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FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND
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A Métis Métier : Transportation in Rupert's Land

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A Métis Mémoire

Transportation in Rupert's Land



by
James McKillip

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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that the provision of transportation services represented one of the core economic activities in the area of western Canada known as Rupert's Land, and that during the period from the amalgamation of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and the North West Company (NWC) in 1821 until the arrival of the railroads in the area in the mid-1880s, the Métis played a central role in providing those services.

The thesis reviews the nature of transportation arrangements within the fur industry of Rupert's Land and describes Métis participation in those arrangements. Métis involvement in both York Boat work and overland transportation by Red River Cart are discussed in detail, as are the York Boats and Red River Carts themselves. The overall value to the Métis economy of their participation in the provision of transportation services is also estimated.

Acknowledgments

Many individuals and agencies provided assistance in the preparation of this thesis. Although it is not possible to thank them all here, this thesis cannot be presented without acknowledging some of those contributions.

I am deeply indebted to the Canadian Forces for allowing me the time to continue my studies at the graduate level. Those studies have been greatly enhanced by the efforts of my graduate professors - Jacques Barbier, Don Davis, Jeff Keshen, Eda Kranakis, Brian Villa and Nicole St-Onge. I must also thank Jan Grabowski for sparking my initial interest in this topic during an undergraduate course on the Aboriginal Peoples of Canada.

The materials used in developing this thesis were drawn from a wide variety of sources. Of particular value were the library and archival holdings of the University of Ottawa, the Archives of St. Paul's University in Ottawa, the National Library and National Archives of Canada, the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, the truly amazing archives of the Hudson's Bay Company and des Archives de la Societe historique de Saint-Boniface. The staff in each of these institutions provided tremendous help in finding information and was always ready to offer extra advice and assistance. I am also indebted to the Hudson's Bay Company for allowing me to use the artwork that graces the cover of this thesis.

Most of all though, I must acknowledge the efforts of my long-suffering thesis advisor, Professor Nicole St-Onge. Her generosity of spirit, patience and professional balance were the keys to the successful completion of this project. To her, my special thanks.

J.D. McKillip
November, 2005

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to
the beautiful Tippawan,
the creative Edwin,
the powerful Chai-Yai
and
the amazing Mitcha.

Between them, they define what life is all about.

A Métis Métier: Transportation in Rupert's Land

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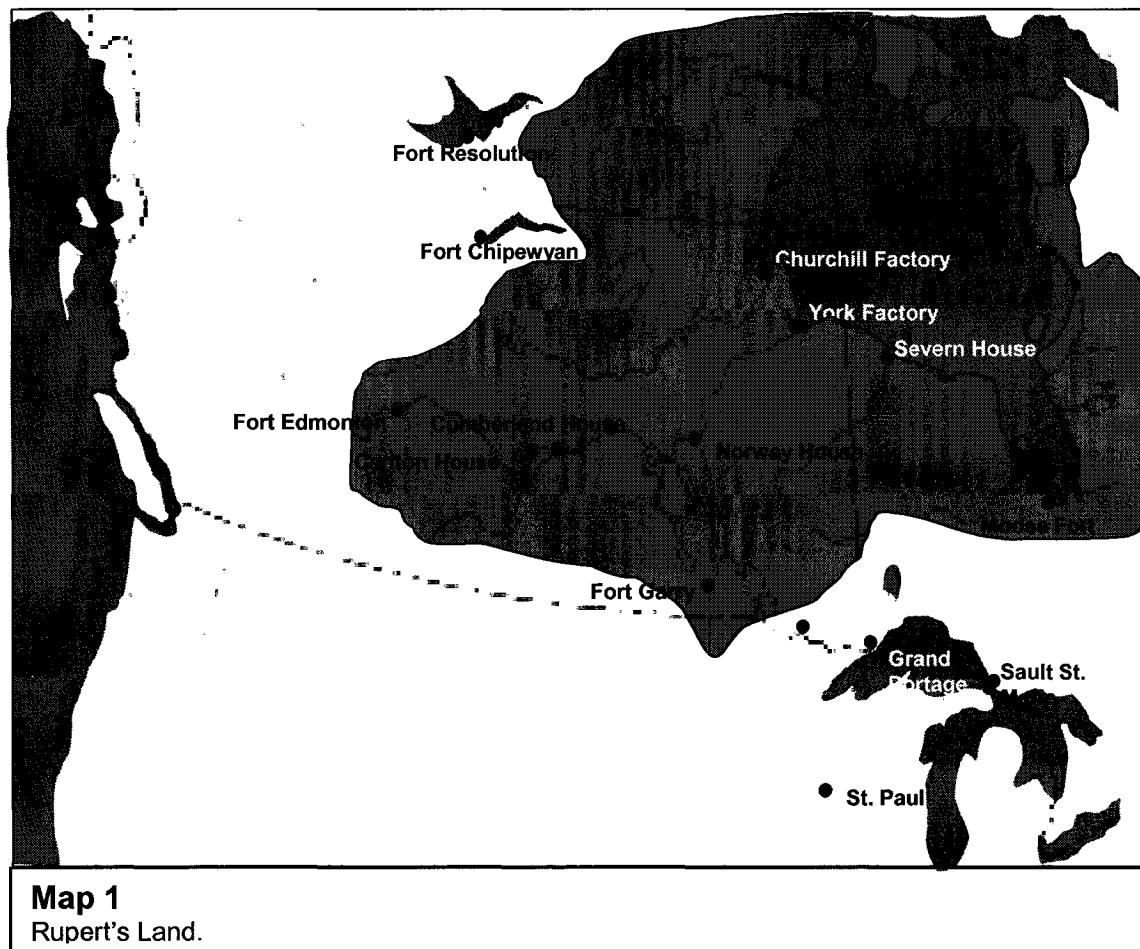
Introduction

The main argument of this dissertation is that the provision of transportation services represented one of the core economic activities in the area of western Canada known as Rupert's Land, and that during the period from the amalgamation of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and the North West Company (NWC) in 1821 until the arrival of the railroads in the area in the mid-1880s, the Métis played a central role in providing those services. The importance of this is two-fold. First of all, the degree to which transportation requirements dominated economic activity in the area under study during the early-mid eighteenth century is not well articulated in the existing historiography. In general, analysis of transportation has been as a sub-set of examination of the fur trade and has never been given anything approaching an independent treatment. There is still only one general history of transportation in Canada and its discussion of the arrangements in Rupert's Land is superficial.¹ The enduring but erroneous image of transportation during the fur trade era remains that of a system of canoes manned by hardy voyageurs.

This study of transportation in Rupert's Land is also important because of its relevance to Métis historiography. As will be discussed later, discussion of the Métis, especially with respect to their eventual marginalization, has tended to revolve around arguments that have economic underpinnings. Unfortunately, these arguments have not taken sufficient account of the role played by Métis in the provision of transport services and the value of that activity to the Métis'

¹ G.P. deT Glazebrook, *A History of Transportation in Canada, 2 vols, National Economy 1867-1936*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964).

internal economy. Moreover, there has been no recognition of the degree to which Métis participation in the transportation industry demonstrated a fundamental flexibility and adaptability of the Métis in the face of change.



The fact that no such study has been undertaken to date does give pause to the scholar. Is it possible that the relationship between transportation and the Métis is so tenuous as to be of no great use in understanding the Métis specifically or the history of Western Canada more generally? Numerous writers, some great and some not so great, have studied the Métis phenomenon of the nineteenth century. Although Métis freighting and tripping have been routinely

been mentioned in their texts, none of these writers identified transportation as a key element in their various attempts to explain what was going on in Rupert's Land.

The failure to identify transportation as significant to the Métis story demands explanation, almost as much as the system itself demands description and analysis. Part of the explanation can perhaps be illustrated by an anecdote from this writer's experience during the research phase of this project. In a small museum near the site of LaVerendrye's little fort La Reine in what is now Portage la Prairie, Manitoba, there is a small picture hanging on the wall. The fuzzy black and white photograph is entitled "Emerson's Hotel" and the principal object in the picture is indeed the Emerson Hotel. The picture, dated 1882, can also be found in the Provincial Archives of Manitoba under the heading "buildings." But there is more to the picture than just a hotel. In front of the hotel is a long line of fully loaded Red River carts. An accompanying note on the back of the photograph explains that the carts are assembled for the "train" to Fort Edmonton.

The people who put a title to the picture, and the people who decided on how the picture would be classified for archival purposes, shared the same perspective as most historians of the Métis. The Red River carts are "invisible" in the picture because the observers are focused on the hotel. Similarly, historians of the Métis have been focused on a variety of objects to the exclusion of transportation. Most Métis studies seek to explain one or all of three things; the rise of the Métis, the dispersal of the Métis, or, most commonly, the Métis

“rebellions.” Like the proverbial inability to see the forest for the trees, it has been difficult to see the carts for the buildings.

It is perhaps fortunate then, at least for the purpose of this paper, that this study did not originate in “Métis studies” *per se*. Rather, the road to this thesis began quite by chance several years ago in an undergraduate course on the Native Peoples of Canada. My interest in the Métis was sparked by a passing reference to a battle between Métis hunters and an army of Sioux warriors at the Grand Coteau in what is now North Dakota. What initially caught my attention was the contrast between the outcome of this battle and the later, and much more famous, Battle of the Little Big Horn.

In 1851, a group of approximately 70 Métis bison hunters was attacked by a Sioux force more than two thousand strong. In 1876, after blundering into the main Sioux camp along the Little Big Horn River, Lieutenant Colonel George Custer found himself engaged with another Sioux army of approximately 2500 warriors.

The outcomes of the two battles could not have been more different. In 1876, Custer’s detachment of 212 United States cavalry was utterly destroyed. So complete was the Sioux victory that the only survivor from Custer’s command was a wounded horse.² The Sioux were not nearly so fortunate in 1851. In the three day Battle of Grand Coteau, as many as eighty Sioux were killed trying to put an end to Métis incursions into what they perceived as their hunting territory.

² Lieutenant-Colonel George Custer was a colourful veteran of the American Civil War, and his U.S. cavalry detachment was composed entirely of regular (i.e., professional) soldiers. For the Battle of the Little Big Horn see, Bryan Perrett, *Last Stand: Famous Battles Against the Odds*, (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1992), 49, and, Carl Waldman, *Atlas of the North American Indian*, (New York: Facts on File Inc, 1985).

Not a single Métis died in the fighting.³ So complete was the Sioux defeat that they never again openly confronted the Métis.⁴

Heady stuff this. How was it possible that a tiny band of Métis hunters could defeat the very same Sioux nation that would later soundly, and famously, defeat a detachment of regular United States cavalry? More research followed and I was led to the Métis organization for their annual buffalo hunts. This too was fascinating in and of itself and led to yet another set of questions. The Métis organization revolved, both literally and figuratively, around a core technological artefact, the Red River cart. Where had this technology come from and how had it become so central to the Métis system? Again, with more answers came new questions.

During research on the Red River cart, it became clear that Métis were using the cart, and the skills associated with it, in a wide variety of ways. Yet the bulk of the relevant historiography portrayed the use of the Red River cart as a minor element in the real drama that was the annual buffalo hunts. More important, Métis historiography seemed to be ignoring, or at least failing to consider, an aspect of Métis society that was potentially of great significance. Still, clues as to the real importance of the carts specifically and transportation more generally, are to be found within the mainstream historiography.

³ One Métis hunter was killed while trying to escape from the Sioux during the battle. He had been captured a few days earlier along with two other Métis hunters. Both of these men were able to break free from their captors and make it back to the Métis camp during the fighting. Antoine S. Lussier and D. Bruce Sealy, eds., *The Métis: The Other Natives*, vol. 1, (Winnipeg: Manitoba Métis Federation Press, 1978), 61.

⁴ This incident is described in detail in, M. Dugast, *Legendes du Nord-Ouest*, (Montreal: Cadieux and Jerome, 1883), 2-38. See also, chapter 4 of this paper.

For many years the Métis society of Western Canada has been the subject of considerable historical scrutiny. While there is broad agreement among historians that the Métis represented a distinctive and important ethnic/cultural grouping in the nineteenth century, there is no consensus on what led to their eventual marginalization and dispersal. Nevertheless, there are two dominant theories.

The first theory is that the Métis were dependent on bison hunting both for subsistence and as the basis of their wealth-generation. In this model, there was a long period of tension between Métis efforts to establish a stable agricultural economy and their pursuit of the bison hunting industry. For a variety of reasons that will be discussed later, bison hunting was generally preferred by the Métis over farming. With the eventual depletion of the bison herds, the material basis of the Métis economy was destroyed and it was this that led to their dispersal.

The second theory is that the Métis were deliberate or incidental victims of the expansion of Canada, especially in the years immediately following Confederation in 1867. In this model, the Métis were either deliberately dispossessed of their land by aggressive settlers or they were swept away by the tide of immigration. The Seven Oaks incident, the Red River Resistance, the Riel Rebellion and the dispersal of the Métis are all consequences of this dynamic. Central to both of these theories is the destruction of the Métis economy.

Unfortunately, the Métis economy has not been sufficiently studied to fully substantiate either of these theories. Métis historiography has tended to portray

the Métis as highly dependent on, and subordinate to, the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and the fur trade. The Company was almost certainly the largest single market for Métis provisions and was a consistent employer of Métis labour. But this picture is far too simple. Preliminary research for this study revealed numerous examples of Métis economic activities that were not directly tied to the Hudson's Bay Company. In particular it seemed likely that a considerable portion of Métis wealth-generating and subsistence activities were linked to the provision of transportation services on land and on in-land waterways to a variety of customers.

Additionally, if the Métis were functioning in a diverse economy in diverse ways, the rationale for the two common explanations for the Métis dispersal would seem to be undermined. For the dispersal of the Métis to be a result of the destruction of the bison, the Métis would have to be so dependent on the hunt as to be incapable of adaptation. Similarly, the argument that the dispossession of the Métis from their Red River farms led to their dispersal rests on the assumption that the Métis were incapable of adapting their economy to that of the changed circumstances of the second half of the nineteenth century.

So, from a passing comment on an obscure battle, a line can be traced leading to a challenge to an extensive historiography. This also hints at something else. It was the story, the narrative, which lit the initial flame of curiosity. For the critical historian though, a good story is not enough. The best story in the world may not be true. Professional rigour demands more. But just what professional rigour demands in 2005 is not entirely clear.

This was not always so. When Herodotus invented historiography in the fifth century B.C.E. the historian's job was to uncover and recount "true" stories in a narrative form.⁵ As Herodotus succinctly put it, history was written, "[...] in the hope of thereby preserving from decay the remembrance of what men have done [...]."⁶ The truth of the narrative was a function of the degree of verisimilitude between the story as told and the story as lived. There seems to have been little doubt that a true historical narrative was achievable and for two millennia, the past and the history of the past were synonymous.

This absence of doubt ended with the period commonly referred to as the "Enlightenment." At first slowly, then with increasing speed, the basis of western thought was shaken out of its "static concept of totality" and religious cosmology.⁷ For historians, the most important concept that emerged from the period was the idea of modernity or modernism.

Modernism's origins in doubt led, perhaps ironically, to the development of a singular attachment to the notion that all knowledge is attainable and a solution to every problem is possible to the rational, technologically educated, and realist mind.⁸ Truth is knowable. From this basis sprang a whole series of ideas linked to the application of the core concept to the actual task of understanding the world. For the historian, the most important of these ideas were those that offered practical tools to assist in reconstructing and

⁵ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), ix-x.

⁶ Herodotus, *The History of Herodotus*, trans. George Rawlinson, (440 BCE; reprint, London: J.M. Dent, 1912), 1.

⁷ John E. Grumley, *History and Totality: Radical historicism from Hegel to Foucault*, (London: Routledge, 1989), 4-5.

⁸ For a description of this see, Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, (London: Routledge, 1997), 18-20.

understanding past events. Empiricism, evidential inference and a belief in human intentionality figured large, as did naturalism and pragmatism.⁹

Modernism opened the door to the development of a series of all-encompassing explanations for the course of human history. These “meta-narratives” included liberalism, imperialism and Marxism as well as fascism and bourgeois capitalism.¹⁰ The aim of all of these was to explain the existing human condition in historical terms and on the basis of scientific enquiry. The discipline of history itself did not evade modernist scrutiny and historicism was the result.¹¹

For the contemporary historian, the influence of historicism is inescapable. Even for those who reject its basic tenets, historicism is still the mark against which other methodological approaches are measured. For all that, historicism remains somewhat of a vague concept. Although not a definition, a useful explanation of historicism is that it:

[...] seems to have three related meanings: for most historians it is the primary historical act of perceiving historical periods in their own terms rather than any imposed by the historian: second and relatedly, it means accepting that every historical period had its own standards through which it determined what was trustworthy knowledge and warranted truth; third, that there are inclusive, demonstrable and determining patterns in the process of historical change.¹²

⁹ G.R. Elton, *The Practice of History*, (London: Methuen, 1967), 355-56.

¹⁰ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (Paris: Minuit, 1979).

¹¹ Friedrich Meinecke, *Historism: The Rise of a New Historical Outlook*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972).

¹² Alun Munslow, *The Routledge Companion to Historical Studies*, (London: Routledge, 2000), 130.

The writing of history then, was focused not on the narrative per se, but on the establishment of the facts that defined the truth. The direct result of this was the development of a reconstructionist approach to historical inquiry, the object of which was to limit the involvement of the historian in the narrative.¹³ The facts would speak for themselves if the historian did his job properly and kept his opinions and prejudices in check. This approach would also avoid the dangers of teleology, the risk that historians would write the past as a function of the present.

But even as these concepts matured and took concrete form, their philosophical basis was being challenged. Many contemporary writers credit G.W.F. Hegel with moving the debate about the nature of historical enquiry forward in the nineteenth century.¹⁴ In particular, his idea of progress through the dialectic of opposing ideas provided an attractive tool for historical analysis, even if his own ultimate conclusions remained suspect.¹⁵ Nevertheless, it was the earlier debate between David Hume and Immanuel Kant that drew the line that was the most important for historical method. Simply stated, Hume believed that it was not possible to know anything with certainty.¹⁶ Kant, while recognizing the limits of knowledge, still believed in a real world and demanded something of more use than Hume's pure skepticism.¹⁷

¹³ White, *The Content of the Form*, 27.

¹⁴ George Dennnis O'Brien, *Hegel on Reason and History: A Contemporary Interpretation*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 524-525.

¹⁵ Page Smith, *The Historian and History*, (New York: Knopf, 1964), 525.

¹⁶ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, (1748; reprint, London: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1961), 354-57.

¹⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans F.Max Müller, (1788; reprint, Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966), 373.

Kant's solution was the idea that, although knowledge itself was elusive, humans were possessed of an innate set of reference frames that made it possible to understand the real world. This idea of an *a priori* foundation for knowledge established the basis of the separation of form and content. *A priori* knowledge provided the form for the rendering of experience into experiential content *a posteriori*, after the fact.¹⁸

While modernists embrace Kant, particularly his belief in the power of reason, his epistemology, the historical school known as constructionism does seem to owe more than a little to Hegel. Constructionists approach history by conceptualizing evidence within a specific framework. Examples of these frameworks include race, class and gender with Marxism's dialectical materialism being the most obvious example of Hegelian influence.¹⁹ Unlike pure empirical modernists though, constructionists acknowledge that the imagination of the historian is at work not only in the construction of the narrative but also in the interpretation of the evidence. Both form and content are constructions. Nevertheless, constructionist historians believe that intellectual rigour and self-conscious skepticism can at least offer a reasonable if not perfect image of the past.²⁰

Much more radical is the post-modern or deconstructionist approach to history. As both terms suggest, this approach is a reaction to modernism and to the reconstructionist/constructionist models. At the core of this radical historical

¹⁸ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 374-377.

¹⁹ Gerald Allan Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 77-78.

²⁰ R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946).

method is the belief that language presents an insurmountable obstacle to pure historical truth. Since language itself is cultural and value-laden, and because language is dynamic, changing in time and space, any narrative, and any narrative-based fact, will inevitably be a subjective interpretation. For the most radical post-modernists then, all history is necessarily a form of fiction.²¹

For historical study the implications are profound. Assuming that the post-modernists don't simply throw up their hands in despair at ever being able to approach history in a meaningful way, the acceptance of the limitations of language present a tremendous challenge. First of all, it is pretty clear that the historicist's emphasis on content over form, epistemology over ontology, is turned on its head. For the post-modernist historian the form of the narrative is at least as important as the content. This is especially so given that most historical facts are narrative-based thus already a product of the interpretive process. An interpretive narrative built on facts established through narrative interpretation is bound to be form-dominated. It comes as no surprise then that historiography is especially important to these post-modern historians.²²

The terms post-modern, and especially deconstructionist, seem, at first glance, to be decidedly negative. Particularly distressing to the historian is the potential discrediting of most of the practical methodologies for judging historical evidence in forming a historical argument. But if post-modernism is seen as the logical next step in the process of intellectual and spiritual liberation rooted in the enlightenment, and not just as something inherently anti-historical, there is still

²¹ Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, 4-5.

²² For a discussion of this see, Keith Jenkins, *Postmodern History Reader*, (London: Routledge, 1997).

hope for the historian. The clear linkage of ideas from modernism to post-modernism suggests a lineage along a continuum.

Ultimately then, the post-post-modernist, or super-modernist,²³ should be able to use whatever tools historical methodology, or any methodology, has to offer.²⁴ Historicist internal and external criticism can co-exist with the extreme epistemological doubt of the most radical deconstructionist. Hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation, can work alongside *long-durée* trend analysis. Quantitative economic theory can parallel the most introspective psychological and psychoanalytic methods. The essence of the super-modernist historian's approach is that whatever can be made useful can be useful, doubt will always remain and narrative content and form are inseparable.

So then, for this study, the form, the narrative, the story, provoke the search for content, the method and the analysis, that can help to bring meaning to this particular bit of history. We begin then, with a historical problem and a methodological approach for the research, analysis, interpretation and explanation of it. The problem is the transportation services of Rupert's Land in the 19th Century, the Métis role in providing those services and the importance of these activities to the Métis internal economy.²⁵ The overall methodological approach is super-modernist, exploiting various analytical tools as they are found to be useful and appropriate.

²³ This term was coined in, Alun Munslow, *The Routledge Companion*, 130.

²⁴ See for example, E.J. Hobsbawm's defence of Marx's materialist conception of history in, E.J. Hobsbawm, "Marx and History," in *Historians on History*, ed. John Tosh, (Harlow, England: Pearson Education Limited, 2000), 91-98.

²⁵ Note that the scope of this paper does not include activities in either the Southern or Columbia departments of the Hudson's Bay Company but does include transportation activity south from the Red River Colony into the United States.

Chapter 1

The Métis ... and Métis historiography – whose story?

Although the broad outlines of the foundation of a Métis society are clear enough, the specific origins of the Métis are probably lost forever to time.¹

Roughly stated, Euro-Canadian men employed in the fur trade joined with Native women living in the same area and a mixed-blood population was established.²

In the early days of this intermingling of populations, children were normally perceived either as members of the Native community or, less commonly, as members of the Euro-Canadian community.³ Any idea of a distinctive mixed-blood community had to wait until the number of people rose to a certain critical mass. By the turn of the nineteenth century at the latest, this critical mass was achieved.⁴

The Métis burst into the public consciousness in 1816 as a result of their bloody confrontation with the Red River Settlement project of Lord Selkirk.⁵ For the next fifty years the Métis thrived as an essential, if essentially silent, part of

¹ For an extended discussion of this problem see, John E. Foster's "Some questions and perspectives on the problem of Métis roots," in, Jacqueline Peterson and Jennifer S.H. Brown, eds., *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America*, (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1985), 73-87.

² For a discussion of this see, Diane Paulette Payment, *The Free People – Otipemisiwak: Batoche, Saskatchewan 1870-1930*, (forthcoming), 19-23.

³ See for example, the family of John Ross as discussed in, George F.G. Stanley, *Louis Riel*, (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1963), 47.

⁴ For a good summary of this see, Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 66-69.

⁵ Or the Massacre of Seven Oaks, depending on one's perspective. For a discussion of Seven Oaks that is sympathetic to the Métis see, Margaret Arnett MacLeod, *Cuthbert Grant of Grantown: Warden of the Plains of Red River*, (1963; reprint, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1974), 38-52. See also, W. Kaye Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years in The Indian Country: The Journal of Daniel Williams Harmon, 1800-1816*, (Toronto: The MacMillan Company of Canada Ltd., 1957), 188-89.



Figure 1

Although highly dramatic, this stylized representation of the “Battle of Seven Oaks” is not an accurate reflection of the nature of the incident that occurred in 1816. “Seven Oaks,” by C.W. Jefferys. NAC C-73663.

the HBC’s fur trade economy.⁶ Then, in 1869, the Métis’ again asserted themselves as a political community in their unambiguous opposition to Canadian plans for the lands that were about to be transferred from the HBC to Canada.⁷ The struggle with external authority that came to be known as the Red River Resistance ended with the creation of the Province of Manitoba and the recognition of the Métis as a distinct and legitimate group.⁸ But the story did not end there. By 1884 new circumstances led to a third and final confrontation between the Métis and outside forces. Nevertheless, during the period from the

⁶ Innis, *The Fur Trade*, 302-06.

⁷ Stanley, *The Birth of Western Canada*, 42.

⁸ Stanley, *The Birth of Western Canada*, 123-25.

Battle of Seven Oaks to the last stand of the Métis defenders of Batoche in 1885, a unique society existed in the Canadian North West.⁹

Just what that society was, and to what extent its character was an accurate reflection of the individual members of the community, remains to be established. Numerous writers have taken up the challenge of making sense of the Métis phenomenon and of squaring often-contradictory evidence with clearly discernible trends. Inevitably, all of these writers had to deal with what is the largest single stumbling block to any reasonably accurate view of the Métis - the near total absence of documents written by Métis themselves. Instead, researchers have had to rely on the words of people who were interacting with the Métis for a variety of reasons and whose mention of the Métis, both direct and indirect, were inevitably filtered by a host of cultural, religious and, in particular linguistic, predispositions and prejudices.

One of the first historians to chronicle the times was George Stanley. Writing in the 1930s, he echoed the “frontier” model of the American historian F.J. Turner¹⁰ and viewed the story of the Métis in the nineteenth century as a struggle in the inevitable clash of civilizations in which the “primitive” Métis were confronted with the advance of “civilization” from Canada.¹¹ Stanley’s focus on

⁹ Frits Pannekoek, “Métis Studies: The Development of a Field and New Directions,” in *From Rupert’s Land to Canada*, ed. Theodore Binnema, Gerhard J. Ens and R.C. Macleod, (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2001), 114.

¹⁰ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1998), ix. See also, George Rogers Taylor, ed., *The Turner Thesis: Concerning the Role of the Frontier in American History*, (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1972), viii. For a full discussion of the roots of the Turner thesis see, Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1950), 59-70.

¹¹ George F.G. Stanley, *The Birth of Western Canada: A History of the Riel Rebellions*, (1936; reprint, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960), vii-ix.

the events of the “Riel Rebellions,” was thoroughly teleological. His study was an effort to explain the present by working backwards through events. Stanley was also writing from a Canadian nationalist perspective and much of his story revolved around his perception of the need to maintain a strong central government. The closing lines of his principal work on the Métis are telling:

A nation divided against itself cannot stand. Only in the realization of national unity can the ideal of the Fathers of Confederation survive.¹²

Stanley’s historicism is also plainly evident. In reconstructing the events of 1869-70 and 1885, Stanley made exhaustive use of Government documents and the correspondence of individuals that were either connected with the governments of Canada and Great Britain or were at least sympathetic to the project of Canadian national unity. Like later studies, the Métis voice is nearly silent in Stanley’s work.¹³ Métis attitudes and perceptions were brought into the story almost exclusively by way of the writings of French-Catholic missionary priests or from the writings of Louis Riel. Although admirable in terms of scholarship, and understandable in terms of method, Stanley’s study sheds very little light on the thoughts and motivations of the ordinary Métis who made up the bulk of the population and who had little or no active role in any of Stanley’s great events.

¹² Stanley, *The Birth of Western Canada*, 407.

¹³ For example, in the chapter of *The Birth of Western Canada* entitled “The Political Results of the North-West Rebellion,” there is not a single reference to any direct or indirect Métis source. Stanley, *The Birth of Western Canada*, 380-407.

In the 1940s, the great chronicler of the Métis, Marcel Giraud, completed his massive study of the Métis. Giraud, writing what would in contemporary terms be characterized as ethno-history, made a determined effort to understand both the origins and the nature of Métis society. His two-volume enquiry is still the single most extensive work related to the Métis.¹⁴ Unlike Stanley, Giraud made broad use of interviews with individual Métis in an effort to counter-balance the weight of Euro-Canadian documentary evidence. Unfortunately, when Giraud conducted these interviews in the 1930s, there were very few Métis still alive who had any direct memory of events before 1885.

Ultimately, Giraud's analysis of the Métis was a variation of the same "civilizations" model used by Stanley. Giraud was clearly sympathetic to the Métis. He framed an image of a society created by the Métis in which elements of both primitive and advanced societies had been effectively fused. In the absence of excessive outside interference and within the stable economic environment of the HBC fur trade monopoly, the Métis had thrived. In his view however, this fusion was only superficial and was not able to survive the severe economic blows that resulted from the extermination of the bison herds and the end of the fur trade empire of the west.¹⁵

Giraud's work is also plagued by his tendency to see the Métis as victims of inherent flaws in their character that were a consequence of their racial makeup. To a contemporary audience, some of his assertions seem incredible.

¹⁴ Although it is quite dated, this is still the only work that attempts a comprehensive analysis of the Métis. Marcel Giraud, *The Métis in the Canadian West*, 2 vols, (1945; reprint, Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1986), 488-524.

¹⁵ M. Giraud, "A Note on the Half-Breed Problem in Manitoba (in Notes and Memoranda)," *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, Vol. 3, No. 4. (November, 1937), 541-42.

In advocating for a Métis reserve regime similar to the Indian reserve system Giraud's paternalistic and racist attitudes led him to the conclusion that only on a reserve,

...would the Métis be in a position to follow his preferred way of life, to give free rein to his instincts without his nature being changed by a society where his weaknesses too often degenerate into vices, and in which the majority of his people, incapable of adapting themselves to the milieu that dominates them [...] are condemned to a wretched and anachronistic existence.¹⁶

In spite of his best efforts, Giraud was not able to see the Métis outside of his own referential basis. This frame of reference was of a world in which civilizations existed on a hierarchy of primitive to advanced and, correspondingly, weak to strong. Giraud saw individual Métis as members of a Rousseauesque savage nobility but concluded that, like other primitive peoples, the Métis were doomed to historical oblivion.¹⁷

By the 1950s, W.L. Morton was prepared to challenge the notion that a clash of civilizations was at the heart of the Métis conflicts. Instead, Morton argued that the Métis were well along in the process of adapting to the changing circumstances of the western economy and society in the 1860s. For Morton, Métis resistance in 1869-70 was based on their justifiable fear of being culturally and religiously overwhelmed by a mass immigration of English Protestants in the

¹⁶ Giraud, *The Métis in the Canadian West*, vol 2, (1945; reprint, Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1986), 523-24.

¹⁷ See Giraud, quoted in, Frits Pannekoek, *A Snug Little Flock: The Social Origins of the Riel Resistance 1869-70*, (Winnipeg: Watson and Dwyer Publishing Ltd., 1991), 12.

wake of transition to Canadian rule.¹⁸ Further, the Métis' rebellion of 1885 was a product of the failed resistance of 1869-70.¹⁹

Although some of Morton's conclusions were at odds with those of Stanley and Giraud, his methods and perspective were in many respects the same.²⁰ As with Stanley, Morton's writings were much more about explaining the Canadian experience than they were about understanding the Métis.²¹ As with Giraud, Morton saw the Métis as the quaint, successful integrators of 'barbarism' and 'civilization,' of Native savagery and European culture.²² But, in accordance with the 'great man' notion of history, Morton put much more stock in the influence of individuals on the course of events than did either of his two predecessors.²³ For Morton, it was the tragedy of the Métis to be under the sway of an unstable and violent Louis Riel at the moment of their greatest sensitivity to change. It was Louis Riel that ruined the Métis achievement and destroyed the Métis nation.²⁴

It was more than a decade before there was any great challenge to Morton's view of the Métis. Although a number of works had followed Morton, they tended to be simplistic and excessively sympathetic to the Métis. In spite of their rather obvious identification with the Métis, authors like Joseph Kinsey

¹⁸ W.L. Morton, ed., *Alexander Begg's Red River Journal and Other Papers Relative to the Red River Resistance of 1869-1870*, (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1956), 2-6.

¹⁹ For an excellent historiographical discussion that encompasses politically oriented material not specifically focused on the Métis see, D.N. Sprague, *Canada and the Métis: 1869-1885*, (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1989), 1-17.

²⁰ There are exceptions to this. Morton's review of Giraud's work was generally favourable. See, Morton, *The Canadian Métis*, in, A.B. McKillop, ed, *Contexts of Canada's Past: Selected Essays of W.L. Morton*, (Toronto: The MacMillan Company, 1980), 61.

²¹ See, for example, Morton, *Canada: the one and the many*, in, A.B. McKillop, ed, *Contexts of Canada's Past: Selected Essays of W.L. Morton*, (Toronto: The MacMillan Company, 1980), 285.

²² See, for example, Morton, *The Canadian Métis*, 61-65.

²³ W.L. Morton, *Manitoba: A History*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), 52.

²⁴ Morton, *The Canadian Métis*, 67.

Howard²⁵ and George Woodcock²⁶ portrayed the Métis very much as had Giraud. The Métis were incapable of adapting to a changing world because, both as individuals and as a society, they were fatally handicapped by their essential primitivism. These works were also very much in the tradition of Stanley and Morton in that their perspective was political and their method teleological. Woodcock and Howard were both discussing contemporary Canada as much as they were discussing the Métis.

Although Giraud had offered the first non-politically focused study of the Métis, it was Irene Spry who changed the nature of the historiographical debate by establishing a new interpretive framework. Instead of directing her attention to the politics and leaders involved in the well-known events of western Canada's early history, Spry concentrated on the region's economy. In advancing her theory of a 'great transformation,' she posited a dramatically changed economic landscape as the principal factor in the upheavals of the nineteenth century.²⁷ In particular, Spry suggested that the opening of the prairies to outside competition after 1844 led to the transformation of the local economy from one of subsistence to an outward-looking market economy. As the economy developed and became more integrated with the international economy, local concepts of property and resources also underwent a fundamental transformation. Old notions of common resources gave way, through a series of intermediate steps, to modern ideas of

²⁵ Joseph Kinsey Howard, *Strange Empire: A Narrative of the Northwest*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1952).

²⁶ George Woodcock, *Gabriel Dumont: The Métis Chief and His Lost World*, (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1975).

²⁷ Irene Spry, "The Great Transformation: The Disappearance of the Commons in Western Canada," in, R.A. Allen, ed, *Man and Nature on the Prairies*, (Regina: University of Regina Press, 1976), 21-45.

private property. Eventually, the subsistence homeland of the Métis and the other Native peoples was transformed into an, “[...] outpost of the industrial market system.”²⁸

The implications of Spry’s thesis were clear, if more than a little deterministic. If the transformation of the prairie economy was an inevitable product of the developing and expanding world economy, then the decline and dispersal of the Métis were inevitable consequences of that change. Although Spry was very sympathetic to the Métis (and to Native people generally), and used language that seemed to put the blame for the destruction of the Métis squarely on Canadian expansionist policies,²⁹ her thesis actually served to deflect responsibility away from any actors. The logic of the economic forces that Spry described meant that neither the Métis nor the Canadian immigrant population were responsible for their fates.

Arthur Ray added another dimension to study of the Métis by focusing attention on the individual and personal aspects of the prairie economy. Although Ray’s early work was not specifically focused on the Métis (he was looking primarily at the relationship between Native people and the HBC), his studies had important implications for Métis historiography.³⁰ The thoroughness of Ray’s methods is everywhere evident and it is clear that he was willing to sift through mountains of data to firmly establish even simple facts. When Ray did

²⁸ For a full discussion of this see, Irene Spry, *From The Hunt to The Homestead*, (Unpublished, by permission Lib Spry), epilogue 1.

