

FIRST TO THE PACIFIC

How a clerk beat Lewis and Clark across North America

By Rick Hull



Alexander Mackenzie
Hudson's Bay Company Archive

Lewis and Clark came a distant second in crossing the continent to the Pacific. They were beaten by more than a decade by a Scotsman, Alexander Mackenzie.

And Mackenzie did it twice. First he headed across the Canadian wilderness, following his compass west towards Alaska and the Russian fur market. But his compass was wrong. After a 1,000-mile struggle, he ended up on the shores of the Arctic Ocean.

Honing up on his navigation skills, he tried again. This time his party hauled a canoe across the Rocky Mountains. Initially he thought he was on the Columbia River. Again he was wrong. Switching rivers, he made it to the Pacific Ocean, but not to the coast itself.

Now Mackenzie is known chiefly for a river that averages more than a mile wide, drains a fifth of Canada, and extends for 2,600 miles. Locally, the pizza chain is probably more famous than him.

But his dual expedition answered vital questions about North America and made Mackenzie and his company rich. And he accomplished both trips with a handful of men and women – not a military expedition.

Mackenzie was from the Outer Hebrides, an island off the west coast of Scotland. His family was slightly better off than many, and he received enough schooling to qualify as a clerk. Poverty was the island's main export. Ships headed to America would siphon off hundreds at a time who were willing to contract as indentured servants in return for passage.

In 1774 Alexander, his widowed father and two aunts sailed for New York. They were just in time for the American Revolution. Loyal to the crown, and with the war turning against them, the family fled to Montreal, Canada. At age 16, Alexander went to work for a fur trading company. Six years later he was a partner in the firm.

Mackenzie was not satisfied sitting at a desk, and decided to learn the fur business firsthand. He started at Detroit in 1784, which was then a small fort on the Great Lakes. In 1786 he headed for Grand Portage. Located on Lake Superior, at what is now the northeast corner of Minnesota, the nine-mile river portage was the first stepping stone to the riches of the Canadian interior.

The fur trade followed an annual cycle. Each spring trade goods from eastern Canada would be stockpiled at Grand Portage and packed into bales of 90 pounds. The bales contained rum, gunpowder, bullets, muskets, iron pots, metal knives, sewing needles, wool blankets and more.

Voyageurs would carry the bales, two at a time, up the steep portage, where their birch-bark canoes waited. The canoes would head to tiny trading posts scattered across central Canada. There the voyageurs would pick up the furs purchased from the different tribes. Then, in the fall, the canoes would return to the Grand Portage with their valuable skins of beaver, otter, fox and lynx.

During his winters in the wilderness, Mackenzie ran into Peter Pond, who was infamous for a couple killings. Pond had studied the voyages of James Cook up the Alaskan coast and was convinced that a major river flowed out of central Canada into Cook Inlet, near present-day Anchorage. It would be the Northwest Passage that everyone had been seeking. Based on Indian

accounts collected by Pond, that river started at Great Slave Lake.

Mackenzie got permission from his partners for an expedition in 1789. He rounded up a local Indian chief and his two wives, and four voyagers and their wives. In total, there were ten men and four women and three canoes. The wives were considered essential for their wilderness skills and low maintenance, said to be able to survive on "licking their fingers." Mackenzie took rubles for when he reached Russian Alaska.

The group started on June 3 and ran into immediate trouble. Great Slave Lake was still frozen. After six days a gap opened up along the shoreline, but another problem developed. No one knew where the outlet was. They hired a guide from a local tribe, who eventually confessed never having been to the outlet. The lake is well over 50 times the size of Flathead Lake. Exploring bay after bay, they found a current after 20 days on the lake.

The journey had problems that Lewis and Clark did not face. The river flowed through marshy terrain, and finding a dry spot to spend the night could be difficult. There were frequent, violent thunder storms and the mosquitoes and black flies were fierce. But one advantage was the June nights at high latitudes – the sky was light enough for travel at 2 a.m.

