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## The Beginnings Of Wheeled Transport In Western Canada

John Alwin

*Montana State University*

Barry Kaye

*University of Manitoba*

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# THE BEGINNINGS OF WHEELED TRANSPORT IN WESTERN CANADA

BARRY KAYE and JOHN ALWIN

Water transport has played a major part in the economic development of Canada. It has been claimed that a series of east-west water routes were essential to Canada's evolution as a trans-continental nation. The many connecting rivers and lakes formed the lines of least resistance through the environment, so that in most regions of Canada, water transport was almost invariably the earliest and most important form of transport. Land transport and land routes developed more slowly and thus played a secondary role in Canada's development prior to the beginning of large-scale agricultural settlement. However, there was one region, the prairie-parkland section of the western interior, where land transport was at least as important as water travel. By the middle of the nineteenth century, movement along the major rivers of

*Barry Kaye, associate professor of geography at the University of Manitoba, has a particular interest in the historical geography of western Canada. John Alwin, associate professor of earth sciences at Montana State University, conducts research in the historical geography of transport in Canada and in the geography of Montana.*

the prairie-parkland, such as the North Saskatchewan, the Red, and the Assiniboine, was complemented by travel along a network of carting trails that stretched from St. Paul, Minnesota, in the southeast to Fort Edmonton on the North Saskatchewan River in the northwest. The use of two-wheeled carts pulled by an ox or horse eventually spread west as far as Montana and south as far as Colorado.<sup>1</sup>

The carts that were employed briefly by French fur traders in the prairie-parkland region during the mid-eighteenth century and for a longer time by North West Company and Hudson's Bay Company traders after 1801 were not the first to appear in the Great Plains region. The two-wheeled cart, or *carreta*, had long been a familiar sight in the southern Great Plains and the Spanish Southwest. Widely used over large parts of Spanish America, including Mexico and Argentina, these carts were clearly part of the Spanish or Iberian tradition of cart making.<sup>2</sup> Beginning in the late sixteenth century, their use spread north from Mexico into the Great Plains and the Southwest.

The Red River cart of the northern Great Plains was the equivalent of the Spanish *carreta*, but its cultural origins are not as well established. Some writers believe it was an extension

to western Canada of the French or French Canadian tradition of cart use. Others claim that the Red River cart was largely Scottish in origin. Still others have said that it combined elements of both the French and Scottish traditions.

The system of land and water travel in which wooden carts played a central role in the northern Great Plains had its origins in the Canadian section of the Red River lowland during the first decades of the nineteenth century. As in most regions of Canada, Europeans first penetrated the Red River country by traveling along the major rivers and lakes. By the time of the union of the Hudson's Bay and North West companies in 1821, the area's water routes were supplemented by a number of regional trails or tracks along which two-wheeled carts were driven, pulled by Indian ponies. This article documents the use and development of wheeled vehicles in western Canada prior to 1821 and examines the conditions in the Red River Valley that led to an innovative mode of transportation that has come to symbolize the old fur trade in the Canadian Northwest.

#### FRENCH WHEELS IN RUPERT'S LAND

The first carts in western Canada were constructed in the early eighteenth century by the Hudson's Bay Company at their posts on Hudson Bay, where they were used locally to haul timber, hay, and other bulky items.<sup>3</sup> French traders, however, were the first to use wheeled vehicles in the interior of Rupert's Land. Copies of two depositions given at Montreal on 6 September 1817 suggest that French carts were used in the western interior of British North America as early as the 1760s. Joseph Lafontaine, an old employee of the North West Company, testified that fifty years earlier (in 1767) at Lake Manitoba he had seen several carts and a cart shed that belonged to French traders who had previously had a post at Portage la Prairie.<sup>4</sup> Testimony by another witness, Jean-Baptiste l'Huron, given on the same day, corroborated this evidence.

Carts were also evidently in use in the Sas-

katchewan River Valley during the French regime. On 31 August 1808 Alexander Henry the Younger recorded that he camped on the site of the former French post of St. Louis "where some years ago were still to be seen remains of agricultural implements and carriage-wheels. Their road to the plains is still to be."<sup>5</sup> Alexander Mackenzie also reported the marks of carriages around the sites of the former French posts of Fort St. Louis and Fort Pasquia on the North Saskatchewan River.<sup>6</sup> Although the design, use, and dimensions of these earliest western carts are not known, several authors have suggested that their basic design was undoubtedly influenced by the carts then in widespread use in France, as well as in other European countries.<sup>7</sup> After the conquest of New France by the British in 1763 and the subsequent desertion of all French posts in western Canada, there is no further evidence for the use of carts until 1801.

#### THE FIRST RED RIVER CARTS, 1801-1810

The North West Company trader Alexander Henry the Younger is generally credited with reintroducing the cart in the western interior in the post-1800 period. The first reference to these carts appears in the 1 September 1801 entry of the detailed journal he kept at the North West Company's Pembina River post. That day four small carts, each drawn by one horse and loaded with baggage and three packs, presumably eighty to ninety pounds each, left the post.<sup>8</sup> In a subsequent journal entry that winter he reported that some men had gone for meat with small carts, "the wheels of which are each of one solid piece, sawed off the ends of trees whose diameter is three feet."<sup>9</sup> By the following fall the traders at Pembina were making wheels that had four perpendicular spokes. The typical cart of 1802 was about four feet high, was pulled by one horse, and could carry about five packs.<sup>10</sup>

Cart design was soon improved, and on 30 March 1803 Henry recorded that one of his men had completed "a real pair of wheels on the plan of those in Canada."<sup>11</sup> These later

Nor'Wester carts were also larger and were able to haul as much as five pack horses could carry. Henry's enthusiasm for his new invention stemmed from the fact that it was "worth four horses to us, as it would require five horses to carry as much on their backs as one will drag in each of those large carts."<sup>12</sup> Since two packs were considered an average load for a horse, this suggests a cargo capacity of about eight hundred pounds.

