

## Friends of Spokane House



There a lot of ways to think about history and as it turns out to “do” history. The Friends of Spokane House ([friendsofspokanehouse.com](http://friendsofspokanehouse.com)) recently encamped near the Kettle Falls Historical Center ([kettlefallshistoricalcenter.com](http://kettlefallshistoricalcenter.com)) where they demonstrated tools, skills, sign language, clothes and artifacts of the fur trade era, specifically from 1810 to 1820. The dates are important, not just because even long ago, things often changed quickly, but because in 1921 the Hudson’s Bay Company bought out the North West (Fur Trade) Company. From then on many changes ensued including Spokane House personnel being moved a hundred miles north to establish Hudson’s Bay Fort Colvile in 1925.

I was at the encampment to meet the Friends of Spokane House (FOSH) in person to learn from their experiences and expertise. The Heritage Network ([theheritagenetwork.org](http://theheritagenetwork.org)) will be commemorating bicentennial of that move to Hudson’s Bay Fort Colvile in 2025. I had been learning about it academically for the most part. Getting facts, people, dates etc. right is important for documentation, especially when so much “historical” information turns out to not be exactly true, especially when it is referenced in a political context. Personal history has some big advantages in that individuals tend to be much more invested in getting a lot of information about their history and that can be a huge trove of information in a digital age, especially with DNA.

But up till now I had not thought of history as recreational or experiential. FOSH brings that all home by living like fur traders did in camp and demonstrating with real-world

artifacts the clothing, tools, shelters and skills of the fur trade. This way of teaching history as a “show and tell” is especially memorable for young people. Schools from around the area took advantage of this event to bus in children. The National Park Service helped arrange the event with support from the Lake Roosevelt Forum ([www.lrf.org/](http://www.lrf.org/)). Well over 100 people visited each day and got to participate in some living history.

The beauty of this format is that not only do you get hands-on experience with real stuff; you get to make friends with people who are knowledgeable and excited about the times and the fur traders who lived in them. FOSH is also very involved with the local tribal people who were then and still now are the most affected. This enriches the reservoir of knowledge FOSH brings to the encampment and also keeps them honest about what went on and how that is playing out today.

The experience of being there includes smoke, fur trade coffee, possibly planked salmon, near freezing temperatures and rain storms. You don't get that in history books. There are lots of other incidentals of note. One is “Hand Talk”, also known as American Indian Sign Language and most often Plains Indian Sign Language (PISL). Having someone along who “spoke” it helped Lewis and Clark navigate the many tribes of Indians they met crossing the continent. It was just as critical to fur traders who came before and after Lewis and Clark. They could negotiate economic deals, get help when they needed it or signal to each other without making noise if necessary.

Thousands of potential native PISL speakers were lost in travesty that was the residential school movement which punished native kids for using it. Still the language merged in large part with the American Sign Language that we see practiced today while announcements are made by government officials. The Friends of Spokane House have added it to their many skills that you can witness at an encampment.

You can look at what the Friends of Spokane House are doing as part of a primitive skills movement. Our own version of that is the Between the Rivers Gathering ([betweentheiversgathering.com](http://betweentheiversgathering.com)); a week-long camp-in with masters and students of a very wide range of skills near Valley Washington. Some members of FOSH are also affiliated with the American Mountain Man Association ([americanmountainmen.org](http://americanmountainmen.org)). In those contexts the connections and camaraderie are keeping history alive from generation to generation.

This article has a lot of Internet connections in it. Those are ironic to some extent because the whole idea is to use them to attend events, get to meet people and connect with them directly. So check out the websites and don't just read history. Live it!