trappers Camp at Beaver Creek**

September 17th – 20th. Spring  
Rendezvous with friends at Beaver  
Creek, Whorouly.

An extended single weekend –

Friday 17th through to Monday 20th.

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See our new Video photo slide  
show on our website at

<http://frontierslivinghistory.tripod.com/frontiers1.htm>

### The Beaver Club

Montreal 1785-1827

From: "Montreal 1535-1914"

By William Henry Atherton,  
S.J. Clarke Publishing Co., Montreal,  
1914

"The members of the famous Beaver Club, constituted perhaps the most picturesque and magnificent aristocracy that has ever dominated the life of any young community on this continent, with the possible exception of the tobacco lords of Virginia. The majority of them were adventurous Scotsmen, but they included French-Canadians, Englishmen and a few Irishmen, and were thoroughly cosmopolitan by taste and associations."

The Beaver Club was instituted at Montreal in the year 1785, by the merchants then carrying on the Indian trade of Canada. Originally the club consisted of but nineteen members, all voyageurs, having wintered in the Indian Country, and having been in the trade from their youth. Subsequently the membership was extended to fifty-five, with ten Honorary Members.

On the first Wednesday in December of each year, the social gatherings were inaugurated by a dinner at which all members residing in the town were expected to be present.

The club assumed powers which would, in the present day, he strongly resisted; among the most notable of them was the rule, that "no member shall have a party at his house on club days, nor accept invitations ; but if in town, must attend, except prevented by indisposition"

The meetings were held fortnightly from December to April and there was, in addition, a summer club for the captains of the fur vessels, who,

in some instances, were honorary members.

The object of the meetings (as set forth in the rules) was "to bring together, at stated periods, during the winter season, a set of men highly respectable in society, who had passed their best days in a savage country and had encountered the difficulties and dangers incident to a pursuit of the fur trade of Canada."

The members recounted the perils they had passed through and after passing around the Indian emblem of peace the calumet (A Calumet is a Native American smoking pipe carved out of pipestone, sometimes called a "peace pipe".), the officer appointed for the purpose, made a suitable harangue."

Fines such as six bottles of Madeira were imposed for neglect of exacting rules and ritual.

Members wore large gold medals on club nights.

There were also five toasts which had to be offered:

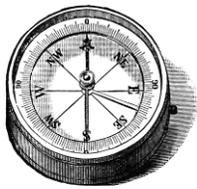
1. The Mother of all Saints;
2. The King;
3. The Fur Trade in all its Branches;
4. Voyageurs Wives and Children;
5. Absent members.

Pemmican, the dried buffalo meat mixed with berries and fat which was the staple food of the fur trade, was brought from the Saskatchewan to be served in the unfamiliar atmosphere of mahogany, silver and candle glow.

Following this, the members and their guests were permitted to pursue their own pleasures

After hours of dining and drinking, the climax of the evening was

**"The Grand Voyage."**



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## The Beaver Club cont.

### “The Grand Voyage.”

Members and guests sat on the floor in a row as if in a great canoe. With fire tongs, swords of soldier guests, or walking sticks, for paddles, they dipped and swung to the rhythm of voyageur songs. It was all very brilliant, expensive, and probably extremely noisy.

One September night in 1808, thirty-one members and guests sat down to dine.

The bill has survived :

32 dinners £12  
 29 bottles of Madeira at 6/  
 19 bottles of Port at 5/  
 14 bottles of Porter at 2/6  
 12 quarts ale 8/  
 7 suppers 8/9  
 Brandy and gin 2/6  
 Cigars, pipes, tobacco 5/  
 Three wine glasses broken 3/9  
**Total..... £28.15/**

The club that night had a notable list of rollicking fur traders.

Presiding was: Joseph Frobisher, then sixty-eight years of age.

Alexander Henry, the elder, was vice-chairman.

The “Cork” was William McKay, a recently retired partner.

His brother Alexander McKay, who had crossed the mountains with Mackenzie and was later murdered on the ship Tonquin, was also present.

