



## Farmer-Labor Founder William Mahoney and His Battle with Communists

JIM MCCARTNEY, PAGE 1



How do supplies get to market? Trains, trailer trucks, and cargo ships do most of the heavy lifting these days, but how was it done in the mid-1800s? Back then, convoys of wooden, two-wheeled oxcarts creaking, swaying, and kicking up dust across prairieland were a common site as fur traders loaded their supplies and made their way hundreds of miles from northern territories to an initial destination—St. Paul. Today, though, the once famed Red River trails are silent. But a recent recreated trek by Canadians Terry and Patty Doerksen has us thinking about what life was like for those early businessmen. Check out these transportation statistics from long ago.

Number of miles between Upper Fort Garry in Winnipeg, Manitoba, to the Port of St. Paul, Minnesota:

**469**

Total weight a typical oxcart and ox could carry (goods and people):

**800 to 1,000 pounds**

Number of carts traveling south to St. Paul in the 1840s:

**Low hundreds**

Number of carts traveling to St. Paul in the late 1860s:

**Thousands**

Number of carts tied together in a "brigade" with three drivers and an overseer:

**10**

Average speed and distance for a typical cart in the 1800s:

**2 miles/hour and 20 miles/day**

Source: "Red River Trails facts for kids," Kiddle, accessed September 29, 2022, [https://kids.kiddle.co/Red\\_River\\_Trails](https://kids.kiddle.co/Red_River_Trails).

To read about the Doersens' recent trek, see "*A Man, a Woman, an Ox, and a Cart: Retracing the Red River Trail*" on page 17.

## ON THE COVER

William Mahoney was a pressman, trade unionist, labor leader, political activist and candidate, and editor. He even served as St. Paul's mayor. Most importantly, perhaps, was his work as a "political entrepreneur." According to author Jim McCartney, the founder of the Farmer-Labor Party "crossed paths—and crossed swords—with some of the most influential leaders in the world." See "Farmer-Labor Founder William Mahoney and His Battle with Communists" on page 1. Photographs courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society. News headline in The Minneapolis Morning Tribune, June 18, 1924, 1.



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REVIEWED BY RENOIR W. GAITHER

# Message from the Editorial Board

It's a shame that history is often reduced to lists—dry, uninspiring chronologies of dates and events. History is so much more—it's people, who through their work, make history—or people, who through their love of land and lore, reenact history and make it come alive in the present day.

William Mahoney was a history maker, an early champion of the labor movement, and a politician who never backed down from a good fight. Or a bad one. In Jim McCartney's cover story, we learn about the "quiet, white-haired little man," a fierce advocate for farmers and workers who described himself as a dreamer. McCartney brings Mahoney to life as we follow his political and personal trajectory.

Then there's Canadian couple Terry and Patty Doerksen. They recently followed the mostly forgotten Red River Trail from Upper Fort Garry in Winnipeg to Lowertown St. Paul—just the two of them and a wooden cart pulled by a young ox named Zik. Terry's love of Manitoba history and his deep respect for the ancient lands of the Anishinaabeg led him to attempt this grueling journey. His adapted dispatches to the *Winnipeg Free Press* and Patty's photos are a delightful addition to this issue.

At Ramsey County Historical Society, we don't just make lists. History comes alive on these pages. We hope you enjoy these stories.

Anne Field, Chair

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## Retracing the Red River Trail

TERRY DOERKSEN

**M**uch has been written about the history of the famous but mostly forgotten Red River oxcart trails that once cut through what is today parts of Canada, North Dakota, and Minnesota for fifty years beginning in the 1820s. Métis (pronounced may-TEE) and Selkirk colonists packed pelts and other products onto two-wheeled wooden carts with their oxen in the lead. They journeyed for weeks across all sorts of terrain through all sorts of weather to deliver their goods to awaiting paddle wheelers in a small river town that would eventually take the name St. Paul. The trips were grueling, dangerous, and, sometimes, deadly.<sup>1</sup>

Over the years, a few brave souls have recreated the journey for posterity, most beginning in Pembina, North Dakota, just south of the Canadian border and west of the existing Minnesota border. As far as we know, no one in modern times has started from Manitoba's Upper Fort

