Les Pays Den Haut

by Isaac Walters

Mythbusters: the Real *Coureurs de Bois* of New France

I have now been reenacting for a bit over a decade. During this time I have met a number of people with a large variety of personae. One of these personae that has always intrigued me was that of the *coureur de bois*. Like other popular personae such as longhunter, ranger, scout, and mountain man; there is plenty of misunderstanding and much romanticism that surrounds the *coureur de bois*.

In the next few pages, I hope to be able to shed some light on who the *coureurs de bois* really were as well as share some additional information on them and the fur trade. This article is by no means a comprehensive study on the subject, nor an end all on the topic, but it is my hope that it will begin a more serious look at these characters and ultimately end in better and more accurate portrayals.

The phrase *coureur de bois* literally means "woods runner," however, in its most basic sense, a *coureur de bois* was a person engaging in the fur trade illegally. In order to better understand this we have to understand how the fur trade worked.

Originally, during the 17th century, Native hunters and trappers brought their furs to trade fairs in or near Montreal where they would trade for a wide variety of European goods (natives, not Europeans, doing the hunting and trading for European goods is the norm for three centuries). Starting in the 1650s and 60s, Frenchmen and *canadiens* (Canadian born and of French descent) began traveling inland to trade more directly with the natives. Although not necessarily and completely illegal (at least not until 1673), this was highly disliked by the authorities.

In 1681, an official system was put into place for the regulation and licensing of the fur trade. 25 licenses (*congés*) were issued each year at a price of about 600 *livres* each, and a stipulation was made that a person could not have a *congé* two years in a row. *Congés* could then be resold, some for up to 1,000 *livres* or more. (Kent RS p. 49). Many of these *congés* were given to the poor (or at least the "poorest" of the rich or elite) and needy as a way for them to make money through their resale. In addition to this, the Intendant was allowed to sell additional *congés* for budget reasons as well as to help in the shipping of needed supplies to interior posts. Holders of these additional

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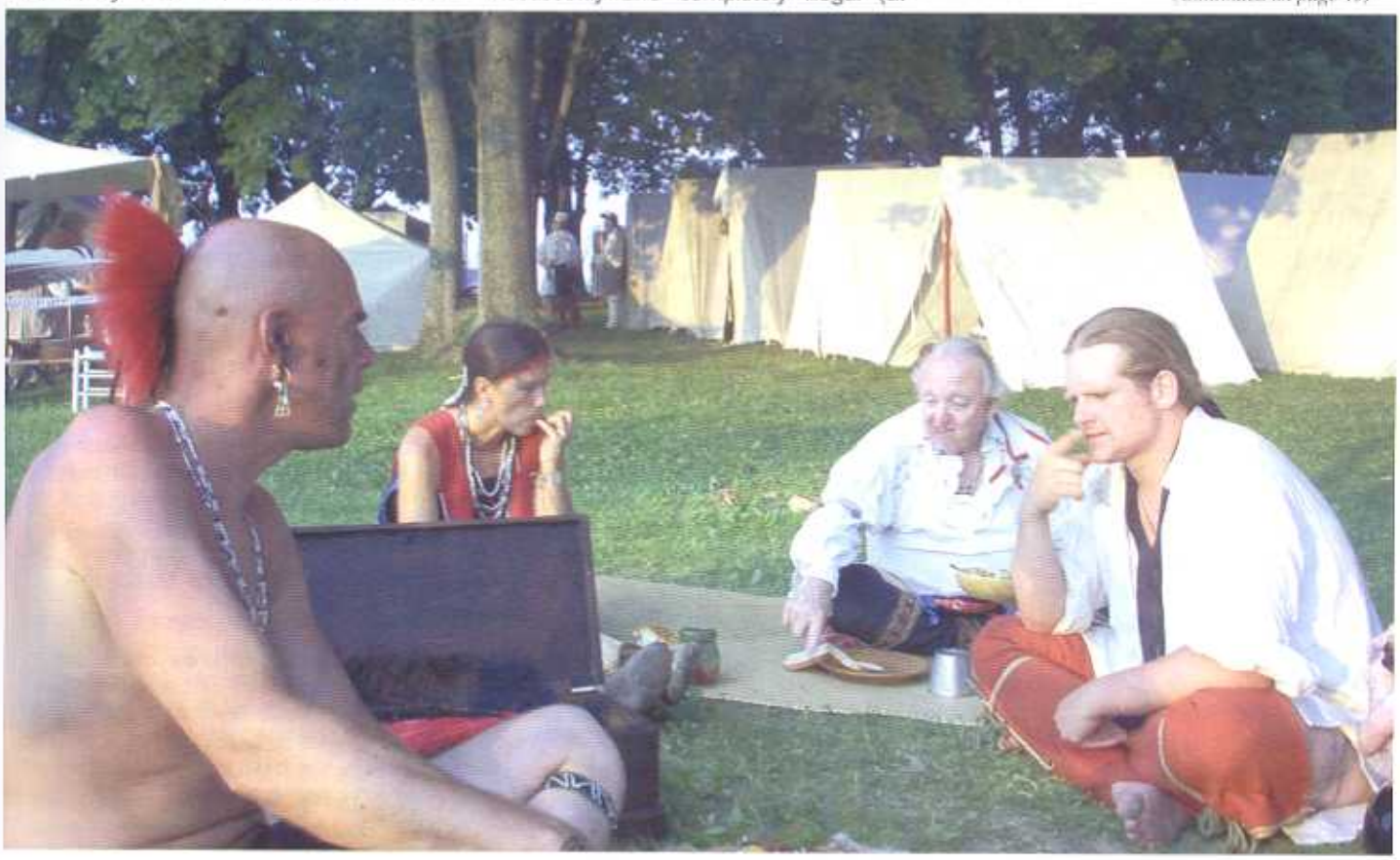

