

# saved by a Jig

**In 1774, forty-three fur traders  
survived by jigging for trout  
on Beaver Lake**

By Dr. Katherine Pettipas

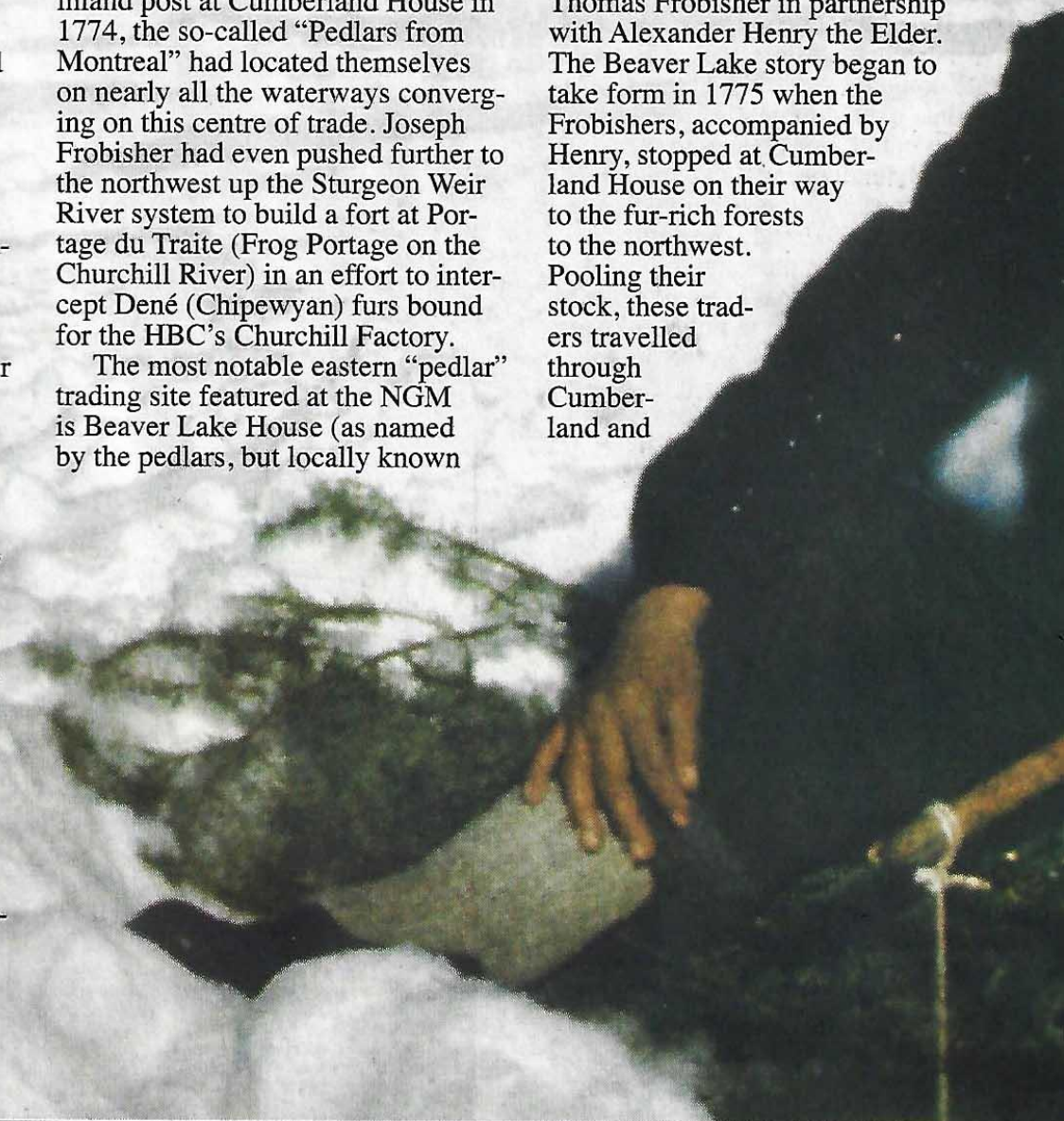
**T**he Northern Gateway Museum (NGM) is located 19 km southwest of Flin Flon at Denare Beach, Amisk (Beaver) Lake, Saskatchewan. The museum was opened in 1957 by Harry Moody, a pioneer of the area who recorded the history of the Beaver Lake - Pelican Narrows district through his writings, photography and artifact collection. An avocational historian, Moody collected fur trade-related artifacts from several locations, some of which are presently displayed at the NGM.