²⁹ See, for example, Spry, *From The Hunt to The Homestead*, epilogue 2.

³⁰ Arthur J. Ray, *Give Us Good Measure: An Economic Analysis of Relations between Indians and the Hudson’s Bay Company before 1763*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), xv-xvi.

focus on elements of the Métis economy, his academic rigour resulted in the establishment of compelling fragments of historical evidence. Unfortunately, much of Ray's analysis seems to have been ignored or dismissed by other historians. One of the most striking examples of this is in Ray's study on pemmican production and prices.³¹ In spite of the near universally recognized importance of the pemmican trade to the Métis economy, few historians have brought Ray's analysis to bear on their own arguments.

In the 1980s there was a surge of interest in Métis studies.³² Not only were there more studies, there were more kinds of studies as new methods and ideas were brought into the debate. Characteristic of these new studies was Nicole St-Onge's analysis of population patterns in a small Métis community. Although she was still working within the framework of the old 'problem,' the marginalization and dispersal of the Métis, her method was radically different. Drawing heavily on then-novel social history methodology, in particular the ideas of the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm, St-Onge used a case study approach to try to explain the transformation of a single community from one dominated by a Métis population to one almost exclusively made up of Francophone immigrants, mostly from Quebec.³³

³¹ See, for example, his analysis of pemmican prices in, Arthur J. Ray, "The Northern Great Plains: Pantry of the Northwestern Fur Trade, 1774-1885," *Prairie Forum*, Vol.9, No.2 (1984): 269.

³² Why this is so is not entirely clear. For one explanation see, Frits Pannekoek, "Métis Studies: The Development of a Field and New Directions," in *From Rupert's Land to Canada*, ed. Theodore Binnema, Gerhard J. Ens and R.C. Macleod, (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2001), 111-14.

³³ Nicole J.M. St-Onge, "Métis and Merchant Capital in Red River: The Decline of Pointe a Grouette" (master's thesis, University of Manitoba, 1983), 1-5.

At about the same time, Gerald Friesen completed his history of the Canadian prairies. Although the Métis question represented only one aspect of Friesen's work, his place in the historiography is important. First of all, in many respects, Friesen's narrative was a return to the grand or meta-narrative tradition of Stanley. In typical constructionist style, the history of the prairies is a subset of the history of Canada. It is also something of a paean to the notion of regionalism, always a topical subject in the Canadian context, and to the virtue of distinctive 'homelands' within a broader national and international community.³⁴

More important, Friesen returned to the same economic arguments as Irene Spry, in particular the notion of a fundamental transformation in the prairie economy in the 1840s.³⁵ Although he did not invoke the primitive versus civilized model directly, he nevertheless stressed the irresistible nature of the changing economic environment.³⁶ Friesen's study was also important because it reintroduced the idea of racial tension in the west without falling back on earlier stereotypes. Rather than explaining events and outcomes in terms of racial characteristics, Friesen discussed the implications of late nineteenth century attitudes to race on the content of contemporaneous documentary evidence.³⁷ This was an explicit recognition of the problem of language and temporal separation that was so vexatious to early post-modernists.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Friesen's study was that it served to reaffirm many of the ideas of existing historiographical traditions such as those of

³⁴ Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 466.

³⁵ Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies*, 92-93.

³⁶ Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies*, 93.

³⁷ Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies*, 94-97.

Stanley and Morton. Coming as it did at the same time as the expanding interest in the Canadian west generally and the Métis particularly, Friesen's work was likely a significant brake to newer conceptions of the Métis story. In an ironic twist, the high quality of Friesen's narrative style made his efforts especially regressive as his is easily the most readable of the relevant histories.

Nevertheless, some historians did return to the Métis problem with new ideas and methods in the tradition of St-Onge. Of particular interest was the idea that a variety of 'push' and 'pull' factors were at work in the dislocation and eventual dispersal of the Métis.³⁸ One of the factors discussed at length was the question of land and land policies and their implementation. Douglas Sprague and Thomas Flanagan offered sharply contrasting views on this topic.

Sprague, an unabashed reconstructionist, came down clearly on the side of the dominance of push factors.³⁹ In particular, he concluded that the Canadian government, through a variety of formal and informal processes, deliberately sought to dispossess the Métis of the land that had been granted to them by virtue of the Manitoba Act of 1870.⁴⁰ Sprague relied heavily on Canadian government documents for his study and much of the evidence that he offered makes for compelling reading. The private correspondence of key figures such as John A. Macdonald provided especially strong support to Sprague's central argument that the Métis were the victims of deliberate policies of manipulation by a Canadian Government that sought to remove them as obstacles to the

³⁸ Sprague, *Canada and the Métis*, ix.

³⁹ Sprague, *Canada and the Métis*, 17.

⁴⁰ Sprague, *Canada and the Métis*, 184.

settlement of the Northwest by Euro-Canadians.⁴¹ Sprague, echoing the conclusion of Morton, if not his rationale, perceived the 1885 rebellion as the direct result of these policies.⁴²

Thomas Flanagan studied the same phenomenon and much the same evidence as Sprague and came up with a nearly opposite conclusion. In his view, the Métis had been treated fairly by the Canadian government and its agents in both the conception and implementation of land policies. Those Métis who left the Red River did so because they consciously chose to seek their fortunes and futures elsewhere. Flanagan suggested that the money that emigrating Métis received from the sale of their land claims was an important advantage accruing to them from the terms of the Manitoba Act.⁴³ Métis activism in the 1880s was not the result of bad faith on the part of the Canadian government but was more in the nature of a fringe movement based on the appeal of Louis Riel's radicalism.⁴⁴ From a methodological perspective, the contrast between Flanagan's and Sprague's interpretations was also important as it dramatically underscored the high interpretive flexibility of the 'evidence.'

Perhaps the boldest of the Métis narratives is that developed in the last decade by Fritz Pannekoek. Using a cultural history perspective, Pannekoek explored the inner workings of Red River society in an effort to better understand the events of 1869-70. Pannekoek concluded that internal strife, especially amongst the leaders of the various communities of Red River, led to a

⁴¹ See for example, Sprague, *Canada and the Métis*, 143.

⁴² Sprague, *Canada and the Métis*, 184.

⁴³ Chester Martin, *Dominion Lands Policy*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973), 20-23.

⁴⁴ Flanagan, *Riel and the Rebellion*, 51-53.

breakdown in social cohesion and a weakening of the overall Red River society. In his view, this weakness undermined the community's ability to resist the imposition of a new society when Canadian immigrants began to arrive in large numbers.⁴⁵

Although Pannekoek's story may strike some as crediting a very small element of the Métis community with rather more influence than seems likely, the evidence that he offered makes for a strong, if at times overstated, case.⁴⁶ His contribution to Métis historiography is significant in that, by exploring an aspect of Métis history that had hitherto received no serious attention, Pannekoek challenged many of the basic notions of Métis historiography. His work underscored the fact that Métis studies still tended to focus on the same old questions and, by striking out in an entirely different direction, illustrated that the field was still wide open for further enquiry. Still, as Pannekoek's narrative is the story of a struggle of competing elites, there is little in the way of a Métis voice reflecting the views of the bulk of the Métis population.⁴⁷

A new chapter in Métis historiography opened recently with Gerhard Ens' social and economic study of two parishes of the Red River Settlement. Although Ens speaks to the question of the dispersal of the Métis, this was not his focus. Instead, Ens adopted an economic model generated from studies of European industrialization and used it to advance a view of a diverse Métis

⁴⁵ Pannekoek, *A Snug Little Flock*, 212. For a discussion of activities of the Protestant Parish of St. Andrew's see, Robert Coutts, *The Road to the Rapids: Nineteenth Century Church and Society at St. Andrew's Parish, Red River*, (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2000).

⁴⁶ See, for example, the discussion of the scandal involving Mrs. Ballenden and Captain Foss, Pannekoek, *A Snug Little Flock*, 124-32.

⁴⁷ Pannekoek, *A Snug Little Flock*, 11.

economy.⁴⁸ Through the lens of 'proto-industrialization,' the Métis come into focus as a collection of many sub-communities with widely divergent interests and priorities.⁴⁹

Ens also advanced a view of a Métis community that was characterized by adaptation to changing economic circumstances. He gave particular emphasis to Métis involvement in the buffalo-robe trade. In his view at least, this trade offered a new employment opportunity when other activities, the provisioning trade in particular, were in decline.⁵⁰ Ens also broke with the bulk of Métis historiography in his definition of Métis. Rather than adopting the usual categorization that defined Métis as the French-Catholic/Native population, Ens considered all of the mixed-blood population to be part of the wider Métis community.⁵¹

By adopting a methodology that stressed demographic data and patterns as indicators of societal trends, Ens attempted to avoid the chronic problem of the lack of Métis documentary evidence. Although other historians had used essentially the same technique,⁵² Ens unapologetically made interpretation of this quantitative data central to his argument. Despite the fact that some of his interpolations may be debatable,⁵³ his approach resulted in a new and imaginative picture of the Métis community. Instead of a community split between the imperatives of the supposedly contradictory and mutually exclusive

⁴⁸ Ens' point of departure for this model is Irene Spry's transformation theory. Ens, *Homeland to Hinterland*, 5.

⁴⁹ Ens method relies, at least in part, on ideas advanced by, Jennifer Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980), 36-42.

⁵⁰ Ens, *Homeland to Hinterland*, 6.

⁵¹ Ens, *Homeland to Hinterland*, 8.

⁵² See, for example, St-Onge, "Métis and Merchant Capital in Red River," 9-15.

⁵³ See, for example, Ens' assertion regarding the status of the fur and pemmican trade in the 1840's. *Homeland to Hinterland*, 75.

hunting and farming groups, Ens fashioned an image of a disparate collection of people connected by interests and class politics. Rather than a 'nation,' Ens portrayed the Métis as, "[...] an ethnic identity based on an occupational specialization in the fur trade."⁵⁴

One of the most interesting contributions to recent Métis historiography is Frank Tough's analysis of the economic history of northern Manitoba in the sixty years straddling the turn of the 20th century. This is true despite the fact that Tough did not focus on the Métis, the Red River Settlement or the transfer of Rupert's Land to Canada.⁵⁵ Instead, Tough attempted to establish a coherent picture of the inner workings of the fur trade and Native economies. Like Arthur Ray, Tough was interested in the detail of day-to-day activities.

Tough's theoretical framework was developed from that established by Harold Innis in his celebrated economic history of the Canadian Fur Trade.⁵⁶ Innis' Euro-centric staple theory⁵⁷ was adapted to reflect the workings of the North American part of the admittedly international fur trade. Tough, anticipating his critics, defended his use of concepts such as labour, capital and commercialization stating:

I leave it to those conforming to current tenets to point out that this sort of economic history is a Eurocentric meta-narrative and a logocentric misrepresentation of life. While the idea of colonialism still has some standing in

⁵⁴ Ens, *Homeland to Hinterland*, 175.

⁵⁵ Tough did commit one chapter to the question of Métis Aboriginal Title. Frank Tough, *As Their Natural Resources Fail: Native Peoples and the Economic History of Northern Manitoba, 1870-1930*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1996), 114.

⁵⁶ Tough, *As Their Natural Resources Fail*, 13.

⁵⁷ Innis, *The Fur Trade*, 396-402.

present academic discourse, specific empirical consideration of the origins of economic domination is lacking.⁵⁸

Tough's point is well taken. While fully acknowledging the limitations of his study he nevertheless highlighted the rather thin bases on which much historical debate rested and continues to rest.⁵⁹ Tough is probably the only writer to have offered a reasonably complete representation of the internal workings of local economies within Rupert's Land.⁶⁰

Tough's enduring contribution to Métis historiography is that his method points the way for further study. By including sundry secondary and tertiary economic activities in his models of the Native economy, Tough shows what is possible in studies of the Métis. His discussion of the Native fishing industry is particularly interesting in view of what is known about Métis fishing activities.⁶¹ Additionally, unlike many of the Métis narratives, Tough does not take demographic data and economic criteria for granted. Rather, his perspective is intensely critical. Broad trends and historiographical paradigms are dissected to establish their validity.⁶²

So what to make of all this historiography for a study of Métis transportation? First of all, it is clear that the image of the Métis drawn by

⁵⁸ Tough, *As Their Natural Resources Fail*, 13.

⁵⁹ He also readily acknowledged the lack of Métis voice in his work. Tough, *As Their Natural Resources Fail*, 13.

⁶⁰ See, for example, his analyses of the seasonal economies of the Pas Indians, Moose Lake Post and Berens River, Tough, *As Their Natural Resources Fail*, 32-34.

⁶¹ Frank Tough, "The Storehouses of the Good God: Aboriginal Peoples and Freshwater Fisheries in Manitoba," *Manitoba History*, No. 39, Spring/Summer (2000), 2-12.

⁶² There are a few notable exceptions to this. For example, Tough seems to uncritically accept Irene Spry's assertion that the currency of the fur trade was the 'Made Beaver' exchange unit, in spite of considerable evidence to the contrary. Tough, *As Their Natural Resources Fail*, 15.

Stanley, Giraud and Morton and reaffirmed by Friesen is an enduring one.

Studies of the Métis still tend to be defined along lines stressing an essentially two-dimensional picture of Métis economic life: nomadic bison-hunting versus sedentary agriculture. Within recent studies the description of tensions and factors 'pushing' and 'pulling' the Métis are still inextricably wound up with the dialectic of the primitive hunt versus civilized farming.

Second, the study of the Métis has always been frustrated to some degree by the absence of Métis voices. The fact that the Métis were largely illiterate is a serious obstacle to a proper understanding of their motivations. Thus, it is important to be creative; not so creative as to invent history, but creative enough to build mental images based on the assembly of many small bits of information. A curious side effect of the lack of Métis voices in the historiography is that quantitative data, such as trade figures and census information, become relatively more useful as it tends to be relatively free of the subjective interpretation inherent in narrative "evidence."

Finally, the question remains as to whose story has been told. Much of the historiography is related to the historians' own place in one of two projects, the project of Canada or the project of the Métis. Clearly, the bulk of the work has been written within the larger story of Canada. This is of course inevitable, at least to some degree. To attempt to completely separate a Métis narrative from the Canadian and fur trade contexts would be to enter a world of imagination and fiction beyond anything conceived of by even the wildest of post-modern thinkers, at least those tied to the narrative form.

Chapter 2

Trade and Transport – To 1821

The origins of the transportation system¹ of Rupert's Land are intimately connected with the origins of the North American fur trade.² When Europeans began arriving along the Atlantic coast in the sixteenth century, furs were among the items offered in trade by Native people.³ Although the early visitors were not specifically searching for fur, most were either explorers or fishermen, the potential value of this new source of beaver was immediately recognized. Since at least the beginning of the sixteenth Century, beaver had been the principal material in the production of the fine felt hats that were the height of European fashion.⁴ By the end of that century, over-hunting and settlement had resulted in the near total extinction of the European beaver and the hat industry was

¹ The terms "system" and "network" are used in this paper in the broad sense conveyed in the Oxford English dictionary rather than in the more developed methodological sense articulated by historians of technology such as Thomas Hughes and Bruno Latour. Although aspects of this study would benefit from a focused technological analysis, the bison hunt being a prime candidate for a "system of systems" approach, this is beyond the scope of the current paper. For a more technological focus, see, Thomas P. Hughes, "The Evolution of Large Technological Systems," in Wiebe Bijker et al., eds., *The Social Construction of Technological Systems*, (MIT Press, 1987), or, Bruno Latour, *Science in Action*, (Harvard University Press, 1987).

² The earliest transportation networks of North America predate, by a considerable length of time, the first European contacts with Aboriginal peoples. By the time Vikings were making their first forays along the east coast of Canada, a complex trading network had long been in operation in the interior. A wide array of goods was traded in a network that extended from the boreal woodlands of Canada to the Gulf of Mexico and from the Atlantic to the Pacific. While some Native people grew corn and tobacco, others hunted and fished. Others came to specialize in the trade itself, acting as middlemen in the exchange of goods from North to South and from East to West. Although not the dominant item of exchange that it was eventually to become, fur was already an important commodity within the North American trade in the 15th Century. Harold A. Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History*, (1930; reprint, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1956), 26-27. For a more anecdotal account of this see the story of the 'beaver bundle' in, Ella Elizabeth Clark, *Indian Legends of Canada*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1960), 61-62.

³ Innis, *The Fur Trade*, 10.

⁴ Norrie and Owsam, *A History*, 63. See also J.M. Bumsted, *Fur Trade Wars: The Founding of Western Canada*, (Winnipeg: Great Plains Publications, 1999), 14. Bumsted errs when he suggests that the utility of beaver for felt was not initially exploited.

aggressively seeking new sources of fur.⁵ A brisk trade in North American fur quickly developed.⁶

Throughout the early period of the trade, it was the Native population that provided the transportation services necessary for the movement of trade goods and fur along existing pre-contact routes. Contrary to the popular portrayal of naïve Native people being duped into trading valuable furs for worthless “trinkets” by conniving Europeans, the trade was beneficial to both populations.⁷ While many European traders congratulated themselves on acquiring valuable furs at little cost, Native people were equally pleased to be able to exchange a simple pelt for items of great value to them. As one Montagnais commentator noted bemusedly, “The beaver does everything perfectly well, it makes kettles, hatchets, swords, knives, bread; and, in short, it makes everything ... The English have no sense; they give us twenty knives like this for one Beaver skin.”⁸ By the late seventeenth century the value of the fur transactions had come to represent a significant portion of the revenues being generated from North American ventures and the fur trade industry had begun to take shape.⁹

⁵ The search for beaver had already led Russian entrepreneurs to venture into the wilds of Siberia. In 1581, one wealthy Russian family, the Stroganovs, hired a mercenary force under the Cossack Yermak and dispatched him to secure their interests. With his little army of less than a thousand men, he marched on the capital of the Siberian Khan at Isker. Remarkably, the Khan capitulated to this tiny force and virtually the entire western Siberian territory fell into Russian hands, almost without resistance. Joseph F. Ryan, ed., *The Russian Chronicles: A Thousand Years that Changed the World*, (Godalming, Surrey, England: Quadrillion Publishing Ltd., 1998), 116.

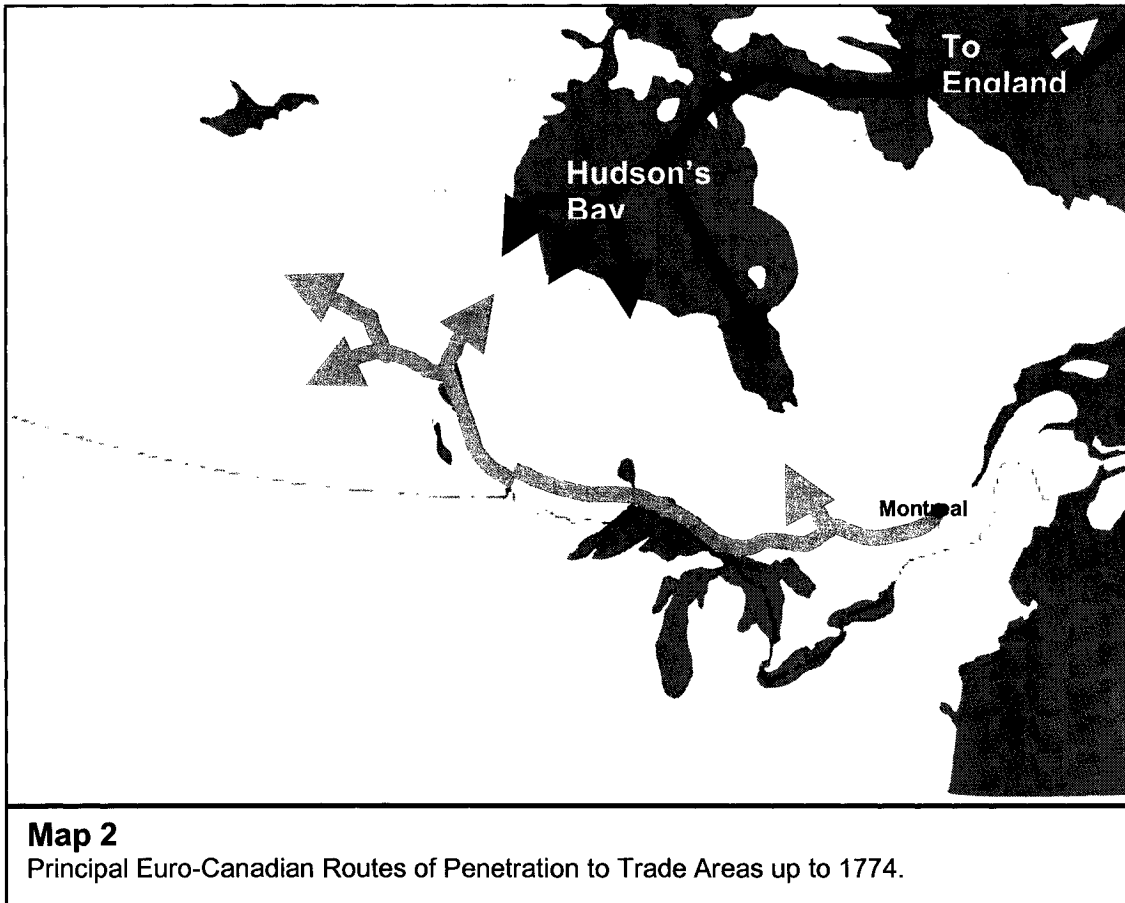
⁶ Although beyond the scope of this paper, both Spain and Russia made significant efforts at exploiting North American fur.

⁷ Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies*, 33.

⁸ Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791*, (Cleveland: The Burrows Brothers Company, 1896): 297-99, quoted in Penny Petrone, ed., *First People, First Voices*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), 5.

⁹ Innis, *The Fur Trade*, 27-28.

Also taking shape was a new transportation network. By the time that the HBC was established in 1670, French interests were already deep in the Canadian interior. The principal route of French penetration was up the Ottawa River and into the Great Lakes (Map 2).



The Huron Nation, because of its central location and extensive trade network, was the focus of early French activities.¹⁰ However, during the period 1648-50, the Huron were almost completely annihilated by the Iroquois and trade with the

¹⁰ In addition to the value of the Huron as trading partners, there were strong political and religious motivations for French efforts at establishing a relationship with the Huron Nation. Jesuit Relations, Volume XVIII, 233. For a discussion of French motivations see, Kenneth E. Kidd, *The Excavation of Sainte-Marie I*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1949), 4-6.

interior was badly disrupted.¹¹ Although the French government had closely controlled all aspects of the trade, the attempt to use the Huron as a single intermediary in the existing Native continental trade network had failed. The necessity of allowing independent French traders to move inland to establish relations with the Native people who were actually harvesting the fur became obvious. By 1663 monopoly control within the French fur industry had been ended and the pattern of future French efforts was established.¹²

While France attempted to reach directly into the heart of the fur territory, the English took a different approach. Exploiting the knowledge of the explorers and traders Radisson and Groseilliers who, ironically, had made their initial explorations in the service of the French,¹³ English merchants sketched out a trade network based on establishments along the northern periphery of the continent. The English had no intention of moving inland.¹⁴ Instead, costs would be minimized and profits maximized based on the assumption that Native people were willing to hunt for furs and transport them to trading posts situated around Hudson's Bay and James Bay.¹⁵ The strategy was immediately and

¹¹ French trade, which had been valued at 250,000 livres in 1648, fell to 65,000 livres in 1652. Innis, *The Fur Trade*, 40.

¹² "Prior to 1760, the *Canadien* fur trade was carried on by small commercial partnerships that were granted *congés*, or trading licenses, for specific destinations for set periods of time." Heather Devine, "Les Desjarlais: The Development and Dispersion of a Proto-Métis Hunting Band, 1785-1870," in *From Rupert's Land to Canada*, ed. Theodore Binnema, Gerhard J. Ens and R.C. Macleod, (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2001), 131.

¹³ E.E. Rich, *The Fur Trade and the Northwest to 1857*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1967), 19-23.

¹⁴ Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies*, 53.

¹⁵ This assumption was based on the realization that, "These Indians and other hunting Indians, such as the Crees in the neighbourhood of Hudson Bay, being farthest distant from the French, possessed beaver in the greatest abundance, valued European commodities most highly, and secured the least favourable rate of exchange. They traded with the French through Indian middlemen, [...] and because of the monopoly of these middlemen and the great distances covered, obtained restricted supplies of goods." Innis, *The Fur Trade*, 40.

spectacularly successful and a century and a half of often-bloody competition began between the HBC and the Montreal-based firms.¹⁶

From the beginning, political events had a profound effect on the trade. The long-standing rivalry between France and England in Europe migrated to North America with the colonies and commerce. Raids and counter-raids punctuated the nearly incessant conflict and made folk heroes of the likes of Le Moyne d'Iberville as France scored numerous successes.¹⁷ In the end however, it was the English who prevailed, underlined by the decisive battle of Quebec on 13 September, 1759.¹⁸ In the Treaty of Paris and the Royal Proclamation of 1763 that marked the end of the Seven Years' War, the British firmly established their control of eastern North America and ended French competition in the inland fur trade.¹⁹

This did not however, signal the end of competition between the HBC and the Montreal-based traders. Although there was little trade out of Montreal in the first few years after the English conquest of Quebec, it was not long before new efforts were being made along the old French routes. In 1766 the old French trade center at Michilimakinac was reoccupied and soon traders were fanning out across much of the old network.²⁰ By 1770 several firms operating out of Montreal had established strong links with inland traders. This proved to be so

¹⁶ Innis, *The Fur Trade*, 47-49.

¹⁷ J. Arthur Lower, *Western Canada: An Outline History*, (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre Ltd., 1983), 19.

¹⁸ Robin Reilly, *Wolfe of Quebec*, (London: White Lion Publishers, 1973), 310-15.

¹⁹ Devine, "Les Desjarlais, 131.

²⁰ Alexander Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal on the River St. Laurence through the Continent of North America to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans: In the Years 1789 and 1793*, (1801; reprint, Edmonton: M.G.Hurtig Ltd., 1971), vii-viii.

effective that further consolidations led to the formation of the NWC during the winter of 1783-84.²¹

The conquest of Quebec also failed to put a stop to conflict in North America. France had been expelled from Canada but it was not long before French warships, harkening back to the days of d'Iberville, were once again menacing the HBC establishments. This time, the attacks were part of the French campaign supporting the American War of Independence. The attacks culminated in raids on the Hudson Bay factories in 1782 and the loss of a considerable number of furs.²² Then, in a repeat of earlier events, the end of the fighting in 1783 was followed by the return of the HBC to its posts.

Although it was eventually to have an important effect on both the fur trade generally and the transportation network specifically, the recognition of the United States as an independent nation in 1783 did not have any significant immediate effect on the fur trade. The real competition was still between the HBC network and the companies operating out of Montreal. There were a few notable exceptions to the Canadian/British domination of the industry, in particular, the series of firms operated by John Jacob Astor.²³ Nevertheless, most of the furs that came from the area that eventually became the American west continued to be trapped and hunted by Native people and then shipped to Europe through Canada.²⁴

²¹ Mackenzie, *Voyages*, xvii.

²² Newman, *Company of Adventurers*, 274-78.

²³ John Jacob Astor, *Business Letters, 1813-1828*, (Benson, Vermont.: Chalidze Publications, 1991), 123.

²⁴ Rich, *The Fur Trade*, 201.

Effective American pressure on the Canadian trade only started after the War of 1812. A dispute between the United States and Britain led to an American declaration of war on Britain on 18 June 1812. Canada was promptly invaded amid expectations of a quick and easy United States victory. Almost immediately the invasion plan went awry. The war, which was supposed to have been over by the fall of 1812, dragged on until the end of 1814.²⁵ The capital of Upper Canada was burned by an American raiding force in 1813 and a British force retaliated by burning Washington in 1814. By war's end considerable bitterness had been generated on both sides of the border. When American fur traders, including J.J. Astor, decided to lobby their government for measures to curb British commercial activities on United States soil, they found a sympathetic audience in Washington. On 29 April 1816, Congress passed an act that barred the Canadian-based fur companies from further activities on American territory setting off the first serious competition between Canadian and American fur companies.²⁶ For the time being though, the substantive competitive pressures in the fur trade lay to the north.

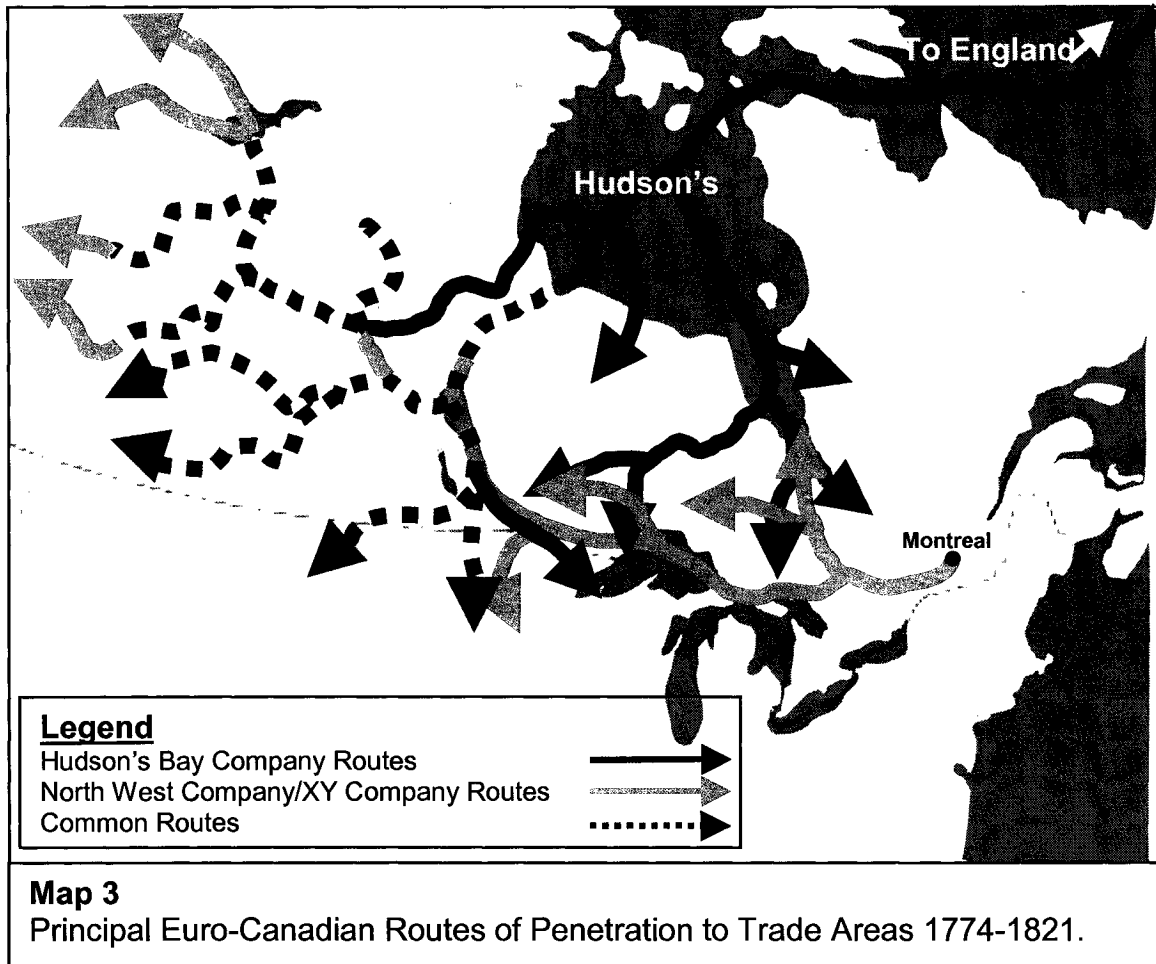
This was the period of intense and often destructive competition between the NWC and the HBC. This competition reached a peak of violence at the Battle of Seven Oaks in 1816 and it became clear to the leaders of both firms that something had to be done to bring order to the trade.²⁷ The solution eventually settled on was to fuse the two competitors into a single company

²⁵ Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson: and his Indian Wars*, (New York: Viking Penguin, 2001), 5-6.

²⁶ *House Journal*. 14th Cong., 1st sess., 29 April 1816, 750.

²⁷ Innis, *The Fur Trade*, 279-80.

under the name of the Hudson's Bay Company.²⁸ The merger was accompanied by many changes in the company structure and its policies and procedures. Perhaps the greatest area of change was in the transportation system.



For the century and a half before the HBC and the NWC merged, two competing transportation networks had carried European goods deep into the interior of North America where they were exchanged for furs (Map 3). The furs

²⁸ A first round of consolidation occurred in 1798 with the formation of the New North West Company, popularly known as the XY Trading Company, from the firms of Forsyth, Richardson and Company and Leith, Jamieson and Company. Sir Alexander Mackenzie joined this group in 1800 and for a while the company was known as Alexander Mackenzie and Company. This company was then absorbed by the NWC in 1804, setting the stage for the final fusion of the major fur trading companies in 1821. National Atlas of Canada, *Posts of the Canadian Fur Trade*, (Ottawa: Department of Energy Mines and Resources, 1973), 79-80.

were then carried out along the same two routes for final shipment to Europe. Although both networks performed the same basic function, they were quite different in detail, reflecting both the different trading philosophies of the parent companies and the origins of the fur trade itself.

The principal NWC route to the North American interior followed the old French route. Starting at Montreal, it led up the Ottawa River and across the Great Lakes. At the head of Lake Superior the route followed the rivers and lakes of what is now northwestern Ontario until arriving at the Red and Mississippi Rivers.²⁹ Other routes followed various rivers and lakes north from the Ottawa into the watershed of James Bay. The main mode of transportation along all of these routes was the canoe. Both the routes chosen and the mode of transportation along these routes were a reflection of geography, the nature of the fur trade and the consequences of competition with the HBC.

By the time the NWC was formed in 1783-84, the British were in effective, if often contested, control of the fur trade areas of the northern part of North America. Since the HBC charter of 1670 gave that company exclusive rights to the trade in Rupert's Land, the Montreal traders were compelled to seek routes that would give them access to fur-producing areas while still avoiding a blatant violation of the HBC's charter provisions.³⁰

The Great Lakes route was the obvious choice. Not only did this avoid HBC territory, the route allowed the NWC to maintain relationships with various

²⁹ For a detailed description of this route see, Mackenzie, *Voyages*, xxviii-lxii.

³⁰ *Charters, statutes, orders in council, etc., relating to the Hudson's Bay Company*, (London: Hudson's Bay Company, 1963).

Native groups that had been established and maintained by French traders for well over a century. The route also nicely skirted much of the perimeter of Rupert's Land. This allowed the NWC to compete for much of the fur that would otherwise have been transported to HBC posts along inland waterways. This competition drained a great deal of the fur away from the HBC.

The NWC continued the French trading style of deep penetration into fur areas and the establishment of trading posts within Native communities.³¹ This system recognized the trading advantage of a close relationship with the actual harvesters of the fur but it also meant that existing Native population concentrations would define the various nodes of the trading network. This series of trade nodes also defined the transportation network that connected them back to Montreal.

A further implication of this pattern of trade was that routes, with the notable exception of the main Great Lakes artery, tended to run along rivers and lakes that ranged in size from quite large to very small. Since only smaller boats were capable of navigating the wide range of waterways encountered, the choice of canoes as the dominant mode of transport was perhaps obvious.³² Not only were canoes well adapted to North American conditions, they were widely available and easily built, maintained and repaired. They were also relatively

³¹ E.A. Cruickshank, ed., *The Correspondence of Lieut. Governor Sir John Graves Simcoe*, (Toronto: Ontario Historical Society, 1923-31), I, 92.