The saving on horses occasioned by the use of large carts in place of pack animals was undoubtedly an important factor in the growth of carting in the lower Red River Valley during the early nineteenth century. There had probably been a few horses in that area as early as the 1740s, but even as late as 1815 they were not numerous. Any vehicle, therefore, that could haul large quantities of buffalo meat, often over long distances, and save on horses held a strong attraction for fur traders dependent on the hunt for a large part of their provisions. These circumstances probably account for the commencement of cart use during the first decade of the nineteenth century in the eastern part of the prairie-parkland of western Canada, an area where the terrain was generally favorable for cart transport.

The new carts of 1803 were immediately incorporated into the North West Company's regional transport system and soon became important as a mode of overland transport to complement the company's watercraft. By at least 1803, for example, carts were being sent overland from Pembina on the Red River to Portage la Prairie on the Assiniboine.<sup>13</sup> By the summer of 1806 Henry wrote of "the great road" linking the main route along the Assiniboine with Lac Plat (present Shoal Lake), a favorite hunting place for traders and Canadian freemen.<sup>14</sup>

A few years after these developments at Pembina, British traders out of Albany also began to construct carts for long-distance transport in the Red River lowland. The introduction of wheeled transport by the Hudson's Bay Company to its inland trading operations was an attempt to solve serious transportation

problems at the western end of the extremely lengthy transportation route that linked Fort Albany on Hudson Bay with the upper Assiniboine River Valley.

In October 1793 the westward reach of the Albany-based traders was significantly extended with the founding of Brandon House in the prairie-parkland zone near the junction of the Assiniboine and Souris rivers.<sup>15</sup> Henceforth, Brandon House served as company headquarters for the Assiniboine River region. It functioned as parent post at various times for outposts including those at Qu'Appelle River, Shell River, Indian Elbow, Portage la Prairie, Halfway bank, Turtle Mountain, and the southwest shore of Lake Manitoba, as well as for at least two sites on the Red River above its junction with the Assiniboine. In 1795 Brandon House also became the home base for the distinctive trade with the Mandan Indians on the Missouri River, which took Hudson's Bay Company traders outside the limits of Rupert's Land.<sup>16</sup>

Brandon House and its many outposts received most of their supplies and trade goods directly from Martin's Falls on the Albany River. Even though some goods were forwarded to Osnaburgh House, much of the cargo was loaded at the Martin's Falls depot, where fur returns were also deposited. Osnaburgh House was considered the jumping-off point for the distant interior, and it was here that the daily journals kept en route to and from Brandon House usually began and ended.

A routine soon developed for the fall bateau parties traveling between Osnaburgh House and Brandon House. A flotilla of from three to five bateaux departed Osnaburgh in late July or early August. Passage to Brandon House required from six to eight weeks, with craft arriving between mid-September and early October. The return spring trip to Osnaburgh House with fur returns usually departed Brandon House during the second or third week of May and arrived at Osnaburgh about one month later. En route, pemmican brought down from Brandon House was cached at one or more sites along the route for use by the returning bateau parties. When the Hudson's Bay Company's Point au Foudre

