

The Red River Cart

A VANTAGE POINTS FLASHBACK

Blazes! We're stuck *again!* We've got 10 carts in this brigade; crossing the Manitoba prairie. And we're nowhere close to our next camp. The mud makes it tedious for my men, and outright exhausting for the animals. But, at least these carts make it better than it was before.

I'm Alexander Henry Jr. I travel from Red River to the Rockies, trading with Indigenous folks for furs. I'm based at Fort Pembina, just south of the 49th Parallel, beside the Red River. When I started fur trading, we'd carry goods overland with horses, or even on our backs! For some loads we'd also use an Indigenous designed sled called a travois.

I *knew* there had to be a better way to cross the prairie; to get us through marshes, mud, creeks and rivers. Canoes just don't get us everywhere we need. So, my men and I built a 2-wheeled wooden cart. It's fairly easy to construct at base camp. And, with limited tools, we can replace parts on the trail. With this cart, an ox pulls up to 900 pounds and travels 25 miles a day. A horse, on the other hand, does 50 miles a day, but, with only a load of 500 pounds.

Wheels for these new carts were first made by cross-cutting trees, a meter or more in diameter. That's a large tree for these parts! We'd wrap the outside of the wheel with braided buffalo hide to give it grip, so it'd turn on wet grass. The next year we added four spokes and the following year we gave the wheels more of a slanted or dished shape. Better stability along slopes. To top it off, the wheels can be removed! And lashed to form a raft, with the cart's body set on top, to allow ferrying across rivers.

This all seems pretty amazing, but gee willikers. The noise! Those wooden wheels make a terrible shriek. You'd hear us coming 10 miles away! We can't quieten them! Greasing the axle only attracts dust around the hub, so the wheels won't turn at all!

Metis families from Fort Garry rely on the cart, driving from Fort Gary to Turtle Mountain and places further west and south chasing and harvesting bison. The Red River Cart has become part of their identity! They transform their carts into shelters by attaching saplings in

a "D" shape to the side rails and pulling a canvas over top. Sun, wind, rain, snow. Not a problem.



Photo from the Archives of Manitoba

Because of their long trains, up to a thousand carts, they attract attention from the Dakota. So the Metis devised a unique military strategy based on the cart. When they battle the Dakota, the carts are circled, nudged together, with their pulling shafts to the middle, giving protection for women, children, cattle and clergy. Brilliant. But, that's another story!

The Red River Cart was the best overland transport on the prairies until about 1870. By then steamboats and trains were getting the attention. Well, our carts had a good run of it.

Loud and proud we'd say!

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