



Paul Kane's painting of the Assiniboine camp described here, with Rocky Mountain House in the distance. Kane was there in 1848. Royal Ontario Museum.

# ROCKY MOUNTAIN HOUSE

by Freeda Fleming

This historic fort, which knew so many famous explorers and fur traders, was established 150 years ago.

ON the great plains of Western Canada that crowd the rolling foothills of the Rockies, the spirits of all those bold explorers and traders, led by David Thompson, must surely salute the hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the building of Rocky Mountain House. Historical records of this post are scarce, and over them has been woven a veil of legend and fancy and fiction. But through it all we can determine some facts—chiefly from Hudson's Bay records, the journals of David Thompson and McDonald of Garth, and the diary of Father Lacombe.

Established by either Duncan McGillivray of the North West Company or his chief Angus Shaw, in 1799, Rocky Mountain House was for over seventy years the most westerly and southerly fort in the Blackfoot country. Anthony Henday of the Hudson's Bay Company had been in that area in 1754-5, but he had built no post there. However, while the Nor'-westers' post was building, James Bird of the H B C was erecting Acton House nearby, and the two rival forts continued to vie with each other for eight years.

Both of them were situated on the left bank of the North Saskatchewan River not far from its junction with the Clearwater, with the Rocky Mountains as a backdrop. David Thompson reports that a year after they were established, Duncan McGillivray (Wil-

liam's younger brother) arrived at Rocky Mountain House "to prepare to cross the Mountains." The North West Company was about to take the bold step of establishing forts on the far side of the Rockies, and McGillivray had with him the only copy in Canada of Capt. Vancouver's *Voyage of Discovery*, so that he could learn what was to be expected on the Pacific coast where he hoped his Company would soon begin trading. While there, he made pertinent extracts from the book, which Thompson copied for his own use. The following summer, 1801, McGillivray made two preliminary expeditions from Rocky Mountain House into the mountains to seek out passes that could be travelled by canoe or pack horse.

By 1802 the post had justified its existence sufficiently for the North West Company to order its expansion and the provision of extensive fortifications. This was carried out by John McDonald of Garth, who had succeeded McGillivray in charge of the district. Five years later McDonald supervised at the fort the preparations for David Thompson's famous journey, which resulted in his discovery and exploration of the upper Columbia River. About the same time Acton House was abandoned, and the Nor'-westers remained unchallenged in that locality until the H B post was re-established in 1819.

Two years after that, when the two companies amalgamated, Acton House was again abandoned in favour of the larger and more strongly fortified Rocky Mountain House. But from 1828, the former N.W.

post was kept open only during the winter for the Piegan trade—dried and pounded meat, dressed leather, wolf skins, etc. Thus it continued, with brief intervals of vacancy, until the increasing hostility of the Indians forced Joseph Brazeau to withdraw all his men and temporarily abandon it in 1861.

This danger from the warlike tribesmen of the Blackfoot confederacy seems to have been nothing out of the ordinary. Chief Factor John Rowand, for instance, writing from Edmonton House in January 1842, refers to "C. T. Harriott at Rocky Mountain House who is tormented almost out of his life since the beginning of October by numerous bands of brutes of Slave [the Cree term for the Blackfeet] Indians who promised to make plenty of robes and kill wolves this winter." And he adds that he wishes his colleagues in the east could "learn what it is to deal with Indians, not with pitiful Muskagoes or even Crees for it is a pleasure or even child's play to settle with them."

Paul Kane, the painter, visited the fort in April 1848, and devotes five pages of his book to a description of his stay there. He has also left us an oil painting of an Assiniboine camp with the fort in the distance. "This fort," he writes, "is beautifully situated on the banks of the Saskatchewan, in a small prairie, backed by the Rocky Mountains in the distance. In the vicinity was a camp of Assiniboine lodges, formed entirely of pine branches. . . . It is built like most of the other forts, of wood, but with more than ordinary regard to strength, which is thought necessary on account of the vicious disposition of the Blackfoot tribe, who are, without exception, the most warlike on the northern continent. I may state that beds of coal are seen protruding here along the banks of the river, similar to that of Edmonton." (Coal is still taken from those beds, and the surveyors of the rich Brazeau coal fields sixty miles to the west followed the old trails that led directly to them.)

