

In 1788 Alexander and his cousin, Roderick Mackenzie, built Fort Chippewyan on the south side of Lake Athabasca which means in the Indian tongue the place where many waters meet. The fort was finished with such care and taste that the curious Indians came there to trade instead of to the rival fort at Hudson Bay. But Alexander Mackenzie could not endure the dull life of a trader: to fish in the summer, barter with the Indians in the autumn and idle through the cold, dark winter did not appeal to this young man of twenty-six. Born for heroic deeds, he determined to follow the twin rivers to the unknown sea.

But the great venture called up difficulties equally great. The return must be made within one hundred days, before the lake settled for its long winter sleep under its mantle of ice. Indians were necessary as guides, if the white man lost his way, as interpreters with strange Indians and as hunters of the wary game that would renew the voyageurs' strength for the grinding toil. But Indians were not to be hired on such a dangerous voyage. They told many tales of mighty waterfalls, evil spirits and had Indians ahead.

But to the master mind all difficulties vanish as mist before the sun. On the morning of June 3rd a canoe floated out from the bank of Fort Chippewyan on the great venture. This birch-bark canoe, which was destined to travel three thousand miles, was forty feet long and carried a ton and a half of supplies, all packed in ninety pound sacks for the portages. There were beads and trinkets for the Indians, pemmican for food, new clothing for the journey, rifles, kegs of powder, lead for bullets, a tent, axes, a medicine chest, pitch for mending the canoe, and a long tow rope for the homeward trail. The watch dog, seated on this valuable freight, felt the importance of his position. Mackenzie carried a special package covered with oilcloth in which were the instruments for finding their position each day. By means of these he could mark on paper the course of the new river. From the leader's shoulder hung a long telescope. With the exception of a camera, an explorer of to-day could hardly be better equipped.

The crew consisted of four Canadian voyageurs. These French halfbreeds were picked men whose pride was in the swift flight of their canoe over a river's winding course or in its dangerous descent of foaming rapids. Two of them were accompanied by their Indian wives. English Chief, the Indian guide, was a noted character. His canoe was paddled by two of his wives and followed by the canoes of many of their friends. Room was found in the Chief's canoe for two young Indians.

Mackenzie drove his men to the utmost for they were racing against time. They embarked at three in the morning and, stopping only once for food, made sometimes forty miles in a day, often carrying their freight around the rapids in the river. They drew to shore