³² The Northwest Company operated a seventy-ton ship on each of Lakes Huron and Superior at the end of the 18th century. Cargo was off-loaded from canoes and the canoes would paddle across the Great Lakes with no cargo and with a reduced crew of only five men. Mackenzie, *Voyages*, xl.

cheap. In 1796 a cargo canoe purchased in Montreal cost only 300 *livres*,³³ an amount similar to the lowest wages paid to a worker for a single season's labour.³⁴



Figure 2

"Canoes in a Fog, Lake Superior," by Frances Anne Hopkins, 1869. Glenbow Museum Collection, 55.8.1

Perhaps most importantly, skilled crewmen could be readily recruited from Native or *canadien* populations. The load capacity of a canoe and the weight

³³ Up to 1841, the currency situation was very chaotic. The most common currency in circulation was the Spanish dollar. One silver \$US was valued at 5s.1d while a gold \$USEagle was worth £2.10s. Rates were fixed in 1841 based on a British gold sovereign. From 1854 to the outbreak of WW1, the adherence of Canada, US and Britain to gold standard resulted in stability of exchange rates. Dollars remained almost equal with variances of +/- .0008 dollars while the two dollar rates remained within 1% of 4.8666 for a pound sterling. The greenback collapse of 1862 kept it out of international circulation until its recovery in 1879. *The History of the Canadian Dollar*. Ottawa: Bank of Canada Publications, 1999. In 1822, £1 Sterling = 12s in £Halifax = 5s in \$US and 27livres. National Archives of Canada, *Hudson's Bay Company Archives* (micro copy), IM 690, B 239 and 272, pg 8, York Factory Account Books, Spring 1826.

³⁴ Mackenzie, *Voyages*, xxviii. The cost of a small canoe purchased inland was around ten "Made Beaver" in 1771. Hearne, *A Journey from Prince of Wales's Fort in Hudson's Bay to the Northern Ocean*, (1795; reprint, Edmonton: M.G.Hurtig Ltd., 1971), 37.

that could be carried over portages came to define the overall size of loads as well as the weight of individual pieces of cargo.³⁵

The character of the transportation system was further defined by two factors. First of all, trade was bi-directional. Generally speaking, Euro-Canadian trade goods were transported inland and furs were transported out to centers for further trans-shipment to Europe. Second, because of the different types of goods flowing in and out of the interior, the actual loading of cargo was quite different depending on the direction of travel. By using fur presses, inland fur traders were able to squeeze a large number of furs into a standard-sized bale that was approximately 90 pounds in weight.³⁶ These bales could be loaded onto

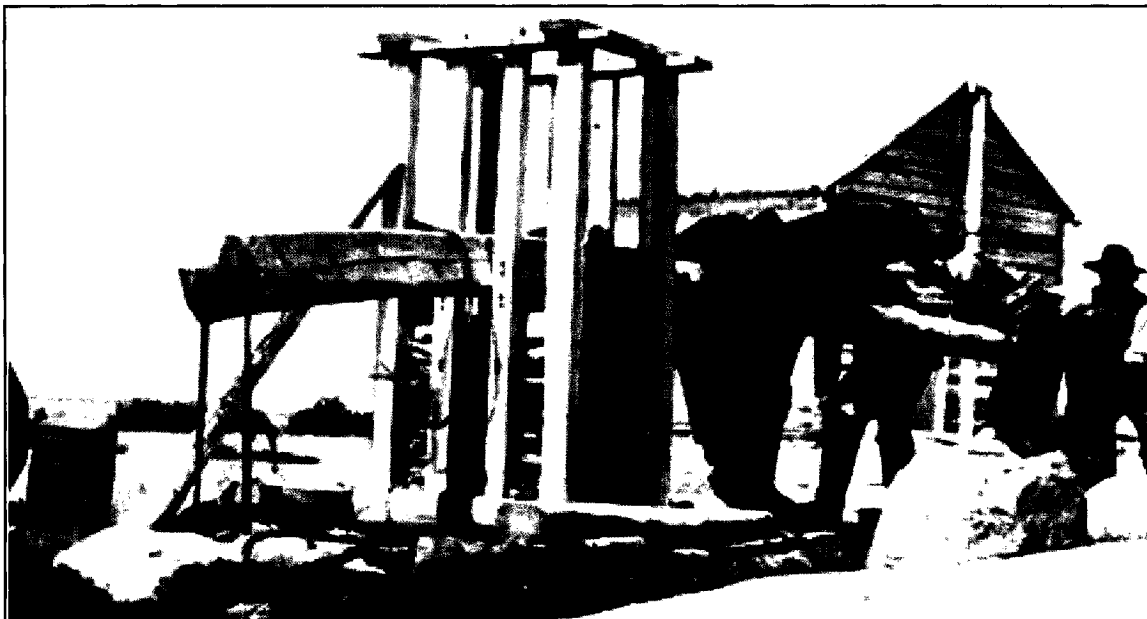


Figure 3

"Hudson's Bay Company Fur Press," (ca 1900). Glenbow Archives, NA-664-1.

³⁵ Typically, canoes for the inland trade were relatively small with a crew of five or six and capable of carrying approximately 35 pieces of cargo. Canoes for the lake traffic were much larger with crews of eight to ten men and capable of carrying as many as 65 pieces of freight. Mackenzie, *Voyages*, xxviii.

³⁶ Elliout Coues, ed., *The expeditions of Zebulon Montgomery Pike to headwaters of the Mississippi River, through Louisiana territory, and in New Spain, during the years 1805-6-7*, (New York: n.p., 1895), quoted in, Innis, *The Fur Trade*, 209. See also, Charles E. Hanson, Jr., "Robe and Fur Presses," *Museum of the Fur Trade Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (Summer, 1967).

virtually any transportation platform and could be carried by hand over the numerous portages along all of the major trading routes.³⁷ Over time, the 90-pound bale became the standard for all cargo and all pack loads, regardless of their contents, came to be known as 'pieces' of freight.³⁸ Cargo coming out of the trade areas consisted almost entirely of standard dimension 'pieces.'³⁹

The loading of cargo for transportation inland was not nearly so straightforward. The wide variety of goods that were offered for sale meant that neither loads nor individual 'pieces' could be standardized to the degree possible for outgoing furs. A typical load might include such items as sewing needles, cutlery, crockery, bolts of cloth, spools of ribbon, tobacco, bags of salt and flour, boxes of shot, barrels of gunpowder, bottles of Port Madeira, cans of macaroon cookies, bales of blankets and cases of guns.⁴⁰ Large, loose items included everything from saw blades to kettles to cannons.⁴¹

Many of the more remote trading posts had very small volumes of trade, so only a very small number of canoes would be sent to them.⁴² Since two or three canoes might carry all of the trade goods for a post for a year, it was not possible to load individual canoes with single commodities. It was also

³⁷ The men who manned the canoes were expected to carry two pieces at a time while portaging, an astonishing 180 pounds. Mackenzie, *Voyages*, xxx.

³⁸ Mackenzie, *Voyages*, xxiv.

³⁹ National Archives of Canada. *Hudson's Bay Company Archives* (micro copy). MG 20F-1. Records of Allied and Subsidiary Companies, North West Company, Minute books (waybills). Kaministiquia, 1807-1814.

⁴⁰ National Archives of Canada, *Hudson's Bay Company Archives* (micro copy), MG 20, B 154/z/1, Norway House Packet Lists, 6 June 1823. See also, National Archives of Canada, *Hudson's Bay Company Archives* (micro copy), MG 20, B 154/z/1, Norway House Packet Lists, Spring 1826.

⁴¹ Mackenzie, *Voyages*, xxv.

⁴² James Bain, ed., *Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian territories, between the years 1760 and 1776...by Alexander Henry, fur trader*, (Toronto: n.p., 1901), quoted in, Innis, *The Fur Trade*, 194.

understood that spreading the loads of individual items out over several canoes was less risky. While the loss of a canoe over rapids would be unfortunate, it would not be catastrophic. If single canoes carrying all of a post's food or gunpowder were lost, the consequences would be grave indeed. This "cross-loading" of cargo became standard practice throughout the fur industry.⁴³

The number of personnel required to make this system work was considerable. For example, in 1796 the NWC employed 1,120 men as canoe crew alone. A further group of 106 men supported the canoe crews as guides and interpreters. The wages for crew varied depending on their actual job but varied between two hundred *livres* per year for the lowest paid, to as much as a thousand *livres* for a guide or an interpreter. If an employee were sent inland over the winter these wages were doubled.⁴⁴ Wages to transportation personnel represented the largest business expense within the NWC trade system.⁴⁵

In comparison to the NWC's transportation arrangements, the HBC's system was the model of simplicity. Since the company's inception in 1670, trade had been conducted on the simple assumption that Native people were willing and able to hunt for fur and to bring it to HBC posts located along the shores of Hudson's Bay. For many years this proved to be a highly profitable arrangement. However, by the middle of the 18th century two factors were beginning to undermine the HBC trade policy.

⁴³ Innis, *The Fur Trade*, 192-94 and 209.

⁴⁴ Mackenzie, *Voyages*, xxvii.

⁴⁵ Innis, *The Fur Trade*, 216-223. See also, Mackenzie, *Voyages*, lii-liii.

First of all, as the trade progressed, the fur-bearing animal populations in the areas closest to the trade centers were quickly destroyed.⁴⁶ As the distance between the source of the furs and the trade posts increased, there was a corresponding increase in the travel time necessary for Native hunters to deliver the furs to the point of sale. There were also negative consequences for the Native groups that supplied the furs. As fur supplies were exhausted within the territory of individual Native groups, those groups were compelled either to become middlemen for more distant groups or to compete directly for the fur. For the groups that found themselves as the new suppliers of furs, their choices were to accept that they would deal through Native middlemen or to attempt to deal directly with the HBC by transiting hostile territory.⁴⁷ Either way, the cost to the Native hunters was climbing.⁴⁸

The other factor undermining the HBC's traditional trade policy was the increasing and increasingly aggressive competition from the Montreal trading concerns. The capture of Quebec by the British in 1759 had led to a momentary interruption of the Montreal based trade but the interruption was brief indeed. Almost immediately, new companies were formed and soon the trade was reestablished and fully functioning. By 1770, the HBC was feeling the effects of this trade as more and more fur was diverted south from Rupert's Land.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Rich, *The Fur Trade*, 247.

⁴⁷ Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies*, 27-30.

⁴⁸ On the rare occasions before 1774 when Hudson's Bay Company goods were offered for sale inland the mark-up in price was a staggering 1000 percent. Hearne, *A Journey*, 176.

⁴⁹ National Archives of Canada, *Hudson's Bay Company Archives* (micro copy), IM 159, B.239/a/70-81, York Post Journals, 1776-1777.

Competition between the HBC and the Montreal firms led to a cleavage in trade wherever Native fur suppliers had the option of dealing with either company. Because the HBC posts were located along the coast of Hudson's Bay, goods were delivered directly into the company's stores from large ships. This meant that bulky or heavy items could be offered for sale at a reasonable cost. Since the Montreal traders had to transport all of their goods inland before offering them for sale, the costs of transportation drove up the price of their goods and made the sale of some large items impractical if not impossible.⁵⁰

But the Montreal traders had the advantage of having their agents located within the communities of the Native fur suppliers where they were able to have the first pick of furs offered for sale. Since the same transportation costs applied to goods coming in as to furs moving out, it was clearly to the Montrealers' advantage to specialize in lower volume, high-value trade items⁵¹ and to deal in the best and most sought after of the 'fancy' furs.⁵²

This strategy was hugely successful. By the end of the 1770s, the furs that the Montreal firms were shipping to London were five to tens times as valuable as those coming from Hudson's Bay.⁵³ By the end of the eighteenth century, the NWC had effective control over the specialty fur market while the HBC dominated the trade in beaver pelts and in low-grade 'fancy' furs. The HBC

⁵⁰ G.P. deT Glazebrook, *A History of Transportation in Canada, vol 1, Continental Strategy to 1867*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964), 20-21.

⁵¹ U.K. Parliament. House of Commons. Report from the Committee appointed to enquire into the state and condition of the countries adjoining to Hudson's Bay, and of the trade carried on there, reported by Lord Strange, 274.

⁵² Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies*, 46.

⁵³ National Archives of Canada, *Hudson's Bay Company Archives* (micro copy), A 1/46/41-41d. See also, Rich, *The Fur Trade*, 174. Rich puts the value of the trade for the HBC and the NWC in 1784 as £242,000 and £30,000 respectively.

knew that it would have to adapt its trade practices if it were to have any hope of challenging the NWC.

The break in HBC policy came in 1774 when Samuel Hearne was sent to establish the first inland post west of the bay at Cumberland House on the Saskatchewan River.⁵⁴ (Map 4) Within a few years a string of HBC posts was established as the company confronted the Montreal traders head on. For the next half-century inland competition for the fur supply was direct, fierce and often violent.⁵⁵

This change in HBC trading policy also meant that it had to establish its own inland transportation network. In the beginning the system operated in much the same manner as the NWC network. Canoes were the main mode of transport and both loads and individual pieces of freight were determined by the same logic as applied for the Montreal firms. Inevitably, costs rose as more and more men and equipment were committed to the inland transportation of goods and furs.⁵⁶

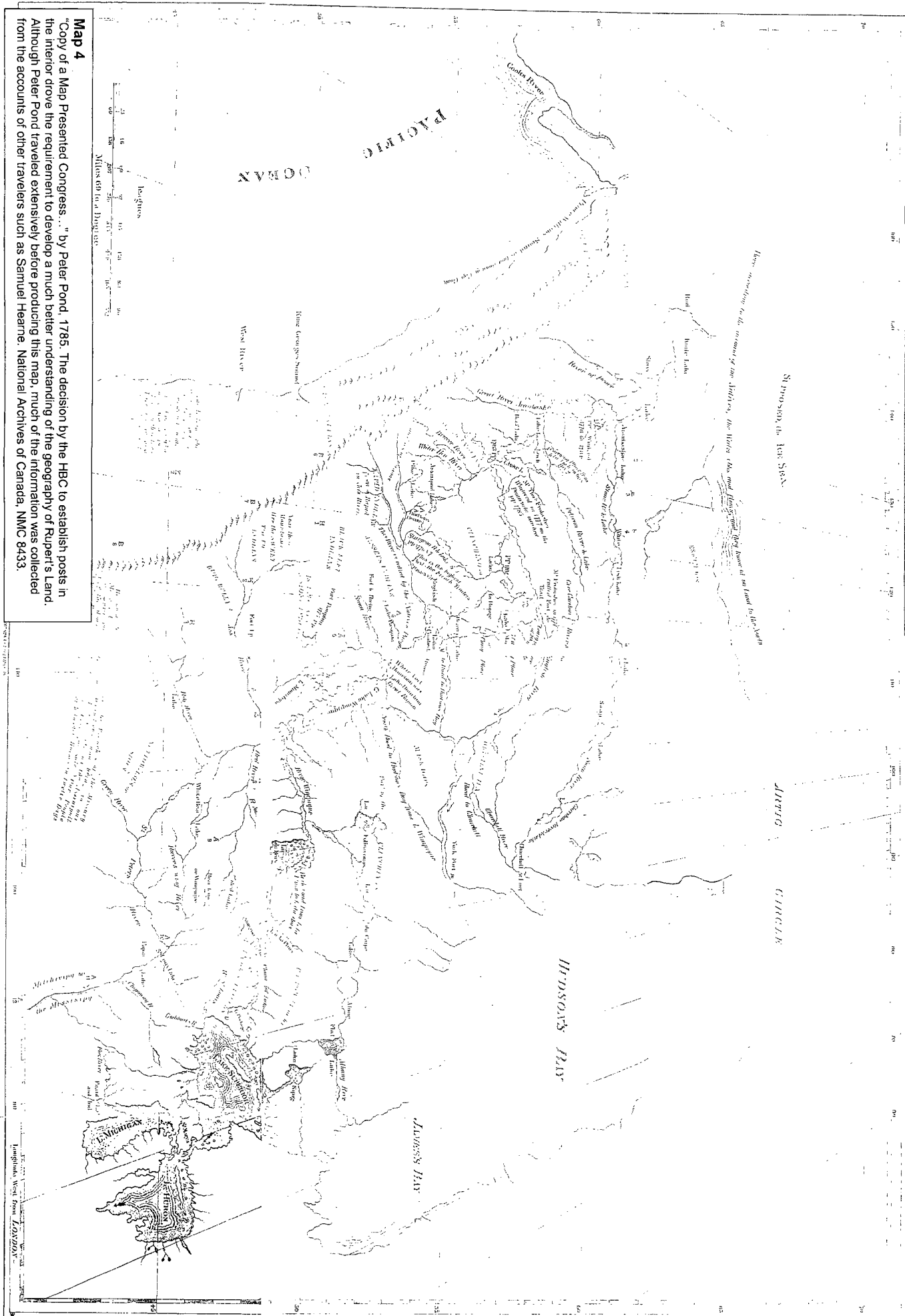
By 1800 the NWC and the HBC both had numerous inland trading posts, long lines of communication, and large numbers of personnel employed in moving goods. Two huge transportation webs spread out across the Canadian interior. In many areas the systems overlapped and in some places competing trading establishments were located side by side.⁵⁷ The HBC had greatly

⁵⁴ Hearne, *A Journey*, xxii. A small post had been established at Henley House in 1741 but was never more than a subsidiary of its parent establishment at Fort Albany. deT Glazebrook, *A History of Transportation in Canada*, vol 1, 21.

⁵⁵ *The Collected Writings of Lord Selkirk, 1810-1820*, J.M. Bumsted, ed., (Winnipeg: The Manitoba Record Society, 1987), 66. See also, Innis, *The Fur Trade*, 279.

⁵⁶ Glazebrook, *A History of Transportation in Canada*, vol 1, 48-51.

⁵⁷ National Archives of Canada, *Selkirk Papers*, I, 65, f.



Map 4
"Copy of a Map Presented Congress. . . by Peter Pond, 1785. The decision by the HBC to establish posts in the interior drove the requirement to develop a much better understanding of the geography of Rupert's Land. Although Peter Pond traveled extensively before producing this map, much of the information was collected from the accounts of other travelers such as Samuel Hearne. National Archives of Canada, NMC 8433."

enhanced its ability to get at the higher quality furs than had previously been the case, but this came at the price of increased transportation costs. The NWC had forced the HBC to compete on its terms but was quickly confronted with a stark geographic reality. In spite of its headstart in establishing links with the inland Native peoples, the NWC soon found itself at a severe disadvantage due to the HBC's shorter lines of communication back to Hudson's Bay.⁵⁸ As each year passed, the HBC gained a larger and larger share of the market. Unfortunately for both companies, the total number of furs being harvested was in decline.⁵⁹

Although the routes along the rivers and lakes of the Canadian interior dominated the organized fur trade transportation arrangements, land transport had always been, and remained, an important part of the overall transportation network. There were three main elements to overland transport arrangements up to 1821. First of all, even at its most extensive, the fur trade's waterborne transport system was confined to a relatively small number of routes connecting various trading establishments. These posts were like stations along a railroad. Behind each post a web of formal and informal paths served the hinterland. Some of these paths served as feeder lines for the fur routes but much of the network was simply the existing Native structure.⁶⁰ Both the NWC and the HBC relied on this system as the principal means for the final distribution of products to Native consumers and for the collection of furs from individual and community Native fur harvesters.

⁵⁸ Innis, *The Fur Trade*, 254-55.

⁵⁹ Innis, *The Fur Trade*, 263.

⁶⁰ Spry, *From The Hunt to The Homestead*, 1/2-14.

Second, waterborne communications were interrupted by many obstacles such as rapids, waterfalls and sandbars.⁶¹ Additionally, it was often necessary to transfer from one river system to another to gain access to various posts. This almost invariably included transiting a watershed defined by a height of land.⁶² The nearly universal method of dealing with these problems was the portage. Canoes and cargoes were carried over or around the various obstacles on the backs of the crews of the canoes. Over the years portages along the main



Figure 4

"Hudson's Bay Company voyageurs at portage on trip from Lake Winnipeg to York Factory," 1882. Glenbow Archives, NA-1041-6.

⁶¹ For example, on the 657 mile long route from Lake Superior to Lake Winnipeg there were 53 portages and 9 décharges. (A décharge involved the unloading of all cargo from the canoe after which the obstacle, typically a rapids, would be passed by paddling or "running" the rapids with the empty canoe. The freight was then carried by hand across the obstacle and reloaded in the canoe.) deT Glazebrook, *A History of Transportation in Canada*, vol 1, 37.

⁶² deT Glazebrook, *A History of Transportation in Canada*, vol 1, 39.

routes became well defined, established paths. In a few cases, the portages were so long and difficult that it became necessary to establish permanent teams of pack carriers at the sites.⁶³

For example, in the case of the Grand Portage connecting Lake Superior to the waters leading west through the Lake of the Woods area, a small post was set up at each end of the 15 kilometre portage.⁶⁴ A team of men lived at each of these posts and their sole job was to carry baggage from one side of the portage to the other.⁶⁵ The work routine on this portage was literally staggering.

Carriers were expected to carry two pieces of freight over the length of the portage in a single day. Typically, a carrier hauled his load for approximately 750 metres after which he would rest for ten minutes. This was repeated over and over until arriving at the other end of the portage. Mercifully, carriers were only expected to make one trip every two days. Eventually, as the route was improved and draught animals were introduced, and by 1821 the portage had been transformed into an all-season road.⁶⁶

The final element in the land transport system consisted of Métis cart trails that extended from the Métis communities located along the Red and Assiniboine

⁶³ This appears to have been instituted around 1790 in at least two locations; Portage la Loche on the Churchill River and Kaministiquia on Lake Superior. Mackenzie, *Voyages*, xxviii.

⁶⁴ Prior to the establishment of the permanent carrier teams, the crews that had come from Montreal were expected to deliver their cargoes to the western end of the portage where it would be picked up by inland crews. These crews then turned around for the return trip that would get them back to Montreal in September, a round trip of approximately six months. Mackenzie, *Voyages*, xlv-xlvi.

⁶⁵ Large canoes or one of the few small ships moved goods and furs across Lake Superior to and from the east end of the Grand Portage while inland crews took over in canoes from the western end of the track. deT Glazebrook, *A History of Transportation in Canada*, vol 1, 31.

⁶⁶ A similar, but less elaborate system was used on the Portage la Loche portage on the Churchill River. At the busy Sault St. Marie portage a road and primitive canal were constructed. deT Glazebrook, *A History of Transportation in Canada*, vol 1, 36.

Rivers south to the bison hunting areas. These trails were not part of the fur trade transportation network *per se* but were an indirect product of fur trade activities.

The vast and overlapping NWC and HBC inland fur trade transportation arrangements created an enormous demand for provisions. In particular, there was a constant demand for food for the canoe crews that moved furs and goods along the inland waterways. What was required was a foodstuff that could be readily transported, easily preserved and was high in calories. Pemmican, a product made from ground, dried meat and animal fat, turned out to be ideally suited for the fur trade's needs.⁶⁷

In the early days of the trade, pemmican (and other foodstuffs) was normally purchased from Native people along the various routes of travel. However, sometime in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, the Métis began to dominate the provisioning trade, especially the production of pemmican.⁶⁸ The basic ingredient of pemmican was bison meat but by the 1800's there were very few bison left in the immediate vicinity of either the Métis communities or the fur trade posts that were the main purchasers of the product. At least as early as 1818 and probably earlier, large numbers of Métis hunters were gathering together and heading out into the prairies in search of bison. Hunters traveled south as individuals or as families until they reached an agreed upon rendezvous. At that point the group organized itself for the hunt and struck

⁶⁷ Alexander Ross, *The Red River Settlement*, (1856; reprint, Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1972), 257.

⁶⁸ *Hudson's Bay Company Archives*, B 239/6/99, J. Hargrave to Sir John Richardson, 12 July 1848.

out for the prairie. As early as 1816, a cart road heading south from the Red River Settlement to the settlement at Pembina appeared on maps drawn by HBC employees (Map 4).⁶⁹ By 1821 the road extended at least as far south as Georgetown in what is now North Dakota.⁷⁰ The pattern of Métis involvement in land transport was already being established.

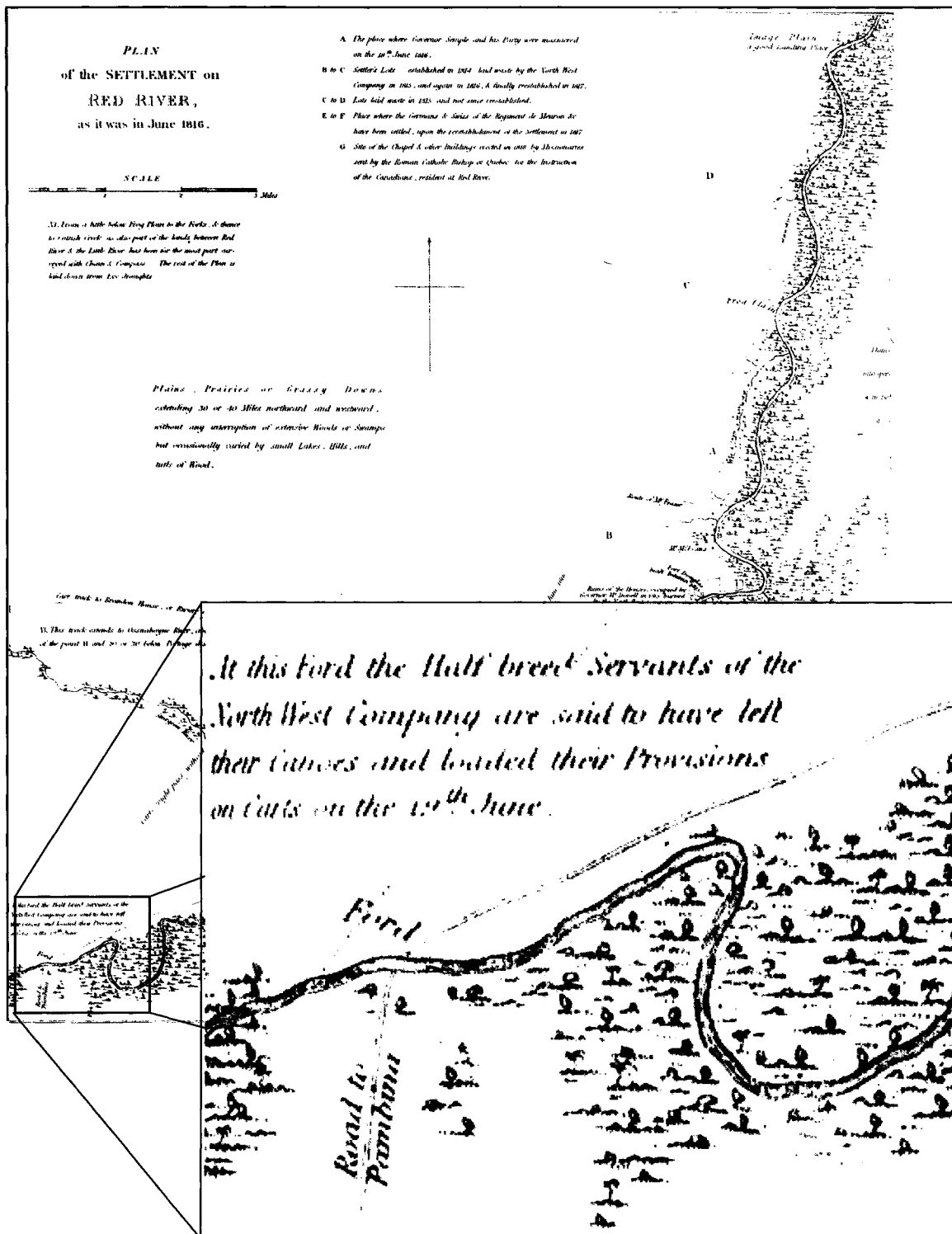
Although it happened almost concurrently with the first efforts to merge the two great fur-trade companies, the establishment of Lord Selkirk's colony at Red River was eventually to figure very large in the transportation system of Rupert's Land. From its first, tentative establishment, the settlement became the locus of controversy, struggle and violence. The HBC had always resisted efforts at settlement within their territories believing, with good reason, that settlers would only serve to interfere with their fur operations. Not only would settlers scare away animals and destroy wildlife habitat, eventually they would be potential competitors within the fur trade itself.⁷¹ Nevertheless, by 1811, Thomas Douglas, Lord Selkirk, had successfully lobbied the British government and the HBC for the grant of a huge tract of land within Rupert's Land.⁷²

⁶⁹ Aaron Arrowsmith's Map of Red River Settlement as it was in 1816 (printed in 1819). John Warkentin and Richard I. Ruggles, *Historical Atlas of Manitoba: A Selection of Facsimile Maps, Plans and Sketches from 1612 to 1969*, (Winnipeg: Manitoba Historical Society, 1970), 188-89. The Pembina Road is also clearly marked on Peter Fidler's 1819 map. Public Archives of Manitoba. *Hudson's Bay Company Archives*. Maps: B.22/e/1 fo. 1d. "A Map of Red River District 1819" by Peter Fidler. These maps directly refute the assertions of several historians who have suggested that the Selkirk settlers were the initiators of a land link to the United States in the 1820s. See in particular, Spry, *From The Hunt to The Homestead*, 1/21.

⁷⁰ Georgetown (originally known as Sheyenne) was located at the point in the Red River where it became practical for navigation. Rhoda A. Gilman, Carolyn Gilman and Deborah M. Schulz. *The Red River Trails: 1820-1870*, (St. Paul, Minnesota: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1979), 71.

⁷¹ Spry, *From The Hunt to The Homestead*, 1/8.

⁷² The 116,000 square mile territory, Assiniboia, was handed over for the token payment of ten shillings. Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies*, 70-72.



Map 5

"Aaron Arrowsmith's Map of Red River Settlement as it was in 1816," printed in 1819. Even at this early date, the road to Pembina is clearly marked. John Warkentin and Richard I. Ruggles The Historical Atlas of Manitoba: A Selection of Facsimile Maps, Plans, and Sketches from 1612 to 1969, (Winnipeg: Manitoba Historical Society, 1970).

From the start there were problems. The settlers arrived at Hudson's Bay too late in the year and did not even make it to the Red River country. An excessively long journey from the bay to the site of the new colony in 1812 meant that no cultivation was possible and the first winter in Canada was one of hunger and misery. More trouble followed. By 1815 many of the settlers had had enough and left for Canada.⁷³

More important was the fact that the location chosen for the community lay astride the lines of communication of the NWC and was in the heart of the territory that was the source of the company's provisions. From the NWC's perspective, the colony was a direct and serious challenge to their operations.⁷⁴ The company responded by encouraging the local Native and Métis populations to resist the intruders. The NWC language was clear; it was their intention to, "...commence hostilities against the enemy in Red River."⁷⁵ The crisis reached its peak in June 1816 and the Battle of Seven Oaks was the result.⁷⁶ The Settlement remained a serious flashpoint for tensions between the rival companies right up to the time of amalgamation.

By 1816 the NWC and the HBC were in a competitive death grip. Like two scorpions trapped under a jar their attentions were riveted on each other, lashing out with stinging blows but never able to completely subdue their opponent. The Nor' Westers succeeded in scattering the Selkirk settlers only to see them return

⁷³ Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies*, 74.

⁷⁴ Whether or not the HBC had deliberately tried to interfere with the NWC by supporting Selkirk's choice of the junction of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers is matter of some debate but the effect was clear. For a full discussion of this see, J.M. Bumsted, *Fur Trade Wars: The Founding of Western Canada*, (Winnipeg: Great Plains Publications, 1999).

⁷⁵ Rich, *The Fur Trade*, 219.

⁷⁶ MacLeod, *Cuthbert Grant of Grantown*, 38-52.

in greater strength the next year. The Bay men, in spite of nearly half a century of effort in the interior, were still unable to dislodge the Montreal 'pedlars' from their positions deep within the Native fur hunters' communities. At numerous posts the rivals literally stared at each other from adjacent trade forts in full knowledge of the fact that there wasn't enough business for two companies. The HBC, by virtue of its possession of the shorter lines of communication to the interior, had survived the NWC challenge at the end of the eighteenth century but it did so at the cost of any real profitability.⁷⁷ The overriding reality of the fur trade was that the receipts of both companies were in decline.⁷⁸ When representatives of the NWC and the HBC met in London in late 1820 to discuss the trade, the existing conditions suggested that a merger was perhaps inevitable. This was, after all, supposed to be a business. It was time to lift the jar and free the scorpions.

⁷⁷ The importance of the transportation costs is plainly evident in the rising cost of goods as they moved inland. By the beginning of the 19th century, NWC goods were marked up by 23% over Montreal prices by the time they reached Kaministiquia. At Fond du Lac the markup rose to 55%, at Lake Winnipeg it was 87% and by the time goods were deep in the prime fur country of Athabasca the markup was no less than 130%. By contrast, HBC goods were marked up by 10% when delivered to any inland post with an additional 10% for posts further away than Lake Winnipeg. The HBC was carrying goods into the interior at less than half the cost of the NWC. deT Glazebrook, *A History of Transportation in Canada*, vol 1, 53.

⁷⁸ Innis, *The Fur Trade*, 165.

Chapter 3

Transportation in Rupert's Land after 1821

When the HBC absorbed the NWC in 1821, the most urgent order of business was to consolidate and rationalize the various assets and processes of the two companies.¹ In a manner familiar to modern victims of corporate mergers, company staff were cut from the payroll or reassigned, trading posts were closed or moved, and local trading arrangements were reorganized in numerous locations. Changes were wide-ranging and affected everything from the London offices of the HBC to the staffing of individual trading posts.² Under the leadership of George Simpson, the new Governor of the Northern Department, the new monopoly sought out economies and savings wherever possible.³ Expenses were trimmed, provisions and supplies were scrutinized for excess and the self-sufficiency of individual posts was encouraged. Particular attention was paid to identifying redundant trading establishments and closing them.⁴ By 1825 the number of posts had been reduced by more than half (Maps 5 and 6).⁵ The fur industry had undergone a radical transformation and was

¹ There remains some debate as to who absorbed whom in this transaction. For a discussion of the merger arrangements see, Bumsted, *Fur Trade Wars*, 217-34.

² Innis, *The Fur Trade*, 283-87.

³ The Northern Department was the most important and largest of the three departments of the HBC operation. The other departments were the Southern and the Montreal. The Northern Department generated more than three times as much profit as the Southern Department and as much as twelve times the profit of the Montreal Department. Innis, *The Fur Trade*, 286.

⁴ The extent of the overlap in the trade operations of the NWC and the HBC is evident in the number and location of the various trading centers in 1821. *Atlas Historique du Canada: Des origines à 1800*, dir. R.Cole Harris, (Montreal: Les presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1987), Planche 62.

⁵ *Atlas Historique du Canada*, Planche 62.

being driven by a new set of priorities. Until 1821 the logic of the fur trade organization was based on competition, after 1821 it was based on economy.

Perhaps the greatest changes came in the transportation apparatus. This had profound effects both on the fur trade organization and on the people directly or indirectly involved in it. The first and most radical change came in the system for moving goods by water. Except as a track for the fast movement of important passengers and mail, the Great Lakes route was immediately dropped, unceremoniously ending its century-and-a-half reign as the main thoroughfare into the Canadian interior.⁶ After 1821, the principal supply route was through the Hudson's Bay factories.