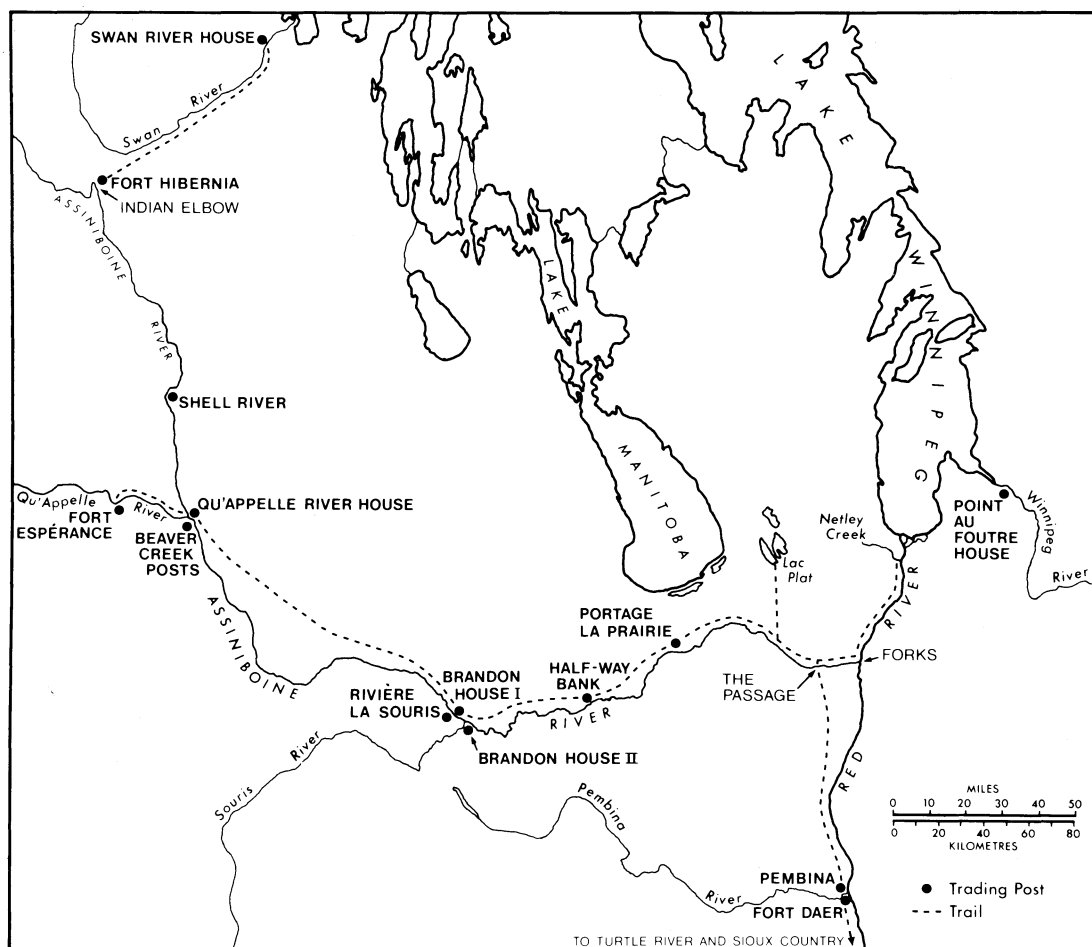


FIG. 1. Trails and trading posts in the Red River country, 1800-1821.

House was operating at the mouth of the Winnipeg River between 1796 and 1802, it was the preferred storage site. In the interval between the arrival and departure of the Brandon brigade, furs were carried to Martin's Falls, and the remaining outfit was conveyed upriver to Osnaburgh House in readiness for the fall trip and the start of the new trading season.

Each spring, outposts upriver from Brandon House conveyed their returns to the parent post just prior to the departure of the brigade. In the fall, supplies and trade goods were forwarded to the same posts after the arrival of the boats back at Brandon House. Outposts downstream on the Assiniboine and Red rivers, as well as

the short-lived outpost on the southwest shore of Lake Manitoba, met the brigade en route to Osnaburgh House along the main track. On the return fall trip the Red River bateaux parted with the brigade at the Forks and, while in operation, trade goods and supplies were left at Portage la Prairie. All other outposts were supplied directly from Brandon House.

John Sutherland, post master at Brandon House's first outpost at the Qu'Appelle River, calculated the distance from Albany Fort to Brandon House as just over 1,300 miles, with the route from Osnaburgh to Brandon House totaling 815 miles.<sup>17</sup> The distance from Osnaburgh to Brandon is significantly greater by

water transport than a small-scale map indicates. The extremely meandering course of the Assiniboine River, which shows up on a map of larger scale, accounts for the additional miles. Travelers using the river frequently commented on its circuitous course and the resultant slow progress.<sup>18</sup>

Although the winding course of the river slowed travel times, it did not constitute an obstacle to navigation for the Hudson's Bay Company's bateaux. Approximately twenty feet in length, the shallow bateaux usually floated downstream to the Forks and on to Osnaburgh House after the snow melt and accompanying spring rains had raised river levels. This trip was normally made with little trouble. The return fall trip as far as the junction of the Red and Assiniboine rivers was also routinely accomplished without major difficulty. Abundant areas of swamp and muskeg and numerous lakes in the Winnipeg and English river watersheds all serve as natural equalizing reservoirs that help to maintain water levels on these rivers during the summer and fall. These conditions and the relatively large size of the rivers helped to provide adequate water depth for the passage of the company's bateaux. The size of the Red River alone was enough to assure sufficient water depth for their ascent to the Forks.

Once the Assiniboine River was reached, however, the upriver passage in the fall usually became more difficult, since high spring water levels are short-lived and the amounts of summer precipitation within the watershed are not large. Because of the paucity of lakes in the basin, little precipitation is held in reserve to be released gradually. The Hudson's Bay Company trader Peter Fidler noted in 1808 that the Assiniboine was very shoal all along its whole course toward the end of summer, and that even half-empty canoes and boats had great difficulty traveling upstream.<sup>19</sup>

The returning Brandon House traders, therefore, had serious transportation problems on the Assiniboine River. Low water levels in the river significantly increased travel time above the Forks. Slow progress usually meant a late

arrival for the craft at Brandon House. Such delay upset trade, as many Indians took essential goods on credit in the fall for their subsistence while trapping during the ensuing winter season. When the craft did not return until late in the season, some Indians who normally traded with the Hudson's Bay Company were tempted to take their debt with rival Canadian traders. The Canadians took advantage of such circumstances by spreading rumors among the Indians that the Hudson's Bay Company boats would fail to arrive and that they should therefore take their debt with the Nor'Westers.

To counter this threat, the Brandon House traders routinely sent men and horses to meet the boats at the Forks or at points further upstream on the Assiniboine. The horses returned with essential goods before the craft arrived and usually went back again to the craft, which continued to be worked upriver, for additional supplies. This system not only supplied Brandon House with badly needed items before the actual arrival of the bateaux, but also served to lighten the craft and facilitate their upriver passage. At the same time the bateau crews were provided with much-needed foodstuffs, especially fresh meat and local potatoes. In at least one year when the water was exceedingly low, shuttle trips actually emptied the bateaux before they arrived at Brandon House.<sup>20</sup>

Parties of several men and up to fourteen horses usually made two or more trips to the bateaux in the fall before their arrival at Brandon House. This relay system was necessary in most years, but it required additional expenditures. Horses were still scarce in the Red River area and expensive to acquire from the Indians. Then there were the costs of feeding the animals and providing a constant watch to keep them from being stolen by the natives. Their load limit was relatively small, usually restricted to two eighty- or ninety-pound packs. Since the use of horses alone did not prove entirely satisfactory at the Brandon House post, the gradual incorporation of carts into this relay system was perhaps a logical development.

