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Honouring those lost along the Red River Trail and celebrating Grey Cups through wild weather

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A few days ago a car with Manitoba plates drove by Zik and me. This was the first time we'd spotted a plate from home after a month in Minnesota — probably because we mostly travel on back roads. I caught myself wishing the driver of the car had noticed the Manitoba flag flying from my ox cart and had stopped to give me a hug.

I guess I miss home. As I travel I often have one Gordon Lightfoot song running through my head:

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It's nice to meet an old friend and pass the time of day,



'perfect campsite'



After ox-shoe pit stop, on through Lake Agassiz's ancient lake bed



Why? Because it's sort of there



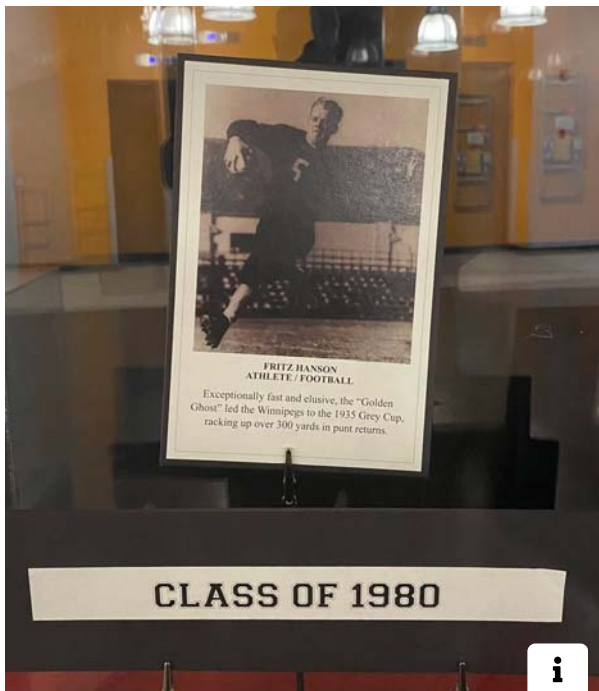
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And talk about the hometown, a million miles away.

Are the [Bombers] still on fire, do they still win all the games?

And by the way, did she mention my name?



It was actually a new Minnesota friend who asked me if I ever watch the Winnipeg Blue Bombers. I assured him I did. He said that he'd like to watch more of their games, but it's so hard to get CFL games in the U.S. I sadly concurred. He said he'd much rather watch Canadian football because it's a lot more interesting than the NFL. I humbly agreed.

Flag of protection

I'm writing on the day before July 4. Patty suggested I should probably add the Stars and Stripes to the Manitoba flag on my willow-stick mast. That would be respectful to all the kind people we've met on our journey. And I might just avoid



some trouble on a day of patriotic fervour.

Besides being a proud Manitoban, I specifically decided to fly Manitoba's flag from my ox cart because it's red. So far so good. Drivers have seen me and Zik in time to avoid any close calls.



I'm not the first person to be protected by this flag. Little Crow, leader of the Dakota people, had been promised by the British that if he should ever run into trouble with the Americans, "the red flag of the North would wrap them round, and preserve them from their enemies." And when trouble did come, and Little Crow retaliated, he deliberately spared Georgetown. Georgetown, though technically on the American side of the border, flew the Red Ensign. Little Crow saw this — the forerunner of Manitoba's flag — and returned the kindness



he had been shown.

'Galloping Ghost'

"The Galloping Ghost" was from Perham, Minn., on the old Red River Trail. The Ghost, a.k.a. Melvin (Fritz) Hanson and "the Golden Ghost," among many other nicknames, helped Winnipeg win its first ever Grey Cup championship in 1935. In later times and different places, this would have resulted in the Grey Cup being brought back home to a celebration with friends. But the Grey Cup has never been to Perham. Until this week. It came in the form of the Bombers' "Grey Cup Champions" licence plate on our RV.

Hanson wasn't big, weighing in at only 145 pounds. He would have disappeared in the shadow of 326-pound Asotui Eli, one of the Bombers who won the 2019 Cup depicted on our licence plate. But Fritz could fly. In that first-ever Winnipeg title win, The Ghost galloped his way to a Grey Cup record that still stands: 334 total punt return yards, the equivalent length of three Canadian football fields.