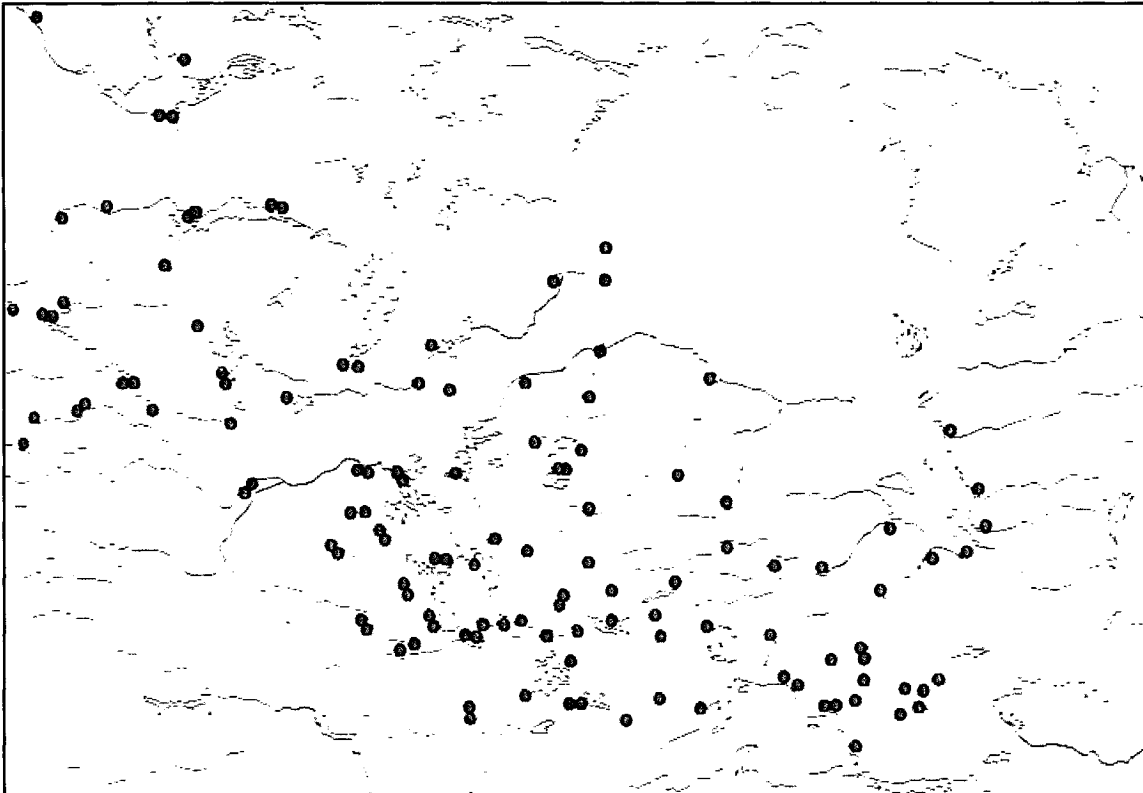
There was also a dramatic change in the mode of transport within the system. Immediately after taking up his post, George Simpson conducted a whirlwind tour of the posts within his area. During this trip he made a simple observation: York boats, the large rowboats that had been operating on the lower Nelson and Churchill Rivers for many years, were quite capable of operating over most of the company's routes.⁷ This was extremely important because York boats were superior to canoes in several respects.

First of all, unlike canoes, a York boat did not need a highly trained crew.⁸ All that was required was a good steersman and bowman; the remainder of the crew needed no special skills. Second, European carpenters could build the

⁶ F. Stewart Wallace, ed., *Documents Related to the North West Company*, (Toronto: The Champlain Society XXII, 1934), 328.

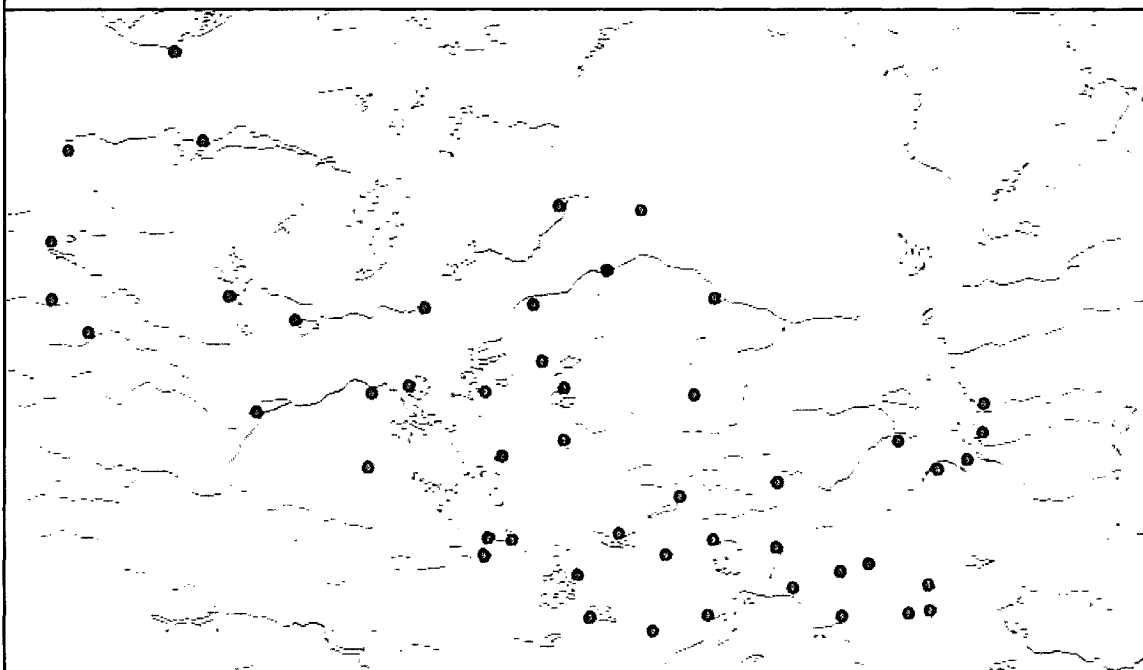
⁷ *Journal of Occurrences in the Athabasca Department by Georges Simpson, 1820 and 1821, and Report*, E.E. Rich, ed., (London: The Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1938), lvi.

⁸ Edwin Tappan Adney and Howard I. Chappelle, *The Bark Canoes and Skin Boats of North America*, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1964), 143.



Map 6

Distribution of Trading Posts – 1821. *Atlas Historique du Canada: Des origines à 1800*, dir R.Cole Harris, (Montreal: Les presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1987), Planche 62.



Map 7

Distribution of Trading Posts – 1825. *Atlas Historique du Canada: Des origines à 1800*, dir R.Cole Harris, (Montreal: Les presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1987), Planche 62.

boats, theoretically reducing both the cost of boats and the company's dependence on Native canoe-builders.⁹ Most important, York boats with a crew of eight could carry much more cargo than a similarly manned canoe. Simpson's notebook from 1823 included a rough calculation that estimated a one-third savings of transport costs wherever York boats could be used.¹⁰ As it turned out, the savings were even more than this on most routes.¹¹

Although the replacement of canoes with York boats was not universally celebrated, many of the crews hated York boat work, the efficiencies were irresistible.¹² Canoes still served some of the smaller and more remote trading posts and they continued to be employed in circumstances where high speed was required.¹³ Nevertheless, by 1825, the vast majority of the HBC's inland riverine and lake transport was by York boat (Maps 7 and 8).¹⁴ For the next half-century, until the arrival of steamboats, York boats carried the bulk of the HBC's waterborne trade.

The actual work of moving goods by York boat was straightforward enough. Typically, boats would begin the year in the interior at places like Fort Chipewyan, Fort Edmonton and Fort Garry. Furs collected over the winter would

⁹ *Minutes of Council Northern Department of Rupert's Land, 1821-31*, R. Harvey Fleming, ed., (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1940), 396.

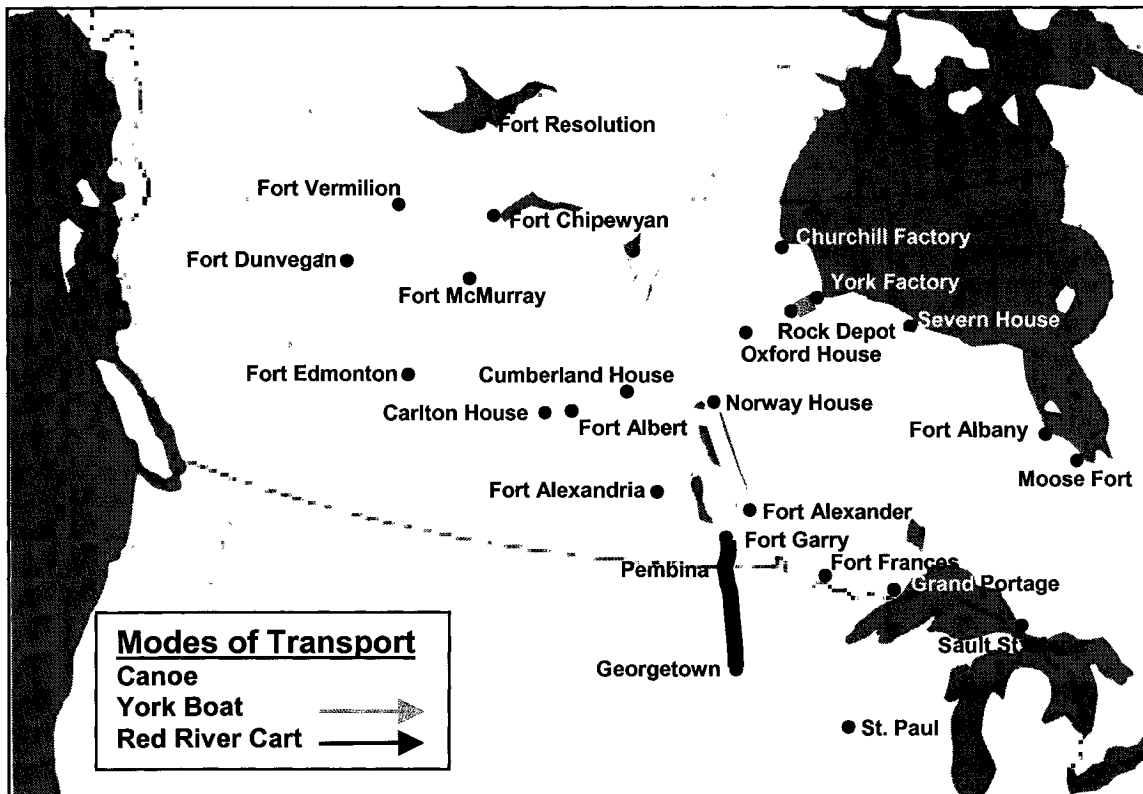
¹⁰ *Journal of Occurrences*, 402.

¹¹ Innis, *The Fur Trade*, 292.

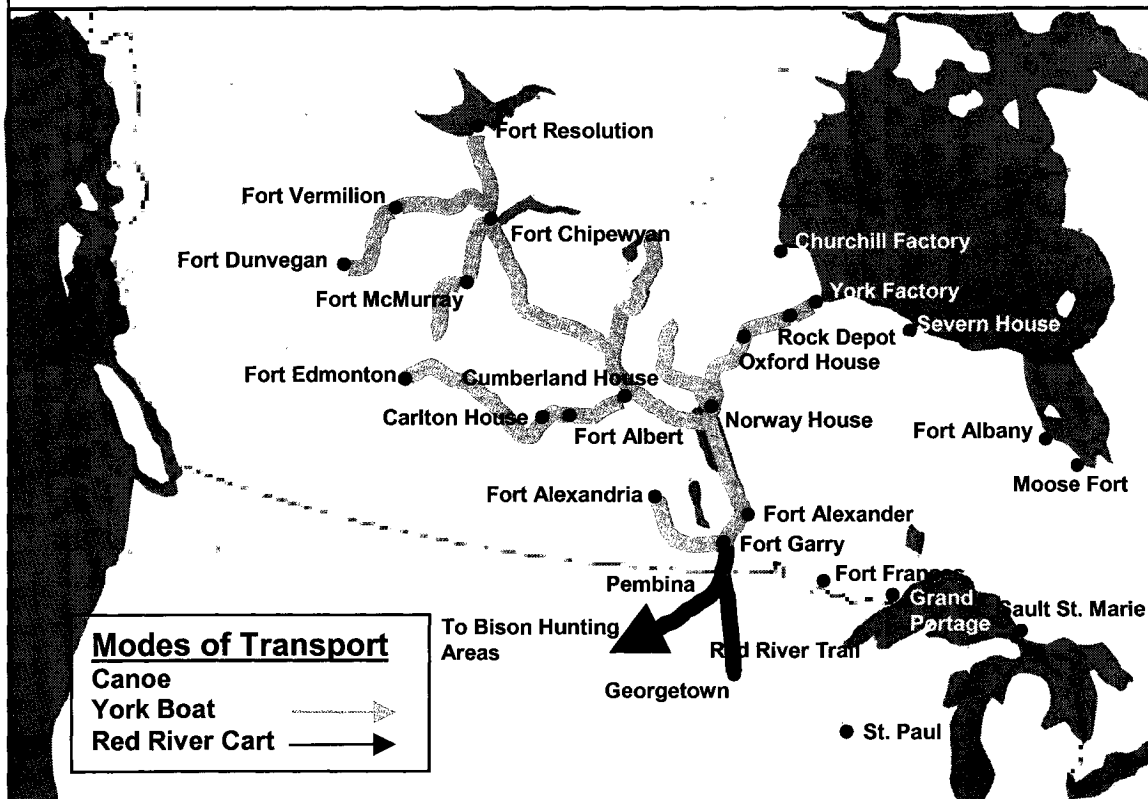
¹² Nicholas Garry, "Diary of Nicholas Garry, deputy-governor of the Hudson's Bay Company from 1822-1835: A detailed narrative of his travels in the Northwest territories of British North America in 1821." *Proceedings and Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada. Second Series*. Vol VII, 1900. Quoted in, Innis, *The Fur Trade*, 289. See also George Simpson's comments on the crews' attitude in, *Minutes of Council*, 422.

¹³ *Minutes of Council*, 350.

¹⁴ Garry, "Diary of Nicholas Garry," 151.



Map 8
 Principal Transportation Routes – 1821.



Map 9
 Principal Transportation Routes – 1825.

be packed into standard 90 pound 'pieces' and loaded into the boats. Depending on the route and the place of origin, the boats then traveled either to York Factory or to the depot at Norway House.¹⁵ Although normally driven by the power of the oarsmen, the boats routinely hoisted small sails to take advantage of winds whenever possible. In 1823, York Boats were able to make the trip from Fort Garry to York Factory via Norway House in 15 to 20 days, bettering the canoe times by from 3 to 6 days.¹⁶

Until 1859, the routine established by 1827 was followed with little change except adjustments to accommodate increasing volumes of trade.¹⁷ Each year, and with the numbers steadily rising over time, approximately 75 York boats plied

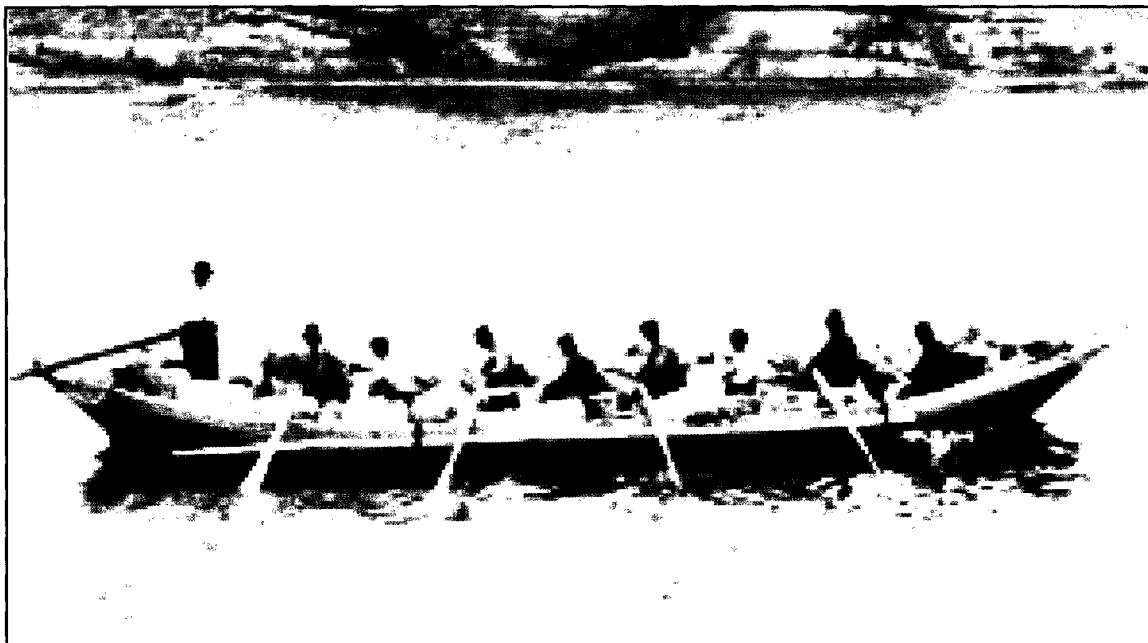


Figure 5

"York boat." Photograph by R.A. Talbot. HBCA 1987/363-Y-2/65.

¹⁵ *Minutes of Council*, 342. The work was also dangerous. See for example, *Undelivered Letters to Hudson's Bay Company Men on the Northwest Coast of America, 1830-57*, Judith Hudson Beattie and Helen M. Buss, ed., (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2003), 328.

¹⁶ The upstream trip took 30 to 35 days. W.H. Keating, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of St. Peter's River, Lake Winnepeek, Lake of the Woods &c, 1823*. Quoted in, Harold A. Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History*. 1930. (Reprint, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1956), 291.

¹⁷ See Figure 8 (page 77) for comparative time/distance tables.

the rivers and lakes of Rupert's Land carrying goods and people while another dozen or so light canoes carried important passengers and mail at high speed.¹⁸ Significantly, more and more of the goods moving by boat were the result of economic activities of the resident and growing population of Rupert's Land.¹⁹ In the beginning, the needs of Rupert's Land and the needs of the HBC were synonymous. With each passing year this was less the case.

Although York Boats continued to dominate the riverine transport industry in the 1860s and remained in use well into the 20th century, their eventual displacement as the workhorse of the trade was foreshadowed in the early summer of 1859. That year, the steamboat *Anson Northrup* made its first trip on the Red River between Breckenridge and Fort Garry.²⁰

By 1859, steam-powered boats had been in operation for many years. The first practical steamboats had been launched in Europe in the first decade of the nineteenth century and within a few years were in widespread use.²¹ By the 1840s, steamships were a common sight on the lakes and rivers of Canada and the United States.²² Still, steam power was slow to arrive in the west. The main problems with putting these boats into operation were the numerous obstacles

¹⁸ These numbers do not include the Columbia district nor the canoe traffic on the lower Mackenzie River. *Minutes of Council*, 277-81. Over the period 1825 to 1875, the number of boats operating on these routes grew from approximately thirty to upwards of eighty. In 1861 there were fifty-five boats on the main route between Red River and York Factory. Manton Marble, "To Red River and Beyond," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 22, No. 129. (February, 1861), 317.

¹⁹ For example, in 1825 some 32,000 pounds of goods were brought into the Red River colony to service the demands of the population. By 1828 this had grown to over 63,000 and by 1830 to approximately 70,000 pounds. *Minutes of Council*, lviii.

²⁰ Luc Dauphinais, *Histoire de Saint-Boniface: À l'ombre des cathédrales*, (Saint-Boniface, Manitoba: Les Éditions du Blé, 1991), 253. Breckenridge, in what is now western Minnesota, was the highest point of the Red River that was considered navigable in 1859.

²¹ Robert H. Thurston, *Robert Fulton - His Life and Its Results*, (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company Publishers, 1891), 23-24.

²² deT Glazebrook, *A History of Transportation in Canada*, vol 1, 86-94.

and low water levels that had plagued canoe and York boat crews for centuries.²³

Portaging was simply not an option for steamboats.

In spite of the limitations, it was clear to many in the west that steamboats were the best solution to the question of how to move large amounts of freight at a reasonable cost.²⁴ This was particularly relevant as railroads were moving deeper into the North American interior and larger and larger volumes of freight were being carried.²⁵

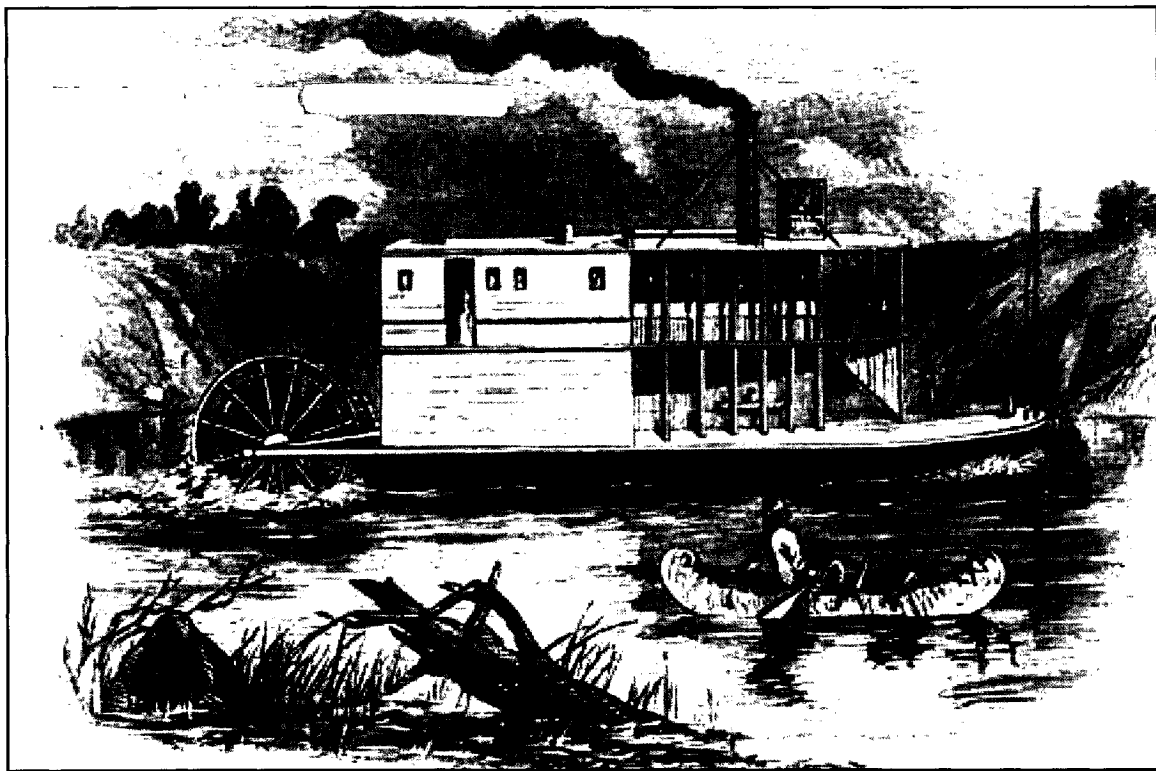


Figure 6

"Steamboat 'Anson Northrup' on Red River, Manitoba, 1860." Glenbow Archives, NA-1406-9.

²³ Travelers to the area were very pessimistic regarding the navigability of the waterways of Rupert's Land for craft larger than the York boats. One American who visited the area at about the same time as the introduction in service of the Anson Northrup commented that the rivers were, "...unfortunately very unfit for the purposes of navigation..." "North American Explorations," *The Living Age*, Vol. 67, No. 859. (17 November, 1860), 434.

²⁴ Joseph James Hargrave, *Red River*, (Montreal,: Printed for the author by J. Lovell, 1871), 52.

²⁵ Albro Martin, *James J. Hill and the Opening of the Northwest*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 114.

By 1858, the merchants of St. Paul were so convinced of the necessity of establishing steamboat service on the Red River that they offered a prize of \$1000 to the first person who could put a boat into operation.²⁶ It was this prize that attracted the attention of Captain Anson Northrup, the operator of a steamboat working on the lower Mississippi River.

Northrup's approach was simple and effective. To save both time and money, Northrup dismantled the boat that he already had, discarded the hull, transported the machinery to the Red River and built a new hull. By 1859 his eponymous boat was ready. Departing Breckenridge on 6 June, Northrup was able to complete the 500-mile trip to Fort Garry within four days.²⁷ The idea of operating steamboats on the Red River had been proven, at least as a concept.²⁸

Still, the arrival of the *Anson Northrup* in Fort Garry, however auspicious it may have seemed at the time, did not result in any great immediate changes in the overall transportation routine.²⁹ First of all, there was still the perennial problem of the water level in the river which, from year to year, was quite variable depending on the amount of rain. Although the steamboats had the potential to

²⁶ Alvin C. Glueck, *Minnesota and the Manifest Destiny of the Canadian Northwest: A Study in Canadian-American Relations*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 144-45.

²⁷ Dauphinais, *Histoire de Saint-Boniface*, 253.

²⁸ For a reaction to the opening of steamboat service see, Service des Archives de la Société historique de Saint-Boniface. Fonds Corporation archiepiscopale catholique romaine de Saint-Boniface. Série Provencher. Boîte 4, Cahier I. P-3529, 13 September 1859.

²⁹ There were certainly some who thought that this was the dawn of a new era. See for example the enthusiastic comments of the Anglican Minister Father Hunter who speculated that the steamboats would result in significant economies and that, "...the freight to St. Paul will be less than to York Factory." Robert Coutts, *The Road to the Rapids: Nineteenth Century Church and Society at St. Andrew's Parish, Red River*, (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2000), 166. James Carnegie, Earl of Southesk, was on hand when the boat arrived and noted that, "Thursday, the tenth of June, was a notable day at Fort Garry [...] this small, shabby, stern-wheel boat, mean and insignificant in itself but important as the harbinger of new developments [...]." Earl of Southesk, *Saskatchewan and the Rocky Mountains*, (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1875), 445.

move goods much more quickly than the overland route, the variations in water levels made actual deliveries unreliable.³⁰ Furthermore, the increase in speed came at a premium in the freight rate. For most shippers, the reliable overland route was still preferred over the fast but expensive and unreliable river route.³¹

There was also the problem of the steamboats themselves. Although the *Anson Northrup* was serviceable enough to make the initial prize-winning trip in 1859, it was, in the words of one commentator, "[...] never much of a boat."³² It only made one more trip that year after which it had to be completely overhauled before the next season.

In the meantime, the boat changed hands as the HBC worked to gain control over the new mode of transport. Renamed the *Pioneer*, the boat was operated by the Burbank brothers who had been underwritten by the Company in the purchase of the boat in exchange for a whopping 50% discount on the rate for freight.³³ In 1861 the HBC assumed outright ownership of the *Pioneer*. Unfortunately, that winter the boat sank from neglect and was dismantled.³⁴

Another steamboat, the *International*, was put into service by the Burbank brothers in 1862. The boat was almost immediately sold to the HBC who found little use for it other than to operate a weekly mail service between Fort Garry

³⁰ Melvin E. Kazeck, *North Dakota: a Human and Economic Geography*, (Fargo, North Dakota: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota Agricultural College, 1956), 39.

³¹ Hargrave, *Red River*, 52.

³² One crewman on the boat described it as, "[...] a lumbering old pine basket you had to handle as gingerly as a hamper full of eggs." "North American Explorations," *The Living Age*, Vol. 67, No. 859. (17 November, 1860), 434.

³³ "Fargo: It's History and Images," Fargo, North Dakota: Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota State University, 2004.

³⁴ Innis, *The Fur Trade*, 343.

and Pembina where river conditions were more reliable.³⁵ Although begun with much fanfare and enthusiasm in 1859, regular steamboat transport to and within Rupert's Land had to wait another decade until the conditions of transportation in the west had changed.

The change came in 1871 with the arrival of the Northern Pacific Railroad at the Red River at Moorehead, Minnesota.³⁶ This railhead eliminated the more problematic parts of the steamboat route and made their operation economically feasible. Almost immediately, an entrepreneur named James Hill put the steamboat *Selkirk* into operation between Moorehead and Fort Garry.³⁷ The HBC responded by putting the *International* back into regular freight service.³⁸ Again working to maintain control through a third party, the HBC partnered with Hill to form the Red River Transportation Company. This company, run by Norman Kittson, soon added three more boats to the river fleet; the *Dakota* in 1872 and the *Alpha* and *Cheyenne* in 1874.³⁹ An American firm operated by James Douglas provided competition for the Red River Transportation company with the construction of two large steamboats, the *Manitoba* and the *Minnesota* in 1875.⁴⁰

Although these two firms dominated the river freight business and brought about a dramatic reduction in the cost of moving goods along the north-south

³⁵ "Steamboats on the Red River," Fargo, North Dakota: Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota State University, 2004.

³⁶ "Moorehead Established," *Clay County Historical Society Newsletter*, Vol. XXIV, No.5, September-October (2001): 5.

³⁷ Erling Nicolai Rolfsrud, *Story of the Peace Garden State*, (Farwell, Minnesota: Lantern Books, 1990), 70-71.

³⁸ "Steamboats," 44.

³⁹ Alvin C. Glueck, *Minnesota and the Manifest Destiny of the Canadian Northwest: A Study in Canadian-American Relations*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 153.

⁴⁰ "Steamboats," 52-56.

route between Fort Garry and St. Paul, their success was short-lived. Almost as quickly as the arrival of the railway at Moorehead had made the river traffic viable, the establishment of a rail link between Fort Garry and St. Paul rendered the boats redundant.⁴¹

On the HBC's other main routes, steamboats were even slower in coming and for the same basic reasons.⁴² Except for those areas where there were long stretches of river and lake uninterrupted by the need to portage, York boats were still able to operate to advantage. Additionally, since the other main routes were much further north, the period of operation was much reduced by the earlier freezing of the waterways.⁴³ Finally, without the prospect of an approaching rail-link, there was little incentive to put steamboats into service on routes that were not likely to see markedly increased volumes of traffic in the short term.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the early steamboat traffic was its absence on the Lake Winnipeg leg of the transport route north to Hudson's Bay. At first glance this would seem to have been an obvious place for the introduction of steamboats. However, by the time the boats were coming into widespread use, trade patterns had already begun to shift the bulk of the trade towards the

⁴¹ The connection was made at St. Vincent, Minnesota when the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad linked up with the Canadian Pacific Railroad. Rolfsrud, *Story*, 77.

⁴² The first steamboat on the North Saskatchewan River was the S.S. Northcote, put into service by the Hudson's Bay Company in 1875. The first steamboats on the Athabasca appeared in 1878. John F. Gilpin, *Edmonton: Gateway to the North*, (Calgary: Windsor Publications, Inc., 1984), 49.

⁴³ Bruce Braden Peel, *Steamboats on the Saskatchewan*, (Saskatoon: Western Producer, 1972), 131-44.

southern route into the United States.⁴⁴ The amount of traffic moving north was simply not enough to justify the introduction of steamboat service on the lake.

Overland transportation arrangements were not as dramatically and immediately effected by the amalgamation of the HBC and NWC as the water transportation system had been. There was no land equivalent to the dropping of the Great Lakes route. Still, changes in land communications eventually transformed the nature of transportation in Rupert's Land.

As already noted, in 1821 there were three main elements in the overland transportation arrangements. First and foremost, the existing system of Native trails and paths remained as the principal means for the collection and final distribution of furs and trade goods.⁴⁵ Roads and foot-tracks had also been developed as a consequence of the need to transport goods over long portages. By 1821 virtually all of the important portages had well-established paths. Finally, as a consequence of the buffalo hunt but increasingly in response to the opportunity to trade with American businesses, a network of trails extended farther and farther southward from the Red River colony.

Traffic along Native trails was almost exclusively on foot. Although horses were used on some routes, routine use of pack-horses or wagons does not appear to have been adopted by the Native populations.⁴⁶ Movement over the

⁴⁴ John Langton Tyman, *By Section, Township and Range: Studies in Prairie Settlement*, (Brandon, Manitoba: Assiniboine Historical Society, 1972), 12.

⁴⁵ Spry, *Homeland to Hinterland*, XI/1. See also, Diamond Jenness, *The Indians of Canada*, 7th ed. , (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 311-12.

⁴⁶ An explanation for this was not evident in any of the material consulted for this paper and it was beyond the scope of the project to investigate it in detail. One hypothesis is that the lack of a system of transport is a reflection of the variegated nature of the Native economy more generally. In the absence of a specialized requirement, no system was developed. For a discussion see, Irene M. Spry, *From The Hunt to The Homestead*, Unpublished, by permission Lib Spry, Prelude.

various portages was also generally on foot although, as already noted, some of the longer portages also used horses and carts to assist in the movement of goods. On the hunting routes and on the trails to the south however, an entirely different and novel system eventually came to define itself. These were the routes dominated by the Red River carts.

As early as 1816, well-defined cart tracks were appearing on HBC maps along with notations where open prairie was trafficable and, “carts might pass without difficulty.”⁴⁷ By 1821 a cart road extended south through Pembina all the way to Georgetown.⁴⁸ Additionally, as the demand for pemmican continued and grew, pressure on the bison herds mounted and hunters were forced to travel farther and farther afield. By 1825, a second cart road branched out to the southwest from Pembina as the assembly area for the great Métis bison hunts moved west.⁴⁹

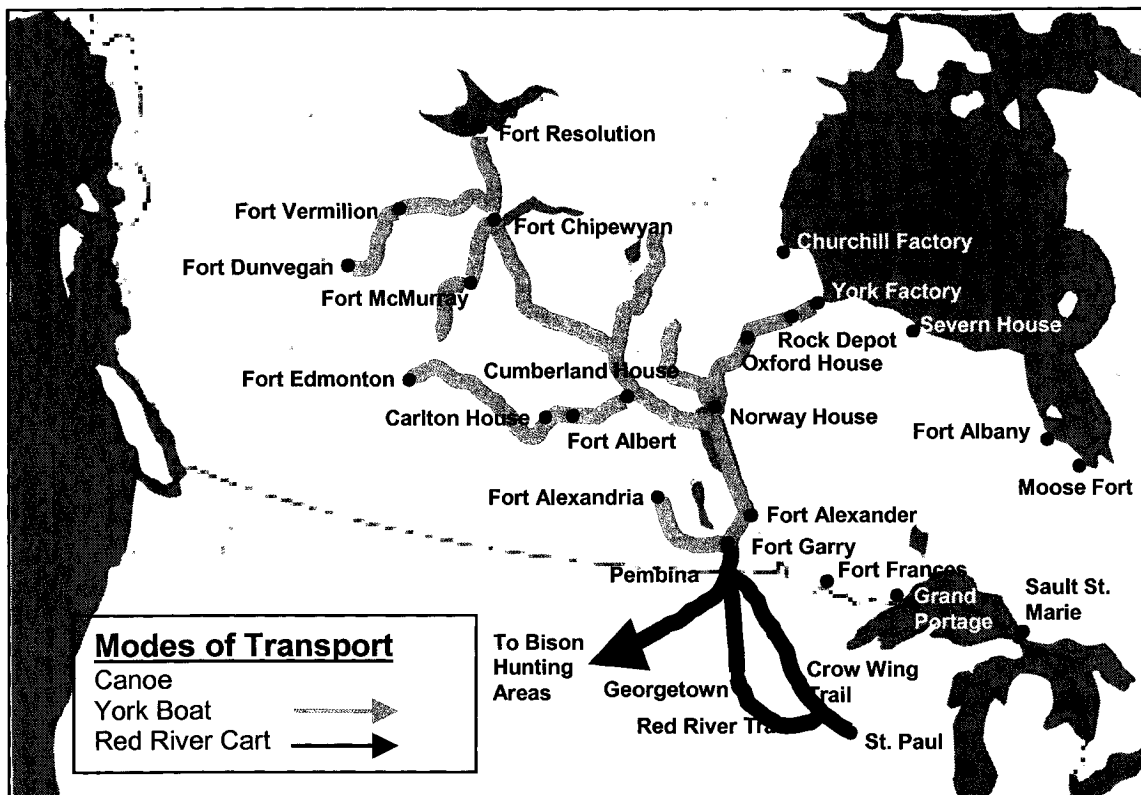
In 1837, St. Paul was established as the terminus of Mississippi River traffic. Lying as it did near the junction of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers, it drew a steady stream of Red River carts in its direction.⁵⁰ Within a few years two main routes had been established from Fort Garry to St Paul. The first of these routes was the Red River Trail. This route followed the main course of the Red River south until it reached the height of land near Lake Traverse in what is

⁴⁷ “Plan of the Settlement on Red River, as it was in 1816.” Engraved and printed by A. Arrowsmith, December 1819. Printed in A. Amos. *Report of Trials in the Courts of Canada, Relative to the Destruction of the Earl of Selkirk’s Settlement on the Red River; with Observations*. London: John Murray, 1820. Frontispiece.

