

season usually cached half its load on a long portage to be retrieved by a fleet of o-daw-ban in the winter.

Not all voyageurs were employed making rendezvous with native people at outlying winter camps or freighting supplies. A very select group were chosen for the task of winter communication between trading posts. It was their task to carry the official company correspondence including news of changes in fur price, staff and trading strategies as well as personal mail and small parcels sent by friends or relatives coming often as far away as Europe. Voyageurs undertaking this type of work for the H.B.C. were known as packeteers because they were responsible for transporting this winter mail packet.

Many round trip mail runs exceeded 500 miles requiring great strength and endurance. The packeteers hauling their o-daw-ban often faced the grueling task of breaking a fresh trail on snowshoes for virtually the whole route, as there existed no packed snowshoe trails between trading posts in those days.

Twenty miles was an average days work. This rate of travel necessitated continuous labour from first light till darkness and travel during periods of extreme cold when the o-daw-ban were difficult to pull. Even worse, travel was occasionally necessary in thaw when little could be kept dry and heavy slush loaded the tops of snowshoes, making for great misery and hardship.

In earlier times, overnight accommodation was obtained in the rudest of shelters, the o-buck-wan. This shelter consisted of a simple tarpaulin lean-to placed before a fire. To stay warm at night it was necessary to chop and haul into camp at least a half a cord of firewood before retiring. Rest was not without interruption as the fire would have to be restoked every few hours.

This class of voyageur hauled a light outfit to increase speed. Included were the barest of essentials: rifle, axe, knife, frying pan, pail, snare wire, spare babiche, flour, soda, sugar, beans, grease, tea, two blankets, one change of clothes, several pairs of mocassins, and tarpaulin, as well as the mail bag. Provisions were kept to a minimum as animals and birds were intended to be shot and snared en route. If game was sparse and the snares set overnight failed, starvation was a real possibility.

Unlike summer canoe brigades these voyageurs often travelled for many weeks alone or with just a single partner. The routes they followed were the summer canoe routes, except for shortcuts or extended detours around weak ice. Breaking through ice and drowning was a common cause of death. A normal load was normally no more than 100 pounds, but under ideal conditions, these voyageurs were capable of hauling 300 pounds all day on their o-daw-ban which they themselves referred to as traîneaux.

Feats of exceptional snowshoe and o-daw-ban prowess were rarely witnessed as few observers were capable of sustaining the rate of travel or enduring the hardships necessary to accompany the very best of these men. The voyageurs and Indians themselves had considerably more admiration for these heroic man-testing accomplishments than for the more mundane labour of the canoe brigade. Certainly the names of McKenzie, Batisse, Polson, McLaren and Bonin will be long remembered in this regard.

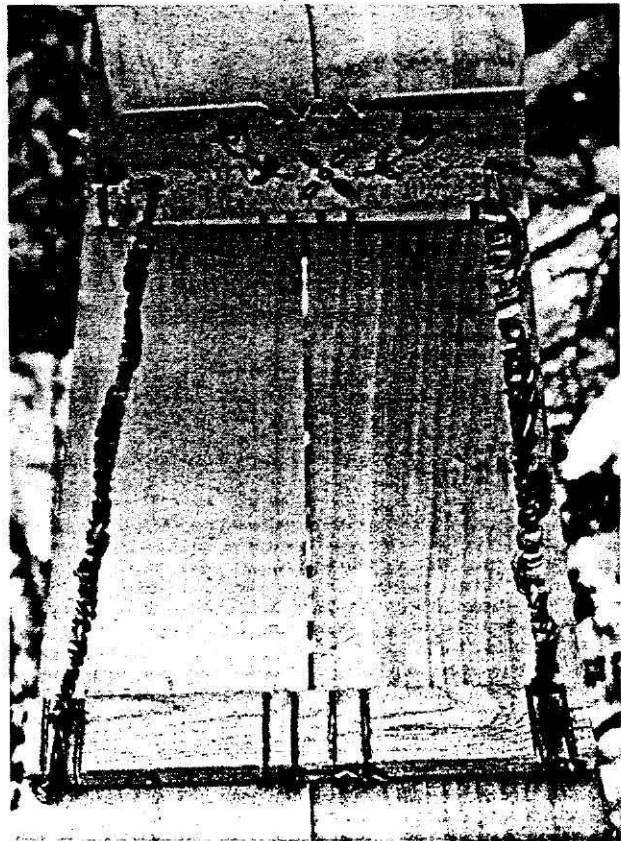
Some accomplishments of the older generation of voyageurs and coureur de bois border on the unbelievable, particularly those of Laguimonière. During the winter of 1815-1816 Laguimonière travelled alone approximately 2,000 miles from the Red River Settlement near present day Winnipeg to Montreal bringing news that the colony had been re-established and was in imminent peril at the hands of the North West Company. Contracted by Lord Selkirk to carry several letters back to the Red River Settlement, Laguimonière reached the western end of Lake Superior before being waylaid and robbed of them by Ottawa Indians working in collusion with Charles Grant of the Fond du Lac Post of the North West Company. The accomplishment of even being able to make the initial journey in the winter without the aid of modern maps is considerable. Today the specific details of his route or for that matter the principal trans-Canada snowshoe and o-daw-ban route from Montreal to the west remain largely an unsolved mystery. Certainly open water and unsafe ice could not have permitted a precise following of the summer canoe route.

Probably the most significant role for the o-daw-ban was its use for transport by native people who lived off the land by hunting and trapping. Before the advent of the snowmobile some form of this device was almost as necessary as snowshoes. The designs

that were developed have subsequently been modified by the introduction of European technology, particularly nails, screws and wire. Likewise several changes came about as a result of the more widespread use of dog teams for hauling around the turn of the century. For the purpose of this discussion, we shall focus exclusively on the most common hand-drawn models in their aboriginal form.

Two basic native o-daw-ban designs have evolved through centuries of development. The first and most important was a design that could be pulled behind a snowshoer breaking a fresh trail in deep, untracked powder snow as would be the case for mid-winter hunting and trapping. This o-daw-ban had to be extremely narrow for easy hauling, yet possess enough surface area to support a heavy load in the soft snow of a fresh snowshoe track. For these conditions, the North American Indian perfected the na-bug-o-daw-ban or "flat" sleigh. An example is shown in the photo. You will note that the children's hill sliding toboggan bears some resemblance to the na-bug-o-daw-ban. However, at least a half a dozen important design features are lacking making hill sliding models most unsuitable for hauling on a fresh snowshoe trail. Like the birch bark canoe, the na-bug-o-daw-ban at its finest, was a mastery of both functional and artistic form.

When travel conditions permitted, a second and more efficient class of o-daw-ban could be used which the Ojibwa called o-kad-o-daw-ban or "legged" sleigh. These sleighs were different from na-bug-o-daw-ban in that they consisted of two narrow widely spaced runners with an elevated carrying bed usually supported by cross bars and raves connected to the runners by vertical legs or staunchions (see photo). When these sleighs were used for hauling canoes over frozen lakes in late spring, a low carrying bed was preferred and thus the staunchions could be built as projections of the runners rather than separate members mortised to the runners.



Osh-tig-wan Na-bug-o-daw-ban (head of the flat sleigh) showing a typical floral pattern and a common method for knotting the Wingwas (the babiche tiedowns holding the front curve).