The author as a coureur de bois? Certainly not... a licensed voyaguer.

A 1750s image of a voyageur from an ex voto painting at Ste. Anne de Beaupre.

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licenses were often required to carry 200 *livres* of military cargo for every 5,000 of merchandise. (Kent PD p.837, Dechêne p. 94) So in reality there were more than 25 *congés* actually in circulation. At this time amnesty was granted to all previous *coureurs de bois.*

"Licenses are granted in writing by the Governor General, to poor gentlemen and old officers who have charge of children. hey are disposed of by the King's orders; and the design of them is to enable such persons to send commodities to these Lakes. The number of the persons thus empowered ought not to exceed twenty-five in one year. But God knows how many more have private licenses. All other persons, of whatever quality or condition, are prohibited to go or send to these Lakes, without such licenses, under the pain of death. Each license extends to the lading of one great canoe; and whoever procures a whole or a half license for himself, may either make use of it himself, or sell it to the highest bidder. Commonly, they are bought at six hundred crowns apiece. [1,800 livres]"
(1685, LaHontan quoted in Kent RS p. 53)

At the time of this new licensing we see the emergence of the terms *voyageurs* and *engagés* for legal participants in the fur trade. From this point on, anyone operating without a contract or *congé* (and therefore illegally) would be referred to as a *coureur de bois. Voyageurs* were wage laborers contracted by licensed merchants. Most often they, through the terms of their contract, would profit from the actual trade of the goods, and many times these *voyageurs* were themselves traders or invested money into the voyage and trade. *Engagés* generally did not have vested interest in the canoe or the goods but simply were contracted laborers. It is interesting to note that the term *engagé* was also used in New France to describe an indentured servant, of whom Governor Frontenac describes as, "a man obliged to go wherever and do whatever his master commanded like a slave during the time of his indentureship" (quoted in Dechêne p. 27). *Engagés* most often were contracted to make a trip into the *Pays d'en haut* and back with goods or supplies, leaving in the spring and returning by the end of the summer. *Voyageurs* often spent extended periods in the *Pays d'en haut* whereas the *engagés* were basically seasonal workers.

Engagé numbers increased throughout the 18th century and by the period of British controlled trade, starting in the 1760s, most all workers are *engagés* but become simply referred to as *voyageurs*. (Greer p. 179) It is during this later British controlled period that the distinction between winterers (*hivernauts*) and pork-eaters (*mangeurs du lard*) or "Montreal-men" becomes common (Greer p. 182). Also, to note, the licensing that made a *coureur de bois* illegal during the French regime no longer existed in the later British period. So there were no *coureurs de bois* during this later period.

Now comes the confusing part.

A detail of one of the 3 coureurs de bois from the Beinecke Rare Books Collection.

