

## **Métis Red River Carts**

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One of the intrinsic symbols of Métis identity is the Red River Cart. The Red River cart has become, like the fur trade sash, a passionate and powerful symbol of Métis nationhood in Western Canada. These noisy but versatile carts crisscrossed what are now the Prairie Provinces, North Dakota, Montana and Minnesota. Among First Nations and Euro-North Americans the carts became identified with the Métis. In fact, "Plains First Nations" sign language for the Métis literally meant "half-wagon, half-man!"

While the inspiration for the Red River Cart came from European carting traditions, the materials used were indigenous to the Plains and its construction was distinctly Métis. A typical Red River Cart had a box measuring two metres in length, a metre in height and half a metre in width.

Its axles were two metres long, its wheels over half a metre in diameter and its shafts, measuring four metres each, ran from the box to the horse or ox. Its hubs were usually made from elm, wheel rims from ash or oak, and the axle from maple. All the carts' wooden pieces were fashioned together by sinew and rope. When the carts broke down, all that was needed for their repair was a bluff of trees, an axe, a saw, a screw auger, and a draw knife.

Even the nails on a Métis-made Red River Cart were wooden, unlike the metal nails used by the fur trade companies. Red River Carts made a terrible squealing noise when they moved because their wooden axles and wheels could not be effectively lubricated. A First Nations' legend maintains that the bison deserted the Plains because they wanted to escape from the hideous noise of the carts!

The first carts were quite small. Larger, better-constructed carts made their way onto the transportation scene around the start of the nineteenth century, possibly by 1803, when improved wheels were being manufactured. These larger, spoked wheels were dished, or curved inward, and provided greater stability and handling.

For the Métis, the Red River Cart was an all purpose utility vehicle and a makeshift home. Métis families used Red River Carts to move their possessions while migrating or resource harvesting. The carts also provided migrating Métis with temporary living quarters and shelter from the elements. Women fashioned decorated covers for the carts from bison hides or canvas, which were supported by an arched frame of cut saplings. When disassembled, Red River Carts also became temporary rafts for water crossings. Once its wheels were removed and reattached under the box and its bottom was enclosed in a buffalo hide tarp, the cart and its cargo could be rafted across rivers and streams. In the winter, the Red River Cart's passenger box, when placed on runners, served as a temporary horse-drawn sleigh.

The Red River Cart was also used as a defensive mechanism when the Métis were threatened. When the Métis had frequent battles over the control of bison hunting grounds with the Lakota Sioux in the 1840s and 1850s, they often formed compact defensive circles with their Red River Carts when they met Lakota war parties. Inside the circle, women, children, and animals could hide safely, while men, old and young, would man the defenses. At the Battle of Grand Coteau in 1851, the Métis dug trenches and rifle pits around their defensive circle of Red River Carts and won a resounding victory against the Lakota Sioux. Henceforth, the Sioux, impressed by Métis courage and martial skills, never made war with the Métis again.

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