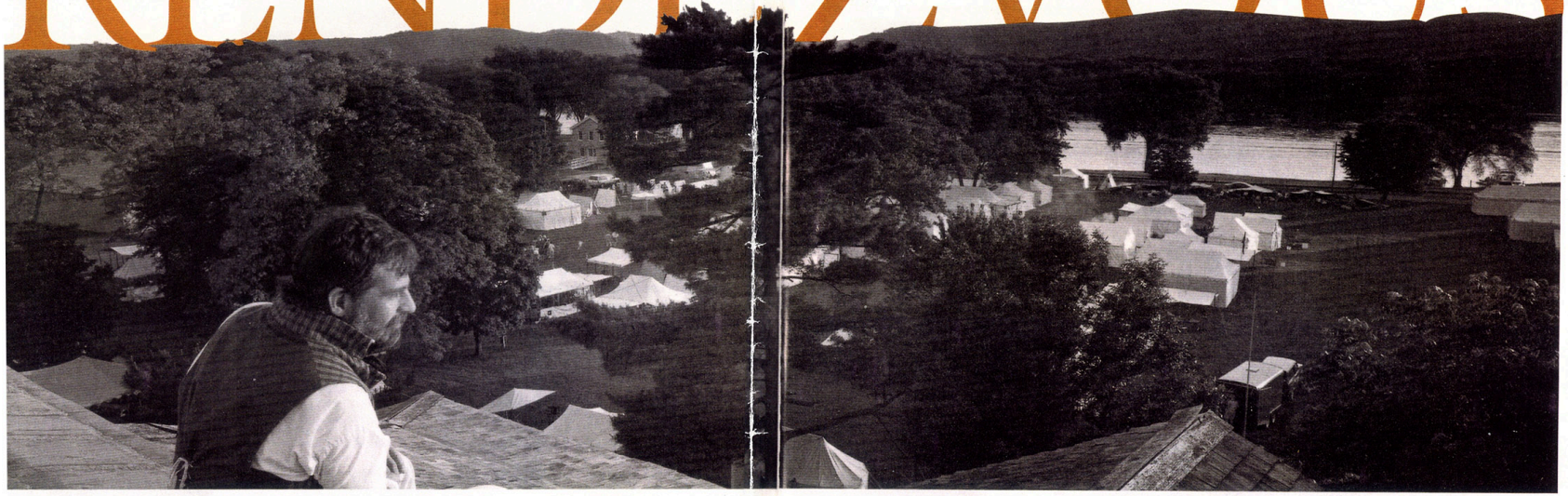
RENDEZVOUS



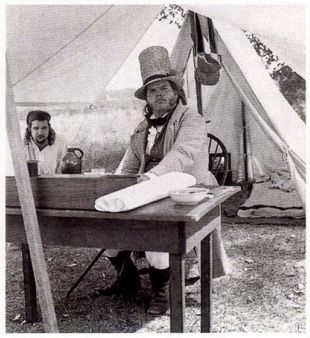
Enchanted weekend gatherings bring Wisconsin's fur trade history to life.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JILL METCOFF

IN A TRADITION which began more than 150 years ago, when the rivers were high and the ice was gone, each spring fur traders and the company merchants who supplied them traveled by canoe to meet at river junctions for rendezvous.

Driven by the European passion for hats made from beaver pelts, the Wisconsin fur trade lasted from about 1670-1840. At first the commercial fur trade was headquartered along the Eastern Seaboard, but then gradually moved inland toward Mackinac Island in Lake Michigan. From there, Euro-American traders, employed by one of the fur giants, were paddled by *voyageurs* or *engages*—hired boatmen—across the rivers and streams of Canada, the American Midwest and Far West.

Wisconsin's noted fur trading spots included Green Bay, La Pointe and Prairie du Chien. There, during the rendezvous, company partners discussed business over elegant dinners. In spring, clerks took inventory and closed accounts for the year. While those men were engaged in long hours of business, the lowly *voyageurs*, whose paddling and portaging jobs were hard labor, and company traders, who had lived through the danger and isolation of the wilderness, celebrated with games and carousing.