Garry—until a few months ago, when Terry and Patty Doerksen of Winnipeg completed a personal journey to the Port of St. Paul—by oxcart and, yes, with a single, juvenile ox named Zik. Terry refers to their sojourn as an “Epic Sov Pat” or journey meant primarily for “. . . walking along in God’s presence and serving as a channel for whatever life He wanted to spill over as we crossed the land.”<sup>2</sup> The couple documented their once-upon-a-dream through Patty’s exquisite photographs and detailed and humorous articles that Terry wrote and uploaded to their hometown newspaper, the *Winnipeg Free Press*. The paper and the Doerksens have graciously given Ramsey County Historical Society permission to excerpt and adapt these articles for the readers of *Ramsey County History*.

—Editor’s Note

To read Terry Doerksen’s complete articles in the *Winnipeg Free Press*, go to <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com> and search for articles written by Doerksen.



This postcard photograph of unhitched Red River oxcarts and resting animals along the trail dates to 1864. It appears the photo was taken by Edward A. Bromley, a well-known photographer at the time. *Courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society.*



In 1958, the Marshall County Centennial Committee sponsored a forty-five-day recreation of an oxcart trek from Pembina, North Dakota, to the Minnesota State Fair. Here, driver Delmar Hagen from Gatzke Township is pictured. Orlin Ostby was a young man who helped Hagen train for the trip. Fifty years hence, Ostby and a small group of family members and friends retraced the same route along the mostly disappeared trail. *Courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society.*



## WEEK ONE

### ***Stepping Stones or Stumbling Blocks?***

I hate a sad ending. The book I had checked out of the Winnipeg Public Library, *The Legend of Pierre Bottineau and the Red River Trail*, had these for its final words:

The great wilderness of the plains turned to settlement and civilization. The trails they knew disappeared, and nobody ever went down them again.<sup>3</sup>

I *had* to talk to the author, Ted Stone, to share the good news. The maniacal song of the oxcart would again be sung on the trail! Ted was living in southern Manitoba, within earshot of the trail he had written about. He knew by proximity that it had gone silent. Ted listened politely as I told him that the wheels were already turning (so to squeak). In a couple of years, I hoped to do something that hadn't been done since the 1870s. Together with Patty, my wife, I planned to take an oxcart down the Red River Trail, 500 miles from Winnipeg to St. Paul, Minnesota.<sup>4</sup> Oh, I still needed an ox and a cart, and I didn't know anything about driving an animal, but those were just details. Knowing what I've learned since about the obstacles to traveling internationally by ox, maybe I shouldn't have been surprised that Ted was a little doubtful.

### ***Convoy (or Not)***

Looking back at history, as the first few carts in the spring caravans slowly screeched their way

Terry Doerksen departed Winnipeg on a cold, rainy May day. Before leaving the city, Doerksen led his ox, Zik, through a local drive-through for coffee, while his wife Patty and a friend shivered atop the cart. *Courtesy of Ivy Sawatzky.*



down what is now St. Mary's Road, more carts joined in behind. That didn't happen to us. Still, we would have been ready. We were in possession of a City of Winnipeg parade permit!

But think about it. Imagine waiting for a three-mile-long, 500-cart-strong, undulating, dusty, squealing snake to pass by. Singer/songwriter C. W. McCall's 1975 trucking anthem "Convoy" could easily be adapted to the scene as an early cart train started gaining force:

By the time we hit the American line,  
We had 500 screamin' carts,  
And a couple long-robed friends of Jesus,  
Heading out from St. Boniface.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, our own journey will see a few variations from McCall's version. Instead of "[crashin'] the gate doin' ninety-eight," we'll really "put the hammer down"<sup>6</sup> if we hit 98 mpw (miles per week). I'm hoping to average two miles per hour and fifteen miles per day for five days each week.

