

Gull Lake: The Great Map-maker



The Gull Lake area was undoubtedly visited by many generations of aboriginal peoples such as the Cree and Blackfoot prior to the coming of white explorers. Recorded history, however, began with fur traders and explorers who were members of the Hudson's Bay Company. These newcomers were aided by native peoples who knew the landscape and how to survive in what was often an inhospitable environment. One such newcomer was David Thompson.

A British-Canadian surveyor and map-maker, known by native peoples as "Koo-Koo-Sint" or "Star gazer", he travelled over 90 000 kilometres across North America, mapping 4.9 million square kilometres (one-fifth of the continent). Although he began his career with the Hudson's Bay Company, in 1797 he joined the North West Company, a change which allowed him to work on mapping the interior of what was to become Canada. During this period, he visited Rocky Mountain House several times, passing the northern tip of Gull Lake using a route originally used by the Cree and Blackfoot peoples. This route was later referred to as the Blackfoot Track. He included both Gull Lake, which he called "Long Lake" and the Blindman River which he called "Wolf River" in his journals and on his maps.

Thompson prepared “his great map” in 1814, which included information from all his many journeys. The map was so accurate it was the basis of the Government of Canada maps which were produced 100 years later. While he started to edit his memoirs in 1846, he never completed them and he died in Montreal in 1857, deeply in debt, his many accomplishments unrecognized.

J. B. Tyrell (Tyrell Museum) came across Thompson’s incompleting memoirs and appreciated their historical value. He edited the work and published “David Thompson’s Narrative” in 1916. This work underscored Thompson’s contribution to Canada and led to the establishment of Thompson as one of Canada’s best known historical figures. Tyrell referred to Thompson as “the greatest practical land geographer who ever lived”.

It always seemed strange to me that there is only one significant geographic landmark in Alberta named after him- The David Thompson Highway. There is so much more to be told about this man who was the epitome of the tough, rugged adventurer.

As an interesting aside, in 1799, he married Charlotte Small, a 13 year old Metis girl, and they had 13 children. Their marriage lasted 58 years, the longest pre-Confederation marriage recorded.

References: Wikipedia- David Thomas Explorer
retrieved January 23, 2017
North West Journal: The Life of David Thompson
www.northwestjournal.ca