Dressed as an 1820s clerk for John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company, a participant watches over a modern-day rendezvous, above. The many rendezvous staged throughout Wisconsin today are not the drunken brawls that ensued when fur traders gathered more than 150 years ago; instead, they are mellow celebrations of history. Participants—men, women and children—dress and even act as characters who may have existed during the fur trade years from 1670-1840.

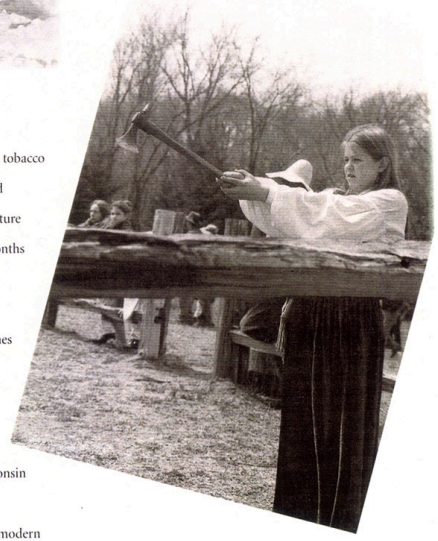
A clerk employed by the Columbia Fur Company in 1827.

"Father Nicholas," a Jesuit missionary.

A shooting contest using black powder muzzleloading rifles.

"Buckskinners," the modern-day equivalent of 1780s-1840s free trappers.

A modern-day rendezvous contest: the tomahawk toss.



Though most of them did not attend the rendezvous, the actual fur trappers were Native Americans. After catching the beaver, muskrat and dozens of other fur-bearing animals, they ceremoniously exchanged the pelts for luxuries such as tobacco and liquor, metal goods like kettles, hunting knives and axes, or woolen cloth and blankets, beads, silver and ribbon—trade goods that altered Native American culture forever. The European traders were equally affected. Often living isolated for months in the wilderness, they adapted clothing made of animal skins, mastered the birch-bark canoe for transportation and embraced Native American foods and customs. Advantageous marriages between Natives and Europeans were sometimes forged, guaranteeing the steady flow of pelts to trade at the rendezvous.

A new rendezvous tradition thrives today. Almost every weekend, men, women and families don historical clothing and construct temporary tent villages at a Wisconsin historic site, public park or rural setting.

Not bound by season, lack of roads, communication or the fur trade itself, modern rendezvous offer a gateway to another, simpler time. The business of today's gatherings is to build a community and sustain the drama of that past era.

A "frontier family" sets up camp using a tent like those seen circa 1827.

Modern rendezvous are not the drunken brawls of the past; instead they have become recreational gatherings for men, women and children alike. There are competitive tomahawk tosses and shooting contests, women's frying pan throws and "best-dressed" or "best backpack" contests which measure the participants' attention to historical detail.

For those who attend, the common thread is an appreciation of history. Shelters, for example, range from the Plains Indian-type tepee and the more historically correct marquee (also a tent), to the simple tarpaulin and canoe of the *voyageur*, and the elm-bark lodges of woodland natives. Experts in the history of that time period are in evidence everywhere. Using pre-1840s processes, craftsmen create hand-wrought iron pieces, exquisite beaded dresses, pipe bags and meticulously carved wooden objects. Others have learned once-necessary survival skills: building and shooting an antique black powder muzzleloading rifle, starting a fire with flint and steel, tanning a hide in traditional ways, or cooking over an open fire.

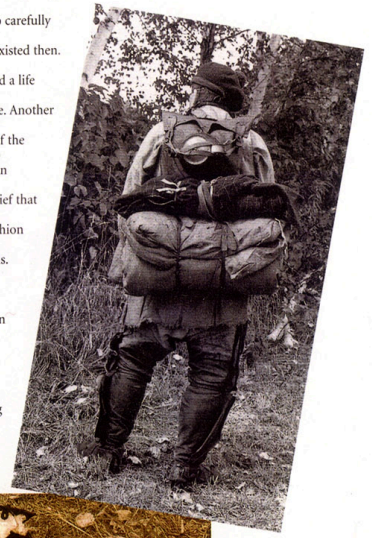
Using a schnitzelbank, a shaving bench operated by a foot-pedal, this rendezvous couple makes historically accurate treenware.

