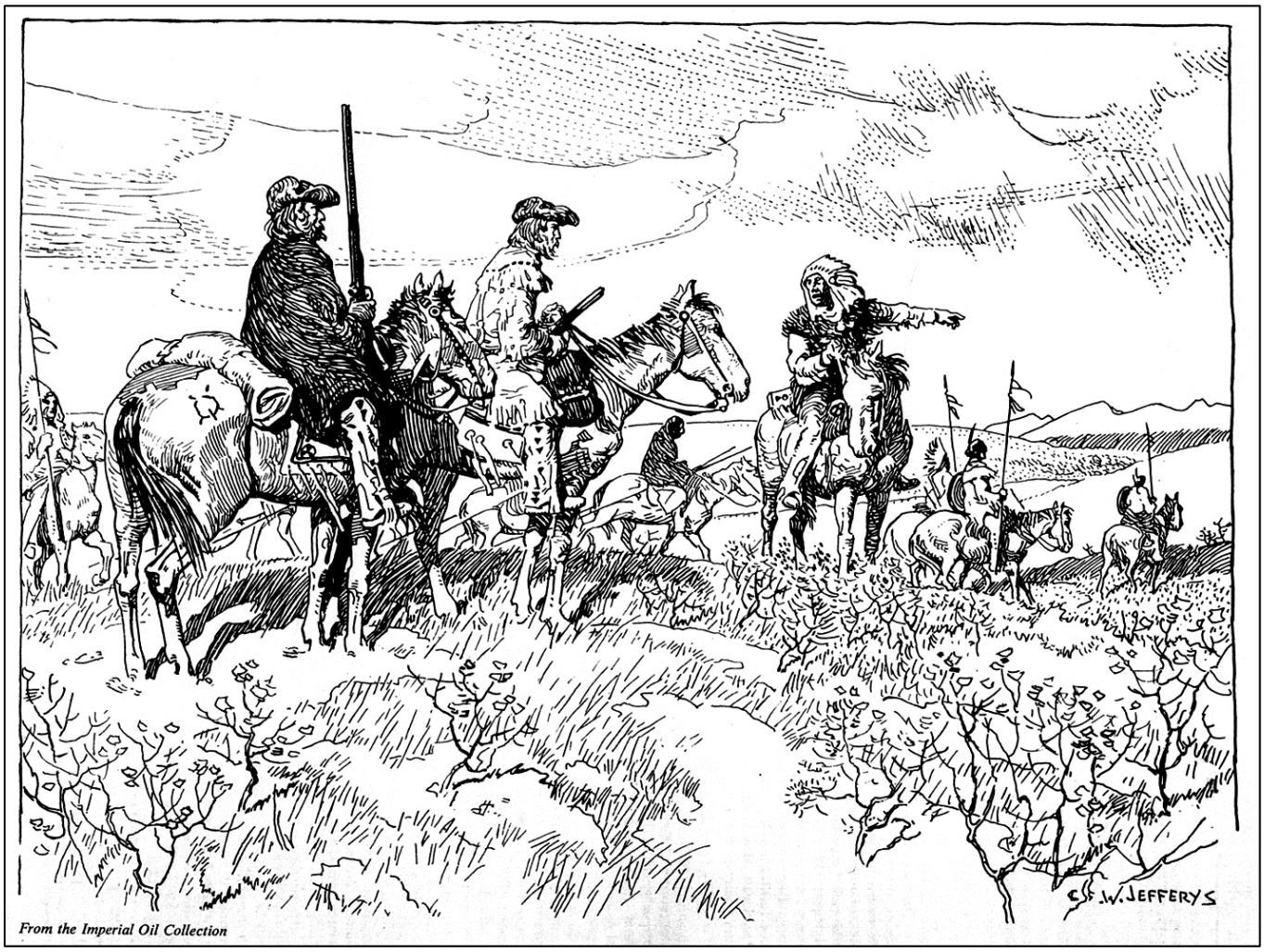
La Verendrye and His Sons

The Search for the Western Sea



Above: The Brothers La Vérendrye in sight of the western mountains, News Year's Day 1743. By C.W. Jeffery's.

Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, Sieur de la Vérendrye, and his sons were the last important explorers during the French regime in Canada. Like many of their predecessors, they pushed westward in spite of lack of support from the king or his officials in Quebec, and in spite of the selfishness and greed of the merchants, who equipped their expeditions only to take all of the large profits of the fur trade made possible by energetic exploration.

La Vérendrye was born on November 17, 1685, in the settlements of Three Rivers, where his father was governor. *1 He entered the army as a cadet in 1697. In 1704 he took part in a raid upon Deerfield, a settlement in the British colony of Massachusetts, and in 1705 he fought under Subercase when a French force raided St. John's, Newfoundland. In 1707 La Vérendrye went to Europe and served with a regiment in Flanders against the English under the Duke of Marlborough. At the battle of Malplaquet (1710) he was wounded several times. Upon his recovery he was promoted to lieutenant, and in 1711 returned to Canada. For several years La Vérendrye served in the colonial forces. In 1712 he married and settled on the island of Dupas, near Three Rivers. There his four sons were born – Jean-Baptiste, Pierre, Francois, and Louis-Joseph.

In 1726 La Vérendrye received the command of a trading post on Lake Nipigon, north of Lake Superior. As this lonely post his desire to find the great sea which lay somewhere to the west was quickened by the rumours he heard from the Indians. *2 An Indian named Ochagach told La Vérendrye that he had reached tidal water by going far westward to a great lake and then down a river. Fear of the coastal tribes, he said, had prevented him from going on to the mouth of the river, but he had been told that the river fell into a great sea and that a powerful nation lived in fortified towns on the coast. Although La Vérendrye was fully aware that the Indians habitually exaggerated and coloured their accounts of distant regions, he was convinced that all such tales had a basis of truth and that the Western Sea lay somewhere to the west. Henceforth the controlling ambition of La Vérendrye's life was the discovery of this sea.

In 1730 La Vérendrye left lake Nipigon and went to Quebec, where he hoped to get men and equipment for an expedition to the far West. At Quebec the governor-general, the Marquis de Beauharnois, received him with kindness and became genuinely interested in his plans. Then came the disappointment so common in the lives of the early explorers. Beauharnois wrote to King Louis requesting men and supplies for La Vérendrye, but the king flatly refused to grant any money for exploration. All that he offered was a monopoly of the western fur trade, by means of which La Verendrye would have to pay the costs of exploration with the profits he could derive from trading. La Vérendrye was disappointed, for even if he could establish a profitable fur trade west of Lake Superior, the demands of business would curtail his explorations. Moreover, he was faced with the problem of getting money for the initial costs of hiring men and buying supplies. Putting all of his own small fortune into the enterprise, he went to

Montreal and for support applied to various merchants there. The merchants, though uninterested in his plans for exploration, agreed to supply him with wages for his men, goods for trading, and all necessary equipment if he would grant them all of the profits of the fur trade. La Vérendrye agreed to this arrangement and prepared for the voyage.

In the summer of 1731, the fleet of canoes left Montreal. With La Vérendrye went three of his sons, Jean-Baptiste, Pierre, and Francois, and his nephew La Jemeraye. Their route was up the Ottawa River, across Lake Nipissing, down the French River, and from Lake Hudson to Lake Superior. They stopped at Fort Michilimackinac, the trading post at the mouth of Lake Michigan, and then went on to the mouth of the Pigeon River, southwest of the present city of Fort William. At this portage La Vérendrye's crews, influenced by wild tales of horrors that awaited them and apprehensive of the hard portages ahead, mutinied and refused to go any farther. At last a compromise was reached. La Vérendrye agreed to spend the winter with half the men at Kaministikwia (now Fort William) on Lake Superior while La Jemeraye went ahead and built a fort on Rainy Lake.

In the spring of 1732, La Jemeraye rejoined La Vérendrye on Lake Superior, bringing furs from the post he had built on Rainy Lake. This post, called fort St. Pierre, was erected on the southern side of Rainy Lake, at the mouth of the Rainy River. La Vérendrye lost no time in leaving for the new fort. A month later he was on Rainy Lake, and after resting at the fort, he went on to the Lake of the Woods. There he built fort St. Charles on the southwest side of the lake.

