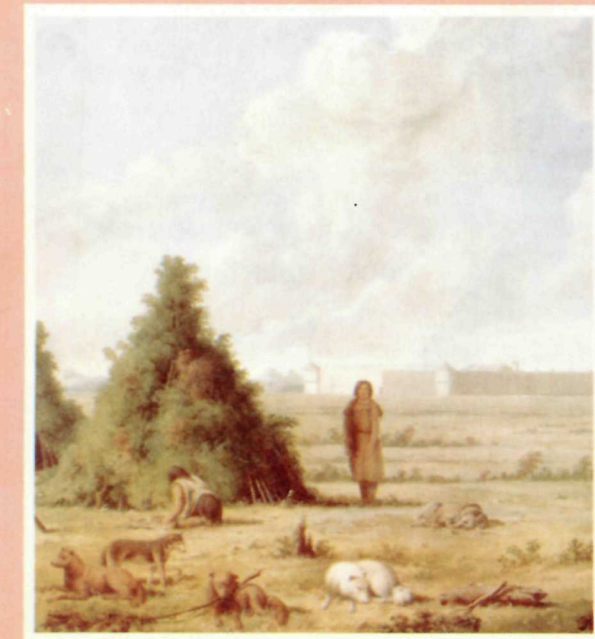


Rocky Mountain House National Historic Park

Alberta



Rocky Mountain House — 1835-61 — by Paul Kane
Courtesy of the Royal Ontario Museum

Rocky Mountain House conjures visions of the days of the fur trade in the Canadian West, of free-moving Indian bands, of beaver and buffalo, of explorers and of the rivalry between the Hudson's Bay and North West Companies.

The story of these events is told at Rocky Mountain House National Historic Park.

Orient yourself to the park at the visitor centre, where you will find interpretive displays, the theatre and administrative offices. Paths through the grounds take you to four fort sites from different periods of the history of Rocky Mountain House. Although the forts are no longer standing, sites and exhibits in the park illustrate past life at the post.

This guide will help you discover the history of this special place which is of major significance in the story of Canada's development.

The map on the other side of this brochure shows the location of park facilities and points of interest. Park programs and personnel are available to make your visit more enjoyable.

The Rocky Mountain House Story

In many ways, Rocky Mountain House was an anomaly. The post was founded to trade with a tribe of Indians who never appeared in significant numbers. It was a base for exploration in the search for a practical route through the mountains, yet, when that route was found, it was farther north. Except for one brief period in its history, Rocky Mountain House was not a lucrative fur trade centre, yet it remained in operation for more than 75 years, with interruptions — a compromise between the Indians and the fur trade companies.

The Fur Trade

Most of the initial exploration of Canada was done by fur traders, men motivated not so much by the desire to expand geographical knowledge as by the search for newer and richer fur country and shorter and better transportation routes. It began with Cartier's landings in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, in 1534, and reached its climax in the closing years of the 18th Century, during the competition between the two trading giants, the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company. Each year the advance posts were established farther west, until, by the mid-1790s, they had reached the vicinity of what is now Edmonton. The Nor'Westers were then so far from their Montreal headquarters that their supply lines were in danger of being over-extended, and they began looking for a link with the Pacific to simplify the logistics problem. These were the conditions which led to the founding of the first Rocky Mountain House.

Company Rivalry

The Hudson's Bay Company was chartered in 1670 and given proprietary privileges over a vast, largely unknown area called Rupert's Land. For more than a century, it was content to maintain posts on the shores of "the Bay". Its trade was challenged by French traders, then, after 1763, by independents and finally, by the North West Company, which was founded in 1784. The Hudson's Bay Company built its first inland post, Cumberland House, in 1774 in an attempt to keep pace with its rivals on the Saskatchewan River. In 1795, the Nor'Westers built Fort Augustus and the Hudson's Bay Company built Edmonton House. Looking farther westward to the rumoured beaver riches of the Kootenay Indians west of the Rockies and to a possible route to the Pacific, the North West

Company, followed by the Hudson's Bay Company, expanded up the North Saskatchewan.