Part of the NGM's fur trade exhibit features European-made metal knives and spear points, axes, strike-a-lights, curved woodworking blades, copper kettles, awls, handmade square-headed nails, a fish hook, an ice chisel, cutlery, and buckles from the late 18th C. Who left these goods behind at Beaver Lake? Fur trade records reveal that such artefacts were used by the Hudson's Bay Company's (HBC) competitors from eastern Canada. The activities of these merchant adventurers resulted in the establishment of a network of posts that was strategically designed to gain the upper hand in the inland fur trade. From their posts, these aggressive rivals intercepted Cree traders travelling down the Churchill River

to trade with the Company. By the time that the HBC had built its first inland post at Cumberland House in 1774, the so-called "Pedlars from Montreal" had located themselves on nearly all the waterways converging on this centre of trade. Joseph Frobisher had even pushed further to the northwest up the Sturgeon Weir River system to build a fort at Portage du Traite (Frog Portage on the Churchill River) in an effort to intercept Dené (Chipewyan) furs bound for the HBC's Churchill Factory.

The most notable eastern "pedlar" trading site featured at the NGM is Beaver Lake House (as named by the pedlars, but locally known

nowadays as Fort Henry) that was established by brothers Joseph and Thomas Frobisher in partnership with Alexander Henry the Elder. The Beaver Lake story began to take form in 1775 when the Frobishers, accompanied by Henry, stopped at Cumberland House on their way to the fur-rich forests to the northwest. Pooling their stock, these traders travelled through Cumberland and







Namew Lakes. They ascended the Sturgeon Weir River, known to the voyageurs as La Rivière Maligne (Bad River). It was decided to winter over at a good fishing location at Beaver Lake. The party crossed Beaver Lake on November 1, and freeze-up quickly followed. In total, there were 10 canoes carrying 43 personnel that had to be

lodged and fed.

The work force was quickly divided into three work gangs – two were detailed to set nets under the ice and the third was employed for a ten-day period at constructing the buildings. Once the construction was complete, Henry remarked that they had almost a “village”: *“we had raised our buildings round a quadrangle, such as really assumed, in the wilds which encompassed it, a formidable appearance. In front, was the house designed for Messrs. Frobisher and myself; and the men had four houses, of which one was placed on each side, and two in the rear.”* Ordinarily, the birch bark canoes would have been buried in the ground to prevent the bark from contracting and splitting from the winter’s cold. However, the ground was already frozen, so the canoes were placed on scaffolds.

Once the lodgings were completed, the men were reorganized into four parties of nine persons each, with the remaining four men being assigned woodcutting duties. Each party, including the woodcutters, was expected to provide for its own subsistence needs. Fish was the mainstay of their diet, and Henry remarks that he and the Frobishers were “continually employed” in fishing. Catches included trout that

