

# Northwest Journal

## *Selecting a Character*

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The following article is from *Northwest Journal* Volume IV, pp. 9 to 15. Part II of this article is in *Northwest Journal* Volume V, pp. 26-33

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ART. III. *Living History — Selecting a Character (Part I)*, being a discussion of some characters to portray during reenactments.

A character can be a very useful tool to re-enactors. If you have a firm idea of what kind of person you are going to portray, and from what period, it can help you avoid confusion that could lead to costly or embarrassing mistakes in your portrayal. Over the summer many club members have asked for pointers on what kind of character they should try to depict. To help answer their questions, the following is a portrait—in very broad strokes—of some of the characters of the fur trade before 1821.

### *Mountain Man*

One of the most popular characters in the U.S. is the American Mountain Man or 'buckskinner'. Such a look is characterized by a complete wardrobe made from buckskin, usually in an Indian style—war shirt, breech-clout, leggings, moccasins, etc., with a fur hat and lots of quillwork or beadwork.

This look tends to be what people can drift into when they first get into living history, especially since we get much our information from the States.

There is nothing wrong with depicting a mountain man. Just remember that mountain men were American free trappers, (not traders, part of the reason the Indians hated them so much), and they date to the 1830's. Any mountain man who successfully evaded the Blackfoot and their allies and made it as far north as Rocky Mountain House or Fort Augustus with his load of furs would doubtless become a major celebrity — as far as I know, none of them even tried.

In general, traders in the Northwest did not 'go native' or even wear native dress, as this quotation from the Mandan journal of Mr. Charles McKenzie (July, 1806) illustrates :

'I heard my name called at the door of the lodge by a voice which was familiar, and enquiring if I was within. I hastened to the door, dressed as I was in the Indian costume, and was much surprised at seeing

far from the comforts of hearth and home. Hivernants (winterers in English) prided themselves on their bravery, strength, and endurance. Hivernants were paid more than pork-eaters, and got two pairs of trousers, two shirts, two handkerchiefs, and two blankets as part of their wages. Each year brought some 'summer men' to the Northwest posts. These were voyageurs who were about to spend their first winter in the interior. By and large, the hivernant was the seasoned voyageur of the Northwest. He saw many friends and acquaintances die — drowned, frozen, starved, stabbed, or 'busted a gut' two thousand miles from home. He may have put down roots in the North West. He may have had a country wife and children, and have Indians for close friends and in-laws. Although he and his family got clothing free from the NWC every year as part of his wages, he wore the moccasins his wife made for him, and his pipe bag and shot pouch and so on may have been decorated with his wife's beadwork or quillwork. When he was ready to retire from the Company's employment, he may have received permission to stay in the Northwest with his family as a freeman, trapping beaver and trading them to the Company. Or he might return home to Lower Canada.

### *Orkney Canoe Man*

The Hudson's Bay Company had two main classes of employees : officers (management, in modern terms) and servants. One of the most important groups of servants in the HBC were the Orkney canoe men.

The HBC had little success recruiting Canadians to paddle their canoes. Instead of voyageurs, the men paddling HBC canoes were 'canoe men', mostly recruited from the Orkney Islands north of Scotland. (The Orkney port of Stromness was the last port of call for HBC ships before crossing the Atlantic.) Life in the Orkneys was tough and cold, and the Orkneymen proved themselves more suited to the conditions in Rupert's Land than Londoners. Orkneymen were considered more sensible and hardworking by their English employers than the rash and indolent French Canadians. Orkneymen were also seen as likely to smuggle and too prone to protect each other from the Company.

An Orkneyman was recruited for a five-year term of service, and had no living expenses during that period, since food and housing were provided by the HBC. A canoe man might start out his first term of service with the firm intention of saving every penny of his modest salary and coming home with a nest egg. He would often start out at a post on Hudson's Bay. When he had more experience, he might move to an inland post. He would try to pinch every penny he could. He might fall in love with an Indian or mixed-blood woman and get married (with or without the blessings of the Company). At the end of his term, he could return to the Orkneys with his nest egg. If he decided to stay on, he would get a bonus for signing on for another five-year stint and could build up enough money for a comfortable retirement back home.

The laborers and canoe men were provided with cotton shirts, frocks (large overshirts used to keep clothes clean during dirty tasks), and trousers made of Russia duck (cotton canvas?) or Russia sheeting (a linen twill also used for tents). The duck and Russia sheeting trousers were especially important for the workers at the inland posts. They were also supplied with 'blue common cloth', possibly for making waistcoats and jackets. Some HBC posts had tailors who sewed clothing for the Indian trade and for the men (Johnson, 97, 118, 125). HBC policy was always firmly against clothing their servants' wives and children at company expense. This suggests that country wives of Orkney canoe men would be more likely to dress in the Indian style than their NWC counterparts, due to the expense of dressing them in the European manner.

