

The Grand Portage Fur Traders Route and Indian Reservation

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Extending southwest and west from the point where the International Boundary touches Lake Superior at the mouth of the Pigeon River between Minnesota and Ontario is a sparsely populated and isolated region of relatively little economic importance. This condition stands in sharp contrast to the situation that prevailed here in the eighteenth century and reflects dynamic relations to the physical and cultural setting both within the region as well as outside of it, operating within a framework of national and international interests.

This region, extending along what is now the International Boundary, was of major significance as long as the fur trade flourished in this part of North America, since it offered a canoe route that extends more directly and farther westward than does any similar route from the edge of Lake Superior.

Penetration of the continent by the explorer and fur trader who came by way of the St. Lawrence and the Great Lakes had been fairly easy as far as the western edge of Lake Superior. At this point, however, the Laurentian Upland stretches southward and westward between the Lake Superior basin and the prairies and constitutes a barrier to transportation.

The eastern edge of this region, where streams descend from the upland level to that of Lake Superior, has been made particularly rugged by the interaction of erosive forces on irregularly distributed rocks of varying resistance. Long, even-crested ridges, rather irregularly distributed, rise steeply to a height of as much as 600 feet above valley bottoms. Few stream valleys extend more than a few miles inland, most of them contain only shallow, boulder filled streams and nearly all of them consist of narrow gorges while the river courses themselves are marked by falls and rapids.

Farther inland the relief is less, but irregularly distributed lake filled depressions made the development of satisfactory transportation routes no less difficult.

However, from a point near the center of the northwestern shore of Lake Superior a series of short, but deeper and wider rivers connecting a chain of lakes, stretches almost directly westward to the Lake of the Woods on the western edge of the upland. This route not only provided access to this region, but was the shortest route through it for canoe transportation and in addition provided access to the head-

water region of the Mississippi and to drainage basins leading to Hudson Bay and to the Arctic.

Although this route was direct, falls and rapids nevertheless made many portages necessary, thirty-six to be exact. The longest of these was the Grand Portage that extended from a point several miles south of the mouth of Pigeon River westward about nine miles to the river to avoid a series of falls and rapids in the lower course of the stream.

Used intermittently by French fur traders after 1731 it became the usual route for English fur traders after 1760. However, it was the Northwest Fur Company, organized in the late 1770's that made the route famous.

This company established a trading post at the Lake Superior end of the Grand Portage to which the name Grand Portage was given. A supply depot and fort, called Fort Charlotte, was established at the Pigeon River end of the portage. A number of other way stations, depots, and forts were set up along the entire route. A fort and trading post of major importance was Fort Frances at the outlet of Rainy Lake, since it was here that furs from the south, west, and north were assembled before being shipped to Grand Portage.

Grand Portage became the great fur trading post of the Northwest Company, at which furs were assembled from the entire tributary area in the early summer. The fur trade in this region also attracted traders from the American Fur Company and the Hudson's Bay Company and competition became keen and sometimes bitter. However, the strongly entrenched Northwest Company was easily able to maintain its position in the region.

With the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 a new problem faced the Northwest Company. The government of the United States began negotiations with Great Britain for the establishment of a boundary. Although the boundary was not fixed until 1842, the United States so strongly claimed this region that the Northwest Company, fearing intervention by American Customs officers, transferred its main base of operations to Ft. William in 1803 and Grand Portage ceased to be a great focal point in the region. The American Fur Company later established a trading post here but Grand Portage never again regained its former importance.

Fixing of the International Boundary at the line of the Pigeon River and the Border Lakes in 1842 divided the region, and the process of slowly drawing each of the parts into a framework of separate national interests was begun.

That part of the region that lies south of the boundary held few attractions for private development after the fur trade had declined, and in 1854 the eastern part of this region was established as a reservation for the Chippewa Indians, occupying, as it does, a part of original tribal hunting grounds.

The discovery of iron in the Vermillion and Mesabi ranges and the techniques for using those ores was followed by rapid and intensive

development to the south of the older fur route. Rail lines were built to connect the iron mines with Lake Superior ports at Two Harbors and Duluth. With connections to the south and east already established, Duluth became the new gateway to the west and northwest; agriculture, industry, and mining offered greater returns at the margins of the region than within it, and this once great focus of transportation became an isolated outlying region. Effectively cut off from the principal routes of land travel in the United States by the southwestward trend of Lake Superior and with no good connections with those routes this region became a remote cul-de-sac.

When lumbering began in the upper Great Lakes region, about 1895, this region had a period of short-lived importance as a source of good quality white pine. White pine forests were the natural vegetation while the lakes and rivers provided a means of transportation to Lake Superior ports for shipment out of the region. The forests were removed also from the reservation by lumber companies that either purchased the land or acquired timber rights.

The focus within the region during the lumbering period was the mouth of the Pigeon River. Not only was the assembly of logs at this point simplified by the large number of lakes to which tributary streams are joined, but the mouth of the stream is sufficiently deep to serve as a harbor which opens into a large protected bay. A small lowland at the mouth of the river provided a good site for lumber camp, sawmill, and storage yard at the harbor's edge.

Nevertheless, the region during the lumbering period never achieved so prominent a position as a focus for transportation lines as had been true in the earlier period. Lumbering operations were carried on at the mouths of other streams entering the Great Lakes so that this was only one of many similar developments.

