

Our history, our country

By Ronald Wolf

In every historian's career there will be numerous times when information will contradict with each other, a war of words if you will. Some sources claim it was La Vérendrye who found the Saskatchewan River (SR) on April 16, 1739 while other sources claim it was Henry Kelsey who did. Instead of looking foolish, I decided not to give claim but to praise both early explorers for finding SR. Since I could find only one date (April 16), logically this is the date we celebrate.

La Vérendrye, the third son of Pierre Gaultier de Varennes et de la Vérendrye, was born at Sorel, New France and was active in his father's trade activities from Fort Kaministiquia to the North Saskatchewan River. In 1738 he was part of his father's expedition to Mandan country in what is now North Dakota. In 1739 he accompanied his brother, Louis-Joseph, and together they discovered SR.

No maps, no radios, not a single luxury would be carried with him or his team. The food they ate would be trapped as they ventured forward. La Vérendrye's exploits were officially recognized in 1749 when he was awarded the Cross of St. Louis; he died that year in Montreal on Dec. 5.

Another source states Henry Kelsey penetrated the area in the 1690s for Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) approximately 49 years before La Verendrye. Would Kelsey be the one who discovered SR? I'll leave that up to you, the reader.

Kelsey, aka Boy Kelsey, started working for HBC before he was 20. He moved to North America where he worked with western native peoples. During 1690-1691, Kelsey travelled with the Cree Nation and explored what is now northern Manitoba from Hudson Bay to SR. He is traditionally believed to be the first recorded European man to see what are now the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan. He is the first European known to have seen the Prairies, great buffalo herds and grizzly bears. After years in pre-Canada, Kelsey returned to England at age 55 in 1722; he died two years later.

SR and its two major tributaries formed an important transportation route during the Precontact, fur trade and early settlement periods in the Canadian West. If Kelsey came across SR 49 years before La Vérendrye, does this give credit to Kelsey of discovering the SR?

The answer may be floating down SR which is a huge part of our history, our country.