



## *The Broken Blade* by William Durbin

**Subjects:** Fur traders—Juvenile fiction; Fathers and sons—Juvenile fiction; Canada—History—1763–1867—Juvenile fiction

**Book List:** North America

**Props:** Voyageur canoe picture, fur

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If only his bed hadn't felt so good that morning. If only he hadn't wanted to sleep for a few more minutes. If only his father hadn't started his chores, hadn't started chopping the wood. . . chunk, crack. The ax snapped down. Chunk, crack. Pierre closed his eyes and imagined the splinters piling up at his father's feet. Chunk, crack, chunk, crack. . . there was a rhythm to the sound that made Pierre drowsy. He drifted back to sleep. Then, a dark croaking sound, followed by a human cry. Pierre jerked his eyes open, jumped out of bed, pulled on his pants, and ran outside. His father sat cross-legged on the ground beside the chopping block, cradling his left hand in his right. Pierre stood openmouthed, staring at the bright blood that pumped from his father's half-severed thumb. "Pierre!" Mother shouted. "Go now. The doctor."

Thirteen-year-old Pierre LaPage is consumed by guilt. He was supposed to chop the wood for his family, not his father. His father was going to be all right. The thumb would heal and his father didn't blame Pierre. But Pierre blamed himself. He knew that because his father had been hurt, he would not be able to provide for the family. They might starve this winter and it was all his fault. If his father hadn't been hurt, he would have been a voyageur (which means "travelers" in French) with the North West Company. He would transport furs (*Show fur*) thousands of miles to be shipped and sold. The voyageurs would carry the furs to canoes and then

paddle the canoes from Montreal to Grand Portage—a total of 2,400 miles over rapids and wild country! (*Show canoe picture*)

Pierre knows that his family will not survive without the money his father would have earned on that trip. So he volunteers to take his father's place. His parents are proud of him and he's proud of himself. But he is also scared. He will be the youngest voyageur and although he has done chores around the house, he has never done hard labor. His mother had hoped he would someday be a lawyer or a judge. She had insisted that he stay in school long after other boys his age had stopped. He is certainly not prepared for the hard life of a voyageur. Their strength and endurance were legendary. It was expected that each voyageur work at least 16–18 hours a day, paddling 55 strokes per minute. Plus, he will have to endure the taunts, practical jokes, and loud behavior of the other men on the trip. He will have to sleep outside and eat the same thing for months: lye-soaked corn, boiled with a few ounces of salt pork.

But Pierre knows that there is no turning back. He has no choice but to endure the trip. Can he survive the relentless teasing, the treacherous waters, and the aching muscles, the bloodied hands? Follow Pierre in the year 1800, as he tries to navigate the winding, rapid waters traveled so long ago by the French Canadian Voyageurs. (*Hold up book*) *The Broken Blade* by William Durbin.