The first reference to a cart in the Brandon House post journal is an entry dated 18 April

1804, noting that the cooper was making a cart.<sup>21</sup> Apparently the same cart was used on 8 May to bring home six sturgeon.<sup>22</sup> The journal provides no additional details on this early cart, but post master John Mackay was evidently pleased with the utility of his new mode of conveyance and built something similar the following spring.<sup>23</sup>

In the fall of the same year a cart was used for the first time to carry goods between the post and the approaching bateaux. The river level was exceedingly low that year, the boats were badly worn from numerous launchings, and it even appeared that they might be unable to reach Brandon House. On the fourth trip to the craft, which were then only a short distance away, the men from the post took a cart along with ten horses. The party arrived back that same evening "with all the cargo by having a cart with them."<sup>24</sup>

The introduction of carts into the Hudson's Bay Company's transport system along the Assiniboine may have been influenced by the example of similar North West Company usage in the Red River Valley around Pembina. The Hudson's Bay Company occupied an outpost on the Red River above the Forks and would have been aware of this Canadian transport innovation when the carts were first used at the Pembina post. Even Hudson's Bay Company employees who did not ascend the Red above the Forks might well have encountered the North West Company carts that moved between Pembina and Portage la Prairie.

However, a complete lack of reference to carts in the Brandon House journals for several years following their initial use by the Hudson's Bay Company suggests that they were adopted more gradually by the British company than by the Canadians. Following the first use of carts to relay cargoes from the approaching fall bateaux in 1805, there is no reference to a similar use until 29 September 1808, when three carts were sent to meet the craft.<sup>25</sup> Subsequent references to carts in the Brandon House journals are much more frequent. That same fall, a party of eleven men took three carts along with fourteen horses on an expedition to establish

the new Brandon House outpost of "Manitobau" on the southwest shore of Lake Manitoba.<sup>26</sup> The following fall three carts were again used to convey goods to the Lake Manitoba post, now called "Little Winnipeg."<sup>27</sup> The Brandon House journal contains frequent references to cart construction during the winter of 1809-10. The next year, and in those years when Brandon House was in operation in the period from 1810 to 1821, carts continued to serve an important role in the Hudson's Bay Company transport system in the Red and Assiniboine river basins.

#### AN EXPANDED ROLE FOR CARTS, 1810-1821

Between 1810 and 1821 the use of two-wheeled carts increased dramatically in the Red and Assiniboine region, particularly along three major routes: (1) from the Forks of the Red and Assiniboine rivers to the upper Assiniboine Valley, (2) from the upper Assiniboine to the Swan River, and (3) in the Red River Valley.

As early as the summer of 1812, carts from Brandon House traveled the entire distance down to the Forks to await the fall arrival of the boats from Hudson Bay. By that time the use of carts had become part of the annual transport routine on the Assiniboine River.<sup>28</sup> Because of the low water levels in the Assiniboine River during the fall that severely hampered water transport, carts became an important adjunct to the company's fur trade transport along the river.<sup>29</sup> The years from 1816 to 1819 were especially dry, and during the summer and fall of those years boat transportation on the Assiniboine was effectively stopped.<sup>30</sup> This experience undoubtedly prompted both the Hudson's Bay and North West companies to make greater use of carts in the Assiniboine River Valley. In any case, the fur traders were faced with the strong possibility of interrupted navigation every summer and fall along the Assiniboine.<sup>31</sup>

Entries in the Brandon House journals provide interesting details on the Hudson's Bay Company's use of carts within that region. The company relied on its own carts, as well as



FIG. 2. *A Red River cart, ca. 1890.* Courtesy Manitoba Archives.

those operated by freemen. From at least 1816 to 1819, "our freemen"—former employees of the Hudson's Bay Company—received a payment of ten shillings for each piece weighing ninety to one hundred pounds that they conveyed with their own horse and cart on a provisioned one-way trip between the Forks and Brandon House. The Canadian freemen hired by the company received a payment of twenty skins for every six pieces, which was considered a full load for a one-horse cart.<sup>32</sup> The same rate applied to freemen carting between Brandon House and the company's Qu'Appelle River post.<sup>33</sup> Freemen were similarly employed to cart goods to Beaver Creek House after its establishment in 1817.<sup>34</sup> Although the company built some carts and purchased others

from freemen, it also hired freemen to haul freight because of shortages of men, horses, and carts.<sup>35</sup>

By 1821 the company had gathered together some sixty horses for use in the Brandon House trade, but in the years for which there are detailed records, hired carters provided much of the service along the Assiniboine.<sup>36</sup> In the fall of 1817 one old freeman, Peltier, completed four trips between the Forks and Brandon House.<sup>37</sup> One-way trips in either direction normally required six or seven days. The route seems to have varied, but usually followed an inner or an outer trail, both of which ran north of the Assiniboine.<sup>38</sup> It is not clear which trail Peter Fidler sketched as far west as Portage la Prairie on his 1819 map of the Red River



District.<sup>39</sup> London geographer Aaron Arrow-smith's 1824 map also shows a trail along the north side of the Assiniboine as far west as Brandon House. The stretch of trail depicted on these maps, which formed the first section of the Saskatchewan, or Carlton, Trail in the more extended network of trails that emerged after 1821, was probably the earliest regularly traveled, long-distance land route in western Canada.