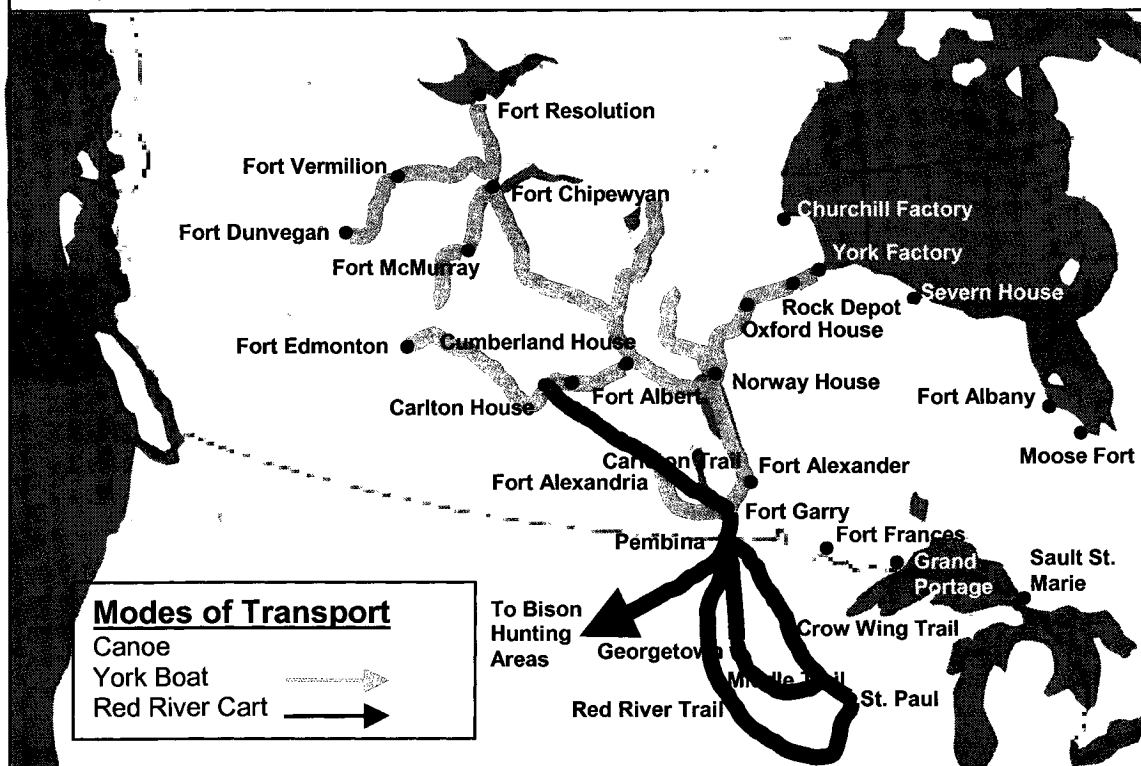
⁴⁸ Giraud, *The Métis*, 280.

⁴⁹ Rhoda A. Gilman, Carolyn Gilman and Deborah M. Schulz, *The Red River Trails: 1820-1870*, (St. Paul, Minnesota: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1979), 14.

⁵⁰ St. Paul’s was initially established by Americans displaced from the area around Fort Snelling as a result of treaties signed with local Native populations. Gilman, *The Red River Trails*, 8.



Map 10
Principal Transportation Routes – 1837.



Map 11
Principal Transportation Routes – 1841.

now Minnesota. From there it struck out southeast and followed the Minnesota valley downstream to St. Paul (Map 9).⁵¹ A second route, known as the Crow Wing or Woods Trail, lay to the east of the Red River and skirted the edge of the forests extending south and west from Lake Superior. This trail was not as easily traveled as the Red River Trail and, as a consequence, did not see as much traffic.⁵² Still, the route had some advantages. In particular, it avoided the areas dominated by the Sioux.⁵³ As will be seen later, depending on who was traveling the route and in what sort of organization, this could mean the difference between life and death.

A third trail, known as the Middle Trail, was actually a series of smaller tracks and bypasses that connected the areas lying between the Crow Wing and Red River Trails (Map 10).⁵⁴ By 1841, the Middle Trail was carrying a large portion of the traffic between Fort Garry and St. Paul. These alternate routes were attractive for a couple of reasons. First of all, the heavy use of the Red River Trail had resulted in deep rutting of the tracks making it difficult to traverse. Almost as serious was the fact that nearly two decades of steady use had resulted in the denuding of the forests along the route. The lack of wood for campfires and for cart repair was a serious concern.⁵⁵

The year 1841 also bore witness to the acceptance of the overland route from Fort Garry to Fort Carlton via Fort Alexandria.⁵⁶ Although the route had

⁵¹ Gilman, *The Red River Trails*, 32.

⁵² Giraud, *The Métis*, 281-82.

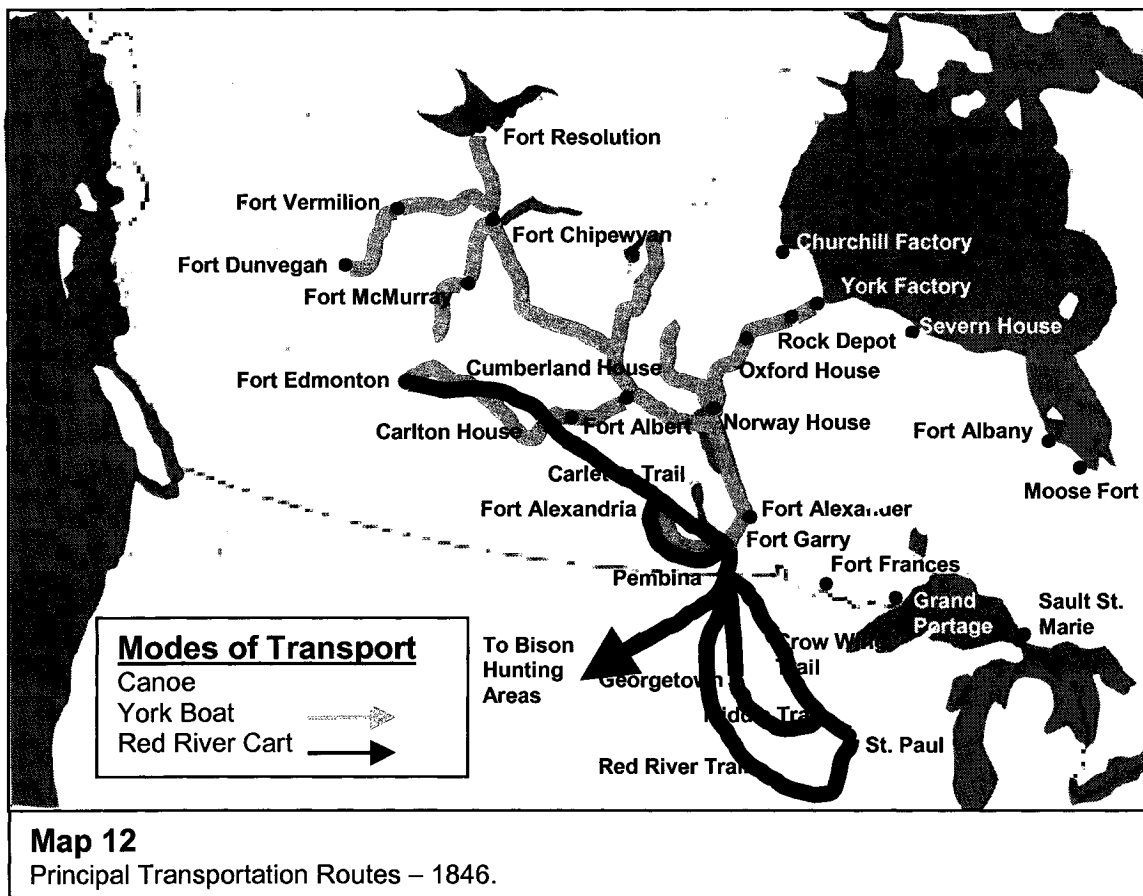
⁵³ Gilman, *The Red River Trails*, 33.

⁵⁴ Giraud, *The Métis*, 282.

⁵⁵ Gilman, *The Red River Trails*, 44.

⁵⁶ Richard Thomas Wright, *The Overlanders*, (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1985), 5.

been used previously as a winter route for dog-sled traffic, it was Governor Simpson's traveling of the trail in 1841 that led to its more general use. Simpson, riding with a party of eighteen men, thirty-six horses and four Red River carts, made the nearly 1000-kilometer trip in thirteen days.⁵⁷ This compared quite favorably with the three weeks that would have been needed to travel by boat to Fort Carlton via Lake Winnipeg and Cumberland House. In 1846 the trail was extended all the way to Fort Edmonton (Map 11).⁵⁸



⁵⁷ Sir George Simpson, *An Overland Journey Round the World: During the Years 1841 and 1842*, (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1847), 47.

⁵⁸ Over the next decade the route was well traveled. As one observer noted, "From Red River to Edmonton, about 800 miles, [...] an excellent cart trail already exists." "The True North-West Passage," *The Living Age*, Vol. 89, No. 1143. (28 April, 1866), 227.

Over the next two decades, the Carlton Trail became one of the most heavily traveled thoroughfares in Rupert's Land. Virtually all of the more famous travelers through the area used this route including Paul Kane, John Palliser and Henry Youle Hind.⁵⁹ This was also the route used by the 'Overlanders,' those adventurers who had struck out cross-country in an effort to reach the Cariboo gold fields of British Columbia in 1859 and 1862.⁶⁰ The Carlton Trail also became the preferred route for that curious phenomenon of the nineteenth century, the 'gentleman travelers.' These early tourists left vivid descriptions of their adventures and of the nature of the country through which they traveled.⁶¹

As the population of Rupert's Land expanded through the middle part of the nineteenth century, so too did the various transportation links. This was true both for internal and external lines of communications. The traditional flow of furs out and trade goods in was augmented by the growing needs of the population both for the import of goods and services and for the export of products other than furs. This was especially true of the Red River Colony area as its long-standing aspiration to be an agricultural exporter began to be realized.⁶²

The rapidly growing United States also had an important effect on transportation within Rupert's Land. Not only were American sources of supply becoming progressively more accessible, the American appetite for produce from

⁵⁹ R.C. Russell, *The Carleton Trail: The Broad Highway into the Saskatchewan Country from the Red River Settlement, 1840-1880*, (Saskatoon: Prairie Books, 1971), 20-25.

⁶⁰ Wright, *The Overlanders*, 5.

⁶¹ Perhaps the best know of these accounts is that of Lord Milton and his friend and traveling companion Dr. Cheadle. Viscount Milton and W.B. Cheadle, *The North-West Passage by Land: Being the Narrative of an Expedition from the Atlantic to the Pacific*, (1865; reprint, Toronto: Prospero, 2001).

⁶² National Archives of Canada, *Hudson's Bay Company Archives* (micro copy), A12/1 fo. 394d, Simpson to Governor and Committee, 18 July 1831.

Rupert's Land presented farmers and hunters with new market opportunities.⁶³ In 1859, more than 800 Red River carts arrived in St. Paul from the Red River Colony.⁶⁴ The increasing demands for transport were thus bi-directional and consequently easier to service. Red River carts making the trip from Fort Garry to St. Paul would be fully loaded in both directions.⁶⁵

All attempts by the HBC to maintain monopoly control over transportation failed in the face of the increasing demands for service and of opportunities for commerce.⁶⁶ Just as the HBC had eventually been forced to accept independent fur traders in the wake of the famous 1849 trial of Guillaume Sayer, the Company was forced to accept other transport providers within Rupert's Land.⁶⁷ By the 1860s, Rupert's Land was teeming with HBC, commercial and private traffic along its rivers and roads.

Early on, the HBC had recognized that the expansion of communications south through the United States would eventually mean a diversion of company traffic from their traditional Hudson's Bay route. As early as 1857, Governor Simpson was experimenting with shipments through the American transport system. By 1874 the economics of transport had become irresistible. After

⁶³ Service des Archives de la Societe historique de Saint-Boniface. Fonds Corporation archiepiscopale catholique romaine de Saint-Boniface. Serie Provencher. Boite 4, Cahier I. P-3501, 17 June 1849. See also, Spry, *From The Hunt to The Homestead*, Chap III/1.

⁶⁴ "The People of Red River," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 18, No. 104. (January, 1859), 172.

⁶⁵ Glueck, *Minnesota*, 91-92.

⁶⁶ The HBC tried to control this traffic by refusing to provide services or access to anyone conducting independent business. For examples of this see, Innis, *The Fur Trade*, 371.

⁶⁷ For a discussion of the Sayer trial and its "free trade" effect see, W.L. Morton, *Manitoba: A History*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), 77.

almost two centuries of service, the route to the Bay was abandoned in favour of the cheaper route south.⁶⁸

The final stage in the transformation of transportation services in Rupert's Land came with the approach of rail lines from the south and the east. In 1871, a railway reached the Red River at Breckenridge (Minnesota). This made it unnecessary for the Red River carts to travel to St. Paul and reduced the distance between Fort Garry and a major trans-shipment point by almost half.⁶⁹ Only a few years later, in 1878, a branch line of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) was extended south to the United States border where it connected with the St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba railroad. Finally, in 1885, the main CPR line was completed and the principal transportation returned, in a rather modified fashion, to the original French trader's Great Lakes route.⁷⁰ The historical wheel had turned full circle.



Figure 7

"Driving the last spike on the Canadian Pacific Railway," Craigellachie, British Columbia, November 7, 1885. Glenbow Archives, NA-1494-5.

⁶⁸ Innis, *The Fur Trade*, 341.

⁶⁹ Gilman, *The Red River Trails*, 24.

⁷⁰ James Grierson MacGregor, *A History of Alberta*, (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1972), 135.

Comparative Time/Distance Tables

Travel by Water			
From	To	Distance	Time
1825			
England (London)	York Factory ⁷¹		70 days
York Factory	England (London)		45 days
England (Liverpool)	Quebec City		45 days
York Factory	Fort Garry	ca 700 miles	30 days
Fort Garry	York Factory	ca 700 miles	20 days
York Factory	Norway House	ca 350 miles	20 days
Norway House	York Factory	ca 350 miles	10 days
Norway House	Fort Garry	ca 340 miles	10 days
Fort Garry	Norway House	ca 340 miles	10 days
Norway House	La Loche Portage		36 days
La Loche Portage	Norway House		21 days
Norway House	Carleton House	ca 200 miles	12 days
Carleton House	Norway House	ca 200 miles	6 days
1861 (Transatlantic Steamships and river Steamboat)			
England (London)	York Factory		14 days
York Factory	England (London)		14 days
England (Liverpool)	Quebec City		10 days
Fort Garry	Norway House	350 miles	10 days
Fort Garry	Moorehead		5 days
1885 (Transatlantic Steamships and Intercontinental Railroad)			
England (London)	York Factory		14 days
England (Liverpool)	Montreal		10 days

Travel by Land			
1830			
Fort Garry	Carleton House	550 miles	30 days
Fort Garry	St Paul	750 miles	30 days
1861			
Fort Garry	Carleton House	500 miles	22 days
Carleton House	Fort Edmonton	400 miles	18 days
Fort Garry	St Paul	750 miles	30 days
Fort Garry	Fort Edmonton	ca 900 miles	40 days
Carleton House	Norway House	650 miles	22 days
Montreal	Fort Garry*		34 days
1885			
St Paul	Fort Garry	750 miles	4 days
Toronto	Fort Garry *		9 days

* Via St, Paul.

⁷¹ Via the Orkney Islands. This was the normal routine as it was Company practice to pick up staff in Scotland enroute to Hudson's Bay. West, *The Substance of a Journal*, 2-3.

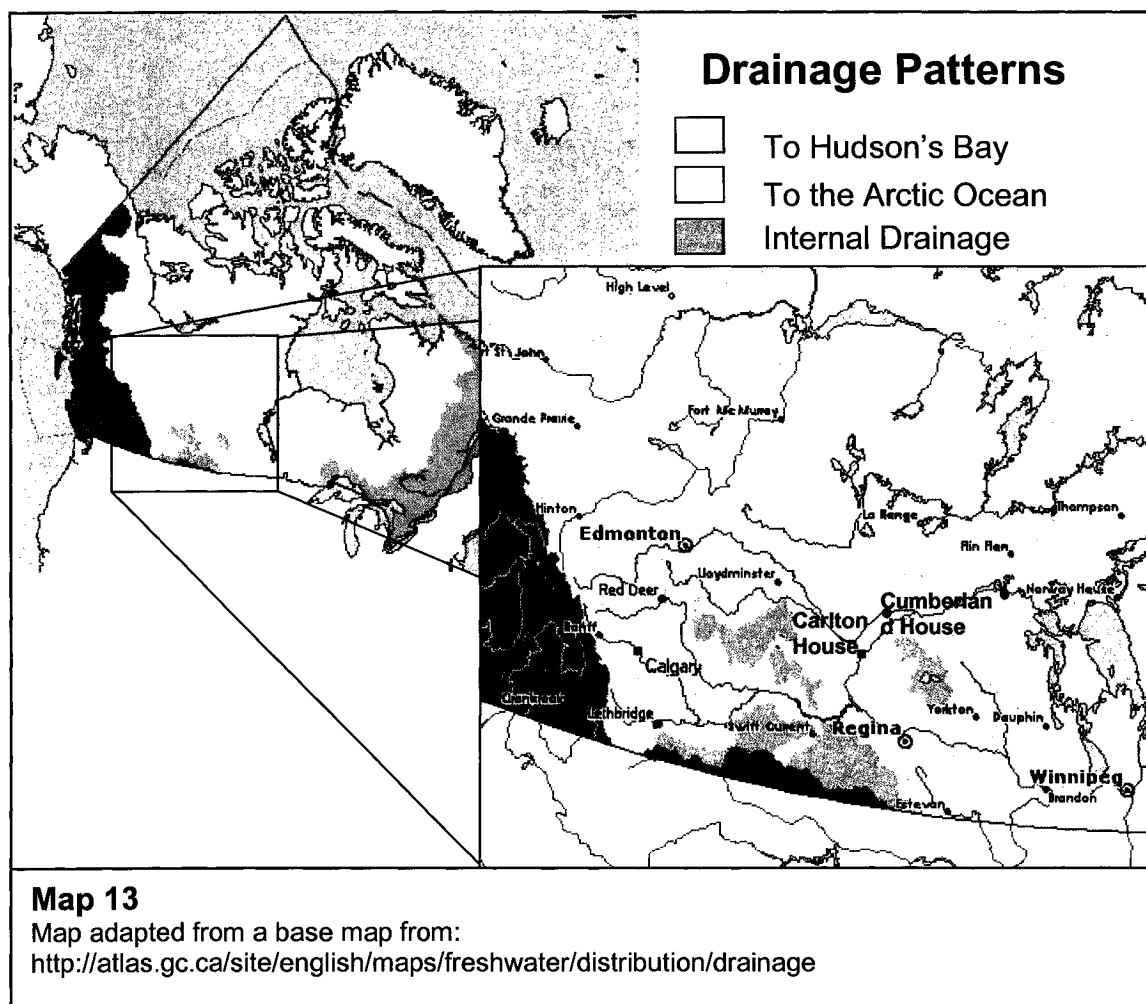
Chapter 4

Technology ... and technique

Although the amalgamation of the HBC and the NWC eliminated the competition that was the principal obstacle to efficient transportation in and to Rupert's Land, serious challenges remained. As Governor Simpson worked to streamline his organization, he was forced to confront the perennial problems of geography, topography and climate. Furthermore, while the newly consolidated Company no longer feared attack from its commercial rivals, there was still considerable danger associated with operating in many of the areas controlled by Native groups. Additionally, as time passed, new competitors appeared both from the United States and from within Rupert's Land. Much of the response to these challenges was formal and on the initiative of the HBC. But much of the response was also informal and diffuse adaptation to changing conditions by the various actors working within the Rupert's Land economy. Of the main strategies adopted to deal with the new economic environment the most significant were a combination of technology and technique.

As already discussed, the first and most dramatic change in the transport arrangements was the abandoning of the Great Lakes route. This meant that the series of large bodies of open water and very small water courses that made up that passage no longer dominated the calculus used to determine the most effective type of boat for general use. As noted, it did not take George Simpson long to figure out that boats would be much more cost-effective than canoes in most circumstances. It was the geography of Rupert's Land that made this so.

Generally, the lands under the direct control of the HBC consisted of two vast watersheds; one draining into Hudson's Bay and the other draining north into the Arctic Ocean.¹ (Map 13). Within these watersheds the land was characterized by generally flat terrain, intersected by relatively large watercourses. Within the Hudson's Bay watershed, rivers tended to drain east and north. Within the Arctic Ocean watershed, rivers generally drained east into the Mackenzie River after which the whole system directed water to the north.



¹ Eventually, the area draining west into the Pacific Ocean became important to the HBC but this is beyond the scope of this paper.

This combination of rivers and lakes allowed for the deep penetration of Rupert's Land along a well-defined and limited number of routes. The Nelson, Churchill, Athabaska, Saskatchewan, Slave, Mackenzie and Red Rivers became the superhighways of the HBC's waterborne trade. As George Simpson had noted, all of these rivers were navigable by boats.

When Governor Simpson made decided to replace canoes with boats, he did not have to look very far for a model. York Boats had been operating on the lower Nelson and Churchill Rivers for years.² Indeed it was their construction at York Factory that gave them their name. The boats themselves were, by the standards of the day, quite simple. Although of clinker construction,³ this was well within the normal skill requirements of any reasonably good boat builder. The cost of a completed boat varied somewhat over time but generally ranged between £20 and £30.⁴ The HBC's depreciation schedule for company-operated boats ran for three years as it was expected that a boat in normal operation could only be expected to last this long.⁵

When finished, a York Boat was normally be approximately 12.6 meters in overall length with and 9.1 meters along the keel. The depth of the boat, from gunwale to the keel, was approximately 0.9 meters. The boats also carried a collapsible 2.7-meter mast that could carry a large square sail. The bottom of the

² Boats of this type were operating along the Hudson's Bay coast as early as 1746. Innis, *The Fur Trade*, 154.

³ This technique involved overlapping of the planking along the sides of the hull. This was more complicated than straight planking but made the boats stronger. Brehaut, *Red River*, note 6.

⁴ The HBC employed dedicated boat builders at several locations including York Factory and Norway House. The price of a York boat was surprisingly consistent throughout the period of study although there were substantial premiums to be paid for a boat made in a "non-standard" building location. John Ryerson, *Hudson's Bay; or A missionary tour in the territory of the Hon. Hudson's Bay Company*, (Toronto: n.p., 1855), 91-95.

⁵ Ryerson, *Hudson's Bay*, 91.

boat was flat which greatly facilitated the passage of shallow waters and also made it easy to beach. When complete the boat would have weighed approximately a ton.⁶



Figure 9

"York Boats under sail." Glenbow Archives, NA-4201-1. Note the unusual lateen sail on the boat in the foreground.

Although the crewing of the boats depended on individual and local practices, a typical crew on one of the long-haul routes consisted of a steersman, a bowman and six oarsmen.⁷ The steersman was the 'captain' of the boat and was expected to organize his crew, maintain his boat and navigate the routes. The bowman was also required to have boating skills.⁸ The remainder of the

⁶ Innis, *The Fur Trade*, 293.

⁷ Ryerson, *Hudson's Bay*, 95.

⁸ Hargrave, *Red River*, 164.

crew was expected to row the boat and help move it and its cargo over the numerous portages and other obstacles.⁹

These portages were the greatest challenge to the movement of riverine traffic. But with the reorganization of the routes and the replacement of canoes by boats, new portaging techniques were required. The procedure normally employed with canoes consisted of unloading the cargo, carrying it over the portage by hand, carrying the canoe over the portage and then reloading the cargo.¹⁰ With York boats, the fully-loaded boat was dragged over the portage by the crews.¹¹

This was no mean feat. The cargo alone would have weighed almost four tonnes and the boat itself added another tonne to the load.¹² At first glance it does not seem possible that seven or eight men would be capable of hauling a five-tonne burden such as this over a portage. Many of the portages were relatively short and flat, but some were very long and very high. The infamous Methye portage at La Loche on the boundary between the Hudson's Bay and Mackenzie drainage systems, was over eighteen kilometres long and rose more than sixty metres.¹³ Two strategies were adopted to deal with portages, one technical and the other organizational.

First of all, the portage tracks had to be improved. The first step was the widening of the path.¹⁴ Although canoes could be portaged along relatively

⁹ Hargrave, *Red River*, 163.

¹⁰ Mackenzie, *Voyages*, xxx-xxxi.

¹¹ *Minutes of Council*, 419.

¹² Ryerson, *Hudson's Bay*, 92.

¹³ Hargrave, *Red River*, 161.

¹⁴ Library and Archives Canada, Acc. No. 1989-400-1.

narrow paths by men carrying the canoes in the traditional single file overhead carry, York boats needed a much wider track.¹⁵ This track had to accommodate both the wider boats and the men that would be variously pushing and pulling the boats.

It was also necessary to improve the surface of the path. The principal improvement was the installation of "rollers" over which the York boats were to be dragged. The "rollers" consisted of logs, split lengthwise and laid across the path at intervals of about four to six feet.¹⁶ The effect was something like a railroad track without the rails. The logs, with their rounded sides up, provided a smooth surface over which the York boats could be hauled.¹⁷



Figure 10

The roller trail is clearly visible in this beautiful painting, "Red River Portage" by F.A. Hopkins," 1877. Library and Archives Canada, Acc. No. 1989-400-1.

¹⁵ Library and Archives Canada, Acc. No. 1988-250-21.

¹⁶ "North American Explorations," *The Living Age*, Vol. 67, No. 859. (17 November, 1860), 434.

¹⁷ "The True North-West Passage," *The Living Age*, Vol. 89, No. 1143. (28 April, 1866), 227.

The second strategy for dealing with the portages was in the organization of the personnel. From the earliest days of the fur trade it had been customary for canoes to travel in groups or “brigades.” This was considered a necessary precaution in the face of the nearly constant danger of attack from competing fur traders or from hostile Native people. Traveling as a group also offered the canoe crews security from the hazards of accidental injuries to personnel or of damage to the canoes. But throughout the period during which the canoe was the main mode of transport, it had been the responsibility of individual crews to carry the cargo from their own canoe over any portage.¹⁸

In the case of York boats, the system of traveling by “brigades” was maintained but adapted. After 1821, although the danger of accidents remained, the danger of being attacked along any of the main HBC York boat routes was not very great.¹⁹ However, traveling in a “brigade” meant that the crews of several boats would arrive at a portage at the same time. Typically, a York boat “brigade” consisted of from four to six boats.²⁰ This meant that perhaps forty or fifty men were available at each portage. Rather than struggling with their boats as individual crews, the men from all of the boats were assembled to form a single team and each boat was dragged over the portage in turn. By eliminating the traditional responsibility of crews for only their own boat’s cargo, the new “brigade” organization made the portaging of a loaded York boat an entirely feasible, if still not particularly popular, undertaking.

¹⁸ Mackenzie, *Voyages*, xlv-xlvi.

¹⁹ Hargrave, *Red River*, 359.

²⁰ Hargrave, *Red River*, 159. Boat brigades were sometimes much larger than this. In 1863 Joseph Hargrave saw a brigade that had “seventeen or eighteen” boats. Hargrave, *Red River*, 369. In 1848 Paul Kane traveled in a brigade of twenty-three boats. Kane, *Wanderings*, 22.



Figure 11

In this image, the crews of at least three boats can be seen hauling a York boat over a short portage. This "brigade" includes at least six boats. "Extremely wearisome journeys at the portages," by Peter Rindisbacher, 1821. Library and Archives Canada, Acc. No. 1988-250-21.

In some locations even these measures proved inadequate. In the case of the La Loche portage, it was not possible for York boats to be dragged over the twelve miles of the portage with any hope of having a serviceable boat on the other end. Because of the extra costs involved, it was only with great reluctance that Governor Simpson agreed to authorize the contracting of two teams along the Mackenzie route.²¹ One team operated on the Mackenzie "brigade" to the

²¹ Simpson had originally hoped to solve the problem of the La Loche portage by maintaining two sets of boats at the site but still manned by the same crews. This did not prove to be an effective solution to the problem but Simpson, still looking for economies, directed that since the trip was effectively halved by the La Loche portage, the crews should be able to make two trips per season instead of the usual one. As it turned out, only the crew operating on the eastern leg of the trip was able to accomplish this. *Journal of Occurrences*, 419.

west of the portage and the other shuttled goods on the route from the eastern end of the portage to the depot at Norway House. On the portage itself, in a manner reminiscent of the final days of the Grand Portage, a team was permanently established whose only job was the transportation of goods from one side of the portage to the other. Horses were eventually sent to the site so that cargo could be carried in wagons and Red River carts.²²

Another technique commonly used by York boats was “tracking.” Tracking was done by disembarking the crew but leaving the boat in the water. The crew



Figure 12

Boat being tracked up the Grand Rapids, Athabasca River, Alberta, 1899. While part of the crew uses poles to keep the boat away from the shore, “brigaded” crews haul the boat up the rapids using lines. Provincial Archives of Alberta, Ernest Brown Collection, B2897.

²² Hargrave, *Red River*, 161. See also, Innis, *The Fur Trade*, 295.

would then pull the boat through the water with ropes running to trails that were cut along the banks of the river close to the water. This was typically done in places where the current was too strong for the crew to row upstream or where the water was very shallow. At the many rapids on the lower Hay River, horses were routinely used for tracking the York boats up the very difficult and shallow watercourse.²³ Although not nearly as romantic as the image of a canoe full of hardy men paddling their canoe through a set of boiling rapids, a more accurate picture of the business of water transport in the nineteenth century would be of a York boat crew hauling their boat or pulling on their oars.

Overland transportation was always something of an afterthought for the fur trading companies. As already noted, although there were significant differences in the way that the HBC and the Montreal trading companies had originally handled their transportation needs, their approaches were dominated by the same basic logic. Virtually all of the goods going into, and the fur coming out of Rupert's Land moved by water. There were a few exceptions to this, especially the need to move important people and some high-value items such as mail at any time of the year. But the total number of people moved and the amount of cargo transported overland by the HBC were miniscule in comparison to their waterborne traffic. It is not surprising then that the main developments within overland transportation arrangements were not a result of direct HBC initiatives or action. The real driving force behind the development of reliable overland transportation links in Rupert's land was the indirect pressure generated by the fur trade's demand for provisions.

²³ Hargrave, *Red River*, 163.

As already discussed, the extensive canoe and boat traffic operating in support of the fur trade created a very large demand for foodstuffs, pemmican in particular. With upwards of two thousand men employed in the business of paddling canoes, rowing boats and portaging cargo, the demand for pemmican was enormous.²⁴ Since a daily ration consisted of from 5 to 8 pounds of pemmican per man per day, the fur trade workers were consuming in excess of a million pounds of pemmican each year.²⁵

In the early years of the fur trade, hunting in support of the fur trade was a straightforward proposition as there were enough game animals within a reasonable distance of both Native communities and fur trade establishments. However, by the turn of the nineteenth century, it was proving necessary for hunters to travel further to find the large herds of bison that were needed to meet the demand for pemmican. By 1818 at the latest, it was already proving



Figure 13

Metis buffalo hunt in the late 1800'S, a sketch by William Armstrong (1822-1914). Glenbow Archives, NA-2426-1.

²⁴ Brian D. Murphy, "The Size of the Labour Force in the Montreal Fur Trade, 1675-1790: A Critical Evaluation" (master's thesis, University of Ottawa, 1986), 121-33.

²⁵ Boat crews would be actively operating for approximately 3 months per year. Thus 90(days) x 2000(personnel) x 5-8(pds/day) yields between 900,000 and 1,440,000 pounds of pemmican per year. This corresponds with the kind of yields that were being generated by the hunts. For example, the 1840 summer hunt alone was reported to have yielded in excess of a million pounds of pemmican. Ross, *The Red River Settlement*, 246 and 272.

necessary to organize large-scale hunting expeditions and by 1820, in excess of five hundred Métis hunters were gathering together for the purpose.²⁶

These hunts, which eventually gathered together well over a thousand participants, have attracted a great deal of attention in Métis and Western Canada historiography. It is perhaps unsurprising that discussion of these hunts, reported on by Euro-Canadian observers, has dramatized the part of the hunt where the actual killing occurred, the so-called “race.”²⁷ But a closer analysis of the overall hunting effort reveals that the main activity during the approximately two-month expeditions was transport. It was this hunt-generated transport capability that was eventually to form the basis of overland transportation arrangements within Rupert’s Land.

First of all, it was necessary to travel to areas where the bison were expected to be found. By the 1820s, this already meant traveling a considerable distance from the main point of sale for pemmican at Fort Garry. Moving at approximately 25 miles per day, travel to the main hunting grounds to the south and west of Pembina would have taken several weeks.²⁸ (See map 9). At the end of each day, the hunters would establish a camp where they would be secure and where they could do the basic housekeeping tasks of eating and sleeping. Routine maintenance and repair of equipment and the care of draught animals would also be done within this camp.²⁹

²⁶ Stanley, *The Birth of Western Canada*, 13.

²⁷ James Grierson MacGregor, *Father Lacombe*, (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1975), 13.

²⁸ John West, *The Substance of a Journal During a Residence at the Red River Colony, British North America : And Frequent Excursions among the North-West American Indians, in the Years 1820, 1821, 1822, 1823*, (London: Printed for L.B. Seelev and Son, 1824), 85-86.

²⁹ R.C. Russell, *The Carleton Trail: The Broad Highway into the Saskatchewan Country from the Red River Settlement, 1840-1880*, (Saskatoon: Prairie Books, 1971), 16.

When a bison herd was located, the “race” would occur. This consisted of a slow approach to the herd followed by a charge on horseback into the mass of animals. Reloading on the fly the best hunters were capable of killing seven or eight bison in a single race. A large hunt could account for many hundreds of bison slain in a single day.³⁰



Figure 14

“Buffalo Hunting,” by John Richard Coke Smyth, 1840. NAC C-001030.

Once slaughtered, the bison meat was prepared either as pemmican or, depending on the season, as fresh or “green” meat.³¹ Other by-products were also harvested depending on the availability of markets. Bison skins became a significant part of this industry in the second half of the nineteenth century because of a high demand for buffalo robes in the United States.³² Preparing the

³⁰ Hargrave, *Red River*, 170.

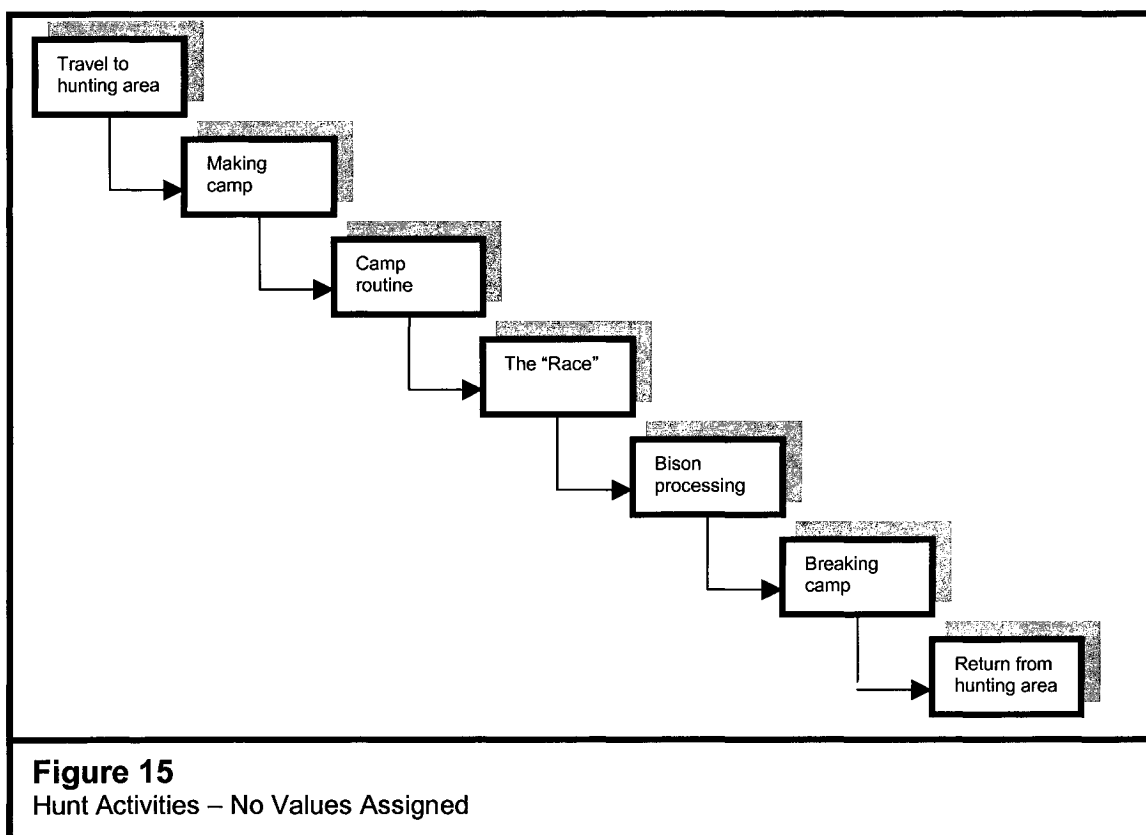
³¹ “Green” meat was normally collected only on the fall hunt as the colder weather allowed for delivery back to Red River without the meat’s spoiling in transit. Hargrave, *Red River*, 168.