### *Tradesmen*

Skilled workers were needed at the posts for many special tasks. Tradesmen ('mechanics') were paid more than canoe men and laborers. At the North West Company's major fort at Grand Portage, tradesmen were allowed the same rations as wintering partners, clerks, guides, and interpreters, but they weren't allowed to eat with them in the Great Hall (Mackenzie, 98).

Tradesmen generally had several roles. They would help at the fort along with the other men. They would also use their skills to make trade goods and articles needed by the fort. *Blacksmiths* made trade goods such as awls, fire steels, and gun worms, and did work for the fort and traders, such as making & repairing hinges and axes, making nails, and repairing guns. *Coopers* were needed to make kegs for the Indians to take away liquor in. *Tailors* sewed coats and other clothes for the Indian trade, and made clothes for the traders when they had free time. *Carpenters* were brought in for major construction jobs like building Fort William. *Boat builders* made boats for both the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company after about 1795.

Tradesmen dressed similarly to voyageurs, but because they were paid a little better than the voyageurs, they may have dressed a little better. For safety reasons, they would have been more inclined to wear shoes instead of moccasins. They would also be likely to wear a leather apron, 'frock' (smock), or both, to protect their clothes while working at their trade.

### *Company Clerk*

Both the British and Montreal-based companies needed clerks to keep track of credit extended to individual Indians and to make sure that the trade goods were shipped to the right posts. To be a clerk, you had to be able to read, write, and do sums, which set the clerks apart from the voyageurs. Clerks were paid more than the canoe men, voyageurs, and laborers, and might find themselves in charge of a small fur post once they had enough experience in the fur trade. In the North West Company, clerks were called commis and could become wintering partners one day. Many Orkneymen could read, write, and figure, and some were promoted from canoe men and laborers to clerks (most notably, William Tomison, who rose to be in charge of all HBC operations in Rupert's Land). But the HBC was run out of London by a Governor and Committee of shareholders, so an HBC clerk did not have the same hope of advancing to the top of the company as his NWC counterpart.

Both companies considered their clerks to be gentlemen, and they were expected to dress and act the part. They tried to follow the fashion of the middle- or upper-class English. Clerks would be able to afford more clothing and slightly more expensive fabrics than their workers. In 1793 (and possibly earlier), NWC clerks had their clothing supplied by the company. Old Fort William says that a list from 1821 of clothing supplied to a clerk consisted of the following : 1 gray cloth jacket, 2 pairs gray cloth trousers, 1 fine corduroy jacket, 1 pair fine corduroy trousers, 4 fine cotton shirts, 2 cotton pocket handkerchiefs, 2 black silk handkerchiefs [probably for stocks], 2 pairs worsted hose [wool stockings], 2 pairs fine imported shoes, 1 London plated hat, and 1 cap (if appropriate). Clerks might also sport some expensive accessories, such as a pocket watch, sword, silk handkerchief, or a pistol or brace of pistols. A clerk's country wife would likely be well dressed to reflect her husband's status, and she would be less likely to wear Indian-style dress.

### *More to Come*

Look in volume 5 of *Northwest Journal* for information on wintering partners, factors, soldiers, guides, interpreters, hunters, free Canadians, country wives, and others.

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# Northwest Journal

## *Finger Weaving*

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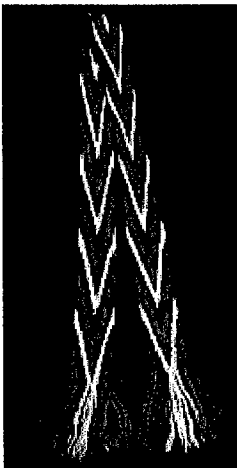
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The following article is from *Northwest Journal* Volume I, pp. 2 to 7.

Due to the nature of net browsers, we are unable to present this article in its original format. The original article was not illustrated.

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Art. III. *Ceinture Fléchée* : *Finger Weaving a Voyageur Sash*, By J. Gottfred, Calgary. Instructions on how to make a chevron pattern sash using traditional finger-weaving methods.



One of a pair of legging ties (garters) woven by the author.

### *The Fléchée*

The ceinture fléchée, or arrowhead sash, was one of the famous badges of the voyageur. The ceinture fléchée had many uses. It was used for warmth, as a tump line and a support on the portage, as an emergency rope, and as a mark of distinction and origin. When tightly woven and treated with beeswax, it could even be used as a cup.