In the early autumn of 1799, parties of the rival North West and Hudson's Bay Companies arrived at the confluence of the North Saskatchewan and Clearwater Rivers and erected two separate posts — Rocky Mountain House and Acton House.

David Thompson Taking an Observation — by C.W. Jefferys
Courtesy Public Archives of Canada



The Indians

The Kootenay trade did not materialize as envisioned. Instead, trade was dominated by the three tribes of the Blackfoot Confederacy — the Blackfoot, Peigan and Blood — their allies, the Sarcee and Gros Ventre, and their traditional enemies, Stoney and Cree. These nomadic people of the plains and foothills supplied furs and provisions to the posts.

Mah-Min — "The Feather", Head Chief of Assiniboines, sketched at Rocky Mountain House by Paul Kane Courtesy Stark Museum, Orange, Texas



Exploration of the West

The North West Company used the post as a base for exploration. David Thompson, explorer, surveyor and geographer, searched for a route through the Rockies. In 1807, using the headwaters of the North Saskatchewan River and Howse Pass as access, Thompson and a party of men crossed the Rockies, exploring and building posts.

The Peigan were determined to halt trade with their enemies, the transmountain Indians, to prevent them from obtaining guns. They successfully blockaded the river above the two posts, and prevented the Nor'Westers' Columbia brigade from proceeding through Howse Pass. Thompson was forced to travel north, crossing the mountains through the Athabasca Pass. In the summer of 1811, Thompson finally reached the mouth of the Columbia River to find that the Americans had already built Fort Astoria. The following year, Thompson returned East to work on his famous map of western Canada. The Athabasca River replaced the North Saskatchewan as the gateway to the mountains, and from that time, Rocky Mountain House remained off the main transportation and communication routes.

Boom Years and Bad Times

After a period of closure, both posts at Rocky Mountain House were reopened in 1819. With the merger of the two companies in 1821, only one post was retained. By this time, the North Saskatchewan's fur resources were depleted. To cut its losses in this district, the Company closed Rocky Mountain House in 1823.

The Peigan were expected to trade at Edmonton House, but instead they carried their trade to company posts west of the mountains and to American free traders in the Snake River country. At the insistence of the Peigan and with their promise to

bring in beaver, the Hudson's Bay Company opened Rocky Mountain House as a wintering post in the autumn of 1825. The Peigan were true to their promise and supplied the company with record returns of beaver. Rocky Mountain House briefly became the most profitable post in the revitalized Saskatchewan District.

However, the boom years were short-lived as the American Fur Company, expanding up the Missouri River, broke the Hudson's Bay Company monopoly of trade with the tribes of the northern plains. In response to the American threat to its trade, the Hudson's Bay Company built Piegan Post on the Bow River, but the gesture was too little and too late. The Americans were firmly entrenched. Piegan Post was open from the summer of 1832 to January 1833, at which time the company returned to Rocky Mountain House.

In 1835, the Hudson's Bay Company built a new post at Rocky Mountain House to replace its dilapidated predecessor. This post was occupied every winter season but one until its abandonment in 1861. Though never again to match the returns of the late 1820s, Rocky Mountain House retained enough of the trade in furs and provisions to justify its continued existence. By the 1840s, buffalo robes were replacing beaver pelts as the prime item of trade. The introduction of the silk hat in Europe signalled the end of the felt hat (made from the fur of the beaver) and the demand for beaver pelts declined.

