

Métis Red River Carts

One of the intrinsic symbols of Métis identity is the Red River Cart. The Red River cart has become, like the fur trade sash, a passionate and powerful symbol of Métis nationhood in Western Canada. These noisy but versatile carts crisscrossed what are now the Prairie Provinces, North Dakota, Montana and Minnesota. Among First Nations and Euro-North Americans the carts became identified with the Métis. In fact, "Plains First Nations" sign language for the Métis literally meant "half-wagon, half-man!"

While the inspiration for the Red River Cart came from European carting traditions, the materials used were indigenous to the Plains and its construction was distinctly Métis. A typical Red River Cart had a box measuring two metres in length, a metre in height and half a metre in width. Its axles were two metres long, its wheels over half a metre in diameter and its shafts, measuring four metres each, ran from the box to the horse or ox. Its hubs were usually made from elm, wheel rims from ash or oak, and the axle from maple. All the carts' wooden pieces were fashioned together by sinew and rope. When the carts broke down, all that was needed for their repair was a bluff of trees, an axe, a saw, a screw auger, and a draw knife. Even the nails on a Métis-made Red River Cart were wooden, unlike the metal nails used by the fur trade companies. Red River Carts made a terrible squealing noise when they moved because their wooden axles and wheels could not be effectively lubricated. A First Nations' legend maintains that the

bison deserted the Plains because they wanted to escape from the hideous noise of the carts!

The first carts were quite small. Larger, better-constructed carts made their way onto the transportation scene around the start of the nineteenth century, possibly by 1803, when improved wheels were being manufactured. These larger, spoked wheels were dished, or curved inward, and provided greater stability and handling.

For the Métis, the Red River Cart was an all purpose utility vehicle and a makeshift home. Métis families used Red River Carts to move their possessions while migrating or resource harvesting. The carts also provided migrating Métis with temporary living quarters and shelter from the elements. Women fashioned decorated covers for the carts from bison hides or canvas, which were supported by an arched frame of cut saplings. When disassembled, Red River Carts also became temporary rafts for water crossings. Once its wheels were removed and reattached under the box and its bottom was enclosed, in a buffalo hide tarp the cart and its cargo could be rafted across rivers and streams. In the winter, the Red River Cart's passenger box, when placed on runners, served as a temporary horse-drawn sleigh.

The Red River Cart was also used as a defensive mechanism when the Métis were threatened. When the Métis had frequent battles over the control of bison hunting grounds with the Lakota Sioux in the 1840s and 1850s, they often formed compact defensive circles with their Red River Carts when they met Lakota war parties. Inside the circle, women, children, and animals

could hide safely, while men, old and young, would man the defences. At the Battle of Grand Coteau in 1851, the Métis dug trenches and rifle pits around their defensive circle of Red River Carts and won a resounding victory against the Lakota Sioux. Henceforth, the Sioux, impressed by Métis courage and martial skills, never made war with the Métis again. Some even fought with the Métis during the 1885 Resistance. The Boers, Dutch farmers in South Africa, used a similar tactic against the Zulus and the British.

Red River Carts revolutionized the way trade goods were transported in the western interior of North America before the advent of railways and automobiles. A horse-powered Red River Cart could transport the same amount of cargo as four packhorses. Horse-drawn Red River Carts were able to carry more than 200 kilograms at a rate of up to 80 kilometres a day. The same carts pulled by oxen could carry almost 500 kilograms at a rate of about 30 kilometres a day. By tying several carts together, one person could control a team of oxen and carts and usually avoid getting stuck in mud, a common problem for individual carts. These innovations decreased freighting costs, while increasing the amount of goods transported. Red River Carts hauled such goods as pemmican, buffalo hides, furs, moccasins, decorated tanned skin clothes, sugar, tobacco, tea, powder, shot, bullets, point blankets, cloth, vermilion, axes, knives, files, copper kettles, guns, and alcohol.

