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A trail of two cities

Ox-cart route forged long-lasting bonds that continue to survive and thrive

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It was the best of times. It was the worst of times... 1817. The Selkirk Settlers and Métis farmers of Red River had been pushed to the breaking point by a variety of plagues: floods, freezing cold, mosquitoes, opposition from the fur-trading companies, a governor who was short on people skills — but the future held promise. There were dreams of producing enough to not only keep the community alive, but to be being able to sell a

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surplus. But to whom? Red River was completely isolated from any market. Lord Selkirk thought about the question as he left the community on horseback, following a series of ancient Indigenous trails that headed ever south and east. And as he rode, he began to visualize a trail of trade between the Red River Settlement and the closest navigable point on a bigger river: the Mississippi.

I bet Selkirk couldn't have imagined that one day cart trains 1,500 strong would ply the route he had charted: exporting pelts and pemmican and coming back with plows and pianos. Or that this trail would be the life-giving artery which would enable his settlement to become the gateway city to the West. That at the other end of the umbilical cord the hardscrabble village which started because of trade with Red River would grow into the capital city of a new State. Or that one day the respective teams of these two trailhead cities would become rivals in a strange game played with blades on ice.

Manitoba puts its stamp on Minnesota



A deep debt



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Manitoba, from the beginning, has given shape to Minnesota. Literally. Minnesota's north-south orientation followed the Red River Trail. It seemed that trade with the community of Red River, now Winnipeg, was that important. The first ox carts from Red River and the first steamboats from St. Louis arrived at 'the Landing' on the Mississippi at approximately the same time. This transfer point quickly attracted settlers from Red River, including a certain Pig's Eye Parrant. I'm pretty sure that's not the name his mother gave, him but it was catchy. Pig's Eye's determination to peddle whisky with complete disregard to its destructive powers fit well with his moniker. His tavern became the centre of the community, so that nascent town took on the distinguished name of Pig's Eye. The name was not to endure. The new log cathedral of St. Paul was erected by fur traders from Red River who possessed a greater fear of God than Parrant. This church would give its name to the future capital of Minnesota.





There were many other shapers of the early state of Minnesota who came from what is now Manitoba. But Minnesota has been slowly paying us back — in the form of hockey players. There has been a steady stream of Minnesotans heading north to put their stamp on the Winnipeg Jets. You may have seen the odd Dustin Byfuglien jersey worn around town and possibly one with a 'C' on the front number 26 on the back. Blake Wheeler (who has often been seen sporting a ball cap featuring an ox-cart wheel, which represents the Jets' captain's charity initiative, Ride Inside) may just be the most influential Minnesotan to settle at the northern end of the Red River Trail. So Pig's Eye Parrant for Blake Wheeler? I'd say Manitoba won that trade.

The Buffalo Wool Company 2022 Inc.

Red River's first attempt at an export business was butter. A writer who sampled this delicacy felt it was so bad it wasn't fit for axle grease on an oxcart. But things have changed. I saw a lot of high-quality Manitoba exports as we travelled through Minnesota. From Agassiz Trailers to Westeel granaries. From Versatile tractors to Westfield augers.

I had been wondering about what product I could export down the Red River Trail, when I almost stepped on it. I had been doing electrical work at FortWhyte Alive and on the way to my truck, I saw a clump of wool that had clearly been shed by one of the resident buffalo. Within 30 seconds I had learned three things about buffalo wool. I had no idea how soft and warm it was. Or how much it stank. Not a nice earthy manure smell — I have no problem with that — but a stench so over-powering it went straight into the box of my truck rather than inside the cab until I could figure out how to remove the scent.