A mountain range appeared to the west. Mackenzie soon realized his surveying skills with the sextant were not what he hoped, and he relied instead on the compass. But he didn't know that the magnetic north pole had migrated south and was just short of the Canadian mainland at the time. The river bent north to avoid the mountains, but Mackenzie's compass continued to indicate he was heading west.

After rapids, food shortages, near mutinies, and fear of the Eskimos, the expedition reached the sea in mid July. But it was the Arctic Ocean, and full of ice floes. His sextant skills were enough to confirm he was above the Arctic Circle.

Returning home against the current and prevailing winds was difficult. The canoes had to be pulled by rope through the narrower canyons.

Mackenzie wanted to call his discovery Disappointment River. But he had proven that the river paralleled the entire length of the Rocky Mountains, and there was no water route to the west. And he had opened a new trading area full of animals with thick pelts because of the arctic cold. At age 25, he demanded a larger share of the company profits in return.

Mackenzie was determined to avoid his original mistakes and find a route to Pacific. But first he had to fill in the gaps in his knowledge. He headed to Cambridge, London, and took classes in astronomy, navigation, mathematics and geography. He talked to merchants on the European side of the fur trade, and quizzed seamen who had sailed with James Cook. On the voyage back to Canada, he spent hours on the deck practicing his navigation skills with the sextant.

In the fall of 1792 he traveled again into the Canadian wilderness to set up an advance camp. Bringing two fellow clerks and six volunteer voyageurs, he built a new fort on the Peace River in what is now west central Alberta. The winter was so cold that his thermometer broke.

This time he would use a single canoe, 25 feet long and four feet and nine inches wide – big enough to carry all the supplies, but light enough to carry across portages.

On May 9 the expedition began.

As they approached the mountains, the rapids increased. Rocks, loosened by the spring thaw, plummeted from the canyon walls. The canoe was pulled by rope or portaged around the worst. Eventually the river narrowed and rapids proved to be too much. The canoe was hauled up the mountainside and a route chopped through the forest.

There were stretches between the gorges where the canoe could be used. But there were repeated collisions with rocks. Each time the canoe was damaged, it had to be gummed and patched – making it heavier and heavier.

A series of high-mountain lakes marked the Continental Divide, and endless portages eventually

brought the expedition to the Fraser River. Mackenzie thought it might be the Columbia River.

Mackenzie decided to abandon the canoe and the river, and continue overland up a different drainage. It was a fortunate decision – the Fraser was impassible downstream where it tumbled through a narrow gap known as the Hellgate.

Each voyageur carried more than 100 pounds of supplies on their backs. The local Salish tribes were friendly and willing to furnish the explorers with salmon and other food. But as they approached the seas, they had to deal with Bello Coola. The tribe had an earlier run-in with sea captain George Vancouver and were still angry about how they were treated.

On July 20 Mackenzie reached a bay with porpoises, strong tides and the smell of the sea. He was on North Bentinck Arm, a small inlet just north of Vancouver Island. He wrote, "Alexander Mackenzie from Canada by land 22d July 1793" on a rock, while four of his crew took a dugout canoe in an unsuccessful search for Vancouver's ship.

After a series of stand-offs with the Bello Coola, the expedition started the trek back home. They found their canoe and supplies where they left them. But then the local tribe stole everything. Mackenzie threatened to direct the English ships to halt the spawning runs of salmon in the rivers unless the items were returned. The supplies reappeared.

Mackenzie also began to buy up furs so the expedition would pay for itself. On September 4, 1793, the expedition was back where it started, just in time for another winter

Mackenzie headed back to Montreal in spring. His firm had merged with the successful North-West Company and soon he was considered one of the richest men in Canada. Returning to London in 1801, he wrote a best-selling chronicle of his two journeys. Lewis and Clark carried a copy on their expedition. The following year he was knighted.

He married at age 48, and had two sons and a daughter. Worn out by his expeditions, he died abruptly of a heart attack at the age of 57.

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