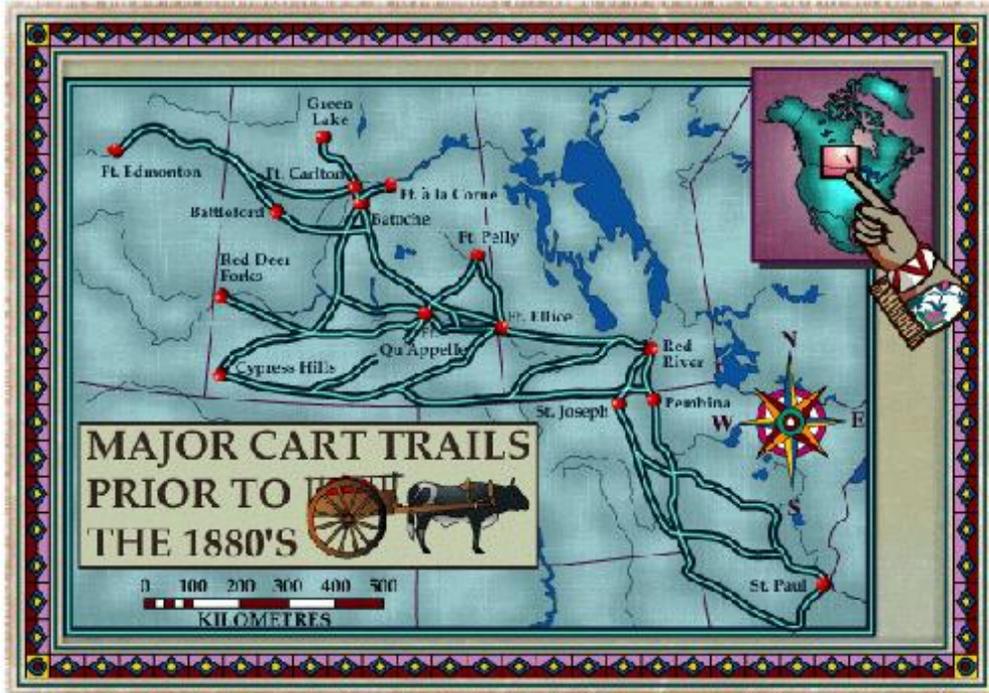
As the Métis became free traders in the 1830s and 1840s, Red River Carts eventually superseded York Boats in the volume of freight hauled. By 1869, approximately 2,500 carts left the Red River Settlement for St. Paul,

Minnesota, outside of the jurisdiction of the Hudson's Bay Company. Cart trails established by Métis freighters connected trading centres and posts, a vital development in flood prone areas such as the Missouri, Red and Assiniboine river basins. The most important Red River Cart trails connected the Red River Settlement to what is now Pembina, North Dakota, and St. Paul, Minnesota. Other trails paralleled settlements along the Assiniboine River from Portage La Prairie and then Fort Ellice. At this point, the trail divided into two, with one branch going to Fort Pelly in the north while the other moved westward to Fort Qu'Appelle, in present-day southeastern Saskatchewan. This western branch then split with one segment tracing its way to the Cypress Hills while the other segment going to Batoche, Fort Carleton, Battleford, and the vicinity of Edmonton.

Carts were also used to transport goods into the forest. Prior to the building of the railways in the early twentieth century in northeastern Alberta, cart transportation actually superseded watercraft use. For instance, in 1889, all the goods received at Lac La Biche arrived overland via freighters from Calgary. The cost for shipping materials along this route was \$5.50 for first class freight, \$5.24 for second class freight and \$4.90 for third class freight. Carts transported goods from St. Paul, Minnesota to Lac La Biche then York Boats hauled the cargo down the Athabasca River.

With the coming of transcontinental railways in the late nineteenth century, opportunities to haul freight on Red River Carts greatly diminished. However, even as Euro-Canadian and European homesteaders entered the Prairie West, the Métis used Red River Carts to haul wood, seneca root,

buffalo bones, and other raw materials to market. Today, throughout western North America, many museums and local heritage centres have samples of Red River Carts on display. In places such as the Métis Farm, in Lebret, Saskatchewan, the Métis still make Red River carts to better connect with the lives of their ancestors.



Adapted From:

Préfontaine, Darren R., Paquin Todd, and Young Patrick. "Traditional Métis Transportation".

<http://www.metismuseum.ca/media/document.php/00728.pdf>