## WEEK TWO

### ***Prayers and Permission***

The Métis buffalo hunters of the 1800s followed the trail south in long cart trains before veering west. Upon departing, they would ask the local bishop to pray for them.<sup>7</sup>

We followed the example of the hunters as we started our own creaky journey, and I reached out to Chief Jim Bear of the Brokenhead Ojibway Nation and a descendant of Chief Peguis, and Jason Bone representing the Anishinaabe people. They prayed for us and dedicated us, cart, and ox to the Creator with a smudge.<sup>8</sup> Guy Gosselin, descendant of early cart drivers Jean-Baptiste Lagimodière and Marie-Anne Gaboury, represented the Métis, who were the developers and drivers of the Red River carts. We met in a hallowed spot—Upper Fort Garry—where Louis Riel established Manitoba's first government, and where he followed the example of the hunters by invoking the Creator's blessing on a new province and incorporating the Creator's name—*Manitou*—into our province's very identity.<sup>9</sup>

As part of our departure ceremony, I wanted to do something that was neglected by the early cart drivers: ask permission to cross the lands of its Anishinaabe caretakers. I presented gifts of

tobacco, healing ointment, and a peace pipe to Jim and Jason and asked if they, representing the Anishinaabe nation, would grant us permission to travel over their traditional lands. It wasn't just symbolic. If they had said "no," we would not have gone. But they were gracious and, under the authority of Chief Gordon Bluesky, blessed us on our way.

## WEEK THREE

### **Why? Because It's (Kinda) There**

Sometimes, when I'm asked why we would attempt a ten-week, slow-motion journey down a long-forgotten trail, I'm tempted to be a smart-ox and quote the climber George Mallory. "Because it's there."<sup>10</sup> The problem is, unlike Mount Everest, the Red River Trail *isn't* there anymore. Not exactly. So what happened to it?

First, the bigger part of the trails disappeared to development and to the plow. In these sections, Patty and I will use existing roads to follow the original route as closely as possible.



Prior to his attempted journey down the Red River Trail, Terry Doerksen (second from left) met with Guy Gosselin, Jason Bone, and Chief Jim Bear of the Brokenhead Ojibway Nation, (L-R) in Winnipeg to ask permission to respectfully cross Anishinaabe land. He was honored and humbled by their kindness. *Courtesy of Brenda Thiessen.*

## Meet the Family

When I started thinking about this journey, my plans were simple—a man, a woman, an ox, and a cart. Once I realized the difficulties and realities we would likely face, I added some modern conveniences. And because I generally feel a little nauseated when people name their vehicles, it is with a measure of embarrassment that I introduce to you our family on the Red River Trail:

**Patty and Terry:** Mom and Dad

**Zik:** Our ox. Short for *Bizhiki* – Anishinaabemowin for ox or buffalo. So, yes, our ox is called Ox.

**René the Cart:** Named after French philosopher René Descartes. (If it even exists. Its persistent squeaking seems to say, "I don't think. Therefore I am not.")<sup>a</sup>

**Vincent Van Go:** Our van home on the go. Sometimes called Our Vincent, Our V, or just RV.

**Blake:** A two-wheeled electric scooter, named for Minnesotan Blake Wheeler, the captain of the Winnipeg Jets.

## A Day in the Life

A simplified day on the trail looks like this: I harness Zik to René and make sure Blake is hanging in his hockey bag from René's north end. Patty jumps on René with me to ponder deep mysteries about God and His Creation as we ride along the trail. After a mile or two, Patty takes



Instead of traveling by planes, trains, and automobiles, Patty Doerksen (pictured here) and her husband, Terry, spent the summer journeying by foot, oxcart, RV, and scooter, as they collected unforgettable memories along the way. *Courtesy of Patty Doerksen.*

Blake and jets back to get Vincent. Patty, with Vincent and Blake, leapfrogs Zik, René, and me to find a good spot for the night. After maybe twelve miles on the road, we three travelers plod into camp, and René gives one final squeal of exhaustion. I stake out Zik and fire Blake back into his cage. Only then can I climb into Vincent to notice the vase of yellow flowers on the table and enjoy the masterpiece Patty has created for supper.



Guy Gosselin carefully places a well-protected package onto the Doerksen cart prior to the big journey. Inside is the actual supply box that once belonged to Jean-Baptiste Lagimodière, one of the early Métis oxcart drivers. Doerksen carried it on his cart for the first few miles of his trip. *Courtesy of Terry Doerksen and Le Musée de Saint-Boniface.*



Second, a third of the original trail was built into roads that are still being used.