A large part of the original reservation passed into private ownership during and immediately after the lumbering period through sale and homestead privilege. There has been an attempt to consolidate the reservation in recent years, reflecting a change in government policy and resulting in the purchase of privately owned land within the limits of the reservation as it becomes available. This has been aided by the abandonment of many homesteads within the region. Of the 60,000 acres of land within the reservation only about 6,000 are still privately owned, although mineral rights have in some cases been retained by earlier owners.

It has been estimated that about 300 Indians live on the reservation. Most of these live along the road that extends from Mineral Center to Grand Portage, along roads that branch out from Grand Portage, or at Grand Portage itself.

Grand Portage is the center for the reservation. It consists of a trading post, a post office, church, school, community house, several cabins for tourists, and a stockade and lodge built in 1941 on the site of the original trading post, the lodge now serving as a restaurant.

A few of the Indians have found full-time employment in forestry and commercial fishing, others have part-time employment as caretakers

of the few summer homes on the reservation, in carpentry, or the manufacture of handicraft articles, while nearly all supplement a meager income by trapping and hunting.

Very little agriculture is carried on. Most of the area included within the reservation consists of birch and poplar covered hills and valleys. Occasional clearings in the forest are in many cases the remains of agricultural settlements established by German and Irish immigrants in the early part of the present century. However, agriculture was never very successful here, and by 1938 nearly all of the farmers had gone elsewhere.

The Indians raise potatoes and cabbage and a few other vegetables. There are no cattle on the reservation and only one family was found that had any poultry.

The soil derived from the slate which underlies nearly this entire region is poor and in most places thin. The growing season is short. A large part of the region has slopes which are too steep or too rocky for cultivation. Nevertheless the lack of interest in agriculture reflects not only the restrictions imposed on farming in the local area, but reflects a way of living that appears more desirable to the Indian than the routine involved in agricultural production.

Forestry does not support the Indians here. Although nearly all of the reservation land is forested, a large part consists of birch and poplar too small even for pulp wood. Furthermore, the Federal Government has designated this as a Wilderness Area, thereby prohibiting commercial lumbering without special permission.

Hunting and fishing provide part of the food supply. Trapping contributes somewhat to the income but beaver, the most valuable of the fur bearing animals in this region, were almost depleted. The colony is growing at present and with trapping regulated by the tribe in such a way that only a certain proportion of the estimated beaver population may be taken in any one year, there is hope that this activity will make a greater contribution to Indian support in the future.

The tourist trade provides only a relatively small source of income. Fishing and boating on Lake Superior are at present almost the only attractions to tourists outside of the beautiful setting. Furthermore, since Grand Portage lies several miles off the highway and is connected with it only by a gravel road, only a small fraction of the passing tourists have been sufficiently interested to turn off the highway and investigate its attractions.

There is hope among some of the Indians that a contemplated relocation of Highway 61 to bring it through Grand Portage will increase the tourist traffic. If such a relocation takes place, intelligent catering to tourist needs may indeed be of benefit to the Indians, but up to the present little initiative in this direction has been shown.

There is much of scenic beauty and historic interest within the limits of the reservation. The Grand Portage, the site of Ft. Charlotte, and the site of the trading post at Grand Portage are all of historic

significance, yet following the Grand Portage route to Ft. Charlotte and returning on foot through the forest probably has little appeal to the average tourist.

The hills, overlooking the village of Grand Portage offer a splendid view of the surrounding region and can be climbed with little difficulty. Middle Falls and High Falls in the Pigeon River at the edge of the reservation are likewise of scenic interest. At present neither is accessible from the American side although both have not only been made accessible from the Canadian side but provided with facilities for tourists as well.

Handicraft articles are of interest to tourists, yet few such items are available within the reservation, none that reflect particular tribal skills or culture.

The Indians on this reservation have not become self-supporting. This is indicated by the fact that 85 per cent of the county relief funds are reported to be used for their support. This condition does not permit a fair appraisal of the ability or resourcefulness of the Chippewa Indians since reservation development is related in part to government policy and in part to the fact that a large part of the capable and ambitious younger men and women have been attracted by better opportunities elsewhere. This is reflected in the fact that a large part of the resident population is either above 60 or below 18 years of age.

Mineral Center is the site of an abandoned non-Indian agricultural settlement. At present only one Indian family lives there.

Hovland, just outside the reservation has almost no commercial contact with the Indians. Grand Marais serves as the commercial and governmental center of the region. Here are the county offices, courts, and high school as well as the center for the border patrol.

Within the limits of the reservation is one other center, namely at Pigeon River which functions as a port of entry and a small tourist center. These two activities form the basis for the entire local settlement.

The highway crossing into Canada at this point extends from Duluth to Fort William and is the only land route joining these adjacent regions between Lake Superior and International Falls. This highway is the only means of access to this region by land from either the American or Canadian side and provides the only connection that this region has with American or Canadian transportation lines.

Customs and immigration officers on opposite sides of the river here reflect separate national interests along a stream that at one time served to unite the entire region. The highway likewise emphasizes a difference in the region, not only with respect to the change from water to land transportation, but also with respect to the change in the direction of movement since the trend of the highway is dominantly north and south in contrast to the earlier east and west movement.

These contrasts reflect the changing relations of a dynamic culture to the physical setting; relations that have brought about a decline in the relative importance of the region and may continue to do so or that may at any moment again reverse the trend.