³² Ens, *Homeland to Hinterland*, 72.

meat or skins would typically have taken two days for each race day and would have involved every member of the hunting parties - men, women and children.

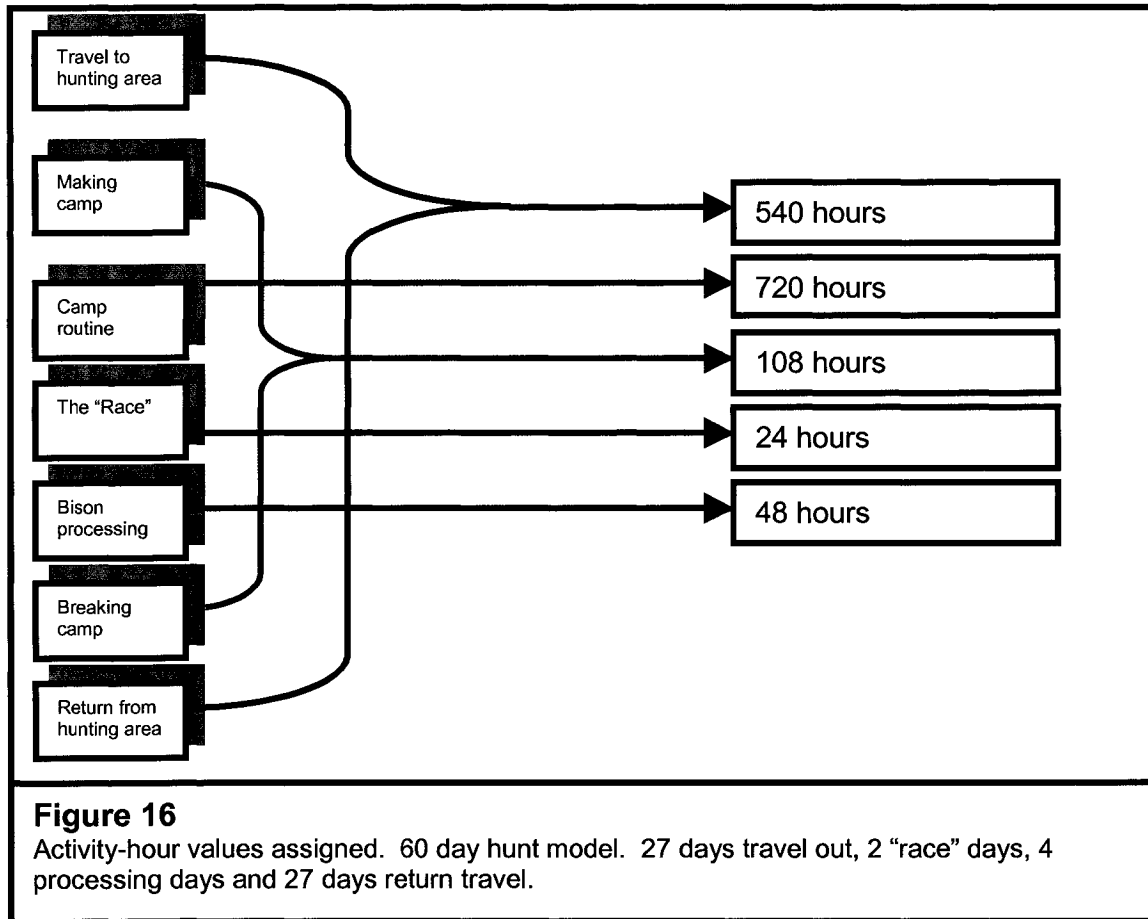
After all of the available transport had been filled, the hunt would return home following the same basic procedures as that followed on the trip out. The time taken was roughly the same. Although the loaded carts would travel more slowly, this was compensated for by the directness of the return route as there was no need to look for bison.³³

If the hunt is analyzed as a process, it is possible to get a much clearer understanding of what is actually going on than we do if we rely solely on the highly impressionistic reports of observers of the hunt. The seven main activities of the hunt are shown in the figure below:



³³ Ross, *Red River*, 158.

If we apply modern business process-analysis to these activities, paying particular attention to the amount of time required for each activity over the course of a hunt, it is clear that, other than the conduct of the normal routine of eating and sleeping, the bulk of the directed effort during these hunts was related to preparing to move, moving and establishing camp after moving.³⁴



Although dramatic, the actually killing of the bison was a minor part of the overall effort. In reality, anyone with a gun was capable of killing a bison. For years many people had done so. The great accomplishment of the Métis hunts

³⁴ For a description of this method see, Michael Hammer and Steven A. Stanton, *The Reengineering Revolution: A Handbook*, 1st ed., (New York, N.Y.: Harper Business, 1995). See also, Kelvin F. Cross, John J. Feather and Richard L. Lynch, *Corporate Renaissance: The Art of Reengineering*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1994).

was that the hunt organization turned the conventional provisioning process on its head. Instead of raw materials being brought to a central location for handling, the personnel and equipment necessary for the harvesting and processing of bison were loaded onto the same transport that eventually carried the finished products through potentially hostile territory to their final market. Rather than conducting a hunt in the conventional sense of the term, this hunting organization was rather more of a well-defended, mobile, meat-packing factory.

For this to work, a variety of strategies were employed. As was the case with waterborne transport, these tended to be a combination of technology and technique. The core technology of the Métis hunting organization was the famous Red River cart. The cart itself was a very simple thing. Although its origins are not entirely clear,³⁵ its basic design was much like other carts in use by other societies at the same time.³⁶ It consisted of a rectangular box mounted on a rudimentary carriage that contained a housing for an axle. Two large wheels were mounted on the axle by means of pins. Two draw poles extended forward from the box to provide attachment for a single draught animal, either a horse or an ox.³⁷ (See Figures 17 and 18).

³⁵ Although the first mention of the cart is an obscure reference to undefined "reports" from 1784, the first explicit comment on the Cart was made by a North West Company trader named Alexander Henry the Younger in 1801. Henry noted that, "Men now go again for meat, with small carts, the wheels of which are one solid piece, sawed off the ends of trees whose diameter is three feet." Elliot W. Coues, "New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest," *Henry – Thompson Journals*, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1897), 5. A number of theories have been advanced with respect to the Cart's origins. These include introduction or invention by fur company personnel, adaptation of French or Scottish carts and direct invention by Métis. Unfortunately, these theories are purely speculative, as no evidence has been offered in support of any of them. See for example, Howard, *Strange Empire*, 54.

³⁶ Coues, "New Light," 45.

³⁷ A detailed analysis of the cart is contained in, Harry Baker Brehaut, P. Eng. "The Red River Cart and Trails: The Fur Trade," *MHS Transactions*, Series 3, Number 28, (1971-72).

RED RIVER CART
 DESIGN TAKEN FROM ORIGINAL CARTS AT
 MANITOBA MUSEUM AT WINNIPEG
 NATIONAL HISTORIC PARK AT LOWER POST GARAY
 REBUILT 1972
 BREHNHAUT, MELIE, B.C.M.
 JANUARY 1981
 DRAWING © 1972 BY H.B. BREHNHAUT

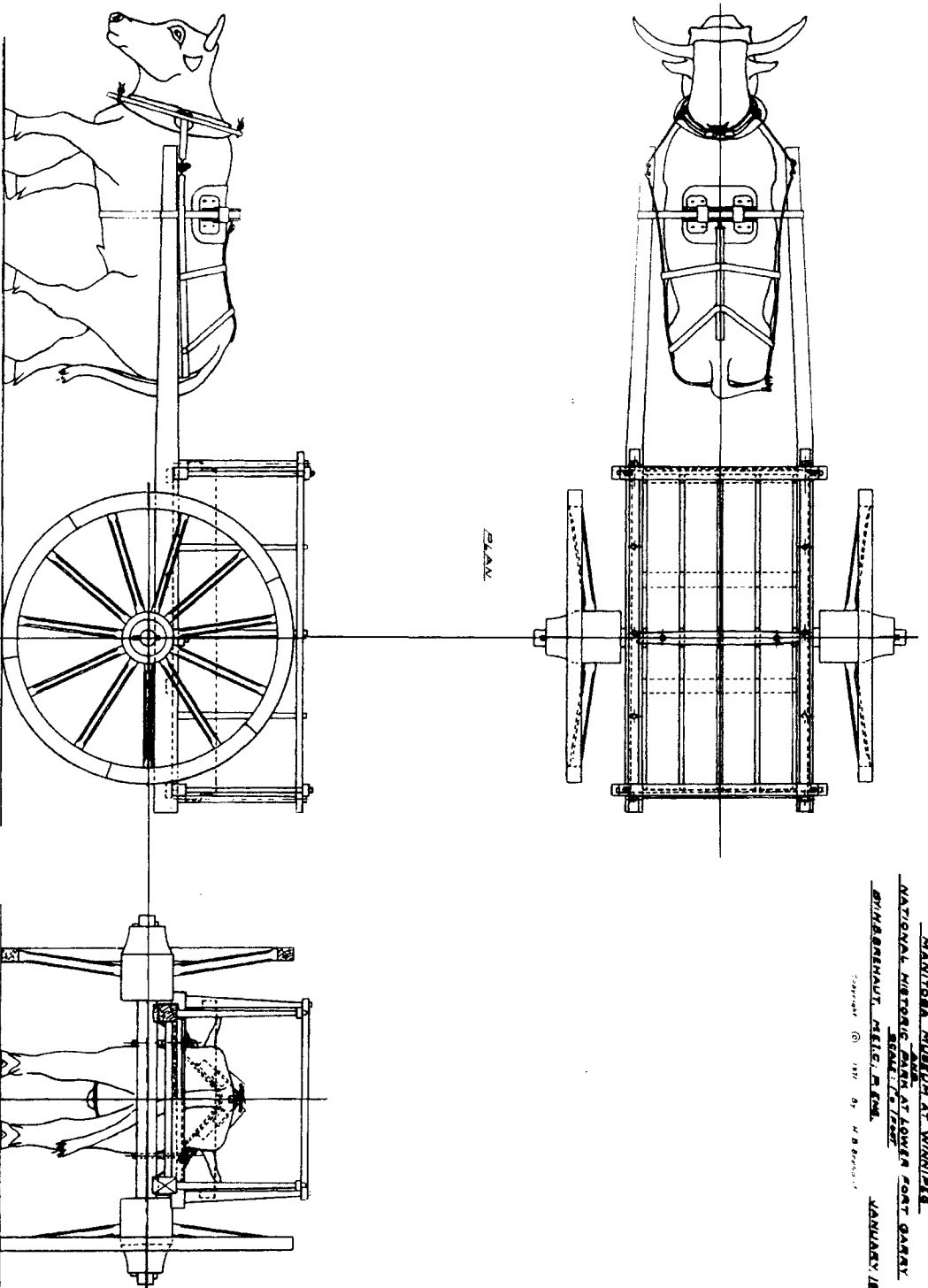
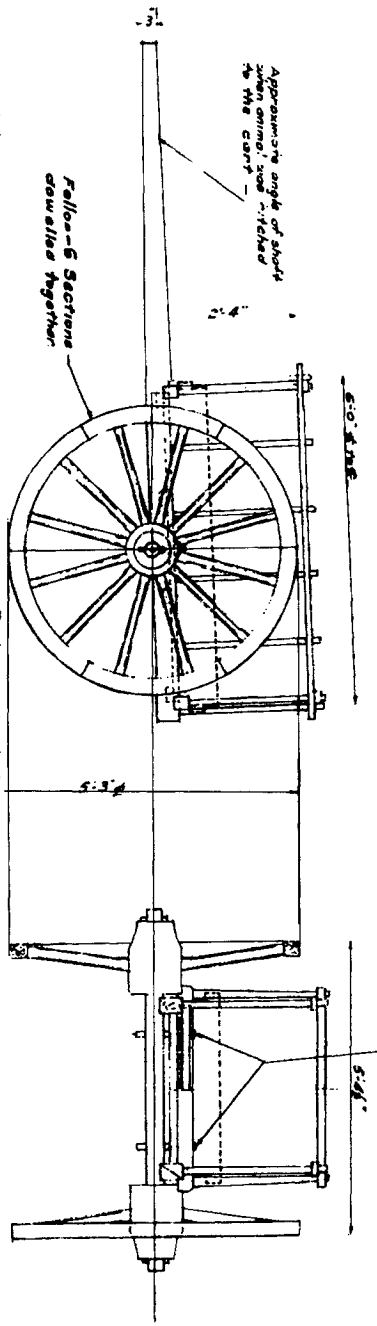
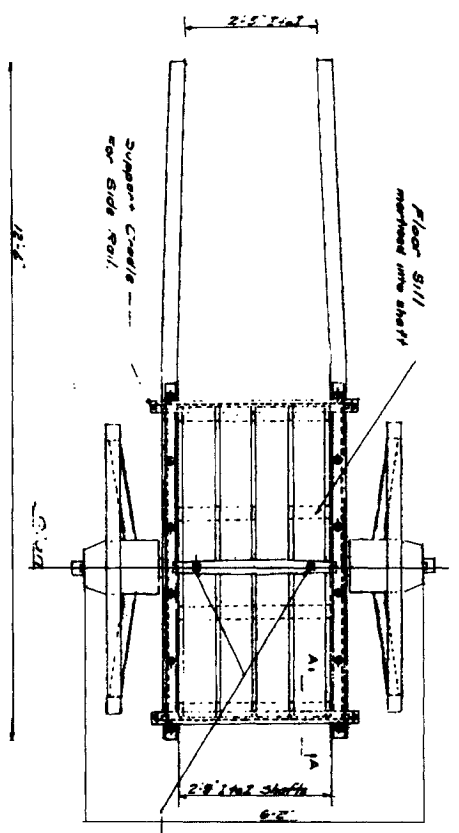
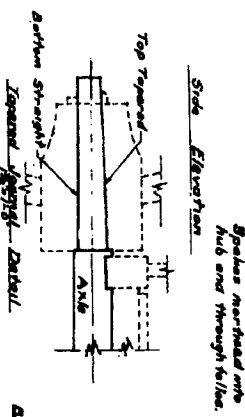


Figure 17
 The Red River Cart, side and plan views. From, "The Red River Cart and Trails: The Fur Trade,"
 by Harry Baker Brehaut, P. Eng. MHS Transactions Series 3, Number 28, 1971-72 season.

Typical Dimensions	
Height	6' 2 1/2"
Felloes	3" x 12' x 2 1/2"
Spokes	12' - 1 1/2" x 2 1/2"
Hub	11' 10" x 6" x 16" long
Wheels	5' 8" x 5'
Shafts	3 1/2" x 4' x 1/2" x 1/2" x 1/2"
Side Sills	1 1/2" x 2 1/2"
Floor Sills	1 1/2" x 2 1/2"
Axle	4" x 4"
Lower Discs	1 1/2" x 1 1/2" x 1 1/2"
Upper Discs	1 1/2" x 1 1/2" x 1 1/2"
Lower Cords	1 1/2" x 1 1/2" x 1 1/2"
Upper Cords	1 1/2" x 1 1/2" x 1 1/2"



There was no standard of construction as the dimensions varied from cart to cart. These dimensions were taken from the original cart. The felloe sections were not standard. The spokes were made of birch and were not standard. The cart was made of birch and was not standard. The cart was made of birch and was not standard. The cart was made of birch and was not standard.



DESIGN TAKEN FROM ORIGINAL CARTS AT
MANITOBA MUSEUM AT WINNIPEG
AND
NATIONAL HISTORIC PARK AT FORT GARRY
WISCONSIN
OCTOBER, 1968

Figure 18
The Red River Cart, detail views. From, "The Red River Cart and Trails: The Fur Trade," by Harry Baker Brehaut, P. Eng. MHS Transactions Series 3, Number 28, 1971-72 season.

A closer examination of the cart reveals that it had several subtle and importance differences in design from other carts. First of all, the Red River cart was made entirely from wood. Unlike other carts and wagons, even the axle and the tires were made of wood. Although this meant that the parts were much more prone to breakage and would wear out rapidly, it also meant that no specialized materials were required either to construct the cart or, perhaps more importantly, to repair it. The wooden axle turned in a simple wooden housing attached to the bottom of the cart and did not use any lubrication.³⁸ The result was, once again, ease of manufacture and repair, while the absence of lubrication also meant that the wheel-axle assembly was much less prone to accretions of prairie dust and dirt. Lack of lubricant also resulted in a famous side effect; a tremendous amount of screeching noise as the cart moved. This characteristic was commented on by several observers who noted that the sound of a Métis cart train was “hellish.”³⁹

That this all-wood construction was a conscious choice is clear. First of all, the principal operators of the carts, the Métis, had easy access to metal and workshops at Red River and elsewhere.⁴⁰ As noted, the use of wood, especially in the axle and tires, made the cart much more prone to wear and breakage than would have been the case had metal been used. But the cart had to function on extended hunting expeditions and long freight trips far removed from workshops

³⁸ “Red River Trail,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 18, No. 107. (April, 1859), 615.

³⁹ Henry Van Dyke, “The Red River of the North,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 60, No. 360. (May, 1880), 809. See also, George Young, *Manitoba Memories, Leaves from My Life in the Prairie Province, 1868-1884*, (Toronto: William Briggs, 1897), 60.

⁴⁰ Frederick Merk, ed., *Fur Trade and Empire: George Simpson’s Journal, 1824-1825* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931), xvi.

and supplies of metal. Not only was wood quicker and easier to work with than metal it was readily available in most of the areas where the carts were operating. It was also possible to 'cannibalize' material from other carts or from pemmican making tools if repair material was in short supply. Although there is no direct evidence that the poles used for stretching and drying bison skins were intended as a 'spare parts pool,' they look suspiciously like the material used in the axles of the carts. The acceptance of the "horrific" screeching of unlubricated axle housings and wheel hubs turns on these same considerations. By eliminating grease or oil lubricants from the running gear the Métis were able to greatly reduce the accretions of dust and dirt that were bound to cause greatly accelerated wear on the wooden axles.

A description of the field repair of a Red River cart was recorded by one traveler:

When a break does occur a ready resource is found in the bundle of "shagganappy," or strips of tanned buffalo-hide, which the traveler always carries with him. Applied wet and flexible by wrapping around the broken shaft, felly, or axle, it soon dries in the wind of the plains and hardens like bone, and no second fracture can occur at the mended place. The harness also, made of the same tanned hide, can easily be mended with the same material. It is an amusing sight to observe the method of effecting such repairs. By some sudden wrenching occasioned by a deep rut, a long-used shaft is splintered and must be mended. The strip of hide is softened in water, and two men wrap it closely around the broken part. Bracing their feet, they draw the bandage with all the strength of their hands and the muscles of their backs until you would say it

could be drawn no more; but the process is not yet completed to the satisfaction of the dusky workmen. They now take the free ends in their teeth, and, using their hands as additional braces, they pull backward with such strain as only iron jaws and steel teeth can withstand. The ends are now secured by intricate knots, and the repairs are completed.⁴¹



Figure 19

A Red River Cart being repaired in the field. The simple axle can be clearly seen in this photograph of a cart lying upside down with the wheels removed. The concavity of the wheel is also plainly evident in this image. The origin of this photograph is unknown. It is reproduced here from an online article, "Steamboats on the Red River," published by the Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota State University Library, Fargo, North Dakota.

⁴¹ C.A. Kenaston, "The Great Plains of Canada," *The Century*, (August, 1892), 574-75.

Although it was possible to attach more than one draught animal to a cart, the nearly universal practice seems to have been to use just one. Restricting the draught power naturally implied strict limitations on the load that could be carried. The decision to limit the hauling power of the Red River carts by employing only one draught animal is at once intriguing and revealing. Although some carts were reported to have carried loads as great as 1,500 pounds on the return trip from hunts,⁴² the normal load was around 900 pounds.⁴³ This seems quite modest, especially since larger wagons, like the American Conestoga, were capable of carrying much greater loads when drawn by teams of two or more horses. A load of 6,000 pounds was not unusual and wagons drawn by six horse teams were capable of carrying eight tons.⁴⁴ But there was a serious disadvantage to these larger loads in the Prairie region.

In the environment in which the Métis were routinely operating, traveling cross-country, often over soft or broken ground and in sometimes-poor weather, the wheels of heavily loaded wagons would simply sink into the ground and the wagons would be well and truly stuck.⁴⁵ The story of John Palliser is telling. In 1857 he led an expedition of the Royal Geographical Society that was sent to

⁴² This was the load available for produce of the hunts. Typically, the men, women and children that were involved in the hunts would ride in the Carts until they were filled with pemmican or other products. The return trip was made on foot alongside the fully loaded Cart. Giraud, *The Métis*, vol II, 141.

⁴³ Giraud, *The Métis*, vol II, 141.

⁴⁴ Maurice Telleen, *The Draft Horse Primer : A Guide to the Care and Use of Work Horses and Mules*, (Emmaus, Pennsylvania: Rodale Press, 1977), 338-39.

⁴⁵ By contrast, the routes commonly used by American settlers traveling west were well established tracks that were intended for heavier vehicles and tended to follow terrain that was firm in good weather. Routes such as the Santa Fe trail and the Bozeman trail were routinely used by families on one way trips west, with all of their belongings loaded onto large wagons. This type of travel was very different from the cross country requirements of vehicles employed in bison hunting and freighting. See John Udell, *John Udell Journal, Kept During a Trip across the Plains, Containing an Account of the Massacre of a Portion of His Party by the Mojave Indians in 1859*, (Los Angeles: N.A. Kovach, 1946), 54.

study Rupert's Land. For his trip he hired two wagons and four Red River carts to transport his team. Within a few days the wagons had been abandoned in favour of the Red River carts because of the constant miring of the wagons in soft ground and their inability to take the punishment of cross country travel.⁴⁶

The process by which this self-imposed load limit was found is not known but it is not difficult to conclude that it was arrived at empirically in the early days of the Red River cart. By the early 1820s the cart drivers knew how much of a load was too much. Since one draught animal was able to pull this load there was little incentive to add extra power. If extra animals were available it would have made more sense to operate a second cart than to try to increase the load of a single cart by adding more power.⁴⁷

By far the most identifiable feature of the Red River cart, and the feature that most set it apart from other types of wagon, was its large wheels and the fact that there were only two of them. The wheels themselves, at least in carts made after about 1820, were 'cone' or dish-shaped. Since this type of wheel would have been much more difficult to manufacture than a flat wheel, it is compelling evidence of the deliberate nature of the design. The concavity served a number of purposes. First and foremost, the shape of the wheel reduced the tendency of the wheel to sink into soft ground.⁴⁸ If the wheel began to sink, its concavity would effectively increase the width of the bearing surface as spokes came into

⁴⁶ J. Arthur Lower, *Western Canada: An Outline History*, (Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre Ltd., 1983), 80-81.

⁴⁷ Even more relevant may have been the fact that many Métis families only owned one horse. This would have made the design choice very simple indeed. Red River Censuses. 1840, 1849.

⁴⁸ George M. Grant, "The Dominion of Canada," *Scribner's Monthly*, Vol. 20, No. 3. (July, 1880), 442.

contact with the ground. This adaptation allowed the main tire surface to be kept small with a resulting increase in speed on hard surfaces.⁴⁹ The shape of the wheel also lowered the cart's center of gravity, thus making it very resistant to tipping. At least one other known use of the wheel's shape was the employment of the wheels as makeshift 'floats.' By covering the wheels with waterproof skins, the wheels were transformed into flotation devices to assist in moving baggage across water obstacles. There is even mention of this technique being used to provide flotation for the cart itself by positioning the 'floats' under the wagon box.⁵⁰

The other distinguishing feature of the Red River cart's wheels was their large size. Although the first known carts had wheels roughly three feet in diameter, by the time that the first images of carts were being produced, the wheels had grown to almost five feet.⁵¹ The size and design of the wheels was more or less standardized at a very early point in the cart's development. The resulting flexibility for the interchange of parts is obvious.⁵² But the principal advantage of the large wheels was that the large diameter and resulting low rim arc prevented the wheel from lodging in holes or ruts in the ground. The large,

⁴⁹ The tires were made of shagganappi, dried bison hide, wrapped around the wheels. "The Red River Colony," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 58, No. 343. (December, 1878), 54.

⁵⁰ Giraud, *The Métis*, vol II, 285.

⁵¹ Although the first mention of the cart is an obscure reference to undefined "reports" from 1784, the first explicit comment on the Cart was made by a North West Company trader named Alexander Henry the Younger in 1801. Henry noted that, "Men now go again for meat, with small carts, the wheels of which are one solid piece, sawed off the ends of trees whose diameter is three feet." Elliot W. Coues, *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest (Henry – Thompson Journals)*, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1897), quoted in Howard, *Strange Empire*, 54.

⁵² Giraud, *The Métis*, vol II, 284.

concave wheels were the main mechanism by which the Red River cart achieved good cross-country performance.⁵³

Another important feature of the wheels was their method of attachment to the axle. Wedge-shaped wooden pins held the wheels in position. These pins were quick and easy to put in and take out with the result that the cart's wheels could be easily removed and replaced. This meant that field repairs, repairs

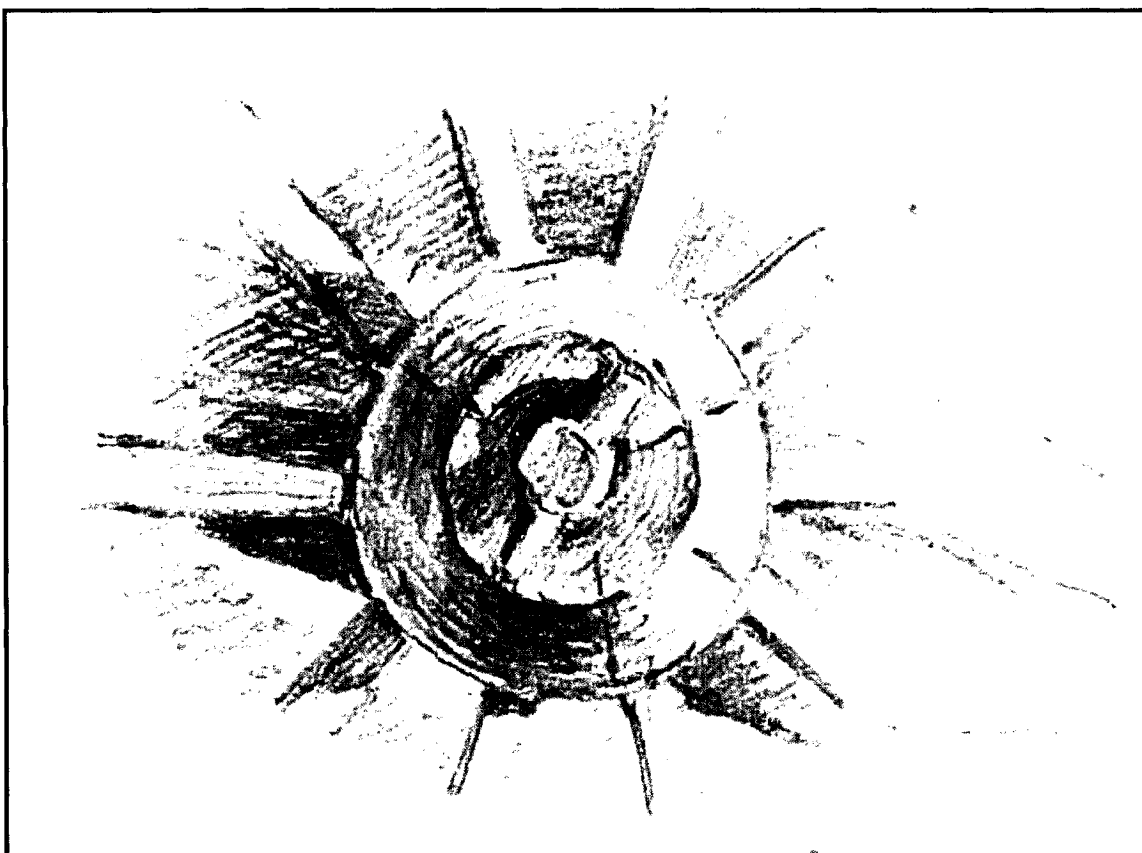


Figure 20

Detailed sketch of a Red River Cart wheel hub showing the method of attachment of the wheel to the axle. From the sketchbook of William George Richardson Hind, June 1862. Sketchbook folio 35, recto, right. Library and Archives Canada, Acc. No. 1963-97-1.35R:C.

⁵³ George Monro Grant, *Ocean to Ocean: Sandford Fleming's Expedition through Canada in 1872; Being a Diary Kept During a Journey from the Atlantic to the Pacific, with the Expedition of the Engineer-in-Chief of the Canadian Pacific and Intercolonial Railways*, (Toronto: Coles Pub. Co., 1970), 122.

done without the need for any special facilities or workshop, could be done very easily. This ease of replacement also meant that the whole wheel assembly could be replaced very quickly with a spare wheel.

The ability to easily remove the wheels offered several other important advantages. First of all, with the wheels removed, the cart body could sit squarely on the ground. This meant that if the cart were being employed as a protective wall there would be no gaps along the ground through which arrows or bullets might pass. Removal of the wheels also allowed the cart to be turned into a makeshift raft. This eliminated the need for fording sites for river crossing as the carts could cross anywhere on a river where the watercourse was not too fast or rough. The draught animals and the cart-drivers would simply swim across the river.⁵⁴

The position of the wheels is also significant. Since the rim of the wheel did not extend beyond the back of the Cart box, the wagon could be stood squarely on the ground on its rear end with the wheels still in place. This offered the same advantage as removing the wheels if the cart were being employed as a protective wall with the obvious additional advantage of greatly increased speed in establishing the wall.⁵⁵ As will be seen later, this ability to transition rapidly from a rolling cart to a protective wall and vice versa was a key aspect of the Métis defensive organization.

Finally, and most obviously, the Red River Cart had only two wheels. The reasons for this are straightforward. A vehicle with two large wheels offered

⁵⁴ C.A. Kenaston, "The Great Plains of Canada," *The Century*, (August, 1892), 575.

⁵⁵ Lussier, *The Métis*, 53.

greater cross-country performance than a wagon of comparable size equipped with four smaller wheels. Furthermore, because a two-wheeled vehicle had no need for any special suspension, especially the kind of complicated arrangement that was necessary to allow the front wheels of a four-wheeled wagon to turn, it was much easier to build, maintain, repair and drive.

The overall design of the Red River cart was considered and deliberate, optimized for the conditions of its employment in a highly competitive commercial enterprise in a very dangerous environment. This design of the cart was not, as has been suggested, the result of some vague ethnic sensitivity to Métis' French or Scottish heritage.⁵⁶

The demands of the hunt also led to the development and refinement of a variety of techniques, both technical and organizational, that proved to be highly transferable to other, more general, transportation applications. These included knowledge of the terrain, expertise in land navigation and the skills associated with driving the carts. This was much more complicated than might appear at first blush as it involved the handling of the draught animals, the rigging of the loads, the selection of routes and the daily routine of driving over rough terrain and across various obstacles.⁵⁷

The sheer size of the hunting expeditions meant that considerable organization was necessary. By the early 1840s there were typically well over a thousand Red River carts and 1500 people committed to the summer hunts.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ See, for example, Howard, *Strange Empire*, 54.

⁵⁷ For a sense of the complexity of this see, Telleen, *The Draft Horse Primer*, 218-65.

⁵⁸ Figures vary but on the 1840 hunt there were estimated to be 1700 Red River carts operated by 500 men, 600 women and 680 children. Ross, *The Red River Settlement*, 246 and 272.

However, it was the danger of attack from other Aboriginal people, the Sioux in particular, that necessitated the development and refinement of a system of defence that provided security both on the move and while encamped.⁵⁹

Camp security was based on several complementary measures. First of all, the camps were formed on the basis of a laager of Red River carts with the carts themselves forming part of the structure of the defence. At the end of each days march, the carts would be formed into a square laager with the area inside the wagons used as the main camp area and as the corral for the animals. In a variation of the popular image of 'circling the wagons' the Métis stood their two-wheeled carts on their ends such that the bottom of the carts faced out with the drawpoles upright. This resulted in a near solid wall being presented to the outside of the laager. The formation was further strengthened by the insertion of poles, normally used for drying buffalo skins, through the wheels of adjacent carts to firmly bind the carts one to the other.⁶⁰

This cart-laager provided a physical barrier that prevented animals or people from drifting out of the camp and provided protection against the danger of unwanted animal or human visitors from entering it. The palisade formed by the interlocked Red River carts was given additional strength by placing baggage packs along the inside of the cart-wall. With the addition of the packs, the wall would be capable of stopping bullets and arrows, at least along the lower levels. Hunters patrolled the inside of the camp on a duty-watch system that ensured

⁵⁹ Woodcock, *Gabriel Dumont*, 39.

⁶⁰ Dugast, *Legendes*, 25.

vigilance.⁶¹ These patrols also extended outside the cart-laager and augmented sentries posted outside the cart-wall.⁶²

Appreciation for the importance of their horses and oxen led to another important technique. While it may have been tempting to hide behind the cart-wall, especially when under heavy attack, the Métis realized that this was not the best way to ensure the protection of their animals. Instead, rifle-pits, basic field defences analogous to the modern slit-trench, were dug outside the cart-laager such that it would be very difficult for attackers to get within range of the animals within the camp. These rifle-pits were dug all the way around the cart-laager at intervals that ensured mutual fire-support between pits and all-round protection for the camp.⁶³ When combined with the accurate, long-range rifle fire that the Métis were capable of, the cart-laager/firing-pit combination would have been very formidable.⁶⁴ In the absence of field artillery, only a determined mass assault or a protracted siege would be capable of overwhelming this sort of defence. There were very few enemies on the prairie who were capable of or willing to make such an assault or to sustain such a siege.

Although camp security was clearly defined and well developed, the organization while on the move, the “march” organization, was probably the thing that most impressed outside observers. Numerous observers commented

⁶¹ Lettre de M. Richer Laflèche, Missionnaire, in, Diocèse de Québec, *Rapport sur les Missions*, (Quebec: Des presses a vapeur D'Augustin Côté et Cie., 1853).50-51.

⁶² Woodcock, *Gabriel Dumont*, 37.

⁶³ Lussier, *The Métis*, 60.

