

# Surveyors of The Past

BY CHARLES FAIRHALL

## PETER FIDLER — 1769-1822

Two of the greatest surveyor-explorers in Western Canada during the second half of the 18th century were David Thompson and Peter Fidler. The careers of these two men ran side by side. Both men were brought to Canada and trained as surveyors by the Hudson's Bay Company, and between them, carried out the initial surveys of some 16,000 miles of waterways.

While every school boy knows the name of David Thompson and is familiar with his exploits, only a few historians have ever heard of Peter Fidler. The former has had a great river named after him, as well as a town in Manitoba, schools and other public buildings, while the latter's name is borne only by an obscure lake in Manitoba, a bay hidden in Wollaston Lake in Saskatchewan and a scarcely noticeable cape on the Alberta

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### PIRANHA<sup>ca</sup>

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reaches the valve, and, just as Jill is at 99½, turns it. Away goes the speed-boat, and, still holding his breath, he is dragged back through the building, causing severe contusions to even his head. Half a mile down the lake, Jill finds the stop button, and hauls in the rope, but there's no Jack at the end of it, so, with a muttered "Oh, rats!" — for she has come to love him — she gets ready to look for the starting button. But, 50 feet astern, an arm and hand appear above the surface, which, from all that hair, and the man's wrist-watch, she suspects may belong to Jack. Taking a chance, she hauls him in — only just in time, too, because a whole school of piranhas is attacking him, and besides he can't hold his breath much longer.

So the picture ends happily, with Jill bandaging Jack until he looks like King Tut, and the lake so polluted that not even a mercury-loaded Wabigoon p'ke can live in it, never mind a piranha. But is the crisis really over? How can it be, when the writers are already busy on Piranha 2? The fade-out shows an ocean beach, and a fisherman casting into the surf, to the accompaniment of music so menacing that you just know that he is about to catch one of those fin-er-lickin' piranhas. They have escaped, and even now are heading for the easy pickings of the Florida beaches!

We left, consumed by apathy, and certainly are planning to go and see the sequel, unless we have some really exciting knitting to do.

portion of Lake Athabasca. Peter Fidler is truly one of Canada's "Forgotten Surveyors", yet the accomplishments of this man are amazing. He was the first white man to write about cactus in Canada, of coal in the prairies, and of the Athabaskan tar sand deposits. His journals provide clear insight into the life and social conditions of the prairie Indians as they came into contact with the white man.

In the 32 years he spent in the service of the Hudson's Bay Company, he travelled over 48,000 miles by canoe, dog sled, horseback, or on foot. He wintered with the Piegan Indians, learned their language, saw first-hand evidence of their tribal wars, learned of the horrible ravages of smallpox among them, viewed the incredible buffalo herds and experienced the beginnings of the Metis uprisings.

He married an Indian woman, Mary, sired 14 children, 10 of whom survived him, left an estate of nearly £3,000 and one of the strangest wills in Canadian history. He bequeathed his journals and maps to the Hudson's Bay Company, his library of 500 books and his surveying instruments to the Governor of the Red River Colony, and after making provisions for his wife and children, deposed of the residue of his estate in the statement "All my money to be placed in public funds, the interest annually added to the capital, and to continue so until August 16, 1969 (the 200th anniversary of his birth), when the entire amount will be placed at the disposal of the next male heir in direct descent from my son, Peter Fidler". This request was never accomplished.

Born in Bolsover, Derbyshire, England, he signed on in London in 1788 as a labourer with the Hudson's Bay Company and was sent to York Factory. At this date, the Hudson's Bay Company was already 118 years old and by Royal Charter had exclusive trading rights in all the area covered by the watershed draining into Hudson Bay. When Fidler arrived there, York Factory relied mainly on furs brought in by Cree Indians and considerable rivalry existed between this outpost and Fort Churchill, the other Company outpost 150 miles away to the north.

These outposts collected furs brought across half a great continent from the Rocky Mountains and the shores of the Arctic Ocean by Indians who wanted the whiteman's goods. Despite their indisputable legal right to the area,

the Hudson's Bay Company was seriously challenged by the North West Company, a Montreal-based Canadian company, who soon discovered the weakness in the system, and set out to exploit it by establishing forts along the trade routes and intercepting the Indians. By doing so, they cut deeply into the profits of the Hudson's Bay Company and waxed rich themselves.

As a countermeasure, the Hudson's Bay Company decided to increase the number of their forts and beat their rivals at their own game, but they were hampered by the lack of accurate maps of the trade routes, namely the lakes and rivers.