Life at the Post 1835 - 1861

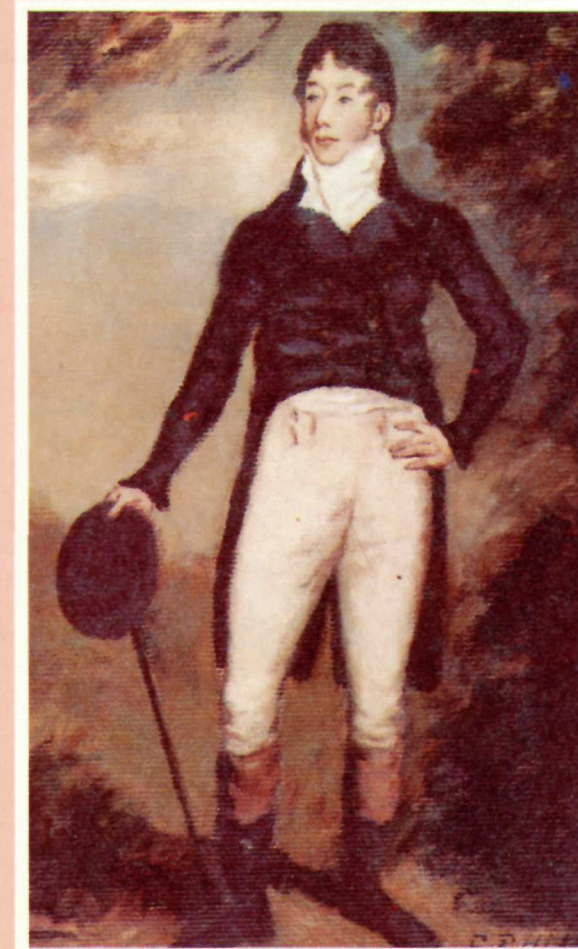
During this period of unspectacular returns, the post built York Boats and supplied pemmican, acquired in trade, to the summer transportation network. The principal activities at the post were obtaining firewood and meat for survival, maintaining the fort and trading with Indians.

Sketch of last Rocky Mountain House fort by Jean l'Heureux
Courtesy Public Archives of Canada



Visitors to Rocky Mountain House in the 1840s and 1850s included missionaries Rundle, DeSmet and Woolsey; the artist Kane; Hector and Palliser of the Palliser Expedition. The 1860s and 1870s saw the arrival of the occasional surveyor and geologist, Robertson-Ross and Butler on government missions, and the missionaries Lacombe, Scollen, the McDougalls, and others.

John McDonald of Garth — Established first Rocky Mountain House fort Courtesy McCord Museum, Montreal



The End of the Fur Trade Era

Relations between the Hudson's Bay Company and the Blackfoot Confederacy deteriorated in the late 1850s and early 1860s. Prior to the usual spring closing of the post in 1861, the company men at Rocky Mountain House were forced to abandon the site and return to the district headquarters at Edmonton House. The Company did not reopen the outpost in the autumn and, finding it abandoned, a band of Blackfoot Indians burned it to the ground.

This was not the end of the fur trade at Rocky Mountain House. Three years after the destruction of the post, the Hudson's Bay Company was back at the site. To prevent bloodshed and disruption of trade at Edmonton House which occurred there when Blackfoot met Cree, the company wished to trade with the Blackfoot at Rocky Mountain House. American traders were occupied in supplying the needs of the Montana gold rush and were paying little attention to the Indian trade, which gave the Hudson's Bay Company a chance to regain its lost plains trade.

The high hopes of the company were dashed when the trade returns proved poor. The influx of illegal whiskey traders in 1869 into what is now southern Alberta was harmful to the Indians and detrimental to the trade at Rocky Mountain House. Smallpox swept the Saskatchewan district in 1870-71. Violence and lawlessness prevailed in the territory of Rupert's Land, which the Hudson's Bay Company had recently relinquished to the new nation, Canada. The arrival of the North-West Mounted Police in 1874 curbed the illegal whiskey trade and the violence. The Hudson's Bay Company saw the Bow River as a safe location for the first time since its arrival in the region. In 1875 the company established itself near Calgary on the Bow River, abandoning Rocky Mountain House.

The end of the fur trade at Rocky Mountain House coincided with the end of an era. The buffalo was soon to disappear and with it the way of life that it supported. The fur trade as the prime economic activity in the West came to an end.

Rocky Mountain House Today

Visitor Centre

Here you will find interpretive displays covering the major themes in the history of Rocky Mountain House — the fur trade, exploration of the west and native people.

In the theatre you may attend slide programs, films and special programs that will help you discover the history of this area.

History/Nature Walks

Take the short walk to the fort sites of the 1835-1861 and 1866-1875 periods. You will also see a Red River cart.