Many of the people that worked illegally one year very well could be legal and licensed the next. Like-wise, amnesty was granted many times to the *coureurs de bois* when they were needed by the government for their various skills as well as for their numbers. This can be seen in the timeline given at the end of the article, as the dates of these pardons correspond with major military expeditions (the Fox Wars, The War of Spanish Succession, War of Austrian Succession, etc.). Often not only was amnesty given to those that surrendered themselves and participated but also trading licenses were given to them for doing so. In addition to all of this, sometimes the authorities, when complaining about those involved in the fur trade (legal and illegal), referred to everyone involved simply as *coureurs de bois*.

"I refer to what relates to the disobedience of the coureurs de bois... It has at last reached such a point that everyone boldly contravenes the King's interdictions. There is no longer any concealment; even parties are gathered with astonishing insolence to go and trade in the native country... There is an almost general disobedience throughout this country. The number of those in the woods is estimated at nearly five or six hundred, exclusively of those who set out everyday... The great number of people who have gone to the native country to trade for peltries ruin the colony, because those who alone could improve it, being young and strong for work, abandon their wives and children, the cultivation of lands, and the care or rearing their cattle; they become dissipated... Their absence gives rise to licentiousness among their wives, as has often been the case, and is still of daily occurrence. They accustom themselves to a loafing and vagabond life, which it is beyond their power to quit. They derive but little benefit from their labors, because they are induced to waste, in drunkenness and fine clothes, the little that they earn, which is very trifling, since those who give them licenses have the larger share, besides the price of the goods, which they sell to them very expensively..."

(Duchesneau quoted in Kent, RS p. 37-38)

Governor Denonville in 1690 gives similar complaints as to the *coureurs de bois* "licensed and not" not marrying, growing in numbers, etc. He further states that there is a "cultivation of a vagabond, independent, and idle spirit. For the aristocratic manners which they assume upon their return, both in their dress and in drunken revelries, wherein they exhaust all of their gains in a very short time, lead them to despise the peasantry, and consider it beneath them to marry daughters, though they themselves peasants like them." They are "libertines and the debauched" (Denonville quoted in Kent, RS p. 116). Also, Intendant Riverin says the following in 1705,

"Since little time is required to carry out this trade the life of the coureurs de bois is spent in idleness and dissolute living. They sleep, smoke, drink brandy whatever it costs, gamble, and debauch the wives and daughters of the natives. They commit a thousand contemptible deeds. Gambling drinking, and women often consume all of their capital and the profits of their voyages. They live in complete independence, and account to noone for their actions. They acknowledge no superior, no judge, no law, no police, no subordination."

(Riverin quoted in Kent, RS p. 159)

It should be noted here that both legal and illegal participants of the trade are mentioned equally. We should also be very careful with these descriptions as they certainly have a built-in upper-class bias. *Habitants* are (at least in the eyes of their superiors) peasants, and in this period they were

considered by the government and the upper-classes as little more than a resource. Generally they are viewed in terms of economic or military worth. Economically they are seen as manpower for the agricultural production needed to support the aristocracy and government. Militarily we have already seen their worth at times of war when they were granted amnesty. During times of war, they suddenly were of utility and importance when they were needed to paddle canoes, transport goods, interpret and help with the native allies, and fight.

The mentions of the *"coureurs de bois"* and their lack of regard for law, lack of response to superiors and even being referred to as "libertines" shows the fear of these administrators in their lack of ability to maintain control over the "lower" classes and keep power. Canadian historian Alan Greer summarizes this best when he says, "... discussions of habitants in letters, reports, and travel accounts generally revolve around questions of their martial valour, their agricultural productivity, and their disposition to obey or rebel." (Greer p. x)