"We found a man at the establishment," Kane continues, "called Jemmy Jock, a Cree half-breed who had temporary charge of it. . . . I learned much from him relative to the customs of the Blackfoot tribe, of which, owing to his long residence among them, thirty or forty years, he possessed a greater knowledge probably than any other man with the same education.

"Shortly after my arrival a report was brought in that the Blackfoot Indians had killed a party of Crees, and that amongst the slain was a pipe-stem carrier, whom they had skinned and stuffed with grass; the figure was then placed in a trail which the Crees were accustomed to pass in their hunting excursions. The Assiniboines, who reside in the vicinity of this fort, I found the most kind and honourable of any tribe that I met with."

There is a story, not substantiated by any Hudson's Bay record, that a young Piegan, who had been nursed through a terrible measles epidemic two years before by the post officials, came to them in gratitude and warned them the post was to be attacked. Since the force of men at hand was too small adequately to defend the place against a large hostile band of Indians, and since food supplies were very low and no more coming in due to the roving bands of warring tribes cutting them off from the friendlier Indians, it was decided to abandon the fort and retire to Edmonton. This was accomplished under cover of darkness, without any loss of life. The Blackfeet, angered to

find their victims escaped, burned the fort with all its buildings to the ground. Whether or not this is strictly true is a matter for conjecture. Records do show that in 1861 the post was abandoned, owing to fears of starvation and the threatening attitude of the Blackfeet, and later mention is made of it having been destroyed, but no details are given.

One of the most readable accounts of Rocky Mountain House is found in W. J. Moberly's reminiscences, published first in the *Beaver* for October 1921 to October 1922, and later in book form, edited by W. B. Cameron, under the title *When Fur Was King*. Moberly arrived at the fort in October 1854, and thus describes it:

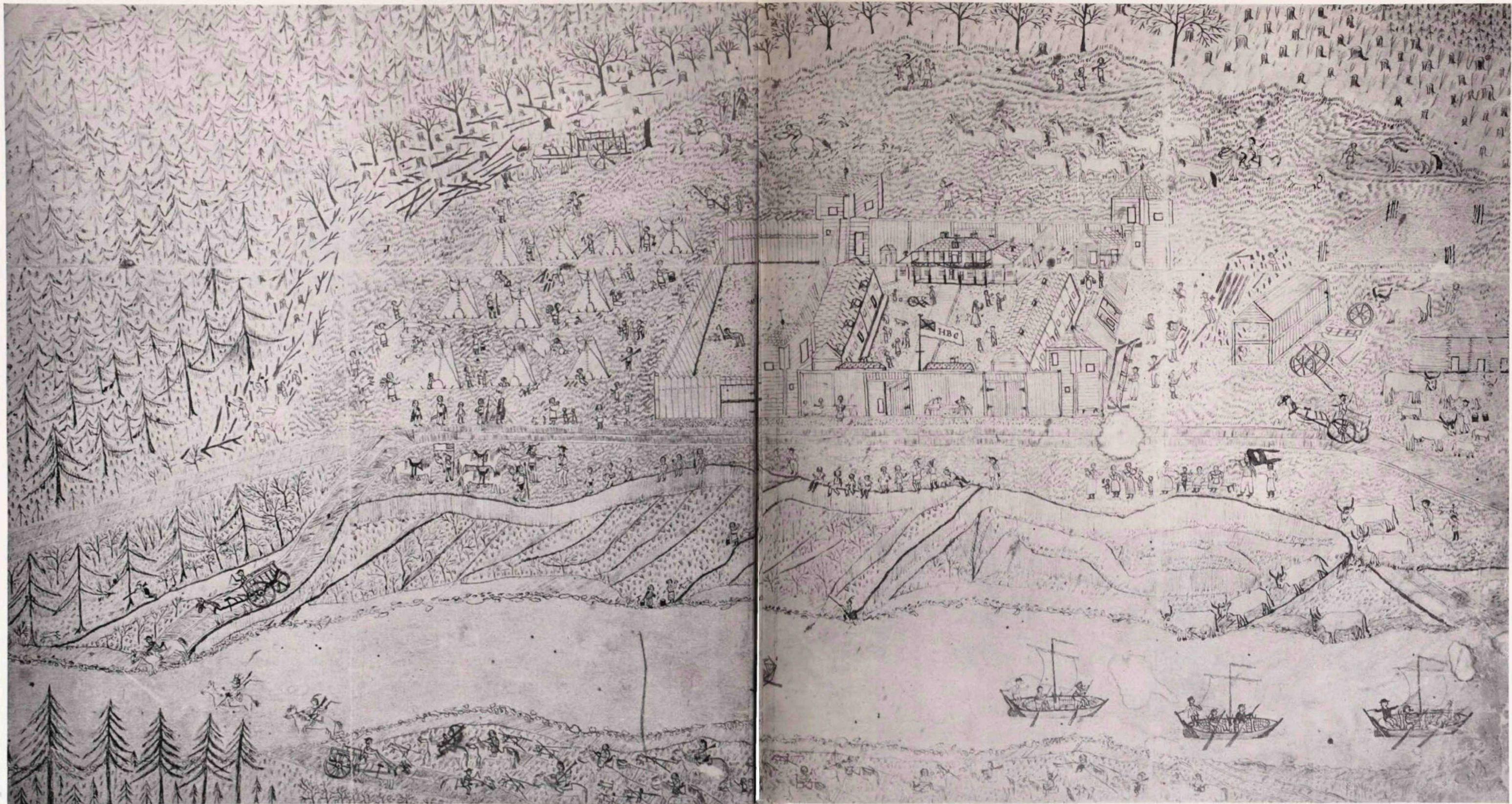
"The post was surrounded by the usual twenty-eight-foot pickets with a block bastion at each corner and a gallery running all round inside about four and a half feet from the top, each bastion containing a supply of flintlocks and ammunition. Within was a square formed by the officers' houses, men's houses, storehouses and the general trading shops, a square between this and the pickets for boat building, with forges and carpenter shops, another square for horses and a fourth for general purposes. There were two gates, the main gate on the north side, and a smaller one on the south side leading through a narrow passage into a long hall the height of the stockade."

Since the fort was not used in the summer months, much time was needed each autumn to make the quarters for the men livable before winter set in. Sir James Hector, in his report of 1858, stated that "it is in a very ruinous condition, owing to its being abandoned every summer, when it is generally adopted as a residence by several families of Indians, who prove anything but improving tenants." Palliser, Hector's companion, visited the post in the winter and spring of 1859, and was much taken with the officer in charge, J. E. Brazeau.

"Mr. Brazeau," he says, "had been for many years in the American Indian fur trade; was a wonderful linguist, and spoke Stoney, Sioux, Salteau, Cree, Blackfoot, and Crow—six languages, five of which are totally distinct from one another. Being of an old Spanish family, and educated in the United States, he also spoke English, French, and Spanish fluently. He carried on a very brisk trade with the Blackfeet, but seemed to be most wretchedly supplied with goods for the trade, and latterly had to send away bands of Blackfeet, eighty and one hundred strong, well laden with buffalo robes, bear skins, wolf skins, and other less valuable furs." Palliser adds: "Rocky Mountain House is a small post, in a very shaky condition, nevertheless the business of the Company is briskly conducted, and work seems much more the order of the day than at Edmonton, where the half breeds in the service of the Company appear very idle, lazy, and impudent."

Mountain House, as it was often called, was also a boat-building post, and Palliser reported that "13 fine Macknow [Mackinaw, i.e. York] boats were turned out before the 1st of May, about 35 feet long, and capable of carrying 75 pieces of 90 lb. each."