A longer walk leads you to the sites of the first two forts built at Rocky Mountain House in 1799. A York boat is on display along your route. You may also attend animation programs dealing with life in bygone days.

Audio Guides

Explore history along your route through the grounds. Eight locations are equipped with illustrations and recorded messages that tell stories of early days at Rocky Mountain House. The map on the other side of this brochure shows where to find them on the trails.

Mini-bus Tour

If you cannot take the walks, a mini-bus tour of the fort sites is available. Arrangements can be made at the visitor centre.

Summer Hours

10 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily from the first Sunday in May to Labour Day.

Winter Hours

8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays. Special arrangements can be made for weekends by phoning 845-2412 or 845-3948 during the week.

During the winter, walkways are not maintained. Snowshoeing and cross-country skiing are permitted.

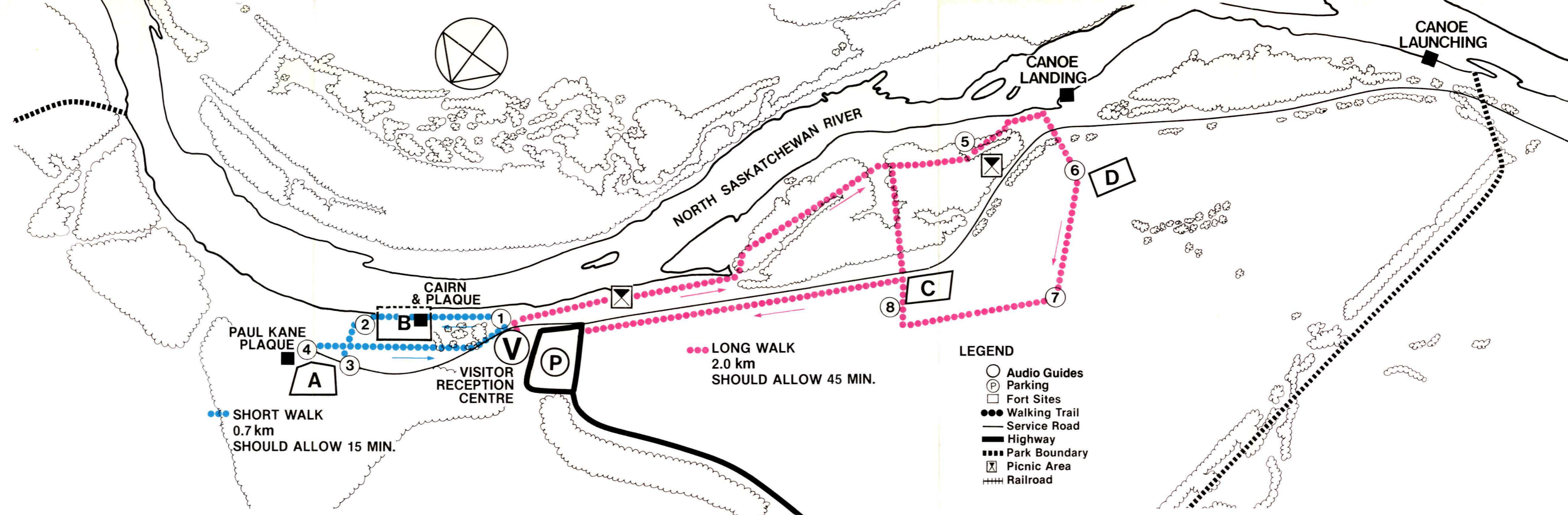
For further information, call (403) 845-2412 or write to the Superintendent:

Rocky Mountain House National Historic Park
P.O. Box 2130 Rocky Mountain House
Alberta T0M 1T0



Explore Rocky Mountain House with the help of the Audio Guides described below and numbered on the map. Recorded messages and illustrations at these eight locations tell you about this special place.

Along the short walk:
 1 - Fur Trade
 2 - The Last Post
 3 - Hardship and Isolation
 4 - Archaeology and History



Audio Guides on the long walk:
 5 - The River – Highway to the Plains
 6 - The First Fur Trade Posts
 7 - The Indians
 8 - Building a Fur Trade Post