Hanson died in 1996 in Canada. Would there be anyone left around Perham who remembered their hometown hero? I tried calling a number of local Hansons, but came up empty. Terry and Bev Hockett have a farm right where the Red River Trail crossed and they welcomed us to camp there for the night. When I mentioned Hanson's name, their eyes lit up. Terry's father was an athlete and had played football for Perham's rival town. When his son was born, Dad thrilled young Terry with legends of the speed of the Galloping Ghost. Finally we had someone to celebrate with!



I showed Terry and Bev pictures of Fritz that I had taken at the Manitoba Sports Hall of Fame. I gave them a Bombers cap that we had brought for the occasion. And of course we took the requisite picture surrounding the Grey Cup. Cheers to the memory of Fritz Hanson, the Galloping Ghost from Perham!

Whether the weather be cold

Like the 1935 Championship, the 2019 Blue Bombers victory was over the Hamilton Tiger-Cats. Our licence-plate Grey Cup game was nicknamed the Drought Bowl, but not because of a weather event. The Bombers and Tiger-Cats were the two teams with the longest championship drought. But the Bombers have played in a few Grey Cups that were affected by the weather:

The Mud Bowl of 1950: The craziest Grey Cup of all. Toronto 13 — Winnipeg 0.

The Fog Bowl of 1962: The last nine minutes were postponed till the following day. Winnipeg 28 — Hamilton 27.



The Wind Bowl of 1965: Up to 64-km/h gusts. Hamilton 22 —
Winnipeg 16.

On our journey down the Red River Trail, we have hit some weather that would keep a die-hard football fan at home. But besides proudly featuring an image of the Grey Cup, our RV home-on-the-road has kept us safe and sound as storms raged. It has even provided a haven for our ox.

There was the time in May when the brutally cold wind was driving the rain against an exposed Zik. In the middle of the night with lantern in hand, I relocated him into the lee of the RV.

In June, when the ox-stopping heat hit, we needed to get just a little further to a camping spot. Patty drove the RV alongside Zik as he laboured down the road. In that moving wall of shade, he gained just enough strength for one last mile.

And then there was that freakish rainstorm. The sky was alive with lightning but it was all within the clouds so Zik and I kept moving against the rain. Suddenly a bolt hit



the ground a little too close for comfort with a crash that spooked Zik into a run.

Patty was following behind so I waved her to come over with the RV— a mobile lightning rod. Zik and I huddled by the open passenger door to wait out the storm. Zik, who had never seen the inside of a “people stable,” took the opportunity to check things out. To his disappointment, we enforce a strict ‘No Oxen inside the RV’ policy.

Death and life on the trail

A man died on the Red River Trail. Was it because of the weather? Heat stroke from a 40 C day like we just experienced? Of course he had to be buried right there beside the trail. His name is long forgotten but he had a name. He likely also had a wife and kids back in Red River who wouldn't hear the sad news for several more weeks. Papa would nevermore return from a cart journey.

A farmer passing by our campsite yesterday pointed out the burial place in a bluff of trees over on a ridge. It was said that they had been digging a basement for a



house there and had come across his remains.

This morning a stunning sunrise proclaimed a new day and lit up that scene of sadness. A beautiful reminder that death is not the end. Death can be overpowered by life.

This January, a family with two young children was fighting its way through a Manitoba blizzard toward a mirage of freedom. They lost the battle against the weather just metres short of the Canada-U.S. border. I drove that last mile of their flight in my ox cart with a heavy heart as I imagined the family's struggle.

When I had learned earlier that the family died close to where I would be crossing the border, I began to think about a suitable tribute. Our first day's travel from Upper Fort Garry brought us near Lacoste Greenhouse on St. Mary's Road. I explained my idea to Cheyenne in Trees and Shrubs, and she generously gave me four small bushes.

When we got to the border a week later, Patty and I planted them there, each one with a name tied to it. The two-year-old and the



mother's bushes were planted side by side, just as the bodies were found.

They are flowering bushes and Cheyenne had promised that, there on the Red River Trail, they would bloom yet this spring. Patty and I remembered Jagdish and Vaishaliben Patel and their beautiful children, Vihangi, 11, and Dharmik, 3.

We prayed that those touched by this sadness would receive "beauty for ashes and oil of joy for mourning." That for these loved ones, light would somehow shine in this great darkness.

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