

How the stars helped to map the west

The Academy Award winning '60s film *How the West Was Won* is an action filled saga illustrating how brave families ventured the elements, wildlife and dangers of conquering the unknown west. While the events are historical facts, there are proceedings that took place prior to this that only made their success possible. David Thompson, famous explorer of the early west trekked, our unexplored land from 1790 for more than 60 years. The early 19th century Western Canada atlas was essentially blank until Thompson filled it in. In that time span he covered an incredible 1.5 million square kilometres of wilderness, accomplishing the staggering feat of mapping half a continent. What's more amazing is they were so accurate that 100 years later it remained the basis for many of the maps issued by the Canadian government and the railway companies. As a matter of fact, we can even credit David Thompson with the exacting survey of much of the Canadian/U.S. border.

So did Thompson have



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Sky's the Limit

an undisclosed method? The English immigrant turned Canadian grew to love nature, the shadow and silences, the evening fire, the stories/singing. He was modest, talented and deeply spiritual. Few know that the First Nations people gave him the name "Koo-Koo-Sint," which means "Star-Gazer," in recognition of his cosmos-based chart work. It wasn't that he was a starry-eyed dreamer, but rather a dedicated astronomer using the best mapping technology of his day fuelled by determination — so no secret. Thanks to Thompson's gift, he mapped out our country which has developed our modern western culture. Despite his foresight, he would never have envisioned today's standard of living two

centuries ago!

Sky watch for the next month:

The Zodiacal Light is a faint, roughly triangular, whitish glow seen in the night sky appears to extend up from the vicinity of the sun along the ecliptic or zodiac. You can see it starting today (Wednesday) for the next two weeks — look west just after twilight and see if you can glimpse it.

Daylight Savings begins March 14 at 2 a.m. While you reset your clock at this time, check out comet Catalina (C/2009 O2) setting in the north north-east horizon. Freshly discovered last July, the 19.5 magnitude object needs a good set of binoculars.

Vernal Equinox in English means spring arrives at 10:32 a.m. on March 20, so we will have an equal amount of daylight with nightfall that day.

The Full Moon rises in the south east-east sky March 30 just after 7 p.m. and spanning the sky all night setting in the south west-west sky before dawn.

Public Events for the next

month:

Explore the Spring Sky Course at the TELUS World of Science 701, 11th St. SW, Calgary. It's a 2 1/2 hour course for novice stargazers wanting to learn their way around the sky taught by science centre astronomer Alan Dyer. Sit in the comfort of the Discovery Dome Theatre as the night sky is simulated on the giant 360° projection screen. This event occurs March 24 from 7:30-10 p.m. Ages 12 and up only. The cost is \$40. For more information, check out <http://astronomycalgary.com/events/info/101> or call Cassandra McAuley at 403-268-8302.

Happy St. Patrick's Day and welcome to spring!

Neel Roberts is a member of the Calgary chapter of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada — the country's leading astronomy club founded in 1849 with more than 4,000 members and 29 centres across Canada. Neel welcomes your questions and comments, and can be reached at 403-485-2683 or Neel_Roberts@ptccanada.com.