In 1733, when these two posts had been built, La Vérendrye found himself in a difficult position. He was unable to pay his men. His supplies of everything, but especially food, were low, yet the Montreal merchants refused to send him any more. Therefore in 1734, after he had sent one of his men to build Fort Maurepas at the mouth of the Winnipeg River, La Vérendrye made the long journey back to Montreal and saw his partners. Bearing their unjust reproaches, he convinced them that his string of trading posts would soon pour profits into their hands. They agreed to equip the expedition again, and after spending the winter of 1734-35 as the guest of Beauharnois, La Vérendrye, taking with him his youngest son, Louis-Joseph, set out for the West and arrived at Fort St. Charles in September.

In June, 1736, La Vérendrye's eldest son, Jean, came from Fort Maurepas with the bad news that La Jemeraye had died. A second blow soon followed.

Because the men at Fort St. Charles were badly in need of food, in June, 1736, La Vérendrye sent three canoes under the command of his son down to Kaministikwia for supplies. With Jean went the Jesuit missionary, Father Aulneau. On an island in Lake of the Woods the French were attacked by a party of one hundred Sioux warriors. *3 Taken completely by surprise, Jean and his men offered only a feeble defence. All were massacred, even the Jesuit, Father Aulneau.

La Vérendrye did not undertake his proposed expedition in 1737. Saddened by the deaths of his eldest son and his nephew, and having to use all his skill to prevent the Chippewas and Crees from making war upon the Sioux for their act of treachery against the French, he remained at Fort St. Charles for part of the year, doing his utmost to prevent his fiery allies from beginning what he feared would develop into a general war among the neighbouring Indian tribes. In the summer of 1738, however, he prepared to set out for the country of the Mandans, an Indian tribe about which he had heard many marvellous tales. La Vérendrye was especially interested in two details from the many accounts of the Mandans related to him by the Indians – that they were white like the French and that they lived on a river that flowed into the sea. He thought that the mysterious Mandans might be Spaniards who had moved north from the Spanish territories far to the south, and he believed that, whoever, they were, they would be able to show him the way to the ocean.

Taking Francois and Louis with him, he went down the Winnipeg River to Fort Maurepas, then crossed Lake Winnipeg and went up the Red River to the mouth of the Assiniboine, the site of the present city of Winnipeg. *4 After meeting a band of Crees at this place, La Verendrye went up the Assiniboine as far as the site of the town of Portage la Prairie, where he built Fort La Reine. In the meantime one of his men, Louviere, went back to the mouth of the Assiniboine and built Fort Rouge on the south bank of the Assiniboine where it enters the Red River. When La Vérendrye had completed Fort La Reine, he chose twenty men to accompany him and set out for the country of the Mandans. He soon met a band of Assiniboines from a neighbouring village. These Indians, who had heard of the white men from some of their tribesmen La Vérendrye had met at Fort la Reine, invited the Frenchmen to their village.

At the Assiniboine village, La Vérendrye and his men were greeted joyfully. La Vérendrye, keeping in mind the fur trade that supported his explorations, gave

presents to the chiefs and asked them to bring their furs to Fort La Reine. The Assiniboines promised to do so and then, to La Vérendrye's surprise, asserted that the whole village would accompany the French on their journey to the Mandans, to whom word had been sent of their coming. Two days after La Vérendrye had reached the village, the whole party set out together, with the six hundred Indians marching in orderly array over the prairie.

Near the end of November, La Vérendrye reached the place appointed for the meeting with the Mandans. A Mandan chief appeared with a small band of men and presented La Vrendrye with tokens of friendship. To La Vérendrye's surprise, these Mandans looked much like the Assinibones; they were certainly not white men, as the Crees had told him. The Mandans invited La Verendrye and his men to the nearest Mandan village, but they were annoyed at the presence of so many Assiniboines. As a means of getting rid of the Assiniboines without appearing inhospitable, the Mandan chief invented a story about the Sioux being on the warpath in the vicinity, hoping that the Assinibones, who were afraid of the savage Sioux, would leave for their homes in haste. He explained to La Vérendrye that the Mandan village could hardly feed such a large number of guests. The Assinibones, however, suppressed their fears when their chiefs shamed them for their cowardice, and they decided to go forward with the French and Mandans.