In 1778, Philip Turner, an Englishman from Middlesex, was the first surveyor employed by the Hudson's Bay Company. When the decision was made to expand the survey operation, Thompson and Fidler were placed under the tutelage of Turner and learned the art of taking astronomical observations and of map making. For the next 30 years, Fidler was to survey over 4,700 miles of lakeshore and river in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. Among his many accomplishments was the mapping of most of the North and South Saskatchewan Rivers. Carrying his sextant and his artificial horizon of quicksilver wherever he went, he determined by precise observations the latitude and longitude of any point, and this laid the framework for future maps of Western Canada.

In 1796, four years after Turner retired, Fidler was appointed Chief Surveyor and Map Maker of the Hudson's Bay Company, carrying on in these capacities until the Company united with the North West Company in 1821. His maps were sent to A. Arrowsmith in London to aid in the delineation of North America.

When Lord Selkirk established a colony on the Red River in 1813, Fidler was employed to make the first formal property surveys in Western Canada. He surveyed 36 lots along the Red River and subdivided Point Douglas into lots in 1817. Fidler was recommended permanent surveyor for the colony and served for a time on the Council of Assiniboia.

It would be wrong to suppose that Fidler's role with the Company was confined to only that of a surveyor-explorer. He was also actively engaged in the Hudson's Bay Company policy of expansion necessitated by the intrusion of the North West Company into the fur trading business. The latter faced up to this action by building rival trading posts, usually within sight of the Hudson's Bay Company posts and although there were times when the niceties of civilized

white men, faced with a hostile environment, were observed, generally speaking, their tactics were those of harassment.

For a time, the Northwesters encountered considerable opposition from other traders from Montreal, namely, the XY Company. In the fierce struggle that ensued between these rivals, the principles of fair play and honesty played no part. No action was too brutal, no deed too despicable, to work on the enemy. To their everlasting shame, liquor was the tool used by these unscrupulous men to debauch the Indians. In 1804, the XY and the North West Companies coalesced and stopped the stupid competition. This meant the Hudson's Bay Company had to face united competitors, now steeped in habits of savagery brought on by recent struggle. Fidler's journals for the years 1802-1806 give us first-hand accounts of affairs at Lake Athabasca.

Always hampered by the lack of men and provisions, Fidler was harassed by the Northwesters who used all means both fair and foul to hurt them. Canoes were burned, fishing lines destroyed, game driven away, and Indians obstruct-

ed in their attempts to trade with the Hudson's Bay Company.

In 1810, Fidler was assigned the task of maintaining an outpost at Ile-a-la-Cross. Here he was confronted again by the Northwesters, who employed a villainous young Highlander of huge stature, named Black, to continue the antics of bullying the Hudson's Bay Company's men.

One day in October, Black and his compatriot, Ogden, came over to the post decked out with a gun, two pistols and a dagger. Fidler records the event in his journal as follows: . . . "I told them both to return the same way they came and that they should not pass through our yard in the insulting manner they indicated. I told one of our men to shut the west gates — which was at last done — they persevered in passing when I struck Mr. Black with a stick two or three times — Ogden immediately drew his dagger and cut two large holes in the side and back of my coat and pricked my body — but no further — Mr. Black then took up part of the stick I had broken over him and struck me on the thumb close at the upper end of the nail and smashed it to pieces — Ogden also struck me twice with a stick — all

our men looking on the whole time without giving me any assistance — Mr. Black and Ogden yet followed me into my room with their guns and daggers and abused me very much while my thumb was dripping. . .".

Throughout it all, Fidler maintained a bulldog-like tenacity and remained fiercely loyal to the Hudson's Bay Company, unlike his contemporary, David Thompson, who left their services and joined their rivals.

At Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan, there is a National Historical Sites plaque inscribed: "Peter Fidler, Meteorologist and Surveyor. Served the Hudson's Bay Company actively for 34 years, trading on the North and South Saskatchewan and the Churchill Rivers, built the fur posts Chipewyan 1791, Bolsover 1799. Greenwich 1799, Chesterfield 1800, Nottingham 1802. Made the first boundary survey of Assiniboia and served Kildonan. His extensive Journal fully reflects the life of the land. Born at Bolsover, England, 16th August 1769. Died at Norway House in 1822."

(*'Men & Meridians'* Vol. 1, Don W. Thompson, "Peter Fidler: Canada's Forgotten Surveyor 1769-1822", J. G. MacGregor - McClelland & Stewart Ltd.)