North West Company traders in the Red River country also used carts to carry supplies from the Forks up the Assiniboine River Valley. In the late fall of 1817, when the river was frozen solid, the Nor'Westers at the mouth of the Souris hired several "French freemen" and twenty-nine carts for this task.<sup>40</sup> On 17 September 1818, Fidler noted the arrival of eight North West Company carts at the Forks from the mouth of the Souris to carry up goods, "as little can be taken there in canoes the water very shoal in the Assiniboyne River."<sup>41</sup> On the following day "The N.W. Co. sent away 10 carts with goods to Brandon House, and 5 canoes went up there with 10 pieces only in each on account of the shoalness of the water."<sup>42</sup> Like their British counterparts, the Nor'Westers also employed carts to supply their post in the Qu'Appelle River Valley.<sup>43</sup>

Although the evidence is slight, there are indications that the relationship between the Hudson's Bay Company at Pembina and the local freemen with regard to carting was different from that which prevailed along the Assiniboine. The Canadian freemen at Pembina used carts in the buffalo hunt rather than in long-haul transport, supplying meat to the traders and, after 1812, to the Red River settlers, most of whom wintered at Pembina in the years prior to 1821. According to the post journal, Hugh Heney, the post master at Pembina, was the only person in the vicinity with the skill to construct a cart. As a result, the freemen hunters were totally dependent on him to meet what was described as their "great want of carts." Heney had sold carts to the freemen at the rate of twenty skins each, and in March 1813 he was hoping to exchange several more

for pounded meat and fat at a favorable rate.<sup>44</sup>

Hudson's Bay Company carts were also used to link Fort Hibernia on the upper Assiniboine with Swan River House on the river of the same name. Fort Hibernia was situated fourteen to twenty miles above the Indian Elbow on the site of former Carlton House.<sup>45</sup> Lacking direct water communication with Swan River House, it was connected to that post by an overland transport route variously reported to be 90 and 120 miles long.<sup>46</sup>

Until 1818 Swan River House functioned mainly as a transit depot for cargoes moving to and from Fort Hibernia. Each summer trade goods were unloaded at or just below the Swan River post by boatmen from York Factory. Until snow fell, horse-drawn carts were used to convey cargoes overland to Fort Hibernia.<sup>47</sup> During the winter, four-dog sleds were used to shuttle cargoes between both posts.<sup>48</sup> Sixty-two dogs were kept at Fort Hibernia in the winter of 1818-19, although only twenty-four were evidently needed by the six "trippers" who worked the winter journeys between Swan River House and Fort Hibernia.<sup>49</sup>

In late May 1817 four boats departed from Swan River House for the last time with returns including those that had been conveyed overland from Fort Hibernia.<sup>50</sup> Beginning with the next season, fur returns from Fort Hibernia were sent out via the Assiniboine River, although trade goods and supplies from York Factory continued to be carted overland from Swan River House. In late May 1818 the five Fort Hibernia craft passed Brandon House en route to York.<sup>51</sup> Although these vessels were built at Fort Hibernia, they were first taken downriver either empty or lightly loaded, perhaps as far as the Indian Elbow, where fur returns carted from Fort Hibernia were unloaded. This prompted Hudson's Bay Company trader William H. Cook to prefer an alternate post site somewhat further down the Assiniboine.<sup>52</sup>

Carts on the land route between Swan River and the upper Assiniboine continued to play an important part in the communication links of the reorganized fur trade of that area after the union of 1821. Writing in 1824 at the time of

the founding of Fort Pelly, the Hudson's Bay Company's new post in the upper Assiniboine River Valley, George Simpson noted that "there is . . . a good cart road from the mouth of Swan River to the proposed site of the new fort [Pelly], and the distance not exceeding 60 to 80 miles; so that by ten or fifteen horses the outfits and returns can be transported with no difficulty."<sup>53</sup>

Cart usage along the Assiniboine River and between it and Swan River, as well as the actual and planned cartage on portages, suggests that carts tended to be used along routes where other modes of transport were particularly difficult. One exception was the employment of carts in the Red River Valley parallel to the main river, especially south of the Forks. The Red provided an excellent water route during the entire open water season for the size of craft used by the fur traders at that time. Still, carts were used to communicate between the Forks and trading posts further upriver.

The cart trail linking the Forks with the Pembina River area was undoubtedly one of the earliest in southern Manitoba. The frequently traveled route lay west of the Red, striking a course south from the cart trail that ran west from the Forks several miles up the Assiniboine in what was later the parish of Headingley. This important crossing of the Assiniboine was commonly noted by cart travelers and was known by such names as "Passage," "Grand Passage," "Crossing Place," or "Ferry."<sup>54</sup> Its location and that of the "cart road" to Pembina are shown on Peter Fidler's map of the Red River District in 1819. When Miles Macdonell, the first governor of the Red River Settlement, traveled south from the Forks to choose a site for Fort Daer at the mouth of the Pembina River in the fall of 1812, he forded the river at this point, which was already an important intersection in the evolving transport network. Crossing with his three carts, he noted several Indian lodges there and wrote, "This is a very public situation being the pass for all travellers."<sup>55</sup> His cart trip from the Forks to the mouth of the Pembina River took four days.

The frequency of cart use on the trail be-

tween the Forks and Pembina cannot be determined, but it was probably less than along the route that ran along the north side of the Assiniboine. Company use of carts may have reached further south than Pembina, perhaps to the Turtle River post, or even to the Grand Forks by 1821, as indicated by the 3 June 1821 arrival of Hudson's Bay Company men at the Red River Settlement, with carts from the Sioux District.<sup>56</sup>

By the summer of 1815 a cart trail was also discernible north of the Forks on the west side of the Red River down as far as the edge of the river's delta. On 18 August 1815 the fur trader Colin Robertson noted in his journal that "there is a cart road from the Creek [Netley] to the Forks of Assiniboine River, the distance by land is from 25 to 30 miles."<sup>57</sup> Agricultural settlement at the Red River after 1812 took place mainly along this stretch of the river, and the trail soon formed an integral part of the colony's evolving transport network.