After Brazeau abandoned the post in 1861, it lay deserted for three years until re-established by Chief Trader (later Senator) Richard Hardisty. At that time a new fort was started about fifty chains downstream from the old one, and about one and a quarter miles above the mouth of the Clearwater. The Dominion government surveyor, W. S. Gore, surveyed



This primitive drawing of Rocky Mountain House was done by "J.L." in 1873, and shows in great detail many of the activities of a western fur trade post in that era. In the foreground a band of Blackfeet is arriving with their horse- and dog-travois, and starting to cross the ford where traders and Red River carts are coming to meet them. Across the North Sas-

katchewan to the left of the fort the post manager is welcoming the chief and sub-chiefs, one of whom carries a flag. Another band of ten lodges is already encamped to the left of the palisade surrounding the garden, and the women are seen at their chores—chopping wood, minding children, pegging out hides and stopping a dog fight. Against the right

hand wall of the fort a York boat is being built or repaired, and in the river a brigade of boats is setting off downstream, presumably to Edmonton. Above them, the cattle are being driven down to drink in the river. The two-storey building in the fort is the one to which the present stone chimneys belonged. They are pictured on the next page.

The original of this drawing was given to Sir Sandford Fleming, the C.P.R. survey engineer, in 1874, and eventually found its way to a library in Pittsburgh. This reproduction was made through the kindness of Donald Leslie, St. John, N.B., from a photostat in his possession. The top of the original not shown here, depicts the Rockies in the distance.

the Company holdings there in 1873, and mentioned in his report that "the fort is new and substantially built but there is very little trading done there now, the Blackfeet finding a market nearer their hunting grounds." Two years later, in fact, Rocky Mountain House was closed, and never reopened.

Much credit for the success of the trading post at this far western point in the midst of warring tribes is due to the sagacity and wisdom of the factors in charge of the Company's business. Every effort was made to keep the neighbouring Indian bands friendly to the white men, to trade fairly with them, to encourage trade, and to promote friendlier relations among the Indians themselves. Here were brought packs of rich furs, buffalo robes and tongues, pemmican for summer food stores, cakes and bladders of grease, dressed hides and fresh meat, all of which were traded by the Indians for blankets, tobacco, vermilion, knives, axes, needles, beads, flour, guns and ammunition.

Father Lacombe, Jesuit missionary for so many years in what was later to become Alberta, did much to allay the hostility of the Indians and win their confidence and friendship for the white men. Early in 1865 word was brought to him that the Indians around Rocky Mountain House were down with an epidemic of typhoid. He hurried to them and for many weeks nursed them and cared for them until the last traces of the disease were gone. Later that year he returned to the Mountain House to spend Christmas with his good friend, Richard Hardisty. In 1870 he again spent the winter at Rocky collecting and revising his notes on his Cree language dictionary and grammar.

The area around the Rocky Mountain House was a rich buffalo hunting ground. Different methods of

hunting these animals were used by the Indians and the white hunters. The high cliffs along the south and east side of the Saskatchewan and Clearwater Rivers provided the setting for scenes of grisly slaughter, as whole herds of buffalo were stampeded over the high banks to be shattered on the rocks below. The success of these drives may be imagined when it is noted that one shipment went out of there consisting of seven wagon loads of tongues alone.

In 1931 the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada unveiled a cairn at the site of the old Rocky Mountain House fort. On the cairn is a bronze plaque setting forth in imperishable letters the record of the early post and its brave men. Nearby stand the remains of the eighty-five-year-old chimneys, restored to a partial measure of their original height, and reinforced against the weather and predatory hands by concrete. A fitting memorial to the memory of David Thompson stands in the naming of the recently constructed steel bridge spanning the Saskatchewan River at the town of Rocky Mountain House and the highway leading into the mountains eighty miles to the westward, the David Thompson Bridge and the David Thompson Highway. The highway, when completed, will leave the Calgary-Edmonton highway at Crossroads and travel west until it passes through Sylvan Lake, Rocky Mountain House, and Nordegg. From Nordegg it will go through the first range of mountains at Windy Point and on across the Kootenay Plains, then through the Howse Pass to join the Banff-Jasper highway near the Columbia Icefields. This route is almost identical with that followed by David Thompson in following the Saskatchewan to its source and then on to the headwaters of the Columbia. No more fitting tribute could be paid to his adventurous spirit.

All that remains of Rocky Mountain House—the chimneys of the main building in the 1864 fort.