Originally, ceintures fléchées were woven by hand using a technique called 'finger weaving'. Later, sashes were machine loomed in England for the Canadian mass market.

The term 'fléchée' refers specifically to the original arrowhead design, but there were many other patterns. The chevron, the 'flammes' (flames), the 'éclairs' (lightning bolts), the 'W' (double chevron), and the 'tête de flèche' (large two-tone arrowhead) were also used. Colors and patterns were distinctive of various regions. Probably the most famous of all sashes were those from the Assomption area of Lower Canada, which had multiple multi-colored lightning-bolts (éclairs) flanking a central red core.

Garters for stockings were also finger woven in many styles, although the simpler designs look better on narrower items.

This article describes how to finger weave the chevron pattern.

### *Materials*

All you need for finger weaving is wool, one or two short lengths of dowel, and your fingers. It is important to use pure wool for your weaving. Wool with even a small amount of synthetic fiber in it is too slippery to yield satisfactory results. This is unfortunate, as pure wool can be difficult to find.

Get wool which is as thick as possible. If you intend to build a sash, you will need to find very thick wool, or, more likely, you will need to twist together three smaller threads to get something thick enough to use for a eight or twelve inch wide sash.

### *Getting Started*

For this project you will need six strands each of two different colors of wool yarn and two six-inch dowels. This will give you a finished product about half an inch wide. This is a nice width for a watch chain, bookmark, hood or mitten string, &c., and it is easy and fast to do. White and red or white and dark green make a very attractive combination.

The finished product will be about one-quarter to one-third the length of the strands that you start with. The tighter you weave your work, the shorter the finished piece will be.

Normally, unless you are making something like a watch chain where you want the chevrons or arrows to point in the same direction along the whole length of the piece, you will work from the middle of each length to each end. This means that the chevrons start in the middle of the piece, and point outwards towards each end. It also means that at any point, you are only dealing with lengths of wool that are half the length of the final piece.

Let's assume that you are using white and red. Cut six white and six red strands to the same length. Make the lengths at least two feet long.

You will now need to place the strands on to the wooden dowel. Lay the strands out in the order in which you will place them on the dowel. For the chevron, the order will be three white, six red, three white.

There are two ways to place the strands on the dowel. The first, traditional, way is to find the center of each strand and loop it over a single dowel. Personally, I do not like this method for small projects because I find that the strands move around too much.

The method that I recommend you start with is to take two dowels, line them up side by side, and tightly bind them together at one end with some extra wool. Now, slide the middle of each strand in between the two dowels. Once they are all lined up in the correct order, tightly bind off the other end of the doweling. The idea is to pinch your wool tightly in between the two pieces of doweling. Make sure that the wool binding the ends together is secure; it is important that the strands stay in place. (If you're not very good at knots, you might use masking tape instead — but you can't do that at re-enactments!)

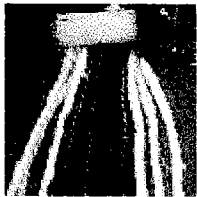
Once all the strands are on the dowel in the correct order and so close together that they are touching, you then gather up all the strands on one side of the dowel and tie them into a bunch. Use a knot that you will be able to untie later!

Tie some more spare wool around the bunch, and tie the other end to a chair, or pin the bunch to a pillow in your lap. When you are weaving, you will need to pull on the strands to get an even and tight weave.

### *Weaving the Chevron Pattern*

Hold the strands that you have now arranged (3 white, 6 red, 3 white) so that they are extending from the dowel towards you. Strands that run lengthwise are called the warp strands, strands that run side to side (across the width) are the weft strands. At this moment, all of the strands are warp strands.

When weaving the chevron, you are always weaving from the middle of the work toward an outside edge. Each warp strand becomes a weft strand in turn,, then becomes a warp strand &c. It may sound complicated, but you will find that it is easy once you get started.



Ready to begin.

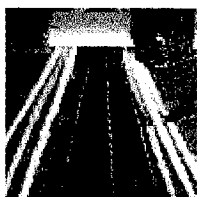
### *The First Weaving*

To begin, divide the warp strands in two. On the left side, you will have 3 white strands and 3 red strands, and on the right side you will have 3 red strands and 3 white strands.

When reading the strands, we will read them from the middle out. So, at this moment, on the left side, (reading from right to left) you have 3 red strands, and 3 white strands (R, R, R, W, W, W). On the right, (reading from left to right) you have 3 red strands and 3 white strands (R, R, R, W, W, W).

With the right hand, you will now pick up strands from the right hand side. Pick up the first strand (red), the third strand (red), the fifth strand (white). You have now picked up every second strand starting from the first strand.