Another development that stimulated the construction and use of carts was an increase in the *métis* population of the lower Red River Valley during the early nineteenth century. The *métis*, the French-speaking mixed-bloods of the Canadian Northwest, resisted assimilation by the Indians, and by the early years of the nineteenth century they comprised a useful and convenient pool of labor at and around many of the fur posts, especially the parkland posts of the Nor'Westers along the North Saskatchewan and in the Red River country. By the time of the establishment of the Red River Settlement in 1812, the greatest concentrations of *métis* in the Northwest were probably in the lower Red River Valley. The *métis* were not part of any planned colonization. Their settlement was uncontrolled, they were squatters, and they set down where they wished in the Red River Valley, at the Forks, along the Assiniboine, and particularly at the mouth of the Pembina River, the key to the buffalo country.

By tradition and culture the *métis* were hunters rather than farmers. After settling at Red River, whether at the main colony or to the south at Pembina, they showed little interest

in farming, and with few exceptions they continued to rely on the hunt for most of their needs. Their life centered around the buffalo hunt, which was organized into large annual or biannual expeditions, probably by 1818. Such hunts took the *métis* out onto the plains beyond Pembina and deep into Sioux territory. The large-scale and paramilitary character of these expeditions was primarily a response to the threat of Sioux attacks in the territory south and west of Pembina. Given the dangerous nature of that territory, it was only sensible for the *métis* to make a common approach to the buffalo herds.

An essential prerequisite for the operation of these large hunting expeditions was a vehicle that could be used to bring back the bulky supplies of meat, fat, and hides they yielded. Since soon after carts were first introduced in the Red River country, they had been employed by both the Hudson's Bay and North West companies, some of whose employees were *métis*, to haul meat a considerable distance from the locale of the hunt to the trading posts. Given the prior carting experience of the *métis* and their freemen associates, it is not surprising that they enthusiastically adopted the two-wheeled cart for their hunting expeditions out of Pembina. As M. A. Macleod and W. L. Morton have noted, "the cart made possible the longer and longer range of the hunt over the plains."<sup>58</sup> As a result, after about 1820 the cart became identified with the *métis* and their hunting way of life. As the numbers of Red River *métis* and the demand for buffalo meat increased, so the need for more carts multiplied. In the late fall of 1821, a report reached the Red River Settlement that the "freemen" were employing one hundred carts to bring home meat to Pembina.<sup>59</sup> Two years later the Long expedition witnessed the arrival of a party of *métis* at Pembina, consisting of three hundred people and "one hundred and fifteen carts, each loaded with eight hundred pounds of the finest buffalo meat."<sup>60</sup>

It was probably during the years from 1810 to 1821 and within the predominantly plains and grasslands environment of the Red River

country that the characteristic features of the Red River cart were fully developed.<sup>61</sup> Although there was apparently no single standard of construction, by 1821 the same general type of cart was used by the Hudson's Bay and North West companies, the freemen, and the *métis*. Almost all scholars who have written about the Red River cart have pointed to the iron- and bolt-free construction as one of its most distinctive features. Details on the construction of these early carts are scarce. Other than references to the use of oak or other indigenous hardwood in their construction at Brandon House, which remained an important center for cart transportation, there are few specific details.

One passage in the Brandon House journal for 1810-11 suggests that an early variety of company carts built at that post had metal parts. On 29 April 1811 two men "went down to Pine Fort to get repaired several Iron Works belonging to the Carts and Hatchets and Augers."<sup>62</sup> In the company's journals, "Iron Works" usually refers to metal parts, usually of boats, bateaux, or post structures, and not to metal tools. However, company records do not indicate what metal parts were incorporated in these carts, or whether the use of metal was a standard feature of all company carts at this time. We do know that some sixty nails were used to put together the different parts that made up each cart at Brandon House. It was Fidler's intention to have ten carts made there in the summer of 1816, for which the company would require "about 600 nails."<sup>63</sup> The early carts at Brandon House, therefore, differed significantly from the classic Red River cart, which was constructed without the use of any metal.

The most detailed description of the carts built at Brandon House during this period comes from a private journal of Peter Fidler, who served as post master there for several years. In an undated entry in his journal, which included the years from 1794 to at least 1816, he listed the dimensions of the various parts of carts at Brandon House. Fidler made no mention of metal parts in his description.<sup>64</sup>

The dimensions of the carts constructed at Brandon House have been compared with those of much later carts on display at the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature in Winnipeg and at the National Historic Park at Lower Fort Garry, north of Winnipeg. Using these relic carts, Harry Baker Brehaut has drafted detailed scale drawings of what he believes to be a typical Red River cart. The dimensions listed by Fidler and those presented by Brehaut are strikingly similar. According to Brehaut, the box of the cart was 6 feet long, 2 feet 9 inches wide, and 2 feet 4 inches deep—dimensions that are only slightly different from those described by Fidler. The Brandon House axle, at 5 feet 10 inches, was only slightly smaller than the 6 feet 2 inches shown in Brehaut's drawings. Fidler says the shafts were 11 feet 6 inches long, while Brehaut's shows them as somewhat longer, at 12 feet 4 inches. The similarity in the basic dimensions of these carts, built perhaps seventy or more years apart, is striking.<sup>65</sup>