When the party reached the Mandan village, La Vérendrye was surprised to find it an elaborate, strongly-built fort, unlike any other Indian settlement he had seen. ***5** The Mandans treated La Vérendrye with the utmost respect. However, his attempts to get information from them were not very successful. When the Assiniboines left the village a few days after their arrival, La Vérendrye's Cree interpreter, unknown to La Verendrye, went with them. With difficulty La Vérendrye understood the Mandans to say that their own nation lived in several large villages along the Missouri, that hostile tribes lived farther south, and that far down the Missouri where it became very wide (the Mississippi) lived a race of white men (the Spaniards). In the hope of getting more information, he sent one of his sons (the Chevalier) to another Mandan village, but the language barrier again made intelligible communication about routes to the westward impossible. "Seeing that it was useless for us to try to question them," says La Vérendrye, "we had to fall back on feasting the whole time we stayed at their fort; even so, we could not go to all the feasts to which we were invited." *(Burpee, pp. 345-346).*

In December (1738) La Vérendrye prepared to return to Fort La Reine. A sudden illness postponed the departure for a few days, but in the middle of the month he left two of his men with the Mandans to learn the language and set out over the prairie with the rest of his men. After a very difficult march in bitterly cold weather, he reached Fort La Reine on the Assiniboine. ***6**

In the autumn of 1739 the two Frenchmen returned from the Mandan village, bringing tidings of a nation of Indians who lived far to the west of the Mandans. Some of these Indians had visited the Mandan villages during the summer, riding horses and bringing other horses to carry their supplies. The two Frenchmen had found one of these Horse Indians who could speak Mandan. This Indian had told them that there were strangers in his country who resembled white men. The country of the strangers, he said, was on the shores of a great salt lake. La Vrendrye heard this account of white men and the Western Sea with joy, for at last he appeared to have found in the Horse Indians a definite means of reaching the ocean.

La Vérendrye himself was unable to make another journey westward, but in 1740 he sent Pierre to the Mandans. Pierre returned to Fort La Reine in the summer of 1741, having failed to meet any of the Horse Indians. In the spring of 1742, however, Francois and Louis set out with two men for the Mandan country. They reached a Mandan village and awaited the arrival of the Horse Indians. Three months passed. Then, tired of waiting, they found two Mandan guides who promised to lead them to the Horse Indians and set out towards the southwest. For twenty days they travelled on horseback in a southwest direction and along the valley of the Little Missouri River toward the Black Hills of what is now South Dakota. Then they turned westward toward the Powder River country and, on August 11, camped on the Powder Hills and waited for the Horse Indians to return to their homes from a hunting expedition. ***7** A fortnight later the first of their Mandan guides left them. About the middle of September a band of Good-looking Indians or Crows appeared. The second of their two Mandan guides, afraid of these enemies of his nation, left the La Vérendryes and went back to the Missouri. The Crows guided the French to a band of the Little Foxes, who in turn guided them on to an encampment of the Horse Indians.

When Francois and Louis reached the Horse Indians, they found the tribe recovering from an attack by the Snake Indians in which many of their warriors had been killed. They could tell the French nothing about a route to the sea

because, they said, the country of the fierce Snake Indians lay between their land and the sea. They guided the explorers, however, to a camp of the Bow Indians, the only tribe that could make war against the Snakes. On November 21 the two brothers reached this camp and were welcomed by the Bow chief, who told them that his warriors were about to march against the Snakes and that their route would take them to the mountains near the sea. The French, not knowing that the Rocky Mountains were hundreds of miles from the ocean, thought that they were close to their goal. When the large war party of the Bows set out in December, the two brothers accompanied it. On January 1, 1743, they came in sight of the mountains. ***8** For eight days they advanced toward the foothills, hoping to surprise the Snakes in their winter camp. Francois then stopped to guard the baggage in the base camp while Louis went ahead with the war party to the foot of the mountains. When the Bows found that the Snakes had abandoned their winter camp, evidently because they feared to fight the Bows, the latter turned and hurried back to the base camp, thinking that the Snakes had tricked them into leaving their women and children unprotected. The chief's efforts to reason with them was in vain. Louis was therefore forced to turn back with the Bows without having ascended the mountains.