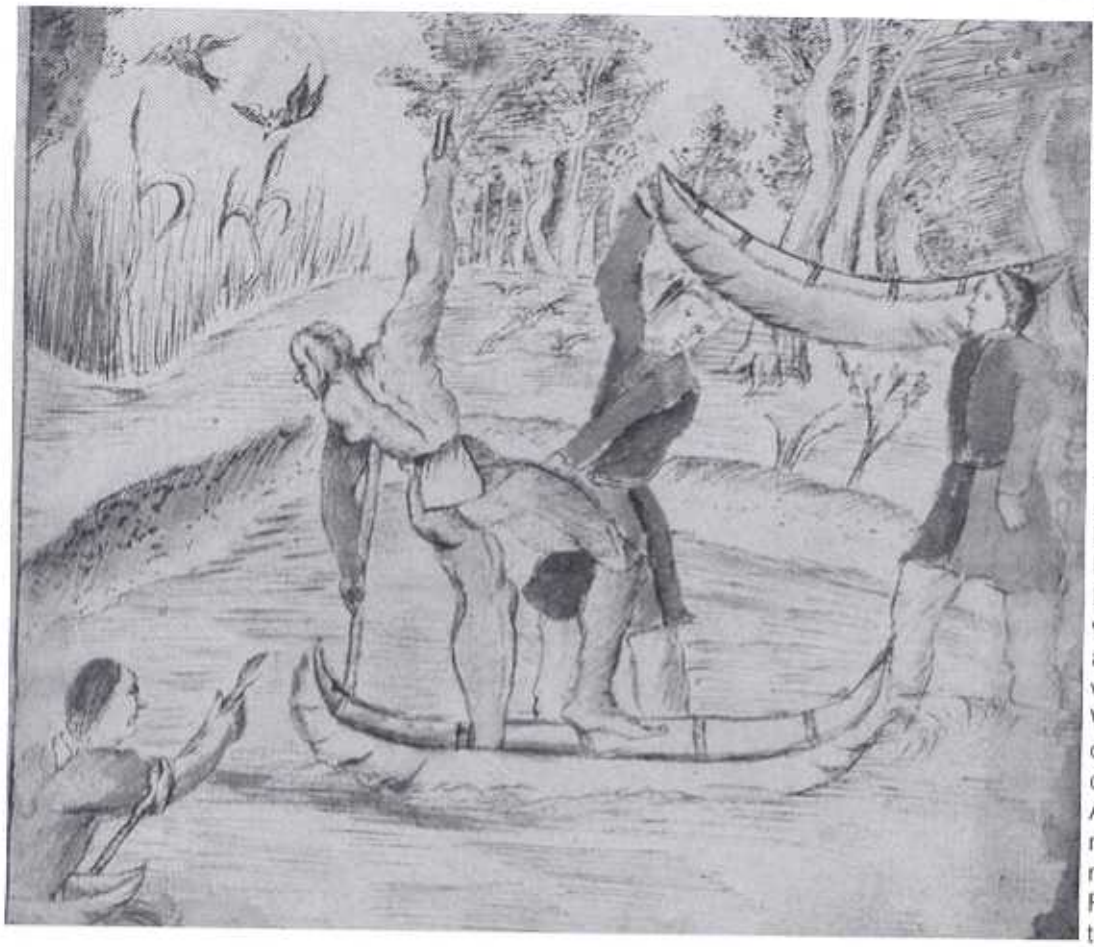
In all truth there seems to be very little difference, other than legality, between *coureurs de bois* and *voyageurs*. Today's reenactors that portray *coureurs de bois* seem to do so as they feel they are more likely to run with, live with, and marry among the natives. Also there is the strong desire to dress more "native" and have more "native influenced" gear. On top of all of this, there is an assumed increase of freedom that the *coureurs de bois* had. As can be seen in the past and upcoming quotes, all of this was the case with *voyageurs* as well.

"It is most unfortunate that Canadian youths, who are vigorous and tough, have no inclination for anything but these voyages where they live in the forest like Indians for two or three years, without any benefits of the sacraments."
(Jean Bochart de Champigny 1691 quoted in Eccles p. 90)

"Many of them settle among the Indians far from Canada, marry Indian women, and never come back again."
(Peter Kalm 1749, quoted in Eccles p. 90)

A detail of one of the 3 coureurs de bois from the Beinecke Rare Books Collection.

So what of the person who wishes to portray a *"coureur de bois"*? A few things must be remembered. You are illegal, and you are not going to be flaunting that fact. This would be much like portraying a deserter at a war reenactment and going around announcing to everyone, with pride, that you were a deserter. In either case, you would probably be caught, arrested, and punished for being who you were and therefore would not be announcing your legal status.



A 1686 image of two voyageurs from Father Claude Chauchetiere.