The third thing that happened to small sections of the old trail is—nothing. It's still there, in obscure places, with the wheel ruts visible. I'm hoping local people will point them out to me. The first place I'll be able to drive my cart on unaltered trail is crossing the border into the US. It's still clearly visible from Google Earth. That'll be pretty crazy—touching the past. Which brings me to an actual answer to the question, "Why?"

### **To Touch the Past**

I'm not the type who is welcome in a museum. I'm tempted to touch the artifacts when no one is looking. When I read history, I wish to see

what those who came before me saw, smell what they smelled, feel what they felt. What was it like to munch on pemmican and listen to fiddle music while leaning on your ox by the fire at the end of a day on the Red River Trail?

In preparation for my trip, I had managed to slip my way into Le Musée de Saint-Boniface. The vetting questionnaire only asked about exposure to COVID-19, with nothing about criminal compulsions relating to artifacts. While viewing the displays, I noticed a label that described a suitcase-sized wooden box with compartments: Lagimodière's Red River cart box. Musket balls for hunting would go in one little section. Extra flints and wadding in another. And then, the thought occurred to me that this box should once again ride on a Red River cart. Lagimodière would have been honored. No? I floated my idea by interpreter Tatianna Balcaen who had unwittingly let me in. She promised to talk to her boss. By that evening, I had an e-mail from curator Emilie Bordeleau-Laroche: "I am very excited to be able to help make this happen."<sup>11</sup>

I have to admit that I touched Lagimodière's box before it was loaded onto the back of my cart last week. And with that historic treasure cushioned on a buffalo robe behind me, I *was* Jean-Baptiste Lagimodière—off on another adventure.

### **It Takes a Village**

I wanted to do as many "real" things as possible on our journey. First up was La Maison Goulet, an original rest house on the trail that is part of the Musée St-Pierre-Jolys. We'd been given permission to sleep there overnight.

We approached St-Pierre-Jolys on Rat River Road. It was the first stretch of original trail route since St. Mary's. It had a feel of authenticity about it. Its curves followed the river, and all the houses and farms were on the river side of the road—relic of the early strip lots along the trail. The French accents of people who stopped to say *bonjour* added to the affect. But I was so focused on my tangible definition of "real" that I almost missed savoring what might turn out to be the "real-ist" things on our journey.

First, there was Al, who stopped to see if Zik needed any grain. Then, when a piece of Zik's harness broke, John offered to help and welcomed us into his yard for our midday break.

He spoke of his best friend, Guy, a descendant of Lagimodière and the one who placed his ancestor's box on our cart. On cue, Guy showed up and joined our conversation. After our rest, I continued down the road, now leading Zik. We passed Murielle's place. She jumped on the cart for a ride. She'd spearheaded the development of the Crow Wing Trail and helped me with my planning. Our old friend Cindy saw the cart from her workplace and joined us, too.<sup>12</sup>

When we arrived at the museum, Mireille La-Roche, the new president welcomed us with open arms. That night, as I lay awake on my buffalo robe on the floor of La Maison Goulet—the floor that had felt the feet of many a jiggling cart driver in years past—I thought about the day. I realized I had experienced something pretty special. It was the real, unchanged spirit of a close-knit, sharing community along the Red River Trail. And they had embraced me as part of it.

## WEEK FOUR

### ***A Deep Debt***

The paddle wheeler from Minnesota nudged the shore of the Red River at the forks of the Rat and lowered its gangplank. When my ancestors stepped onto terra firma, they had no idea of the history of the ground on which they walked. They had been offered free land to till—sixty acres per family—and freedom to follow their Mennonite faith. Like their salvation, the land truly was free. . . for *them*. But in both cases, it cost someone else dearly.

The Anishinaabeg had been the caretakers of this corner of the country. The Creator of the land, *Gitche Manitou*, had given the people everything they needed to live here. The rivers were given them to travel and fish. The *bizhiki* and *waawaashkeshi*—bison and deer—were given them to hunt. And then, through a treaty that would be repeatedly eroded with time, the Anishinaabeg were informed that the land was no longer theirs. Three years before the arrival of the Mennonites, they were told to choose a block of territory equivalent in size to sixty acres per family: land that would become the Roseau River Anishinaabe First Nation reserve and the Brokenhead Ojibway Nation reserve.