In the post-1821 period, when cart design probably remained unchanged, this versatile overland vehicle became a standard mode of inland transport along a network of cart trails that eventually stretched from the Red River to the upper Saskatchewan as well as south into American territory. Prior to 1821, however, long-distance freight hauling employing two-wheeled vehicles was not a feature of the transport system west of the region of the Red and Swan rivers. By the second decade of the nineteenth century, carts had come into local use at some Hudson's Bay Company posts on the North Saskatchewan River. Constructed of locally available materials, they were utilized mainly for the short-distance hauling of bulky goods such as timber, firewood, hay, and meat; they stayed in use until the first snow, when they were replaced by sleds drawn by dogs or horses. At Fort Edmonton, where carts were constructed at least as early as spring 1815, some of the first carts also incorporated "iron work," but details on design and size are absent.<sup>66</sup> In the post journal of Carlton House, lower down the North Saskatchewan, there is an isolated reference to "a horse and small waggon"

on 20 November 1814.<sup>67</sup> Not until 1819 do wheeled vehicles, at first referred to as "drugs," feature prominently at that location.<sup>68</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The development of wheeled transport in Canada's western interior in the early nineteenth century was consistent with an ongoing process of transport innovation and modification that accompanied economic growth and increasing European presence in the region. The widespread adoption of carts as an overland mode of conveyance followed a period of time during which small, bark, Indian canoes had led to larger custom-built canoes, crude wooden barges, bateaux, and even the prototype of the York boat. Early cart usage was often ancillary and even parallel to waterborne transport routes, but as population expanded and economic opportunities were sought beyond the reach of the existing aquatic transport system, alternate modes were required. Pack horses and dog sleds had been used for overland transport, but their value was limited as the quantity of trade increased. Carts could easily and effectively handle larger cargoes and permitted a spatial expansion of commerce, especially in the post-1821 period. With geographical expansion and its attendant increased interaction came the need for even more efficient modes of transport. Thus, the same process that had led to the development and adoption of the cart was also responsible for its eventual demise.

## NOTES

The authors thank the Hudson's Bay Company for granting them permission to consult and quote from the company's archives.

1. Richard Dunlop, *Wheels West, 1590-1900* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1977), p. 43.

2. D. J. Robinson, "Trade and Trading Links in Western Argentina during the Viceroyalty," *Geographical Journal* 136 (March 1970): 24-41; David R. Ringrose, "Carting in the Hispanic World: An Example of Divergent Development,"

*Hispanic American Historical Review* 50 (February 1970): 30-51.

3. See, for example, Fort Churchill post journal, 26 and 28 September 1734, Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Winnipeg (hereafter HBCA, PAM), B42/a/15, fo. 10, and Fort Albany post journal, 15 and 20 August 1745, HBCA, PAM, B3/a/37, fo. 6.

4. Cited in "Summer Packet," *The Beaver*, Outfit 282 (June 1951): 49.

5. Elliott Coues, ed., *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest: The Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry and of David Thompson*, 2 vols. (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1897; reprint, Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, 1965), 2:482.

6. W. Kaye Lamb, ed., *The Journals and Letters of Alexander Mackenzie* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1970), p. 118n.

7. Edward Van Dyke Robinson, *Early Economic Conditions and the Development of Agriculture in Minnesota*, Bulletin of the University of Minnesota (Minneapolis, 1915), p. 32; Grace Flandrau, *Red River Trails* (Great Northern Railway, n.d.), p. 21.

8. Coues, *New Light*, 1:186.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 204-5.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 210.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 211.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 210-11.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 289. The freemen element in the population of Rupert's Land comprised former employees of the fur trade companies who had chosen not to return to Britain or Canada at the termination of their period of service.

15. The advance of Albany traders into the prairie-parkland region is thoroughly examined in John Alwin, "Mode, Pattern and Pulse: Hudson's Bay Company Transport, 1670 to 1821" (Ph.D. diss., University of Manitoba, 1978), chap. v.

16. For information on the Mandan trade, see John A. Alwin, "Pelts, Provisions and Perceptions: The Hudson's Bay Company Mandan Indian Trade, 1795-1812," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 29 (July 1979): 16-27, and John C. Jackson, "Brandon House and the Mandan Connection," *North Dakota History* 49 (Winter 1982): 11-19.

17. Fort Ellice post journal, 1793-1794, HBCA, PAM, B63/a/1, fos. 13 and 14.

18. Brandon House post journal, 9 September 1797, HBCA, PAM, B22/a/5, fo. 6; Shell River post journal, 20 October 1794, HBCA, PAM, B199/a/1, fo. 9.

19. Peter Fidler, "Journal of a Journey in a Canoe from Cumberland House . . .," 19 May 1808, HBCA, PAM, E3/5, fo. 28.

20. The craft had been emptied when they arrived at Brandon House in September 1807; Brandon House post journal, 30 September 1807, HBCA, PAM, B/22/a/15, fo. 4.

21. Brandon House post journal, 18 April 1804, HBCA, PAM, B22/a/11, fo. 11.

22. *Ibid.*, 8 May 1804, fo. 12.

23. Brandon House post journal, 3 May 1805, HBCA, PAM, B22/a/12, fo. 12.

24. Brandon House post journal, 29 September 1805, HBCA, PAM, B22/a/13, fo. 10.

25. Brandon House post journal, 29 September 1808, HBCA, PAM, B22/a/16, fo. 3.

26. *Ibid.*, 6 October 1808, fo. 4.

27. Brandon House post journal, 8 October 1809, HBCA, PAM, B22/a/17, fo. 7.

28. Miles Macdonell to Selkirk, 17 July 1813, Selkirk Papers, microfilm copies in the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Winnipeg (hereafter SP, PAM), 3:764.

29. Manuscript by Lord Selkirk Relating to Red River, 1819, SP, PAM, 47:12, 661.

30. Brandon House Report on District, 1819, HBCA, PAM, B22/e/1, fo. 6.

31. Lower Red River Report on District, 1822-1823, HBCA, PAM, B235/e/1, fo. 2.

32. Brandon House post journal, 7 September 1817, HBCA, PAM, B22/a/20, fo. 15.

33. *Ibid.*, 15 September 1817, fo. 16.

34. *Ibid.*, 11 October 1817, fo. 17.