On the return journey to the base camp, the four Frenchmen became separated from the Bows and were ambushed by a small party of Snakes. A few shots from the Frenchmen's muskets made the Snakes flee, but the explorers wandered about for two days and with great difficulty found the Bow camp. The Frenchmen accompanied the Bows for a few days on the homeward journey. Then, wishing to turn more directly toward the Missouri River, they went their own way, travelling in a fairly straight line eastward. In March they encountered a strange tribe of Indian, the People of the Little Charry, and remained with them for two weeks. Before he left these Indians, Louis buried on a hill near the Missouri a tablet of lead bearing an inscription claiming the country for France. ***9** On May 18 the explorers were back at the Mandan villages, from which they returned to Fort La Reine with a band of Assiniboines. They reached the fort on July 2 and were welcomed by an anxious father.

The story of La Vérendrye and his sons after 1743 is anti-climactric. The eldest La Vérendrye's enemies, jealous of his monopoly, became more active in their misrepresentation of his motives until father and sons were summoned to Montreal. De Noyelles was given La Vérendrye's monopoly. Five years later, in 1749, however, the acting governor of New France, the Marquis de la

Galissoniere, restored the western monopoly to La Verendrye and decorated him with the Cross of St. Louis. Unfortunately, this recognition came too late. In the midst of preparations for a new expedition, La Vérendrye became ill and died on December 5, 1749.

His sons tried to carry out his plans, but they soon discovered that the favour given to their father in 1749 did not extend to them. The new governor, La Jonquiere, appointed instead Legardeur de Saint-Pierre, a man ignorant of the West and of Indian customs. The brothers protested the injustice of their rejection and based their claims upon their experience in the West, but their pleas fell upon deaf ears. Without money or influence, they fell into obscurity. Saint-Pierre failed to accomplish anything, and the task of making an overland journey to the Pacific Ocean was left for the British to attempt and eventually to accomplish.

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* Footnotes:

1. Local governors held office at Montreal and Three Rivers. The governor-general, who ruled the whole colony of New France, lived at Quebec.
2. French explorers had been seeking this *Mer de l'Ouest* from the time of Cartier. At first it was thought to be somewhere not far west of Montreal. Then explorers gradually worked their way westward and discovered that the Great Lakes, including Lake Superior, were not even parts of the great western sea. Radisson had gone several hundred miles west of Lake Superior without reaching the sea, but La Vérendrye, apparently ignorant of Radisson's most westerly excursions, knew only that the sea must be somewhere beyond Lake Superior.
3. This apparently unprovoked attack was later explained. Earlier in 1736 a party of Sioux on the way to Fort St. Charles had been fired upon by Chippewas in ambush. When the surprised Sioux had shouted "Who fire on us?" the Chippewas had replied, "The French." The Sioux, believing what they had heard made a vow to avenge themselves .
4. In his journals and letters, La Vérendrye very seldom calls his sons by their names. Consequently, it is often difficult and sometimes even impossible to know which son is referred to in the text. To make matters worse, we cannot be sure which of his three surviving sons (Jean-Baptiste, the eldest, was killed in 1736) he calls "the Chevalier." Burpee's conclusion is that "the question is still unsettled, but the balance of proof points to Louis-Joseph" (*Journals, p. 13*). In this essay the Chevalier is identified with Louis-Joseph, but no claim is made for the correctness of the identification.
5. The Mandans lived around the Upper Missouri River in what is now North Dakota.
6. During the next year (1739) Francois established several trading posts: Fort Dauphin (on Lake Manitoba). Fort Bourbon (on Cedar Lake, near the mouth of the Saskatchewan River), and Fort Paskoyac (on the Saskatchewan, at a place now known as The Pas).

7. The route taken and the farthest point reached by the La Vérendrye brothers on this journey have been the subject of much speculation. The account given here is probably the most widely accept. The journal of the Chevalier, our only source of information, is not at all precise in the recording of directions and distances. See Burpee, pp. 17-28, for a summary of the various theories advanced by historians.
8. These mountains were probably the Big Horn Mountains in northern Wyoming, an easterly part of the Rocky Mountains.
9. This tablet was found in March, 1913, by a young girl. The location was on the west bank of the Missouri River opposite Pierre, South Dakota.