With your left hand, pick up the first strand (reading from right to left) on the left hand side. This strand (red) will now be used as a weft strand on the right hand side. Pull this strand through under the strands that you have in your right hand, and on top of the remaining right hand strands. Put down the strands in your right hand, but do not lose track of the weft strand that you just pulled through. The best way to keep track of this strand is to loop it up over the dowel.



The first weaving.

### *The Second Weaving*

With your left hand, you will now pick up warp strands from the left hand side. What was the first (red) strand on the left hand side is now being used as a weft strand on the right hand side. You should now consider this strand to be part of the right hand side. This means that the left hand side currently consists of five warp strands, (R, R, W, W, W).

Starting again with the first strand (red), pick up every second strand on the left hand side. Your hand should contain 1 red and 2 white strands.

Now, with the right hand, pick up the first warp strand (red) on the right hand side. This strand will now become a weft strand on the left hand side. Pass it under the strands in your hand, and over the remaining strands. You may now put down the strands in your left hand. Again, be careful not to lose track of the weft strand that you have just woven. Remember, the best way to keep track of this strand is to loop it up over the dowel.

You have now woven two strands, one from each side. Think of this as having done one row. The warp strands should now be symmetrical. Reading from the middle out, each side should consist of 2 red, and 3 white strands (R, R, W, W, W).

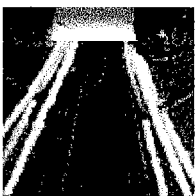
You must now pause and look at your work. On the right hand side, the first warp strand is red, and is a 'down' strand, that is, it is currently underneath the weft — it is being pushed down by the weft. The second strand is a red 'up' strand. the third is a white 'down', the fourth a white 'up', and the fifth a white 'down'.

On the left hand side, the first strand is a red 'up' strand, the second is a red 'down' strand, the third a white 'up', the fourth a white 'down', and the fifth a white 'up'.

In the middle, the two weft strands cross ; the top strand is the left side weft.

Every time you have woven two strands (right and left wefts), your strands look the same — only the color order will change.

This will become clearer after you do the next row.



The second weaving.

### *The Third Weaving*

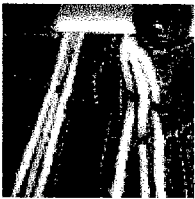
You will now weave as you did for the first weaving. You will take the first left hand side warp strand, and weave it through the right side. Take careful note that you must weave the right side next because the first strand on the right hand side is a 'down' strand. That means that when you pick it up, it will cross, or cover, the weft. The first strand on the left hand side is an 'up' strand ; if you were to pick it up you would expose, or uncover, the weft.

You must always weave the side that starts with the 'down' strand. If you always weave one row at a time (that is, do one right weft and one left weft), then you will always start again by picking up strands on the right hand side.

On the right hand side, pick up the first strand (down & red), the third, (down & white), and the fifth (down & white).

Now bring the weft strand through and lay it straight out. The previous weft strand should still be set aside over the dowel. That strand must now come down and under the new weft strand, and thus become the new warp strand at the end of the row. You must now place the weft strand that you just wove over the dowel so as not to lose track of it.

The right hand side now consists of the following strands: up & red, down & red, up & white, down & white, up & white, down & red.



The third weaving.

#### *The Fourth Weaving*

Now, you must finish the row by weaving the right hand side first strand (up & red) through the left hand side. On the left hand side, pick up the first (down & red) and third (down & white) strands. Pull the first strand from the right hand side (up, red), through and lay it out straight.

The previous left hand weft strand must cross the new weft strand on top — note that on the right side it was (and will always be) underneath, on the left side it will be (and will always be) on top.

Place the new weft strand over the dowel so that you do not lose track of it.

#### *Checking Your Work*

You must now check your work. The left hand side should consist of the following strands : up & red, down & white, up & white, down & white, up & red. (R, W, W, W, R)

The right hand side now consists of : down & red, up & white, down & white, up & white, down & red. (R, W, W, W, R).

Note that the strand colors are the same, but if you compare the left side to the right side, you will see that if a strand is up on the left side, its right side counterpart is down and vice-versa.



The fourth weaving.

### *Subsequent Weavings*

After each row (that is, after you have woven one right side, and one left side), all that will change is the order of the colors — the 'upness' and 'downness' of each strand position remains the same. If you learn to recognize the correct strand position, then you can immediately spot a mistake.

It is important to spot mistakes right away, as you cannot carry on. I have occasionally had to unravel an inch of weaving when my attention lapsed and I forgot to check my strand count and whether the correct strands were up and down!

