

The Other Thompson

William Thomas Thompson 1853-1938

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If someone were to ask who the most famous Surveyor in the United States was, the answer would most likely be President George Washington. If the same question were asked for Canada, the answer would most certainly be (self aspirations aside) David Thompson.

There have been many articles, journals and books written about the exploits of one David Thompson. Surfing the net for “David Thompson Surveyor” you will get 17,200 hits. Surfing for William T. Thompson, Surveyor you will get no hits. The most ambitious of David Thompson’s mapping journeys took him from Rocky Mountain House, Alberta

through the mountain passes of British Columbia and south by the river systems across Washington State reaching the mouth of the Columbia River in 1811. Unfortunately for Canada it only was a few months earlier that the American Captain Gray sailed into the mouth of the Columbia.

The reference to David Thompson’s explorations is only as a means of comparison with the amazing life in surveying experienced by William T. Thompson, which is only chronicled in part herein.

W. T. Thompson’s first entry into the realm of Professional Land Surveying began when he was 19 as an articulated student to Mr. Hugh D.

Lumsden,
P.L.S. in 1872.

One of his first duties was to supply the survey crews with liquid refreshments. One of their favourites was “Brothers Company’s Porter and Rum” even though he himself remained a teetotaler throughout his life. While serving his articles he worked on surveys of the Northern Railway-Washago to Bracebridge, the Credit Valley Railway-Toronto to Orangeville and beyond, and for the North Grey Railway-Collingwood to Owen Sound. He then received his Ontario Commission as a P.L.S. in 1875.

The only record to be found in the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources of any Crown surveys that he performed, is his survey of Gillmor Township in 1878. He, however, had other things in mind. During the year of 1879, along with an articulated "pupil," Arthur Maddock and an expert canoeist, Jeff Avery, he set out to explore and map over one thousand miles of Ontario. The route would begin through the Muskoka, Petewawa, Amble du Fond and Mattawa Rivers into the Ottawa River. From here they turned north by the tributaries (most likely Lake Temiskaming and the Montreal River) over the watershed divide and down the Abitibi and Moose Rivers to James and Hudson Bays. The return course followed the Moose and Missinaibi Rivers recrossing the height of land, and down the Michipicoten River to Lake Superior. During the journey he continually took observations for latitude with a sextant.

On his return to Toronto he presented the Ontario Crown Land Departmental Archives with a map showing the topographical and geographical features of the landscape. Thompson also had an account of his trip published in the "Globe" in December of 1879. Neither of these artefacts has yet to be located on the writer's part.

The call of further adventures drew him to the West. In 1880, under instructions from Lindsay Russell, then Surveyor-General of Canada, he left, along with other surveyors, to survey block outlines, 4 long and 4 broad making 16 townships in all. The townships were in a part of the North West Territories, which later became Saskatchewan. At this point in his life, Thompson had already achieved a B.A.Sc., an M.A. Sc., and a C.E. from McGill University. He also was commissioned as a D.L.S. and a D.T.S. In 1882, he attended the inaugural meeting of the Dominion Lands Surveyors' Association.

Fortunately for us, from this point in time he started a detailed journal, which followed his professional career up to 1883, but does not appear to be

recorded for any later years. Much of what follows is taken directly from his first hand accounts of his experiences from 1880 to 1883.

Thompson travelled to Winnipeg from Toronto by way of Chicago, Minneapolis, St. Boniface and the Red River. He called Winnipeg, or Fort Garry as it may have been called then, an embryo city, gateway to the west and an outfitting point for all survey parties and fur traders. The unpaved streets were a quagmire, often displaying single boots left in the "unctuous adhesive clay." On the outskirts of the city there were Métis, who were called "freighters." With their assistance, the survey equipment and supplies were loaded on Red River carts, which were driven by oxen instead of ponies, because their hoofs would spread and not sink as deeply while crossing marshy ground. Together they headed west.