⁶⁴ Laflèche, *Rapport*, 65.

favourably on this, including Alexander Ross who compared the Métis cart-train to the “victorious army” of Wellington.⁶⁵

The annual hunts began with the assembly of individual Métis hunters and their families at a central meeting point such as Pembina. A leader was then elected from a small group of captains and he was granted complete authority for the duration of the hunt. Authority was exercised through the captains, each of whom had ten soldiers under his direct control. And although this authority was, at least theoretically, nearly absolute, in fact it was circumscribed by a set of rules and conventions that had developed over the years and included formal sanctions including, for the most severe offences, flogging and banishment.⁶⁶

In addition to the captains, a number of hunters were chosen to act as guides. Each day, at the raising of a flag, authority was handed from the Captain of the Hunt to the guide whose turn it was to lead the day’s march. The guide was responsible for supervising the breaking of camp and for the conduct of the march itself. At the end of a day’s march, the flag was lowered signifying that authority had passed back to the Captain of the Hunt who was responsible for the order of the camp as well as its security and discipline. Both camp tear-down and set-up were typically accomplished within half an hour,⁶⁷ quite an accomplishment for a camp that could have a population of more than 1,500 people and be comprised of more than a thousand Red River carts.⁶⁸ Depending

⁶⁵ Ross, *Red River*, 267. See also, Paul Kane, *Wanderings of An Artist: Among the Indians of North America*, (1858; reprint, Toronto: The Radisson Society of Canada Ltd., 1925), 54-55.

⁶⁶ Ross, *Red River*, 248-49.

⁶⁷ “[...] everything moves with the regularity of clock-work.” Ross, *Red River*, 249.

⁶⁸ Ross, *Red River*, 244.

on terrain and the degree of threat posed by other Natives, the cart-train was formed into two, three or four parallel columns.⁶⁹

To guard against surprise, detachments were sent out to the flanks of the cart-train as well as to the front and rear. Additionally, scouts, equipped with binoculars, were sent well ahead of the cart-train to search for bison or enemies.⁷⁰ In the case of a sighting, warning was sent to the main body of carts by signals such as throwing dust in the air in the case of bison or running the horses back and forth in the case of enemies.⁷¹ In areas of particularly high threat, armed parties were sent out ahead of the main group to secure high ground and key terrain features such as fords.⁷²

Although a high degree of organization and discipline are apparent from descriptions of the cart-train on the move, a train that might stretch out to five or six miles in length, it is the conduct of the hunting party during the Battle of Grand Coteau that best illustrates how refined these skills were. Having been warned by scouts of the approach of a large body of Sioux warriors, the Métis established their cart-laager and waited for the attack that was not long in coming.⁷³ All attempts by the Sioux to enter the camp were beaten back. Nevertheless, it was obvious to the Métis that they could not resist the Sioux

⁶⁹ For example, in preparing the march plan for the 1851 hunt the hunters were divided into two groups that would remain close enough together so as to be able to provide mutual support, a distance of twenty to thirty miles, but not so close as to “[...] injure each other’s hunt.” Lussier, *The Métis*, 51.

⁷⁰ Lussier, *The Métis*, 53.

⁷¹ Kane, *Wanderings*, 54-55.

⁷² Ross, *Red River*, 267.

⁷³ Lussier, *The Métis*, 53.

indefinitely. The only reasonable course was to try to link up with the main hunting party that was somewhere off to the northwest.⁷⁴

After a no doubt restless night, the Métis broke camp, formed into four columns and began to withdraw to the north, all of this in full view of the Sioux. Mounted parties were sent to cover the front, the flanks and the rear of the cart-train. After less than an hour's march, the rear security party signaled that the Sioux were in pursuit.⁷⁵ In what can only be described as an astonishing demonstration of skill and discipline, the four columns wheeled into position to form a square. With the cart-laager formed, this time in two concentric rings, the Métis rushed out to dig their rifle pits at a distance of perhaps thirty meters from the barricade.⁷⁶ By the time the Sioux caught up with the Métis, the Sioux found themselves again confronted by the Métis' formidable field defences. As on the previous day, numerous attacks over a period of five more hours were frustrated by steady and accurate Métis fire. With casualties mounting and nothing to show for it the Sioux realized that they were beaten.⁷⁷ The Métis had successfully executed what is arguably the most difficult operation in war, the fighting withdrawal.

The inherent flexibility of the sophisticated, Red River cart-equipped hunting organization became apparent when, beginning in the 1830s, the demand for overland transportation services began to rise. At first this consisted of occasional trips to trading posts based on urgent requirements of the HBC.

⁷⁴ Laflèche, *Rapport*, 62-63.

⁷⁵ Laflèche, *Rapport*, 64.

⁷⁶ Lussier, *The Métis*, 60.

⁷⁷ Laflèche, *Rapport*, 65.

But as the population of Rupert's Land grew and became more differentiated, the demand for transportation services also grew and differentiated.

There were three main groups of customers for overland transport. First of all, the HBC continued to dominate the economic landscape well into the second half of the nineteenth century. Lacking any significant transport capacity of its own, the company routinely contracted out its freighting needs.⁷⁸ This was consistent with Company practice with its riverine transport where freight was normally moved by contractors rather than by dedicated company staff.

The growing settler community also generated a demand for service. By the mid-1830s, the Red River Colony's agricultural activities had matured considerably and the HBC was no longer willing or able to consume all of the Colony's production.⁷⁹ The need for new markets was keenly felt. Additionally, the perennial demand for goods shipped into the colony was not being met by the HBC's transportation arrangements. These had never been particularly flexible, but with the approach of settlements in the United States, the delays associated with waiting for Company shipments became unacceptable.⁸⁰ By the mid-1830s, connections had been established with communities in the rapidly expanding United States, St. Paul in particular, and by 1837 at the latest, there was a steady flow of traffic between Red River and St. Paul.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Canada. National Archives of Canada. *Hudson's Bay Company Archives* (micro copy). A 12/1 fo. 394d, Simpson to Governor and Committee, 18 July 1831.

⁷⁹ Spry, *From The Hunt to The Homestead*, XVII/15.

⁸⁰ Spry, *From The Hunt to The Homestead*, I/22.

⁸¹ Service des Archives de la Societe historique de Saint-Boniface. Fonds Corporation archiepiscopale catholique romaine de Saint-Boniface. Serie Provencher. Boite 5, P-4412 to P-4451, *Notice sur la Riviere-Rouge*, December 1843, 252.

The final group of transport service customers consisted of the many and various travelers to and through Rupert's Land. From modest beginnings, this turned into a fairly significant activity as interest in the territories of the west increased. Catholic priests and Protestant ministers were among the first to avail themselves of this kind of service.

Although the clergy were quite good at securing free travel on HBC transport, this was not always the case. For example, when the Reverend John West was taken on as a chaplain to the HBC in 1820, the Company provided him with free transportation all the way from England to the Red River Settlement.⁸² However, once established in Rupert's Land, Reverend West began to have a few ideas of his own with respect to missionary activities far from his assigned HBC post. In 1823 he conducted his own trip far to the north in search of "Esquimaux" souls to save. Although much of the trip was made on Company boats he found it necessary to hire a canoe and crew for the final leg of his trip from Norway House to Fort Churchill.⁸³

The experience of the Catholic clergy was similar. Although the HBC was very generous in providing free transport when it was readily available, they were not prepared to provide services on demand, especially when there was a requirement for transport to places or at times that did not correspond with Company business. In 1841 for example, the Catholic Church was compelled to

⁸² John West, *The Substance of a Journal During a Residence at the Red River Colony, British North America : And Frequent Excursions among the North-West American Indians, in the Years 1820, 1821, 1822, 1823*, (London: Printed for L.B. Seelev and Son, 1824), 2.

⁸³ West, *The Substance of a Journal*, 158.

spend £12 in cash to have two thousand pounds of pemmican delivered to one of its posts by Red River cart.⁸⁴

Beginning with the visit of the Earls of Caledon and Mulgrave in 1841, Rupert's Land became a destination for what in modern terms would be referred to a "ethno-tourists." In reality, these were rich Europeans seeking adventure and most were interested in hunting the still plentiful game of North America. In all cases, these parties needed transport. In the case of the Earls of Caledon and Mulgrave, the job fell to a party led by a Métis, Cuthbert Grant of Seven Oaks fame.⁸⁵ A stream of aristocrats followed. Included in this group were: the Comte de la Guiche in 1851, Lord Southesk in 1859, Lord Milton and Dr. Cheadle in 1862-63 and the Conte Arrigo di Maggiore di Castiglione in 1864.⁸⁶ Numerous gentleman hunters and sportsmen followed in the footsteps of these well-heeled travelers.

There were also a series of artistic, scientific and government survey missions that generated work for transportation service providers as they made their way into Rupert's Land. Among these, some of the more famous include the artists Paul Kane,⁸⁷ Peter Rindisbacher⁸⁸ and William George Richardson Hind.⁸⁹ Scientific expeditions included the botanists Thomas Drummond, David

⁸⁴ Service des Archives de la Societe historique de Saint-Boniface. Fonds Corporation archiepiscopale catholique romaine de Saint-Boniface. Serie Provencher. Boite 4, Cahier H. P-3059, *Lettres de Belcourt*, 28 July 1841.

⁸⁵ George Simpson, *An Overland Journey Round the World, During the Years 1841 and 1842*. (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1847), 47-48.

⁸⁶ These travels are neatly summarized in Spry, *Homeland*, V/2.

⁸⁷ Kane, *Wanderings of an Artist*, 1-25.

⁸⁸ Alvin M. Josephy, and Amon Carter Museum of Western Art. *The Artist Was a Young Man; the Life Story of Peter Rindisbacher*, (Fort Worth, Texas: Amon Carter Museum, 1970), 63.

⁸⁹ Wright, *The Overlanders*, 23.

Douglas and John Jeffery, the biologist and ornithologist Robert Kennicott and the zoologist Donald Gunn.⁹⁰

In 1857, the Imperial government mounted a mission to explore the territory that was by then still largely unknown to those not connected with the fur trade. This mission, led by John Palliser, was the first of several missions that radically transformed the image of Rupert's Land in the popular imagination of Canadians. Palliser's team was followed the next year by two teams, one led by S.J. Dawson and the other by Henry Youle Hind. In each of these cases, the parties were compelled to seek out local contractors capable of providing reliable transport for their teams.⁹¹

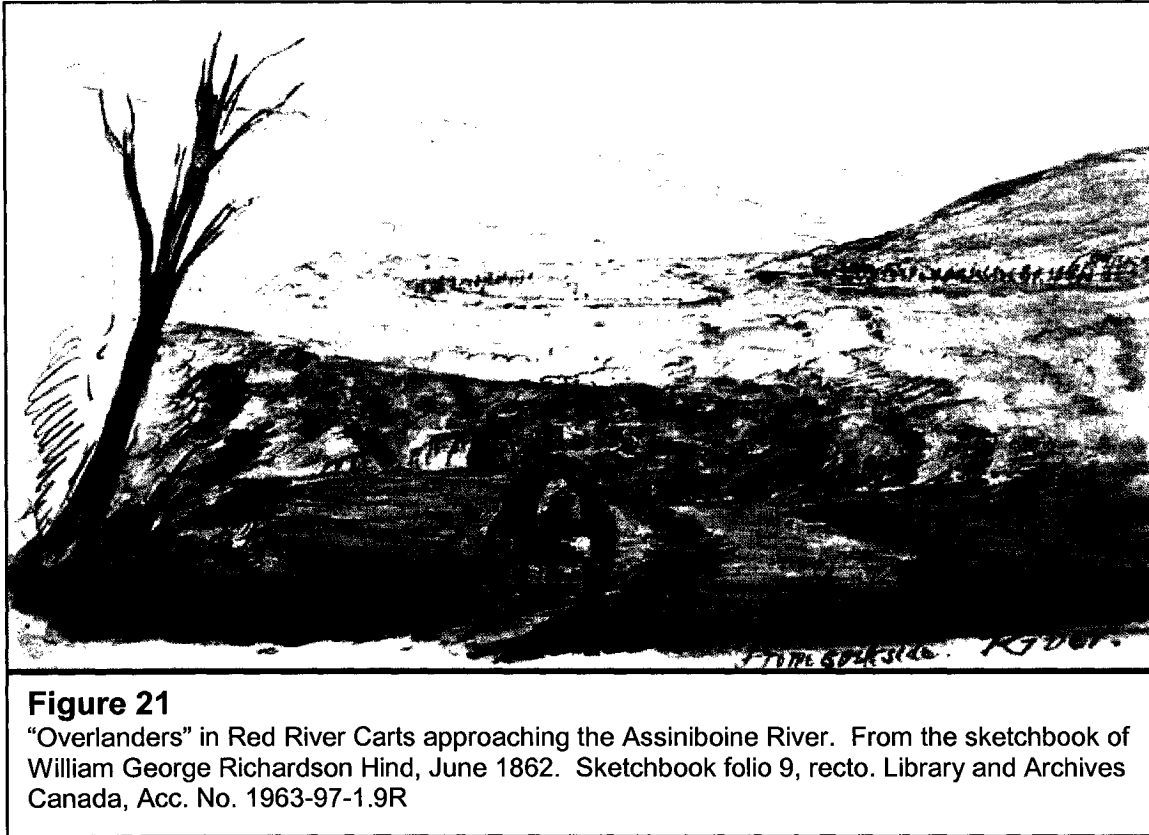
Finally there were many people who simply wanted to transit through Rupert's Land on their way to somewhere else. Of this group, the "overlanders" were perhaps the most conspicuous due to their relatively large numbers. The aptly named "overlanders" were gold-seekers who, impatient with the idea of traveling round the continent by ship, sought an overland short-cut to the gold fields of the west coast.⁹² Again, their need for transport was obvious.

As this freight and general transport activity increased both in scale and in geographic reach, techniques employed on the bison hunts were adapted to the conditions in each of the various areas. First of all, in the absence of any great threat of attack on most of the established overland routes, cart-trains were organized much more along the lines of a caravan than was the case when traveling cross-country in search of bison. Although the technique of 'circling the

⁹⁰ Spry, *From The Hunt to The Homestead*, VI/5.

⁹¹ Spry, *From The Hunt to The Homestead*, VI/10.

⁹² Wright, *The Overlanders*, xx.



wagons' was maintained when setting up camp and the end of each day, it was modified based on the reduced threat. Rather than setting the carts on their ends, the carts were formed into a circle sitting upright with the draw-poles to the outside of the circle.⁹³ This still performed the function of a corral for the Métis' animals but was much easier and faster to set up and tear down than was the case with the hunting laager.

The use of established routes also meant that the carts would be traveling along well-worn and easily recognizable surfaces. This meant that navigation was much less of a challenge than it would have been on a hunt. It also meant that the driving and handling of the carts was much less difficult. This led to a

⁹³ "The People of Red River," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 18, No. 104. (January, 1859), 175.

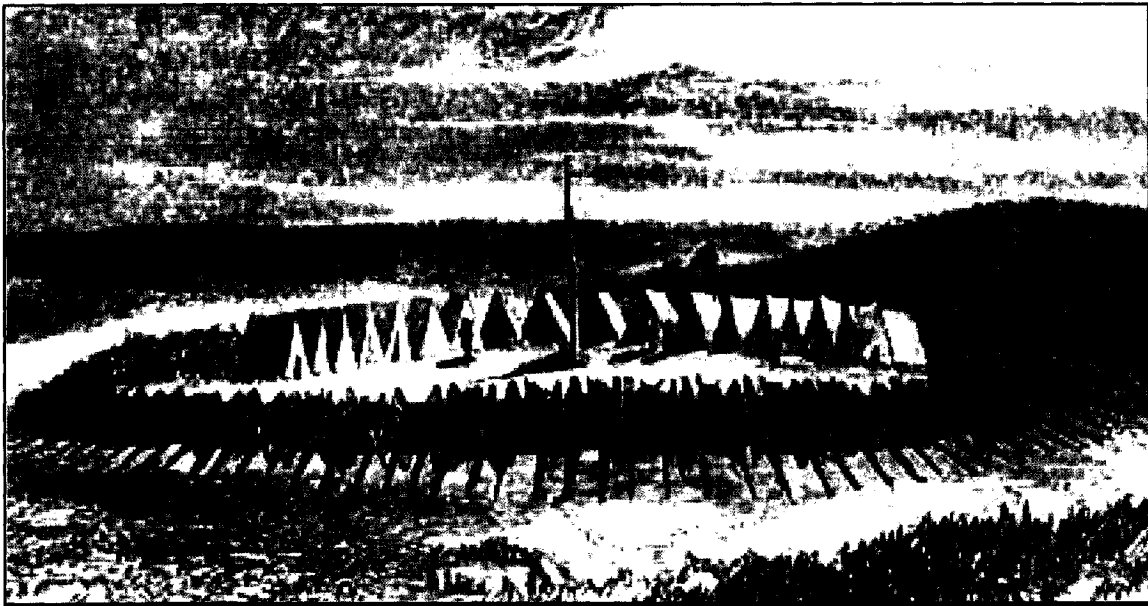


Figure 22

This image from 1859 shows the variation of the 'circling the wagons' technique as it would have been used in relatively safe areas such as on the Carleton trail. "The People of Red River," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 18, No. 104. (January, 1859), 175.

very important adaptation. Very early on, Métis freighters recognized that it was possible for one driver to handle more than one cart if the driving was along regular surfaces. As early as 1831, cart brigades headed south to the United States along the Red River trails were being conducted with four men driving ten carts.⁹⁴ Three of the men would drive three carts each while the 'captain' of the group, responsible for the organization and navigation of the brigade would drive a single cart.⁹⁵ Typically, these cart-brigades were assembled with other brigades into a large cart-train that might have fifty to a hundred carts in total.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Service des Archives de la Société historique de Saint-Boniface. Fonds Corporation archiepiscopale catholique romaine de Saint-Boniface. Série Provencher. Boîte 5, P-4412 to P-4451, *Notice sur la Rivière-Rouge*, December 1843, 255.

⁹⁵ Hargrave, *Red River*, 59.

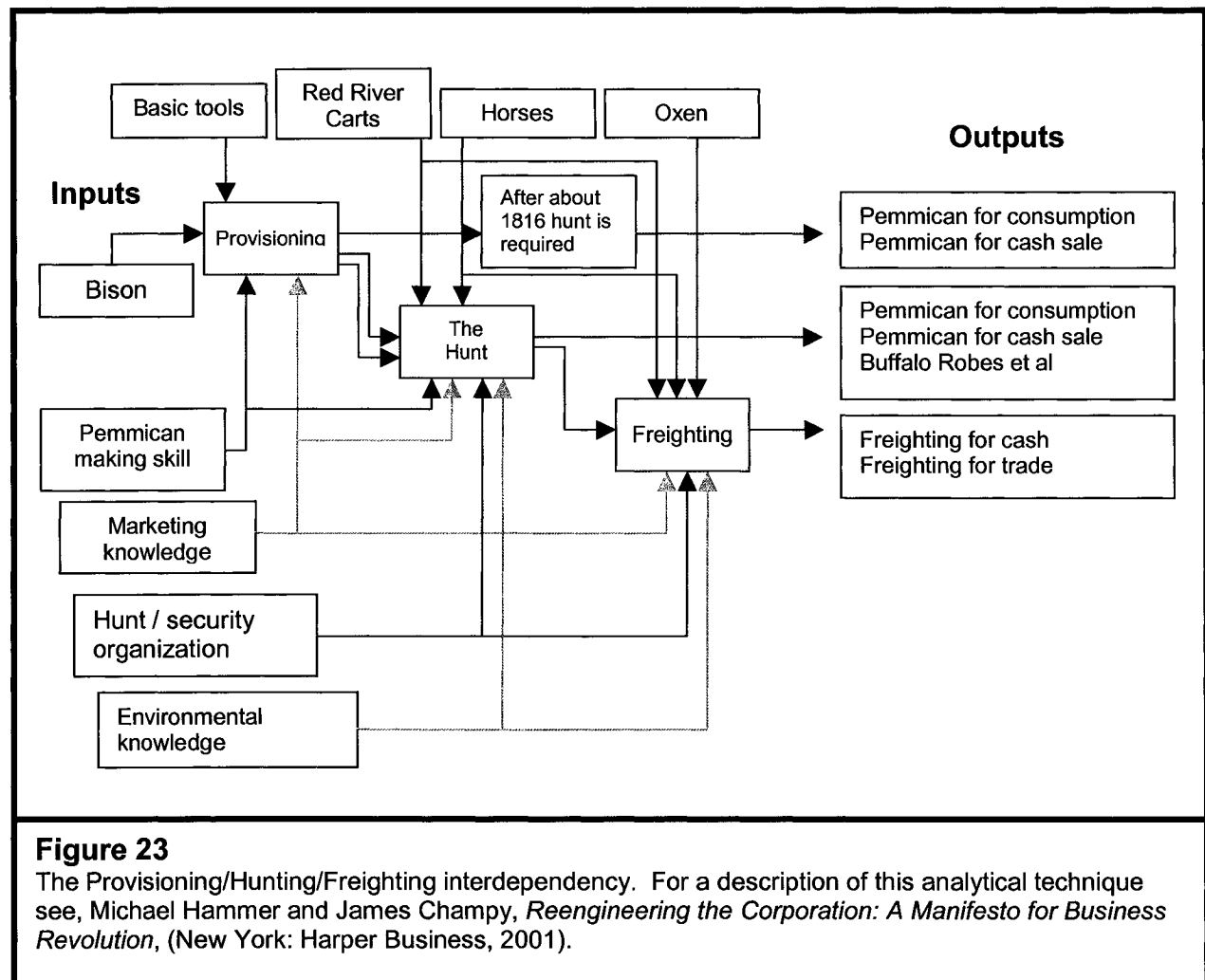
⁹⁶ Service des Archives de la Société historique de Saint-Boniface. Fonds Corporation archiepiscopale catholique romaine de Saint-Boniface. Série Taché. Boîte 6. T-0001 to T-2062, February 1861, 0158.

Later, on parts of the Carleton trail where the track was both well-worn and well-known, some Métis drivers were seen to be handling as many as six carts each.⁹⁷ The advantages of this are obvious. As freight was moved on a per pound rate, one driver could greatly increase his profits per trip by driving more than one cart. As will be discussed later, this practice also had important implications for the Métis economy as a whole.

The bison hunts were the crucible in which a safe and reliable overland transportation capability had been formed. This interrelationship is depicted schematically in Figure 23. Beginning with the simple needs of local hunting as part of the provisioning trade, new skills and equipment were developed in response to the demands of hunting bison in lands far removed from the hunter's homes and in areas dominated by hostile Native groups. With some adaptations, the technologies and techniques used in hunting were highly transferable to the needs of freighting and other routine transportation tasks within Rupert's Land and beyond.

At the same time, the rationalized riverine transport requirements of the fur trade resulted in the development of a body of personnel trained and equipped to move along the inland waterways of Rupert's Land. In the case of both overland and waterborne transport, the HBC had helped to generate personnel and plant essential to the operation of the fur trade but in a manner that made it nearly impossible for the Company to ultimately control them. As new demands for transportation services developed, the Métis found themselves uniquely situated to exploit the possibilities of both of these industries.

⁹⁷ "Red River Trail," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 18, No. 107. (April, 1859), 615.



Chapter 5

The Métis and Transportation

That Métis were heavily involved in the provision of transportation services in Rupert's Land is obvious from even the most cursory examination of contemporaneous accounts of travel. Almost every significant account from the period mentions the Métis as manning boats, carrying freight, running supply and transport for various expeditions or participating in some transport or transportation related activity. This is true almost from the time that the Métis first appear in the historical record and remains the case at least until the arrival of the railroads in the 1880s.

It is also true that many observers had considerable difficulty distinguishing between Métis and other Aboriginal people. It is this ambiguity in the historical record that is the most serious obstacle to the development of a clear picture of Métis involvement in the various elements of the nineteenth century Rupert's Land economy. Still, by a reasonable application of the abductive process it is possible to establish an estimate as to the extent of Métis involvement in the transportation arrangements that have been described in this thesis. In the case of the York boat traffic, the picture is not completely clear. In the case of the movement of overland freight and passengers the picture is very clear indeed.

Even before the decision had been made to replace canoes with York Boats on most of the HBC's routes, Métis were recognized as skilled, if unruly, boat handlers. John West, a chaplain employed by the HBC, observed in 1821

that the, “[...] Bois brulés have displayed the most striking ability as steersmen of boats, through the most difficult rapids, and in the navigation of the rivers [...]”.¹ However, at this early time, the HBC had still not determined who was best suited to man the expanding York Boat brigades. Throughout the 1820s there was considerable discussion and not a little experimentation related to this.

The original plan was that Orkneymen were to be employed in preference to Canadians as the Orkneymen were considered to be more reliable. Although it did not turn out to be the case, the London committee also assumed that they would be cheaper in the long run.² However, the members of the council, the men who were actually in Rupert’s Land directing operations, did not agree with the London committee’s assessment nor did they agree with a proposed pay scale.³ The council favored the employment of Canadians as boat crew because of the “[...] slow, inanimate habits,” they ascribed to the Orkneymen.⁴

But the London committee was no so easily dissuaded from its position and, in a March 1823 letter, suggested that the poor opinion of the Orkneymen was, “premature if not ill founded” and persisted in its belief that it would be cheaper to bring these men into Rupert’s Land than it would be to employ

¹ John West, *The Substance of a Journal During a Residence at the Red River Colony, British North America : And Frequent Excursions among the North-West American Indians, in the Years 1820, 1821, 1822, 1823*, (London: Printed for L.B. Seelev and Son, 1824), 137. In a particularly revealing passage West goes on to say that, “[...] if [the Métis] advantages were given them in education, they have capacities of usefulness that might adorn the highest stations of civilized life. Of moral degradation, however, of these people, in common with that of the Canadian voyageurs, it is difficult to exhibit an accurate picture. Suffice it to say, that it is a degradation which, in some respects, exceeds even that of the native Indian himself.”

² This decision was made in February of 1822. *Minutes of Council*, xix. It may be that the commonly accepted notion that York Boats were normally crewed by Orkneymen is based on this directive.

³ Agnes C. Laut, *The Conquest of the Great Northwest; Being the Story of the Adventurers of England Known as the Hudson's Bay Company. New Pages in the History of the Canadian Northwest and Western States*, (New York,: George H. Doran Company, 1918), 114.

⁴ The relevant council meeting was held on 8 July 1822 at York Factory. *Minutes of Council*, xx.

Canadians.⁵ Although not convinced, Governor Simpson agreed to a compromise arrangement in which equal numbers of Canadians and Orkneymen would be employed in the boats, noting that the Canadians were, “[...] a volatile inconsiderate race, but easily managed,” whereas the Orkneymen were, “[...] slow and lacking in physical strength and spirit.”⁶

But this was not the end of it. In 1826, Simpson decided to try employing Métis as wage labourers on the boats. At £15 sterling per year, they represented a considerable savings over the Orkneymen because there were no costs associated with recruiting them and transporting them to Rupert’s Land. The experiment was considered to be reasonably successful but Simpson considered the Métis to be “indolent” and prone to desertion.⁷ No Métis were employed in 1827 because of the high number of them who had deserted their posts in the previous year. Still, the economics of employing locally available labour was irresistible and Métis were again hired in 1828.⁸

A decision with even greater long-term consequences for the involvement of Métis in the boating business came in 1825. In a move that would be described as ‘outsourcing’ in modern business terminology, Simpson decided to contract for the movement of freight wherever possible. This meant that, instead of HBC men manning HBC boats, individual entrepreneurs would be paid for the movement of cargo on a piecework basis at standardized rates. A boat

⁵ Letter to George Simpson, 13 March 1823. *Minutes of Council*, xxii.

⁶ Report by Simpson to the London Committee, 23 June 1823. *Minutes of Council*, xxiv. The Orkneymen were to be paid £12 sterling per year over a five year contract. This was a considerable reduction in wages from the £17 to £20 that had been paid to canoe crew. Canadians were to be paid 600 livres per year. *Minutes of Council*, xxxviii.

⁷ *Minutes of Council*, lviii.

⁸ *Minutes of Council*, lviii.

steersman would buy his own boat, hire his own crew and manage the monies earned. Although there seems to have been some doubt as to whether or not there were sufficient people interested in doing this, the experiment was immediately successful. By the second half of the 1820s, of the fourteen boats on the Red River to York Factory route, only three were HBC-owned and crewed.⁹ For the next half-century, Métis were heavily involved in York Boat freighting, either as paid HBC employees or as piece-work contractors or as independent boat operators.

Determining exactly who these people were and how many of them were employed in this work is difficult to know with any certainty. Still, it is possible to make some reasonable estimates. If eleven of the fourteen boats operating on the Red River to York Factory route were manned entirely by Métis, this would mean that approximately 88 of the 112 men employed on that route would have been Métis. By 1830, there were approximately 75 boats operating along all of the HBC routes under study.¹⁰ With each boat carrying a crew of eight, the total number of crew would number 600. If the ratio of Métis to other crew were the same throughout the territory as they were on the Red River to York Factory route, this would suggest that perhaps 480 Métis were so employed.

This number, though only a very gross estimate, is significant. Even if the number is reduced by fully half, it still suggests that several hundred adult, male Métis were employed annually in the crewing of York Boats. This is supported by the observations of various people who made use of boat transportation. In the

⁹ Giraud, vol II, 103.

¹⁰ *Minutes of Council*, 277-81. As already noted, this does not include the Columbia or Southern departments.

spring of 1841 for example, Monseigneur Provencher directed that three boats manned by Métis were to be engaged to transport goods on behalf of the church.¹¹ According to the report of John Palliser, the boats used to support his 1857 expedition were crewed by “[...] half-breed voyageurs [...]”.¹² Further, Palliser reported that, “Each boat is manned by one steersman, one bowsman, and six or seven middlemen, who, mostly half-breeds of French-Canadian or British decent...”¹³

Other travelers made similar observations. Manton Marble, reporting for the *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in 1861, suggested that there were 55 York boats operating between York Factory and Red River and that “[...] the crews were dominated by Metis.”¹⁴ Joseph Hargrave, traveling by York boat in 1862 made the same observation noting that, “[...] the tripmen are half-breeds [...]”.¹⁵ Julian Ralph, reflecting on his experiences in Rupert's Land noted that it was “[...] the half-breeds [...] manning the great York boats of the Hudson's Bay Company.”¹⁶

While the evidence to suggest that Métis were heavily involved in York boat work is strong, in the case of Métis involvement in overland transport the evidence is overwhelming. In almost every account of travel by Red River cart

¹¹ Service des Archives de la Société historique de Saint-Boniface. Fonds Corporation archiepiscopale catholique romaine de Saint-Boniface. Série Provencher. Boîte 4, Cahier H. P-3144, *Lettres de Belcourt*, 25 December 1840.

¹² *The Papers of the Palliser Expedition: 1857-1860*, Irene M. Spry, ed., (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1968), 392-93.

¹³ *The Papers of the Palliser Expedition: 1857-1860*, Irene M. Spry, ed., (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1968), 542

¹⁴ Marble, Manton. “To Red River and Beyond,” *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 22, No. 129. (February, 1861), 306.

¹⁵ Hargrave, *Red River*, 159.

¹⁶ Julien, Ralph. “Talking Musquash,” *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 84, No. 502. (March, 1892), 509.

the Métis were clearly identified as the cart drivers and trip captains, sometimes even by name. In 1841 for example, the Catholic Church in Red River contracted Métis for the transport of more than a ton of pemmican to one of its posts¹⁷ while also hiring three Métis to transport food from St. Paul in May of that year.¹⁸ The next year, an Oblate priest accompanied a group of twenty-seven Métis Red River carts that traveled to the United States with sale goods.¹⁹ In 1846 the church paid 150 'louis' to a Métis trip captain named Lefevre for the transport of six passengers from St. Pierre to Pembina.²⁰ In 1849, Monseigneur Provencher made the trip from Pembina to St. Paul in a Métis cart-train.²¹

American visitors to Red River also observed and commented on the role of the Métis in the freight business. In 1859 one traveler, writing for *Harper's Magazine*, noted the mastery of the Métis over their equipment:

As the Métis are all taught the use of their rude instruments, the building of new carts and the repairing of old ones, fill the settlements with the rattling of a thousand hammers. These carts are curious and ingenious contrivances, built entirely of wood; not a nail, or screw, or particle of metal being used in their

¹⁷ Service des Archives de la Société historique de Saint-Boniface. Fonds Corporation archiepiscopale catholique romaine de Saint-Boniface. Série Provencher. Boîte 4, Cahier H. P-3059, *Lettres de Belcourt*, 28 July 1841.

¹⁸ Service des Archives de la Société historique de Saint-Boniface. Fonds Corporation archiepiscopale catholique romaine de Saint-Boniface. Série Provencher. Boîte 4, Cahier H. P-3144, *Lettres de Belcourt*, 25 December 1840.

¹⁹ Service des Archives de la Société historique de Saint-Boniface. Fonds Corporation archiepiscopale catholique romaine de Saint-Boniface. Série Provencher. Boîte 5, P-4412 to P-4451, *Notice sur la Rivière-Rouge*, December 1843, 88-285.

²⁰ Service des Archives de la Société historique de Saint-Boniface. Fonds Corporation archiepiscopale catholique romaine de Saint-Boniface. Série Provencher. Boîte 5, Cahier K. P-4214, 21 September 1846.

²¹ Service des Archives de la Société historique de Saint-Boniface. Fonds Corporation archiepiscopale catholique romaine de Saint-Boniface. Série Provencher. Boîte 4, Cahier I. P-3500, 17 June 1849.

construction. But such is their strength that they last for several years, and carry heavy loads on journeys of a thousand miles every season.²²

Another *Harper's* writer, traveling to Red River later the same year, passed a Métis cart-train with 150 carts on its way to St. Paul. His description of the cart drivers is as amusing as it is unambiguous,

One hardly knew whether to be most surprised at the odd uniformity of their costume of coarse blue cloth, richly ornate with brass buttons, their showy belts of red flannel, and their small jaunty caps, or at the remarkable diversity of their figures and complexions, including, as it did, the fair skin and light-brown curls of the Saxon, and the swarthy hue and straight hair of the Indian, with every intermediate shade that amalgamation could produce. [...] As the train dragged slowly by, each driver raised his cap with a respectful 'Bonjour'.²³

Manton Marble, again writing for *Harper's* in 1861, identified two cart operators by name, Joe Rolette and a Mr. Bottineau.²⁴ Perhaps the most famous name related to cart-driving was that of Antoine Gingras, a Métis contracted in 1843 by Norman Kittson, another Métis, to handle cart brigades operating between Kittson's store in Pembina and the Red River settlement.²⁵

²² "The People of Red River," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 18, No. 104. (January, 1859), 175.

²³ "Red River Trail," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 18, No. 107. (April, 1859), 615.

²⁴ Marble, Manton. "To Red River and Beyond," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 22, No. 129. (February, 1861), 306.

²⁵ In 1843, Kittson also hired Joe Rolette to work on the cart-trains as a sub-contractor. *The Papers of the Palliser Expedition: 1857-1860*, Irene M. Spry, ed., (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1968), 608.

His name appears in several sources where he was referred to as “le roi des charettes.”²⁶

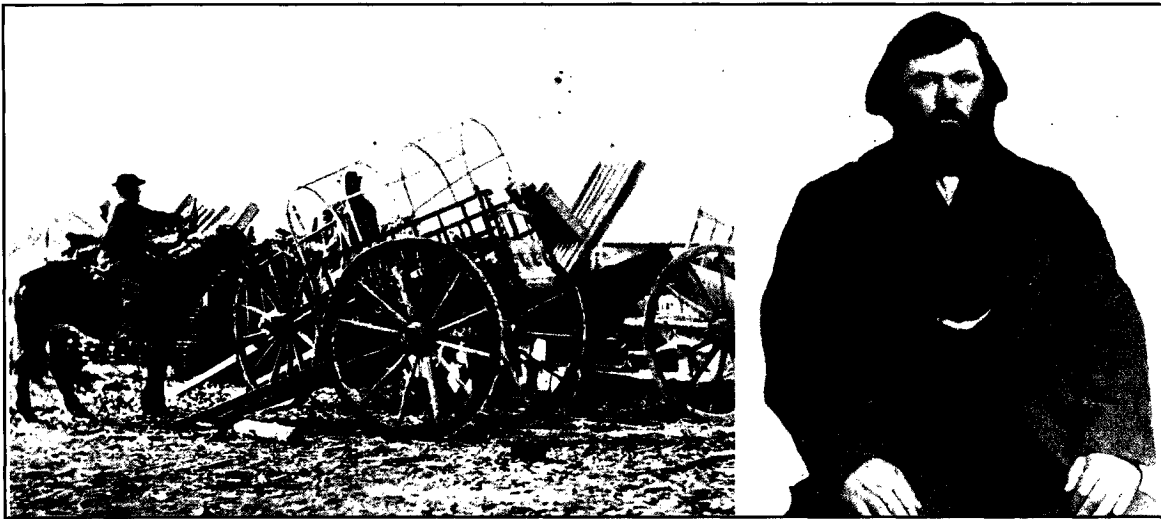


Figure 24

In these two remarkable pictures, Antoine B. Gingras, “le roi des charettes,” can be seen in 1870 supervising an assembly of Red River carts on the left and posing for a portrait in 1875. Societe historique de Saint-Boniface, B-213 (left) and Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Transportation, Red River Cart 40 (right).