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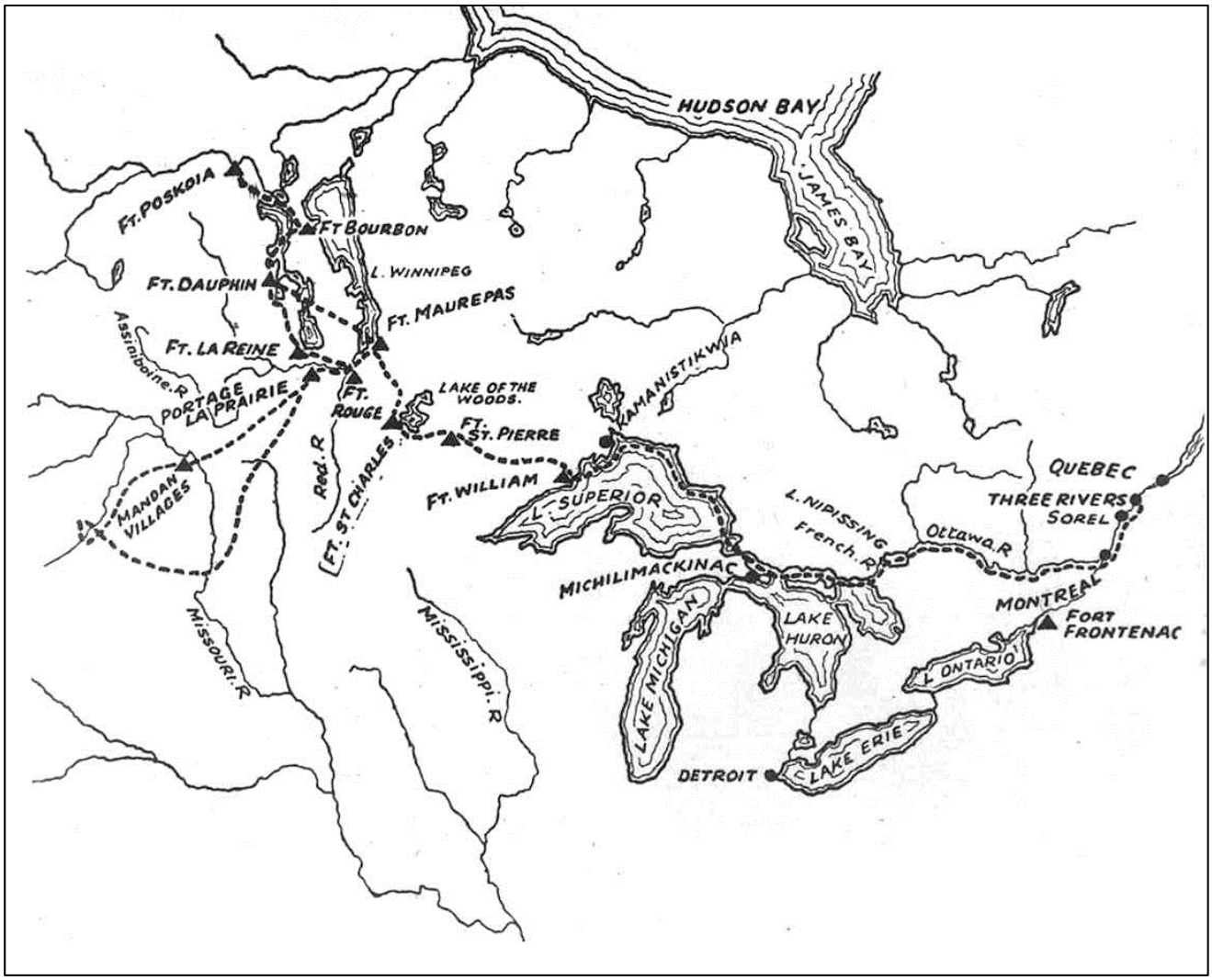

Above: Map showing La Vérendrye explorations and posts during the 1730s.

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From: "La Verendrye And His Sons" - Archives of Manitoba, Still Images Division, Imperial Oil Collection, Portfolio 1, No.8.

Above: An artist's impression of a French era trading post, circa 1750. *(A of M: Transportation / Dog team # 8.)*