I've never been a businessman so I was a little nervous about taking the risk. I know that the previous Buffalo Wool Company in these parts, in 1824, failed miserably. They did actually manage to export a few yards of woollen cloth to England where it sold for way less than it cost to produce it. But their start-up costs were huge. My only financial outlay was for a few squirts of Febreze. The original plan was to take my export-grade buffalo wool by paddlewheeler down to St. Louis where most of the early fur products from Red River ended up. But I saw an opportunity when a few new friends met me at Banfill Tavern in St. Paul — an original watering hole on the trail. I announced that I was putting my buffalo wool up for auction and started the call at one dollar. I may have discovered my new 'calling' as an auctioneer. The winning bid came in at US\$100. No

word of a lie.

Flush with cash, I felt a little more generous than Pig's Eye. I offered free shots of another successful Manitoba export: Crown Royal, the pride of Gimli and top-selling Canadian whisky in the U.S.

Hitchhiking on the trail

Hitchhiking rules of 'thumb':

Travelling alone, wait an average of 20 minutes for a ride; travelling with a companion, wait an average of two hours for a ride; travelling with two companions, one weighing 1,600 pounds, wait for a miracle.



Four days before our May 17

departure day, Patty and I drove down our planned route on St. Mary's and over the floodway to look in dismay as the Red River Trail disappeared into the flooded Red River. That started me praying that God would part the Red Sea. He had done it before. I pictured a ribbon of black asphalt slowly emerging out of the water. I didn't need a full-blown miracle. God surely had time to do it through natural methods if he wanted. But He didn't do it. So, God. What's the next move?

And then, just as you might expect, God did something unexpected. I had been hoping for Moses but He provided Noah with his ark to get one more animal past the flood. I didn't realize that Noah looks exactly like my friend Tim from Stonewall. Nor that the ark could pass for a cattle trailer.

A couple of weeks later, in Minnesota, Zik started limping. His hooves were worn too low to continue. I had arranged to meet a farrier the next day, but that was still 19 kilometres down the road. It might as well have been as far as the moon. We were stopped to figure out our next move, with Zik



grazing in the ditch, when a truck and cattle trailer pulled up. “Do you guys need a lift?” We hadn’t even had time to ask for a miracle. We had mentioned our predicament to a curious mail carrier an hour earlier who had apparently talked to his cattleman friend, John. So John spent the morning bringing Zik and me to our destination, going home and changing his trailer to a flatbed and then delivering the cart. Miraculous kindness! We were back on schedule.



We were back on schedule, but not for long. Zik had more shoe problems. Then he caught pneumonia. With a young ox and a lot of heat bogging us down, we made miles but never did hit the 24-km-a-day pace I had calculated at the beginning. We couldn’t just keep plodding forever till we reached St. Paul, Minn. We had a paddlewheeler to catch. So I

arranged a ride from Canada to take us to St. Paul. We wouldn't be dependent on a miracle this time. The day before the trailer would show up we reached the Crow Wing River, 560 km from Winnipeg. That's when we got a phone call saying our arranged ride had fallen through. So God, guess what we need again?

I mentioned our situation to a couple of people we had met. One responded with a text: "Try Dennis." It turns out this Dennis had driven past Zik and I the day before. When he got home, Dennis saw a Facebook post about us that mentioned we were getting trailered the 270 km to St. Paul. Dennis's thought was, "I'd like to be the guy who trailers them down."

On July 17, exactly two months after we had left downtown Winnipeg, we picked up the Red River Trail again in St. Paul. We left from the spot where previous cart drivers had camped while waiting for their paddlewheelers to arrive at the Landing. As we approached the Cathedral of Saint Paul, it was our turn to pick up a hitchhiker. Like in the olden days when monks would catch rides on ox carts



heading into town, there was Father John Ubel, the rector of the cathedral, waiting with his thumb out. We dropped him off and then completed our long journey at the docks of the Mississippi. After Zik and the cart were loaded onto Dennis's trailer for the ride back home, it seemed fitting to head back to the cathedral for mass. Like cart-driving worshippers from the past, we gave thanks to the Good Shepherd for bringing us safely down the Red River Trail. And for all the miracles He had done on the way.



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