The area to be surveyed was in the Qu'Appelle Valley region near the present City of Regina. The townships were to be laid out in what was called "the second system of survey." Thompson's work, however, was not confined to this area and he found time to survey as far as the Lesser Slave Lake region and along the Peace River to near the border of British Columbia. While working in the bad lands of Alberta, he came across the remains of a dinosaur, dug it up, labelled all the parts, crated them and shipped them east to the Geological Survey Department in Ottawa. There is no record of him having been given credit for the find.

General George Custer's massacre at the Battle of the Little Big Horn took place in 1876. Sitting Bull and many of his band of Sioux warriors, took refuge north of the border at Wood Mountain, Saskatchewan. Thompson and his crews encountered many of these Indians wearing and carrying American equipment taken from Custer's men. On one encounter Thompson found himself two or three miles ahead of his party. At first glimpse he thought that two figures crouched around a fire were squaws. They turned out to be muscular men, fully six feet in height; and each

wearing nothing but a thong held in place over one shoulder.

They carried formidable clubs and looked quite menacing. Fortunately, as greetings proceeded, the pony that Thompson was riding must have sensed trouble and lunged to one side before any further contact was made. The pony then turned and trotted back toward his party, which was now visible in the distance.

Thompson's meeting with the Sioux, however, did not end there. Later Sitting Bull, himself, along with several counsellors, paid a visit to Thompson's encampment for an interview with Thompson, who happened to have been absent that day. His assistant informed him that Sitting Bull wanted to discuss obtaining a reserve in that district. He claimed that the country to the south was old hunting grounds. The sly Sitting Bull knew that the Marquis of Lorne, the Governor General was soon to arrive at Fort Qu'Appelle, which was guarded by the Mounted Police. At a meeting addresses were delivered and a curious buffalo dance was performed in honour of the Marquis, but there was no mention of what resulted.

During the same summer Thompson came down with what he called "an attack of quinsy" [not John] saying it was the most severe illness of his life. Sitting Bull heard of the ailment and sent his medicine man to affect a cure. Thompson recalled being surprised by a ferocious looking savage loaded with bells and dangling bones entering his tent. The medicine man, complete with a grotesquely painted face, jumped, danced and uttered "diabolical expressions." He then concocted a pungent brew of roots, stirring it with a "grimy thumb" and had Thompson drink it. The next morning he said he was better, but did not know whether the incantations or the brew was the cure.

For the next several years Mr. Thompson performed a multitude of engineering and survey services throughout the area, which later became Saskatchewan and Alberta. He finally settled in 1922, with his wife and family of seven children, in Cranberry Portage, Manitoba near the Town of Flin Flon.

There he did surveys of mineral claims until July 8th, 1938 at the age of 84 years.

It was that day, while in the process of doing a survey of a claim at Cold Lake, Manitoba, that he became separated from the rest of the survey party. He was not found until the 18th of July about fifteen miles from the place he had set out to go. It is not confirmed whether he died of starvation, exposure or, as a true surveyor, from a heart attack while attempting to raise a pole with a blueprint on it as a flag. His friends were quoted as saying, "He died as he would have wished, in harness and amidst surroundings he knew and loved so well."

The Book "Muskeg, Outcrops and

40 Below" lists veteran Prairie Surveyors that includes the name: William Thomas Thompson, D.L.S., D.T.S., O.L.S., A.L.S., S.L.S., B.C.L.S., B.Sc. (civil), M.A.Sc., C.E., M.L.S.

An anonymous verse that accompanies the list captures Mr. Thompson's life and may be a goal for us all reads:

A SENIOR'S CREED

We cannot change yesterday
That is quite clear
Nor begin on tomorrow
Until it is here
So all that is left
For you and me
Is to make to-day
As good as can be.
-Anon.

Sources:

"Annual Report of the Association of Ontario Land Surveyors" for 1939

William Thompson Biography by his son George F. Thompson and E.T. Wilkie.

"Saskatchewan History Vol.III, No.3, Autumn, 1950", "Adventures of a Surveyor in the Canadian Northwest 1880-1883" (with thanks to Bill Jobin-Bevans).

"Muskeg, Outcrops and 40 Below" by John H. Webb, Land Surveyor.

"Surveyors of Canada 1867-1967" by Courtney C. J. Bond, D.L.S.