About the table were such fur trade celebrities as

- William McGillivray
- James McGill, whose fortune established McGill University
- Isaac Todd
- Josiah Bleakley

- John Gregory
- George Gillespie
- Roderick McKenzie
- Thomas Thain, who died insane after bankruptcy
- General Drummond, who succeeded General Isaac Brock in command of the Montreal garrison
- Sir John Johnson, Bart., superintendent -general of Indian Affairs
- Colonel Sheaffe, who assumed command after Brock was killed at Queenston Heights
- John McDonald of Garth, builder of Rocky Mountain House
- Archibald Norman McLeod, active in the later feud with Lord Selkirk;
- Alexander McKenzie, cousin of Sir Alexander Mackenzie
- John Jacob Astor, that rising citizen of New York, who had just established the American Fur Company and was on his fall buying trip to Montreal.

Originally the club consisted of 19 members, whose names appear on the clubs history page 8. As time went on, others who qualified were admitted, but membership was not allowed to get out of hand since one of the club rules states there were to be no more than 55 regular and 19 honorary members at any time. During the 42 years of the Club’s existence there were about 100 admitted to membership. In looking over the list of members it is evident that membership in the club was not reserved exclusively for the North West Company men, but we may be quite certain the men of the Hudson’s Bay Company would not be allowed in the door, at least not until after the Union of 1821

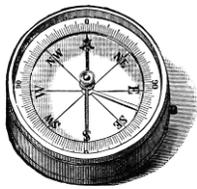
While it is true the records mention Lord Selkirk at a Beaver Club dinner in 1803, we must bear in mind his attendance there was as a guest only, and undoubtedly both parties had an ulterior motive in setting up this meeting, as we will see later.

The forming of the Beaver Club in 1785 provided the North Westers with an ideal opportunity to let off steam, tell of their experiences in Indian territory, and to revel in the havoc they played with their competitor. They were indeed in very high spirits.

During this period the Hudson’s Bay Company was not idle. The men from the Bay fought blow for blow and were able to recouperate many of their losses.

When the North West Company failed in 1804, in their attempt to buy the Hudson’s Bay Company, and again in 1805 when their offer to buy the rights to use the Hudson’s Bay route for shipping furs to Europe was turned down, the North Westers must have had some doubts about their future and this undoubtedly affected company spirit. Such a situation could account for the apparent lack of interest in the Beaver Club between 1804 and 1807.

The revival of interest in the club after 1807 could be accounted for by the fact the North West Company was again on the verge of buying controlling interest in their rival and in 1808 when the deal fell through they became more determined than ever to break their competitor. This determination is vividly reflected in the many skirmishes between the two companies during the establishment of the Red River Settlement.



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The bloodshed at Red River must have caused the traders from Montreal to realize how senseless it was to carry on with this bitter rivalry and in 1821 they were absorbed into the Hudson's Bay Company. What was now left to instill interest in the Beaver club?

With the building of trading posts throughout the west, it became less dangerous to travel into the wilderness. The rough and tough devil-may-care fur trader was becoming a thing of the past, and no longer did they have a competitor whose territory they could invade. That which caused the Club to be formed, held it together, and made the meetings so interesting to the members, was now gone. The attempt by George Simpson to revive the club in 1827 was doomed from the start.

The spirit just wasn't there and the Beaver Club faded into oblivion."

### Web Ref:

<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~qcmntl-w/BeaverClub.html>

## Trading Post - Interior



reproduction of what the trading post at Lower Fort Garry might have looked like. Some of the items you can find include hats, hobnailed boots, HBC blankets, wash basins, kettles, kitchen utensils, harnesses, flour, tea and soap

### Web Ref:

<http://www.furtradestories.ca>

## The Beaver Club medal



Front view



Reverse View

### Medals Dimensions:

3.9 long; 5.3 wide; 0.1 high

The motto of the Beaver Club was "Fortitude in Distress," and the words were engraved on a gold medal. Members were required to wear their medals on special occasions and at the meetings.

### Web Ref:

[http://www.furtradestories.ca/details.cfm?content\\_id=267&cat\\_id=2&sub\\_cat\\_id=3](http://www.furtradestories.ca/details.cfm?content_id=267&cat_id=2&sub_cat_id=3)



## Our 1<sup>st</sup> Birthday as a Club



Well a year has gone by since we started the club

Our achievements in the past year have been really something we can be proud of

- A great club website
- A really good newsletter
- A beautiful video slide show which can be viewed on our website

And we have put some great effort in improving our personal gear and clothing.

We have also made some great friends both here in Australia and overseas.

If this is what a small number can achieve in one year, then we can take the time to be very proud of our selves.

And I look forward to what we will achieve in the future.