As late as 1878, Métis operating Red River carts were still being observed on the Red River trail to St. Paul, though in much reduced numbers than was the case before the arrival of the railroad in the area.²⁷

That the Métis dominated overland transport is also evident in the extent to which they were involved in the many and various scientific and government survey expeditions that traveled in Rupert’s Land beginning in the 1850’s. As already noted, John Palliser’s team, sent by the British government to explore all aspects of the land, traveled through the area in 1857 in transport largely

²⁶ Service des Archives de la Societe historique de Saint-Boniface. Fonds Corporation archiepiscopale catholique romaine de Saint-Boniface. Serie Taché. Boite 8. T-6304, Letter from Antoine Gingras to Mgr. Taché. 16 February, 1869.

²⁷ “The Red River Colony,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 58, No. 343. (December, 1878), 54.

supplied by Métis.²⁸ Henry Youle Hind's Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition was dispatched by the Canadian government in 1857. Its purpose was to investigate the Red River and establish a route west from the Lakehead through HBC territory. As with Palliser's team, Hind hired Métis to provide the transport.²⁹ From 1858 to 1862 the boundary-marking expedition of Royal Engineers worked to mark the boundary at the 49th parallel as established in the Treaty of Washington. The same team worked from 1872 to 1874 to mark the boundary from the Lake of the Woods to the Rocky Mountains. On both expeditions, Métis were engaged to provide transport.³⁰



Figure 25

Members of the Boundary Commission in camp as photographed by anonymous Royal Engineers during North America Boundary Commission, 1874. NAC C-004164.

²⁸ *The Papers of the Palliser Expedition: 1857-1860*. Edited by Irene M. Spry, (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1968), 26-28.

²⁹ Hind, Henry Youle, *Narrative of the Canadian Red River Exploring Expedition of 1857 and of the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition of 1858*, (London: Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, 1860), 49.

³⁰ *Mapping the Frontier: Charles Wison's Diary of the Survey of the 49th Parallel 1858-1862*. George F.G. Stanley, ed., (Toronto: MacMillan of Canada, 1970), 17-18.

In another little twist of historical irony, the Captain Butler that participated in the Red River Expedition hired Métis to provide him the transport associated with his original reconnaissance of the area in 1870.³¹ Similarly, the team that conducted the initial surveys in advance of the construction of the Canadian Pacific railway - the railway that was ultimately to eliminate the need for most of the Métis freighters - were transported by Métis in Red River carts.³²

As with the scientific and government expeditions, the 'gentlemen' travelers' also engaged Métis to provide them with transportation across the prairies. In the case of Lord Milton and Dr. Cheadle, their team consisted of four Métis - Jean Baptiste Vital, Toussaint Voudrie and Athanhaus Bruneau - all under the control of the trip captain, Louis La Ronde.³³ The Earls of Caledon and Mulgrave, the Comte de la Guiche, Lord Southesk and the Conte Arrigo di Maggiore di Castiglione all made use of Métis transportation services to greater or lesser degrees.³⁴ The same is also true for the artists Paul Kane,³⁵ Peter Rindisbacher³⁶ and William George Richardson Hind,³⁷ and the scientists,

³¹ As Captain Butler succinctly put it, "Halfbreeds manned the "train." Capt. W.F. Butler, *The Wild North Land*, (London: S. Low, Marston, Low and Searle, 1878), 363.

³² The chief engineer of the Canadian Pacific Railway traveled from Fort Garry to Fort Edmonton in 1872. The baggage for the party was carried by Métis contracted Red River carts averaging an astonishing 40 miles per day. Grant, George M. "The Dominion of Canada," *Scribner's Monthly*, Vol. 20, No. 3. (July, 1880), 442.

³³ Viscount Milton, and W.B. Cheadle, *The North-West Passage by Land: Being the Narrative of an Expedition from the Atlantic to the Pacific*, 1865, (Reprint, Toronto: Prospero, 2001), 46.

³⁴ These travels are neatly summarized in Spry, *Homeland*, V/2.

³⁵ Kane, *Wanderings of an Artist*, 1-25.

³⁶ Alvin M. Josephy, and Amon Carter Museum of Western Art. *The Artist Was a Young Man; the Life Story of Peter Rindisbacher*, (Fort Worth, Texas: Amon Carter Museum, 1970), 63.

³⁷ W.G.R. Hind traveled with a group of "overlanders" in the summer of 1862. Wright, *The Overlanders*, 23.

Thomas Drummond, David Douglas, John Jeffery, Robert Kennicott and Donald Gunn.³⁸

Even where Métis were not employed as the actual drivers on expeditions, the long reach of Métis transportation expertise was evident. In the case of the 'overlanders,' the traveling parties do not appear to have hired any Métis drivers. Still, Red River carts to transport the travelers were purchased from Métis in Red River and at least some of the groups seem to have hired Métis guides.³⁹ These groups also took considerable advantage of the Métis' domination of the prairie trails by accompanying Métis freighters and traveling in their company. Still, the vast majority of the Métis employed in overland transportation were those nameless drivers encountered by the likes of Manton Marble during his travels on the Red River trails or the many Métis who plied the Canadian routes such as the Carleton trail.

To establish the importance of all of this transportation work within the overall context of a Métis economy, it is first necessary to quantify it, both in terms of the number of people employed and its value, both absolute and relative to other activities such as provisioning. A summary of the relevant data is contained in the table at Figure 26.

The earliest hunts on record are those that took place in 1818. It is not known how many people were involved in this hunt nor do we know how many Red River carts were employed in the effort. However, only two years later, 540

³⁸ Spry, *From The Hunt to The Homestead*, VI/5.

³⁹ Wright, *The Overlanders*, 286-87.

Figure 26. Data Capture Summary Sheet

Year	Total Population of RRP	Number of Carts Hunting	Number of People on the Hunt	Price of Permittance	Price of Buffalo Robe	Value of the Hunt	Value of the Hunt per hunter	Number of Carts Freight	Number of People Freight	Freight Rates (rand)	Value of Freight	Value of Freight per freighter	Number of Boats	Number of People Boating	Freight Rates (rand)	Value of Boating	Value of Boating per crewman	Unskilled Labour Rate
1820		540	1620	3d /ld		£80/5	£11.5s					0	0	0	0	0	0	£10
1821		800	2400	3d /ld		£9000	£11.5s					0 (4)	0	0	0	0	0	£10
1822		800	2400	3d /ld		£9000	£11.5s					0	0	0	0	0	0	£10
1825		800	2400	3d /ld		£9000	£11.5s					11 (14)	88	25s	£198	£18 *	£10	
1827		800	2400	3d /ld		£9000	£11.5s					0	0	0	0	0	0	
1830		820	2400	2d-3d /ld		£9000	£11.5s					40 (53)	320	20s	£3600	£11.5s		
1831	2,417	750	2250	2d-3d /ld		£8437.10s	£11.5s			17-18s		40 (53)	320	18s	£3120	£16		
1832		750	2250	2d-3d /ld		£8437.10s	£11.5s			17-18s		40 (53)	320	18s	£4800	£15		
1833		750	2250	2d-3d /ld		£8437.10s	£11.5s			17-18s		40 (53)	320	18s	£4160	£13		
1836	3,646	750	2250	2d-3d /ld	\$ 3.50	£8437.10s	£11.5s			17-18s		40 (53)	320	18s	£3200	£10		£15
1837		700	2100	2d-3d /ld		£7875	£11.5s			17-18s		40 (53)	320	18s	£3200	£10		
1838		800	2400	2d-3d /ld		£9000	£11.5s			17-18s		40 (53)	320	17s	£3200	£10		
1839		900	2500	2d-3d /ld		£10125	£11.5s			17-18s		40 (53)	320		£3200	£10		
1840	4,369	1500	4500	2d-3d /ld		£16875	£11.5s			17-18s		41 (55)	328	16s	£3280	£10		
1843	5500	1600	4800	2d-3d /ld		£18000	£11.5s			17-18s		41 (55)	328	16s	£3280	£10		£14
1847				2d-3d /ld	\$ 3.50					17-18s		£8.10-9.0		16s		£10		£14
1849	5,391			2d-3d /ld						17-18s		£2550-2700		16s				£14
1851		900	700m	2d-3d /ld		£10125	£14.10s			17-18s		£8.10-9.0	56 (75)	44s	£9960	£20		
1855				2d-3d /ld						17-18s		£3400-3600		18s		£20		
1856				2d-3d /ld						17-18s		£6375-6750	56 (75)	44s	18s	£9960	£20	
1857				2d-3d /ld						25s		£11250	56 (75)	44s	18s	£9960	£20	
1860		500	1780*	2d-3d /ld		£5625	£11.5s			25s		£16250	£31.5	536	18s	£10720	£20	
1861	8,000	1200	1000m	1s/ld	7s	£54000	£54	1300	520	25s		£16250	£31.5	536		£9112	£17	£12
1862		1600	4800	4d		£24000	£15			25s			67 (90)	536		£9112	£17	
1865				4d	7s					25s			67 (90)	536	16s.3d	£9112	£17	
1871	11,960	1600	4800	4d		£24000	£15	1000	400	25s		£12500	£31.5	67 (90)	16s.3d	£9112	£17	£18
1873				4d				150 (1000)	400	25s		£12500	£31.5					£20
1875				4d				1000	400	25s		£12500	£31.5					

Data points in black are drawn directly from primary sources. Data points in blue are drawn from secondary sources or are calculated. Data points in green are estimates only. Gray areas indicate no data available.

* These are average wages based on a 1 x Steersman at £22, 1 x Bowsman at £20 and 6 x Middenmen at £17. The other figures are arrived at in the same way.

** This group only made a single trip that year while the others made two round trips to St Paul or Fort Carleton.

* Of this group, 500 were men, 600 were women and 680 were children.

This rate is for the Fort Garry to St. Paul route. ## This rate is for the Fort Garry to York Factory route.

carts headed south to hunt bison in the area south and west of Pembina.⁴⁰ From later hunts we know that the ratio of people to Red River carts on the hunt was approximately three to one, typically one adult male, one adult female and one child on average.⁴¹ If this holds reasonably true throughout the period, the number of people on the 1820 hunt should have numbered approximately 1600. Keeping in mind the requirements of the hunt as already described, these numbers make sense. At least one person would have been required to drive each cart and a considerable number of additional people would have been accompanied the hunting expeditions on horseback. Since the ratio of men to women to children was roughly equal on these expeditions, it is reasonable to conclude that each cart and driver was accompanied by one rider on horseback with one non-toddler child as a passenger. These numbers also make sense considering the amount of labour necessary for the transformation of harvested bison into pemmican or other bison products.

If we further consider the load capacity of the Red River carts (800 to 900 lbs) and the price at which the pemmican could be sold (from 2d to 3d)⁴² it would appear that a Métis family of three were capable of generating somewhere between £7 and £11 per hunt. The price of pemmican remained reasonably stable throughout the period from 1820 to 1860 and the capacity of the Red River carts remained unchanged throughout the period under study in this paper. In

⁴⁰ Stanley, *The Birth of Western Canada*, 13.

⁴¹ Ross, *The Red River Settlement*, 121.

⁴² Innis, *The Fur Trade*, 309.

1860 there was a very large spike in the price of pemmican⁴³ but by 1865 the price had settled down to around 4d per pound where it remained, with some local fluctuations, for the next decade.⁴⁴ During the 1860s and 1870s, a Métis hunting family could expect to generate approximately £14 from a single hunt.

The first year for which there is any hard data related to freighting is for 1843. In that year, 120 carts made the trip to St. Paul while an unknown number of carts were employed on the route to Carleton House.⁴⁵ The freight rate for a standard 90lb 'piece' hovered around 17 to 18 shillings during the period from 1831 to 1855⁴⁶ after which it shot up to 25 shillings per 'piece' in 1856, a rate that was maintained for the duration of the period under study.⁴⁷

In the early years of the freighting, it would have been necessary to have had at least one person per cart because of the constant threat of attack by Native groups such as the Sioux.⁴⁸ By the 1850s however, especially in the aftermath of the stunning victory of the Métis at the Battle of the Grand Coteau, the freighting routine settled down to the method already described by which it

⁴³ Service des Archives de la Société historique de Saint-Boniface. Fonds Corporation archiepiscopale catholique romaine de Saint-Boniface. Série Taché. Boîte 6. T-0001 to T-2062, *Mission Account Book*, February 1861.

⁴⁴ Service des Archives de la Société historique de Saint-Boniface. Fonds Société historique Métis. Boîte 2, Chemise 2. Nault letter. 1879.

⁴⁵ Notice in the *Wisconsin Herald*, 15 September, 1847. Quoted in, Innis, *The Fur Trade*, 294.

⁴⁶ Canada. National Archives of Canada. *Hudson's Bay Company Archives* (micro copy). IM 153, Fort Garry Post Journals, 1797-1854. D 4/75, p. 408, Simpson's Report. Fort Garry, 29 June 1855.

⁴⁷ Service des Archives de la Société historique de Saint-Boniface. Fonds Corporation archiepiscopale catholique romaine de Saint-Boniface. Série Taché. Boîte 7. T-3329, *Mission Account Book*, spring 1865 account totals. See also, Archives of Manitoba. *Hudson's Bay Company Archives*. B 239/P/1-5, Expenditure Books, 1824-1920.

⁴⁸ "A Visit to Red River," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 13, No. 77. (October, 1856), 670.

was possible for four drivers to handle ten carts, even on the long-haul to St. Paul or to Fort Edmonton.⁴⁹

In the 1830s and 1840s then, a single Red River cart driver carrying ten standard 'pieces' of freight could expect to earn between £8.10 and £9 for a one-way trip, if he carried a full load. If he were fortunate enough to have cargo to carry in both directions, his profit could, at least theoretically, be doubled to somewhere between £16 and £18 per freighting season.

In the period beginning in the 1850s, the potential return on a season's trip would have increased as a function of both the increased freight rate and the more efficient method of handling the Red River carts. A team of four men driving a brigade of ten carts could reasonably expect to earn approximately £125 for a one-way trip on either of the two long-haul trips to St. Paul or Fort Edmonton. Again, if the brigade were fortunate and well managed, it had the potential to double its earnings if it could find freight to be carried in both directions.

The amount of money that a freighter could make working in support of the various travelers through Rupert's Land is very difficult to quantify except to say that wages varied tremendously. Some of the Métis who contracted out to the Boundary Commission team in 1862 seem to have been paid only £5 for the season⁵⁰ while the four Métis that worked for Lord Milton and Dr. Chilton earned

⁴⁹ "Red River Trail," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 18, No. 107. (April, 1859), 615.

⁵⁰ Spry, *From The Hunt to The Homestead*, VI/27.

between £3 and £12 per month.⁵¹ Pierre Desnommais, the guide hired by Lord Southesk, was paid a whopping £25 for a single month's work.⁵²

Although determining the actual number of Métis who were employed in the York boat traffic is very difficult, determining how much they would have made is relatively easy since the rates were dutifully recorded by the HBC in their registers.⁵³ Interestingly, it seems that the original rates of pay were based on the rates of pay that had been established for canoe crew. As the HBC experimented with the employment of different people through the 1820s, these rates of pay remained relatively stable and relatively high. However, beginning in 1831, the rates of pay were forced down from a high of approximately £18 on average.⁵⁴ By 1836 the rates had dropped to only £10.⁵⁵ The rates remained relatively low until there was a sharp increase to £20 in 1851.⁵⁶ After then, the rates remained relatively high, only declining slightly to around £17 in the 1860s and 1870s.⁵⁷

If independent boat operators were operating on a piecework basis, their yearly income would have been a function of the capacity of their boat, the freight

⁵¹ Milton, *The North-West Passage by Land*, 46, 51 and 126.

⁵² Southesk, *Saskatchewan and the Rocky Mountains*, 52.

⁵³ For example, see, Canada. National Archives of Canada. *Hudson's Bay Company Archives* (micro copy). IM 153, Fort Garry Post Journals, 1797-1854. D 4/75, p. 408, Simpson's Report. Fort Garry, 29 June 1855.

⁵⁴ This was part of a deliberate plan by the HBC to use its market power to drive down the rates of pay for boat crews. Canada. National Archives of Canada. *Hudson's Bay Company Archives* (micro copy). D 4/5 fo. 82-82v, Simpson to Donald McKenzie, 24 August 1825. See also, Canada. National Archives of Canada. *Hudson's Bay Company Archives* (micro copy). A 12/1 fo. 394d, Simpson to Governor and Committee, 18 July 1831.

⁵⁵ Canada. National Archives of Canada. *Hudson's Bay Company Archives* (micro copy). IM 153, Fort Garry Post Journals, 1797-1854. D 5/28, p. 365-56, Clouston to Simpson. St. Paul, 30 July 1850.

⁵⁶ George Simpson, Report from the Select Committee on the Hudson's Bay Company, 1857. Quoted in, Harold A. Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History*. 1930. (Reprint, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1956), 311.

⁵⁷ Innis, *The Fur Trade*, 312.

rate and the size of their crew, always keeping in mind that, as was the case with Red River carts, boats doing piecework might not necessarily fill their boat to capacity on each trip. Interestingly, the freight rate for cargo on the Fort Garry to Fort York route mirrored, almost exactly, the freight rate for cargo being carried overland to St. Paul.⁵⁸

As already noted, a York boat was capable of carrying approximately ninety standard 90lb 'pieces' of freight. In 1830 an eight-man crew with a full boat could have expected to earn something on the order of £112.10 for a one-way trip between Fort Garry and York Factory.⁵⁹ Divided eight ways it would have netted approximately £14 per crewman, recognizing that the Steersman and Bowsman would normally have taken a larger share than the Middlemen. These prices declined somewhat in the late 1830s and 1840s such that the overall take for a one-way trip would have fallen from approximately £81 in 1835⁶⁰ to only £72 in 1840.⁶¹ However, in the 1840s, rates returned to nearly the same prices as had been available in 1835 and then remained there until a collapse of the price in 1865⁶² brought the rate back down to 1840 levels.

If the piecework rate of return is compared to the rate of return when drawing a standard seasonal wage it is fairly clear that there were choices to be

⁵⁸ Although this intriguing detail merits further attention, this writer has no explanation for the apparent correlation of land and water freight rates. Spry, *The Papers of the Palliser Expedition*, 544.

⁵⁹ Canada. National Archives of Canada. *Hudson's Bay Company Archives* (micro copy). A 12/1 folio. 394d, Simpson to Governor and Committee, 18 July 1831.

⁶⁰ Innis, *The Fur Trade*, 309.

⁶¹ Service des Archives de la Societe historique de Saint-Boniface. Fonds Corporation archiepiscopale catholique romaine de Saint-Boniface. Serie Provencher. Boite 4, Cahier H. P-3144, *Lettres de Belcourt*, 25 December 1840.

⁶² Service des Archives de la Societe historique de Saint-Boniface. Fonds Corporation archiepiscopale catholique romaine de Saint-Boniface. Serie Taché. Boite 7. T-3765, 1866., *Mission Account Book*, Pere Maissonneuve, spring 1866 account totals.

made. The wage rate was certainly higher than the return that could be expected based on the piecework freight rate. But, as was the case with the Red River carts, the nominal rate of return for piece-work freighting could be substantially improved upon if it was possible to obtain two-way work.

From the preceding calculations it is clear that Métis individuals who participated in the transportation sector as described, could have been expected to earn at least as much money as an unskilled labourer working for the HBC. If the estimated number of people engaged in the provisioning trade is compared to the estimated number of people engaged in the supply of transportation services, and if the estimated revenue generated from each activity is calculated, it would appear that the value of transportation services to the Métis economy varied somewhere between one fifth and one half of the value of the provisioning trade. This is summarized in the table at Figure 27. Although these numbers can only be considered to be very gross estimates, it is evident that transportation was an major component of the Métis economy in Rupert's land during the nineteenth century.

Year	Number of people in the provisioning trade.	Value of the provisioning trade.	Number of people freighting overland.	Value of overland freighting.	Number of people freighting by water.	Value of freighting by water.	Overall value of transportation.
1830	2400	£9000			320	£3600	£3600
1840	4500	£16875			328	£3280	£3280
1843	4800	£18000	100	£900	328	£3280	£4180
1851	2700	£10125	400	£3600	448	£8960	£12560
1861	3600	£54000	520	£16250	536	£9112	£25362
1871	4800	£24000	400	£12500	536	£9112	£21612

Figure 27
Estimated Overall Values.

This conclusion is absent from the existing Métis historiography. The existing models of Métis economic activities are nowhere nearly sophisticated enough for them to be useful tools. Many arguments related to the Métis are severely handicapped as a result. This is true for individual Métis, Métis families and for the community (or communities) as a whole.

The complexity of this is apparent if we consider other aspects of the Métis economy set against the conclusions of this paper. An example of this would be an analysis of the activities in 1843. This is the first year in which there are sufficient data to make possible a comparison between the relative importance of provisioning and freighting. A cursory look at the data might lead us to conclude that, except for the 400 or so adult males who were employed on York boats or in overland freighting, the vast majority of the Métis population, some 4000 people, spent the productive part of that summer out hunting bison. This assessment would be consistent with the standard interpretation that Métis chose to participate in the hunts at the expense of their farms. But if we also consider that the total Métis population of Red River was something on the order of 5000 people, it doesn't seem possible that so many people could have been away, especially since many people, especially the very young, the very old and the infirm, would not have participated in the hunts. We also know that there were sufficient numbers of people left behind such that Métis subsistence farms could be maintained.⁶³

⁶³ Monseigneur Provencher noted that, "Quiqu'il parte une grande quantite de personnes, a chaque tour de chasse, il en reste neanmoins un plus grand nombre pour la culture de la terre." Service des Archives de la Societe historique de Saint-Boniface. Fonds Corporation

However, all of the major transportation activities described were delimited in time. Even if we accept that virtually the entire able-bodied population of Red River participated in a bison hunt that year, it is still possible that some or all of them could also have done other things. In the case of the bison hunts, there were normally two each year, one in the early summer and one in the late summer to early fall. The time required to make a long-haul freight trip to either Fort Edmonton or St. Paul meant that it was also possible to make two trips in a single season. A Red River cart operator could quite reasonably make a long-haul freight trip and still have time to participate in the second hunt of the year.

Because of the nature of boating, it does not seem likely that those Métis employed in riverine transport would have participated in the hunting/freighting business. Although this is not impossible, the skills and lifestyle associated with boating were quite different from those of the Red River cart operators. Additionally, since both types of freighting required a capital or labour investment to pay for or build their Red River carts or York boats, it seems likely that, once chosen, an individual would stick to carting or boating, at least for a single season and as long as it was profitable.

From the perspective of a family though, it is entirely conceivable that one or more adults could have participated in some sort of hunting/freighting combination, another adult male member of the family could have been boating and all the while the young, the elderly and the infirm could have been maintaining a subsistence level farm. This would have resulted in a considerable

archiepiscopale catholique romaine de Saint-Boniface. Serie Provencher. Boite 5, P-4412, *Notice sur la Riviere-Rouge*, December 1843, 92.

level of subsistence or cash-generating flexibility within a given family even without considering the many other activities that Métis were involved in that are not discussed in this paper such as fishing, logging and so on. Given the vagaries of the environment such as droughts, floods and locust infestations, the occasional failure of the bison hunts, and fluctuations in the rising and falling demand for goods and services, this flexibility would have given the Métis a capacity for adaptation as least as good as, and probably greater than, the ideologically-driven and long-subsidized settler agricultural community.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ The ideological aspect of HBC and government support to the continued existence of a Red River agricultural community is beyond the scope of this paper. But for at least the first twenty years of its existence, the Red River Settlement was not a viable economic entity and the HBC fully recognized that the community was something of a welfare case. See for example, Canada. National Archives of Canada. *Hudson's Bay Company Archives* (micro copy). A 12/1, fo.397, *Simpson to Governor and Committee*, 18 July 1831.

Conclusion

This dissertation has argued that the provision of transportation services represented one of the core economic activities in the area of western Canada known as Rupert's Land and that Métis played a central role in those services. If true, the perennial question remains; so what?

The first answer to 'so what?' is that any history of the Métis that includes arguments based wholly or substantially on assumptions regarding the Métis economy may be presumed to be deeply and fundamentally flawed and thus probably wrong. Strong words these. But the degree to which an understanding of the role of transportation in the Métis economy affects existing Métis studies must be considered on two levels. The first level is the obvious direct problem of errors of fact and omission based on an incomplete understanding of the Métis economy that is the essential core of this paper. The second level is one of historical method. How is it possible that so much has been written about the Métis without there every being anything like an accurate model constructed that would describe their economy? We need look no further than the work of Frank Tough in his modeling of Native communities to see how much is possible in this regard.

Two examples from 'Métis historiography' may help us understand the problem. Writing in the 1970s and continuing her work well into the 1990s, Irene Spry developed a meta-narrative of western Canada in the nineteenth century that has come to be known as "the great transformation." Unfortunately, this unambiguously economic meta-narrative never took serious account of Métis

involvement in the provision of transportation services nor of transportation *per se*. Rather, and building on the earlier 'staples' theory offered by Harold Innis, Spry described a prairie economy that had been transformed from an essentially self-sufficient subsistence economy into something that was part of the interconnected world economy, and only beginning in the 1840s.

This cannot be true. There were extensive links to the outside economy long before the 1840, largely through the mechanism of Métis trade and transport south from Red River into the United States as early as 1816. Even more important, the fur trade itself was but a small part of an international trade that had been conducted since the seventeenth century. That Canadian fur trade historiography understandably concentrates on the Canadian part of the trade does not diminish the fact that the principal value-added part of that industry was European. Canada was, for the better part of three centuries, the raw materials part of an industry that processed these materials into products that were then further distributed for ultimate sale. Profits from these sales paid for the production of other commodities for sale to Canada in exchange for the raw material of the industry - fur. The Canadian fur trade economy was inextricably bound up with the European economy from its inception. The very existence of the Métis as a distinctive ethnic, economic or social grouping is part of this dynamic.

Gerhard Ens' work regarding the role of the Métis in the 'bison robe industry' provides another example of how flawed assumptions regarding the nature of the Métis economy affect analysis of the Métis more generally. Ens'

study of the bison robe trade accepted Spry's premise that the prairie economy was largely isolated from the rest of the world until the 1840s and was essentially a subsistence economy. When Ens proposed that a change in Métis work priority from pemmican making for the provisioning trade to bison-robe harvesting provided the foundation for a Métis 'proto-industry,' it was conceived within the Spry economic construction.

Ens' detailed examination of this bison-robe proto-industry recognized the various elements of the Métis economy but, encumbered as it was by the selected analytical framework, did not fully quantify and compare the objects of the study. Rather than constituting a new industry as Ens has suggested, the bison trade was more of a vertical integration towards markets in the Métis bison-harvesting industry writ large. The real factors controlling the harvesting of bison products were the load limit imposed by the characteristics of the Red River cart and the degree to which the Métis hunting/transport organization was capable of safely carrying its produce to market. A 900-pound load per cart was all that could be reasonably and safely carried back from any hunt. Thus, a Métis hunter, confronting the carcass of a fresh bison kill on the prairie, would be compelled to make a choice of what to keep from the kill, based on his expectations of what could be sold or consumed after the hunt had returned home. If market conditions meant that it was worth more to fill the cart with bison robes than pemmican or vice versa, this is what the hunter could be reasonably expected to do. It is highly unlikely that bison robes would have been harvested and hauled back to Red River as part of a notional 'proto-industry' unless this is

where the profit lay. Whether bison meat or bison robes were selected as the bison hunt product on any particular hunt, the overall hunting organization functioned in essentially the same way and for the same motive - profit.

Spry's narrative was based on a too idyllic view of the nature of the Native existence in the years before the 1840s and an insufficiently nuanced characterization of international trade in the same period. Ens' study tried too hard to fit his excellent analysis of the bison-robe trade into his 'proto-industrial' model. Both writers commented on but failed to analyze and quantify Métis involvement in transportation.

What is suggested by these two examples is that the methodological problem at the root of this Métis historiography is that it isn't really Métis historiography at all. These and other writers have written their histories within a constructionist framework that makes too many assumptions and uses too many models with too little use of the rigorous critical methods of the historicists and without the doubt of language embraced by the post-modernists.

The second conclusion to be drawn from this study is that the Métis were not nearly as dependent on bison hunting as has been suggested by writers such as Giraud, Friesen and Spry. Adaptation of the core technologies and techniques of the hunting organization to the business of transport provided the Métis with opportunities that were simply not available to other aboriginal peoples in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Implicit in this essential flexibility is a lack of dependence on agriculture. This is especially true when we consider how dependent the Red River settlers

were on the good will and charity of the HBC and the British government for at least the first quarter century of the settlement's history. In competitive economic terms, the independent Métis were much more successful than the settlers and were capable of supporting themselves long before the farming settlers were capable of confidently feeding themselves.

There are also several minor conclusions to be drawn from this study. First of all, the popular image of the fur trade, that of voyageurs in canoes, is inaccurate when applied to the trade after 1821 when York boats dominated the waterborne traffic of the trade. Related to that is the surprisingly minor role played by steamboats. Although they arrived with great fanfare in the west, they were too late to have the impact that they had elsewhere. Geography and weather put too much of a brake on their use in Rupert's Land and by the time they were being effectively used, the railroads had overrun and replaced them.

It is also clear that, in spite of the popular notion that the economy in Rupert's Land was based on barter and that 'Made Beaver' or 'MB' was the standard of exchange, this was not the case. Although MB and other barter techniques were used as a measure of trade in the direct furs-for-goods transactions of the fur traders, the bulk of the goods and services exchanged and provided during the nineteenth century were done on the basis of cash or cash value, normally carried on book accounts.

Finally, this study begs a question. Why the Métis? If the transportation industry was of such importance and value why was it so dominated by the Métis

at the expense of both settler and Native communities? There would appear to be two main reasons for this.

First of all, when the provisioning trade was developing, the fur companies wanted to limit the role of Native people to hunting for fur. If too many Native people were distracted from the task of hunting in the far-flung regions of Rupert's Land, the whole basis of the trade would have been undermined. This was their part of the industry. Although initially resistant to settlers, the HBC finally accepted their presence but sought to limit their involvement in the fur trade. Red River turned out to be a convenient place to put the surplus workers who were left without work at the time of the amalgamation of the HBC and the NWC. The settlers who came from outside of Rupert's Land were part of an ideological commitment to the development of an agricultural colony as an outpost of Great Britain's global trading empire. This was their part of the system. The Métis, at first slowly, but more and more so as their numbers grew, constituted the principal available work force in the area.

The second reason is simple enough. Although anyone could have driven out onto the prairie in search of bison or down a track carrying cargo to some distant destination, the chance of their surviving the experience without the sophisticated transportation and defensive organization of the Métis was not good. As a result of various initiatives, opportunities and evolutions, the Métis were, by the 1830s at the latest, the only people that were capable of doing this work. By design or by default, in the nineteenth century, transportation in Rupert's Land was well and truly a Métis métier.

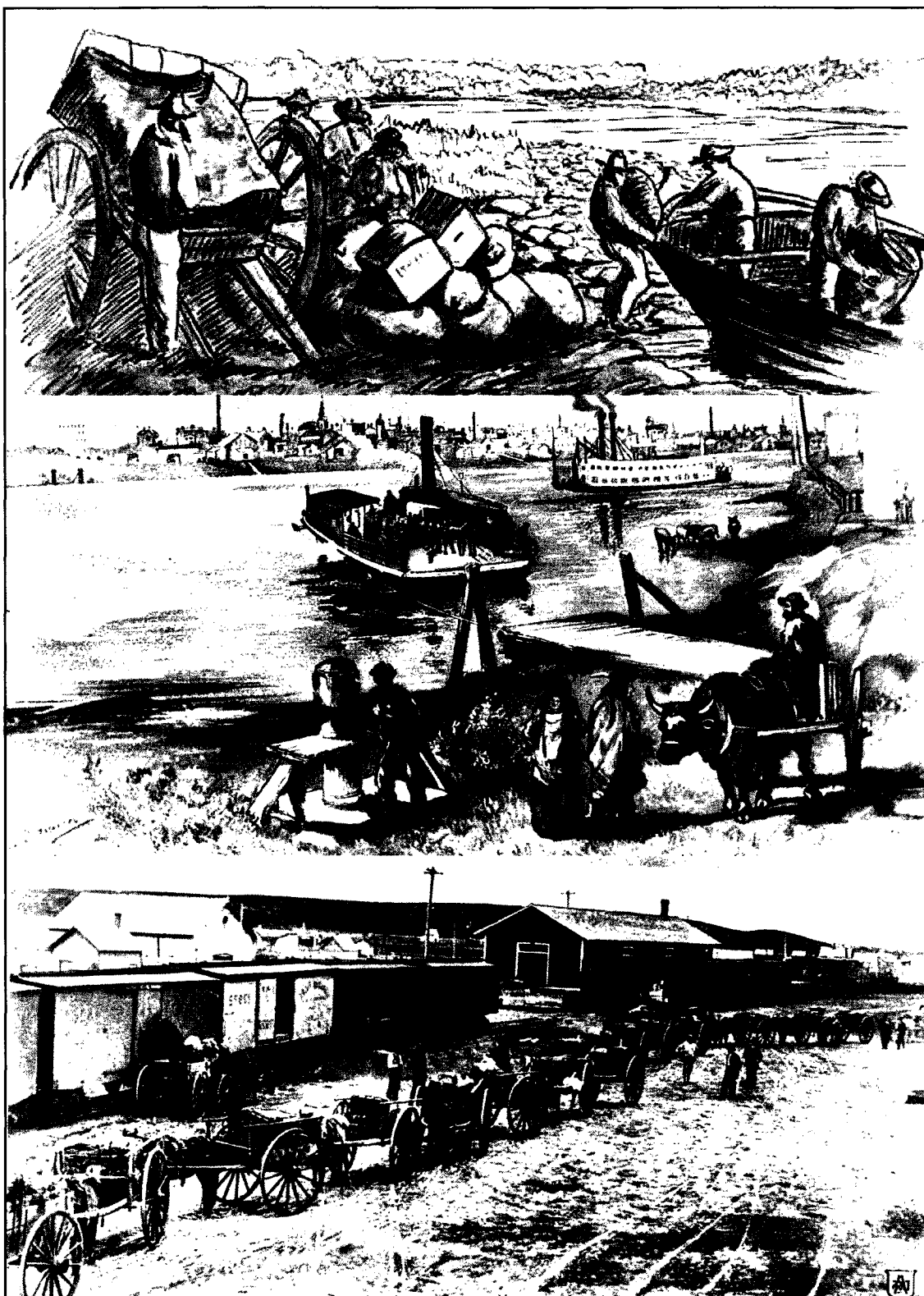


Figure 28

Images of interconnectivity in the transportation system. At the top, Red River Carts meet York Boats in 1862. In the middle, Red River carts meet steamboats in 1879. At the bottom, Red River carts meet the railroad in 1888 for the final delivery of goods. Top image from the sketchbook of William George Richardson Hind, June 1862. Sketchbook folio 29, recto. Library and Archives Canada, Acc. No. 1963-97-1.29R. Middle image from, Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Transportation – Boat 4, Negative No. N12765. Bottom image from Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Transportation – Red River Cart 13.

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