

Trapped

A Frenchman's illegal journey

A dark summer night in 1661, two young trappers slipped out of the fort at Three Rivers, near Mont Royal (Montreal) in New France.

"Who goes?" cried the sentry.

The two men knew that those who trapped for furs without permission from the French king or one of his governors in New France could face imprisonment—or even death. But the men also knew that they were widely admired for their exploits and hoped that the sentry would let them pass. They spoke their names: Pierre Esprit Radisson and Medart Chouart, Sieur des Groseillers.

"God give you a good voyage," whispered the guard.

Radisson, like his brother-in-law Groseillers, was no newcomer to the wilderness of the New World. At 25, he already had three major expeditions behind him. His parents had moved to Mont Royal from France when he was a child. And as a boy, Radisson had gone exploring, only to be seized by the Iroquois. His captors, he later re-

called, "burned several parts" of his body, "plucked four nails out of my fingers and made me sing."

But for men with Radisson's spirit, the great fortune to be had in the wilds of the American West overshadowed the dangers.

Leather and fur were all the rage in Europe. Beaver was used for muffs, mittens, and trims, and kings gladly traded jewels to get them.

Radisson had applied for a trapping license before his journey with Groseillers, but the governor at Three Rivers wanted half the profits. "Much vexed at such an unreasonable demand," Radisson wrote. He refused to comply, setting the stage for his nighttime escape.

Once clear of the fort, he and Groseillers set off in a small boat stocked with trinkets to give to the "wild men," who he said "were dazzled by such gifts." Radisson's party included numerous adventurers; two priests, who would "endeavor to convert the Indians to the Christian faith"; and a group of Indians "from the Upper Country."

Led by native woodsmen, Radisson traveled along the banks of Lake Michigan and Lake Superior, ever westward. Along the way, he caught deer, buffalo, moose, and

beaver in great quantities. "We came to a place where were abundance of otters, in so much that I believe all gathered to hinder our passage," Radisson reported. One 12-day stretch, he and his men killed more than 600 animals.

The great trapping spree came to a brutal halt when winter hit. "The hunger tormented us most," Radisson wrote. The crew took to eating their dogs, then wood, then worse. After a battle with the Iroquois, they returned to their campsite with prisoners and corpses.

"The



Keith Bendis

dead," he recalled,

"were eaten, and the living burned with a small fire."

When the men finally returned to Mont Royal, they found little solace. The governor jailed Groseillers and stole the furs. Furious, Radisson renounced France and signed on to trap for her arch rival, England, where he eventually claimed he was cheated as well. In the end, he was considered a traitor in both countries and a hero in none. The first white man to explore as far west as the Mississippi, he lived the rest of his life in England and died poor and unknown.

—Sarah Blustein

Just the Facts

... ABOUT THE FRENCH

% of U.S. Population in 1790: 2

% of Immigration to U.S. in 1991: 1

First Town: Parris Island, S.C., 1562

(abandoned two years later)

Main Reason for Immigrating:

Religious persecution of Huguenots by French Catholics

Main Adversary: English. England and France were always at war

Oh Yeah?: Paul Revere was a French Huguenot

Slurs: "Frogs," for various reasons