**Solomon Merasty jigging for trout, 1950s.  
Inset in Title: Jig hook found at Fort Henry.**

COURTESY HARRY MOODY COLLECTION, NGM

**Continued on page 28**



Continued from page 27

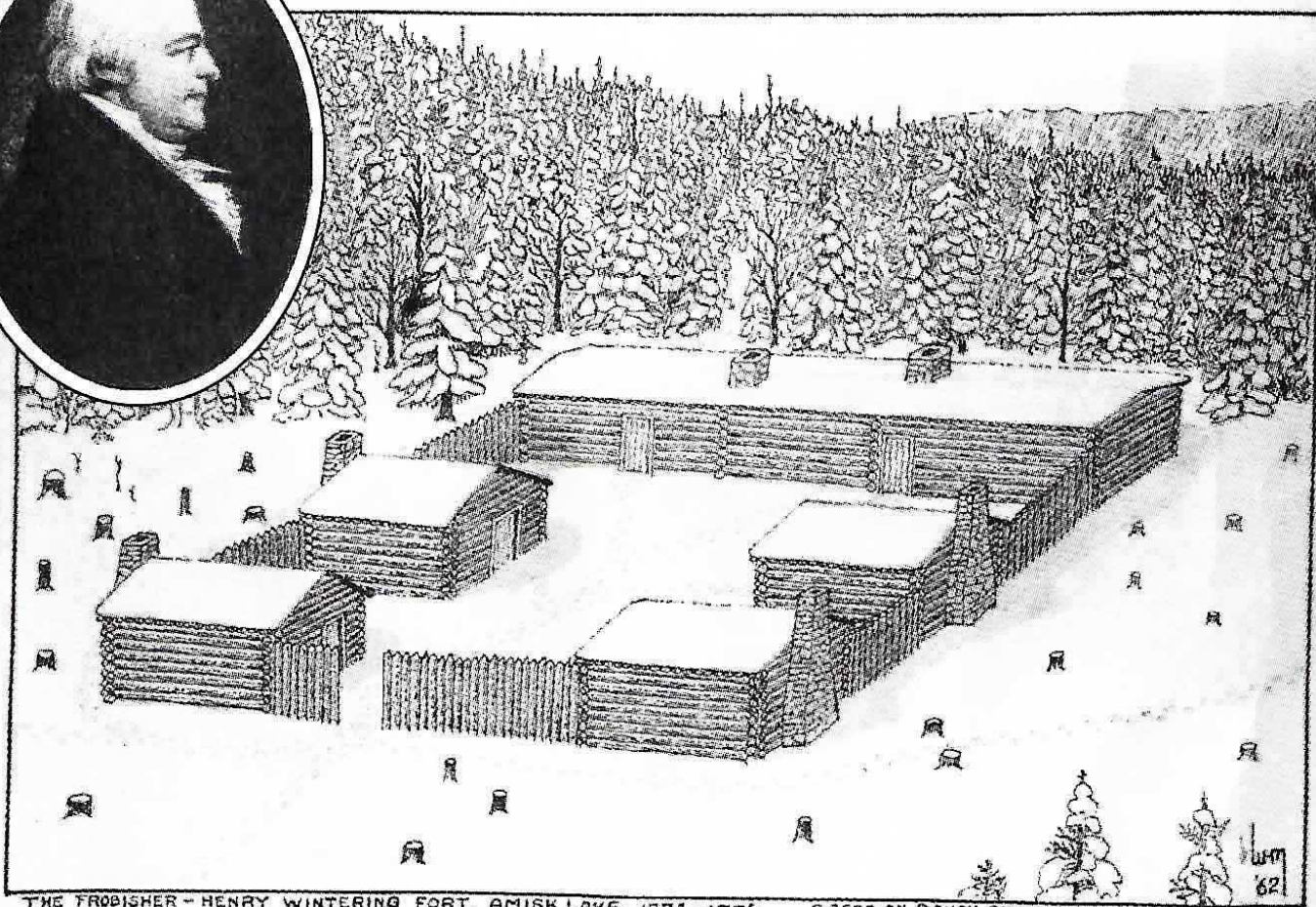
averaged ten to fifty pounds, white fish averaging five pounds, and average-sized pike and pickerel. A single sturgeon was also caught. The method of fishing is described as follows: "we made holes in the ice, and took trout with a line, in twenty and thirty fathom water, using white-fish, of a pound weight, for our bait, which we sunk to the bottom, or very near it." At times, over twenty large trout a day were caught using the line method. The only mention of other game are two moose that the local Cree hunters brought in soon after the trad-



ers' arrival at the site.

The extreme weather conditions proved to be particularly challenging, and Henry noted that they "suffered severely from the cold, in fishing." On December 25, the frost was "so excessive" that they nearly perished. The temperature dropped continually to 32 degrees below Fahrenheit – "the mercury contracted one eighth, and for four days did not rise into the tube." Local Cree were recorded as bringing in beaver, bear's meat and "some skins" for trade and usually remained at the post over night.

Determined to visit the Plains, Henry left Beaver Lake on January 1, 1776, eventually meeting up,



THE FROBISHER - HENRY WINTERING FORT, AMISK LAKE, 1774 - 1776.

BASED ON ROUGH SKETCH BY ALEXANDER HENRY

Top: Buckle found at Fort Henry site by Harry Moody.

Bottom: Sketch of the fort on display at the Northern Gateway Museum.