Not only are you not going to flaunt your illegality, but the term *coureur de bois* would be rather insulting. This can easily be seen in the 1672 account of Pierre de Lugerat, a miller from Montreal who was drinking at a friend's home. While drunk, he told his friends that he would not consent to the marriage of his son to the daughter of a local tailor, Nicolas Hubert. Lugerat said that Hubert's family was a bunch of *chaussers et coureurs de bois*. Insulted, Hubert took Lugerat to court for defamation. (Moogk p. 136) Even it you are a *coureur de bois*, you will probably not refer to yourself as one. This is similar to referring to a 21st century family as a bunch of poachers. Even if you were hunting without a license (poaching) you probably would refer to yourself as a hunter and would be insulted at being called a "poacher".

Another thing to think about is: where are you?, what are you doing?, and what time are you portraying? There is a good chance that, regardless of your past, you may be pardoned and no longer illegal. Many *coureur de bois* reenactors I have seen are portraying periods of war when they would most likely have been pardoned to fight against the English. If you were not pardoned, you would not want to be caught amongst a bunch of soldiers that would arrest you for your crimes.

One must also consider the number of men involved in the trade and the number of licenses out there. Commonality would suggest that you are going to be licensed (or contracted by someone who is), at least more often than not. *Voyageur* and *engagé* population generally equaled between 2%-12% of adult male population in New France by the mid 18th century. Regionally this varies and Montreal Island would have a fur trade population as much as 50%. (Dechêne pp. 118-119) Additionally, the fur trade affected most all of the citizenry of these areas– canoe builders, blacksmiths, woodworkers and coopers, seamstresses, farmers (who provided pork, peas, and wheat for supply), and many others. While speaking of other trades or occupations, we should note that by the mid-eighteenth century, most paddlers in the fur trade were *engagés* and as seasonal employees would have some other type of job for the remainder of the year. If portraying one of these people, you very well may want to research and learn about being a farmer, baker, or some other trade.

Finally, one last thought for the reenactor. How native would a *coureur de bois* actually look? Beside the common breechclout, leggings, loose European shirt (without waistcoat and *justaucorps*), and moccasins; what else would have been common? We do know that tattoos were common, but all of these were common also to the *voyageur*. Also, many period accounts mention how European the natives were in dress, wearing French shirts, tapaboards or tuques, capots, and even their native garments being made of European cloth.

There is only one known period image of *coureurs de bois*. It is in the Beinecke rare books library at Yale and pictures three very plainly dressed men. Two wear only a shirt and *capot*, with their heads covered by *tuques*, and their legs and feet are bare. The third is dressed the same but has leggings and moccasins on. They are quite devoid of the excessive decoration that is often seen on reenactors. Although native items were most likely used by many, a more conservative, "less is more" approach may lead to a more appropriate portrayal (whether *voyageur* or *coureur de bois*).

The *coureur de bois*, although highly romanticized, exaggerated, and misunderstood, is a portrayal that many of us see at reenactments. With a close examination of the information available to us, it is my hope that reenactors will take an accurate and authentic approach to their portrayal. It is also my hope that many reenactors will consider the common road and develop their portrayal accordingly.

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Timeline

Early 1600s - *Compagnie des Cents Associés* controls the fur trade. The *Compagnie* allows open trade but has monopoly over exports

1650s - Some canoe-men are heading into the interior (illegally) and legal trade is done in Montreal at "fairs"

1673 – Royal decree prohibits (on penalty of death) anyone from leaving homes and wandering woods for more than 24 hours without permission and permit from the government.

1679 – The Intendent (Duchesneau) states there to be "nearly" 500-600 *coureurs de bois* in the interior. Most historians believe Duchesneau to be exaggerating. Louise Dechêne states that the numbers must be highly exaggerated based on numbers of imports. More likely 100, if that, backed by merchants. (Dechêne p. 92)

1681 - Licensing established and trade can only be legally conducted by those with a license (*congé*). The terms "*Voyageur*" and "*Engagé*" emerge.

1696 - All western posts and trade closed. Illegal activities continue.

1714 - Amnesty granted to *coureurs de bois* and granted again 1716

1719-20 - Revocation of licenses and trade system. Licenses however were still issued, against the King's orders, in the colony. (Kent, RS p. 229)

1728 - Trade renewed

(Dechêne states that congés were reestablished between 1716-19 suppressed again and then reestablished in 1726)

1737 - Amnesty granted again

1742 – Licensing changed and no ran through the leasing of posts to *fermiers* who would resell/distribute/sublease their licenses

1756 - War interrupts and most legal traders are called back east. Some remain in west.

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