After you have woven the next row your strands on the left hand side should be: up & white, down & white, up & white, down & red, up & red. (W, W, W, R, R).

The strands on the right hand side should be : down & white, up & white, down & white, up & red, down & red. (W, W, W, R, R).

### *Tension*

After every row it is a good idea to pull on each warp strand to adjust the tension of the piece. Try various tensions on a few trial pieces, and you will rapidly find the correct 'pull'. You do need to pull fairly hard, especially when using a larger number of strands.



Weave tension.

### *Finishing the Ends*

To finish the ends, you have a couple of options. You can twist two strands together, or you may simply braid together three or four strands and knot them at the end. (I am partial to a three-strand braid, as it leaves you with finer, smoother fringes than the twist method.)

To twist two strands together, pick up one strand and twist it until it kinks. Then, without letting the first strand unwind, twist the second strand in the same direction, until it also kinks. Now, starting at the bottom, let the two strands naturally wind together. You can tie a knot in the end to keep them together. You can twist with or against the natural twist of the strand, but you will get a different effect depending upon which you choose. Experiment on a test piece to see which type you prefer, before using it on your real project.

### *Larger Pieces*

For your first project, I would recommend that you begin with something small, such as the garters used for decoration, and to hold up leather or woolen leggings.

A nice chevron garter (or woman's Indian style belt) of two colors would consist of 12 white, 24 red, and 12 white strands.

If you are using three colors, A, B, & C, then place your strand on the dowel thus: 8 A, 8 B, 16 C, 8 B, 8 A.

If you are using four colors, A, B, C & D, then place your strands in the order: 6 A, 6 B, 6 C, 12 D, 6 C, 6 B, 6 A.

You will find that using four colors is actually easier to weave than using two colors. This is because it is easier to keep track of the smaller number of strands of each contrasting color. For a nice four-color design in traditional colors, try white, red, dark green, and black.

Once you have had some practice and are ready to commit the time for a larger project, you may wish to try weaving a full sized ceinture fléchée.

The width of such a belt should be six to eight inches for a man, half an inch to four inches for women and children. The bourgeoisie wore deluxe belts measuring up to ten inches wide (Bourret & Lavigne, 18). The total finished length should be around twelve feet. Such a project will keep you out of trouble for a while!

You may have difficulty finding wool of adequate thickness for such a project. In that case, you may need to twist together thinner wool to make thicker strands. This problem was also common two hundred years ago!

### *Wearing the Ceinture Fléchée*

The ceinture fléchée can be worn in a couple of different ways. For the maximum decorative effect, simply wrap it around your body, and loop one end over the other so that the ends hang down just to one side of the center. After you have adjusted it to a comfortable tightness, smooth out the folds of the hanging portion to make it flat. This is the way to wear the ceinture fléchée if you are going to a dance and want to look your best!

An alternative to this method is to first fold the ceinture fléchée in half along its length, then wrap it once around the body with the fold on the bottom, and tie it in the same way as above. By putting the fold on the bottom, you have just created yourself a pocket in which you can store your pipe, tobacco, tinder, a few coins, your clasp knife, some string, your watch (if you can afford one), and perhaps a couple of musket balls hammered into a pair of dice!

If you don't want the ends dangling in your way while you are chopping wood &c., then simply wrap the fléchée around your body twice, and tie the fringes together. This effectively doubles your pocket space, so you now have space for a deck of cards, a snuff box, a candle stub, and perhaps a piece or two of cheese and a biscuit!

I discovered that my fléchée was far more useful and comfortable than I had ever imagined. Storing all that stuff around your waist is far more comfortable than stashing it into pockets that you either sit on or bend around! For the life of me I can't imagine why the fléchée ever went out of style. This discovery is an example of those serendipitous aspects of living history which make it so much fun!

### *Further Reading*

The definitive work on the history of the ceinture fléchée is *Assomption Sash* by Marius Barbeau,

published by the National Museum of Canada (Bulletin 93, Anthropological Series no. 24.).

The best work I've found on weaving the various designs is *Le Fléché, L'art du tissage au doigt*, by Françoise Bourret and Lucie Lavigne (Les Éditions de L'Homme, Montreal : 1973).

The best, most readily available work in English is *Finger Weaving: Indian Braiding* by Alta R. Turner (Cherokee Publications, Cherokee, North Carolina : 1973). It is carried by Jas. Townsend & Sons, Panther Primitives, and the Log Cabin Shop.

I wish to thank Kim Palmer at Victoria Settlement, and Irène from La Société des Amis du Fléchée in Edmonton for their kind assistance in getting me started on this enjoyable past-time.

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