Inset: Alexander Henry Portrait PHOTO COURTESY GLENBOW ARCHIVES

PHOTOS BY FRANK FIEBER

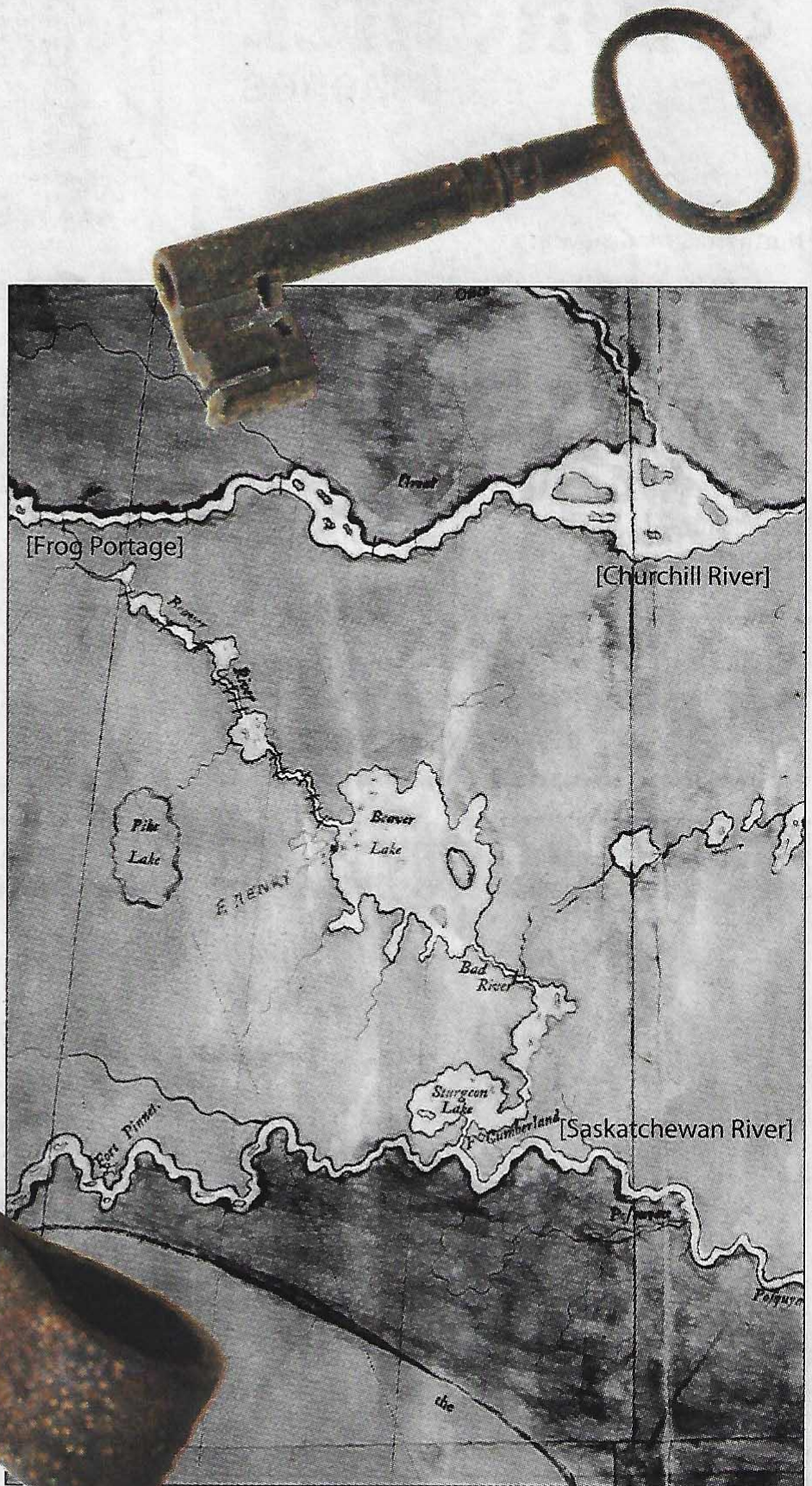
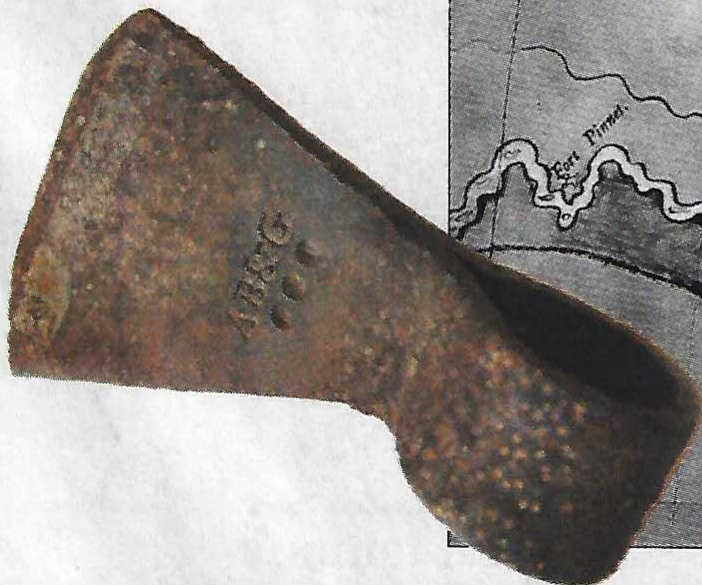


## HISTORY

and spending part of the winter with a large camp of Nakota (Assiniboin). Henry returned to Beaver Lake on April 9 and found his men in good health. However, the ice was slow to melt, the fishery was failing, and as the days went by, and the men often went "supperless." Relief arrived in early May when Henry was able to hunt for migrating waterfowl on the Sturgeon Weir River.

On May 21, 1776, Henry and 40 men left Beaver Lake, following Joseph Frobisher to his post at Portage du Traite. From here, they travelled further up the Churchill River and successfully intercepted Dené traders from Lake Athabaska who were on their way downstream to trade with the HBC. Their canoes laden with furs, Henry and Joseph Frobisher made their way back to Montreal. Henry returned to his merchant life and became a dormant partner in the newly-formed North West Company (1779). ■

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**Axe head and key unearthed at Fort Henry and on display at the Northern Gateway Museum.**  
**Inset: Map from Alexander's Henry's report, *Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories Between 1761 and 1776*.**