35. Some carts were evidently built by freemen; on 7 October 1817, John Flett, an Orkney freeman, was hired at Brandon House to build carts for the company during the winter. At the same time two Canadian freemen with tools provided by the Red River Colony were hired to make carts at the Qu'Appelle River post; *ibid.*, 7 October 1817, fo. 17. On 1 September 1817, while at the Forks, Peter Fidler purchased two carts from a freeman named Poitras for \$25 each; *ibid.*, fo. 13.

36. Nicholas Garry, "Diary of Nicholas Garry," *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*,

vol. 6, sec. 2 (1900), p. 134.

37. Brandon House post journal, 8 November 1817, HBCA, PAM, B20/a/20, fo. 20.

38. Peter Fidler mentions "the track nearest the river" as distinct from "the outer track" during his journey to Brandon House in August 1817; *ibid.*, 6 August 1817, fo. 9.

39. This map forms the frontispiece to the Brandon House Report on District, 1819, HBCA, PAM, B22/e/1.

40. Brandon House post journal, 24 October 1817 and 2 and 3 November 1817, HBCA, PAM, B22/a/20, fos. 18 and 19.

41. Brandon House post journal, 17 September 1818, HBCA, PAM, B22/a/21, fo. 32.

42. *Ibid.*, 18 September 1818, fo. 32.

43. Brandon House post journal, 11 November 1817, HBCA, PAM, B22/a/20, fo. 21.

44. Pembina post journal, 13 March 1813, HBCA, PAM, B160/a/4, fo. 19.

45. Fort Pelly Report on District, 1818-1819, HBCA, PAM, B159/e/1, fo. 10.

46. *Ibid.*, fo. 2, and Brandon House Report on District, 1819, HBCA, PAM, B22/e/1, fo. 7.

47. Horses were bought from Indians for twenty to thirty shillings each; Fort Pelly Report on District, 1818-19, HBCA, PAM, B159/e/1, fo. 8.

48. *Ibid.*, fo. 7. Fidler reported that three-dog sleds with cargo capacities of 250 pounds were used on the winter run between the two posts; Brandon House Report on District, 1819, HBCA, PAM, B22/e/1, fo. 7.

49. Fort Pelly Report on District, 1818-1819, HBCA, PAM, B159/e/1, fo. 7.

50. Swan River post journal, 31 May 1817, HBCA, PAM, B213/a/7, fo. 1.

51. Brandon House post journal, 30 May 1818, HBCA, PAM, B22/a/20, fo. 44.

52. Fort Pelly Report on District, 1818-1819, HBCA, PAM, B159/e/1, fo. 2.

53. Simpson to Governor and Committee, 5 June 1824, HBCA, PAM, D4/87, fo. 12.

54. J. S. McMahon, "Location of the Passage," *Manitoba Pageant* 14 (Autumn 1968): 7-12.

55. Miles Macdonell's journal, 9 September 1812, SP, PAM, 62:16, 749.

56. Winnipeg post journal, 3 June 1821, HBCA, PAM, B235/a/4, fo. 4. For an excellent study of carting and cart trails in the Red River Valley after 1820, see Rhoda R. Gilman, Caro-

lyn Gilman, and Deborah M. Stultz, *The Red River Trails: Oxcart Routes between St. Paul and the Selkirk Settlement, 1820-1870* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1979).

57. Colin Robertson's journal, 18 August 1815, SP, PAM, 65:17, 380. For many years both the Hudson's Bay and North West companies had a post at Netley Creek, which may have stimulated the early development of this trail. It was at Netley Creek also that the Hudson's Bay Company kept many of the horses used to pull the carts from the Forks to Brandon House.

58. M. A. Macleod and W. L. Morton, *Cuthbert Grant of Grantown* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1963), p. 109.

59. Alex. McDonell to Colville, 13 November 1821, SP, PAM, 23:7, 463.

60. William H. Keating, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of St. Peter's River*, 2 vols. (London: G. B. Whittager, 1825; reprint, Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, 1959), 2:40. The cart numbers presented here cast serious doubt on the often repeated claim, which derives from Alexander Ross, that as many as 540 carts took part in the Red River spring hunt in 1820; Alexander Ross, *The Red River Settlement* (London: Smith, Elder, 1856; reprint, Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, 1957), p. 246. Ross did not arrive at Red River until 1825 and his information about the colony's early years is not always accurate.

61. General studies of the Red River cart include Olive Knox, "The Red River Cart," *The Beaver* (March 1942): 30-43; Connie Kucharczyk, "The Red River Cart," *Red River Valley Historian* 3 (Fall and Winter 1969-1970): 62-68; Harry Baker Brehaut, "The Red River Cart and Trails: The Fur Trade," *Papers Read before the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba*, ser. 3, no. 28 (1971-1972), pp. 5-35.

62. Brandon House post journal, 29 April 1811, HBCA, PAM, B22/a/18a, fo. 14. The Nor'Westers had a forge at Pine Fort on the Assiniboine River.

63. Brandon House post journal, 14 and 23 May 1816, HBCA, PAM, B22/a/19, fos. 31 and 34.

64. Peter Fidler, "Note Book (1794-1813)," Manuscript in the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Winnipeg, p. 37.

65. Brehaut, "Red River Cart and Trails," pp. 10-11.

66. Fort Edmonton post journal, 13 March 1815, HBCA, PAM, B60/a/13, fo. 23; *ibid.*, 20 March 1815, fo. 24.

67. Carlton House post journal, 20 November

1814, HBCA, PAM, B27/a/4, fo. 3.

68. Carlton House post journal, 1819-1820, HBCA, PAM, B27/a/9. Webster's International Dictionary defines a drug as a kind of low heavy truck used in moving timber and other heavy weights.