Cast of rendezvous characters, clockwise from top left: *Voyageur*, a crude, party-loving man hired to do the heavy work of hauling furs. Buckskinner, or free trapper. Trader in the employ of the Northwest Company between 1790 and 1821. Pre-1840s Native American, probably a Mesquakie Indian.

A love of history also extends into the creation of a rendezvous persona—an invented character who may have lived prior to 1840. Many participants come as one of the cast of characters who attended the original rendezvous: merchants, company partners and clerks, *voyageurs, engages* and traders. And though frontier homesteading families and Native American trappers were infrequent visitors to rendezvous of old, today many participants adopt those personas as well.

Developing a persona is a historical quest. For some, it means no more than acquiring some version of quasi-historic clothing, but at the other extreme are those who carefully research a time period prior to 1840 to create a "real" person who could have existed then. One man studied surveying techniques of George Washington's time, developed a life story, and owns the weaponry, clothing, glasses and tools of the surveying trade. Another portrays a Mesquakie Indian who might have swapped beaver skins with one of the legions of traders employed by John Jacob Astor. Although not Native American himself, he has adapted the people's values into the making of his clothing: Belief that the earth is sacred and that animals must not be wantonly killed led him to fashion bear claws of acrylic and an elm-bark hut from contemporary roofing materials.

Often clad in fringed buckskins and adorned with full muzzleloader gear, another popular rendezvous character is the buckskinner—a grizzled, wild man who reflects the spirit of the Rocky Mountain free trappers. Still others come costumed as *voyageurs,* with wool stocking caps, striped socks and woven sashes. For many, these rendezvous personas carry over into daily life: paddling a handmade canoe for hundreds of miles, visiting schools as a *voyageur* or playing the music of these earliest Euro-American adventurers in Wisconsin.



Carrying only the essentials for six months in the wilderness: pack crampons, gloves, loose stuff bag, canteen, wool shirt, salt and pepper, socket fork, tooth powder and brush, beeswax and tallow candle, flint and steel, coins, comb, fire bag for belt, hatchet, belt buckle, char tin, bag and soap for gun cleaning, bullets, shirt, razor and mirror, pot with rice, sugar, tea, blanket and oil cloth.

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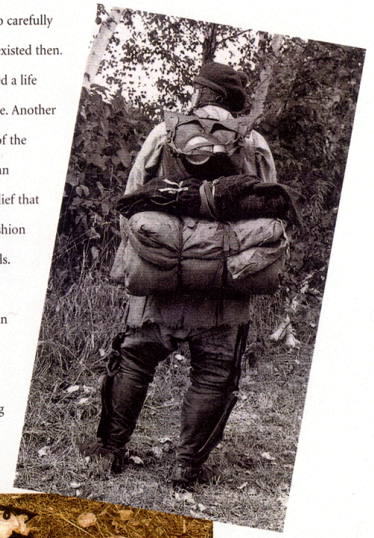

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At day's end, a magical moment descends on the rendezvous when past and present seamlessly unite.

Today's "wilderness trekkers" construct shelters and make stew for communal dinners like those of individuals and frontier families before 1840.

Fires burning in contemporary tepees cast a romantic glow.

Rendezvous today celebrate the past and provide unique opportunities to experience history with a sense of timeless enchantment, if only for a weekend. In the past, the fur trade brought two cultures together and shaped their futures. Today, values from past and present merge, creating a new mythology which celebrates the earth, self-sufficiency and living simpler lives. What results is a community based on sharing, honesty and tolerance.

At day's end, a magical moment descends on the rendezvous when past and present seamlessly unite. Imagination pulls one back as the gentle sounds of domestic activity dominate the camp with the murmur of conversation and clinking of heavy campfire pots and utensils. Candle lanterns flicker like fireflies and faces glow in the light of campfires. As dinner ends, old-time instruments come out and the music and storytelling begin.

The photographs appearing in this portfolio are part of a photographic project on rendezvous which was funded in part by the Wisconsin Humanities Council and the National Endowment for the Humanities.