In those early days, the Mennonites sometimes welcomed hungry Indigenous visitors

asking for food. They had no idea that when they offered *braut* (bread) and *vota* (water) to their guests, they were serving those who had once been lords of the land that bore these gifts: that by so doing, they were serving the One who had been Lord of Heaven but came down to identify with the brokenhearted.

My feelings about this history are deeply mixed. I am thankful that 146 years after my ancestors landed here, I have a wonderful place I call home. Yet, I am sad that my gain came at such a loss to those entrusted by our Creator as stewards of the land. In planning our trip, I realized that the Red River Trail passed right through Roseau River First Nation. Could this be my opportunity to express my debt and gratitude?

About thirty of us outsiders were graciously invited to a ceremony with Anishinaabe leaders on sacred ground where the old trail crossed. With gifts and faltering words, we visitors tried to describe what our hearts felt. Chief Craig Alexander received what we had to offer and showered us with gifts and blessings in return. Afterwards, we shared a feast of bannock, *forma vorscht* (farmer sausage), and stories. An old wall had started to crumble. Hugs, selfies, and new bonds of friendship were filling the gap.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Border Patrol***

In the 1800s when the Red River cart drivers used to cross from one territory to another, the whole international border concept and location were fairly nebulous. Passports and paperwork were unheard of. That has changed. I was planning to cross where the original trail crossed—twelve miles from the nearest port of entry. I was trying to do it legally.

The difficulty was not on account of authorities digging in their heels. Everyone was quite enamored with the idea. There was just no precedent. But after innumerable phone calls to nine different parties on both sides of the border, it was finally arranged that an American veterinarian, Homeland Security, and border authorities would meet Zik and me at the closest accessible road. An official even brought a sniffer dog—ostensibly to check for illicit imports, but he hinted he was more interested in a good story to tell at day's end.



Terry Doerksen spent about a year ahead of his trip making countless phone calls and corresponding through endless emails to make sure everything was in order when he finally crossed the Canada/US border. Despite the hassle, being there—in the middle of nowhere on unaltered Red River Trail land with a cart and ox for the first time since 1870—was quite a rush for the Doerksens. *Courtesy of Patty Doerksen.*

## WEEK FIVE

### An “Epic Sov Pat”

Eight thousand years ago, as bands of wanderers followed a receding Lake Agassiz north, they came across a brand new convergence of four rivers near what is today called Winnipeg. An unseen Guide had led them to a place of abundant fish and a transportation hub that would make this the perfect Place of Meeting. The new arrivals couldn’t have known that they had come to the very heart of their continent, Turtle Island: a heart with four river veins flowing in and one large life-giving red artery flowing out.<sup>14</sup>

Now in the twenty-first century, I had come to call the city, built here where many paths meet, my home. I felt drawn to be part of the Creator’s ongoing expression of care for those dwelling here. I wanted to honor Him as those before me had done for millennia. In seeking to put feet to what was in my heart, I decided to walk around Winnipeg. Literally. While doing so, I asked the Creator to continue his life-giving work here; I sang of his goodness and love; and I declared his sovereignty over this place. I walked the perimeter, followed the actual city boundaries, and trekked down gravel and dirt roads. I scaled fences, waded through swamps, swam across the four rivers, and clearly felt the presence and direction of that same unseen Guide.

Somewhere along the way, I found a metaphor in the Canadian Rangers, a quasi-military, mostly Indigenous order of watchmen and women who patrol the wilder parts of this

country. Their presence declares the land to be sovereign territory. Thus, they call their journeys “Sovereignty Patrols” or “Sov Pats.”<sup>15</sup> I saw that my wanderings about Winnipeg were doing the same thing as the Rangers but on a spiritual level, and so my ventures came to be known as “Sov Pats,” as well.

Still, I often wished that I could journey on a bigger scale. Five years ago, the dream of an “Epic Sov Pat” began to take form. Every version involved my love of Manitoba history and started with an oxcart leaving the heart of Winnipeg and heading down the Red River Trail.

### ***Cyborgs on the Red River Trail***

As I planned my dream, there were two unbending obstacles in my way. My knees. I could walk—painfully. But to haul myself onto a cart repeatedly and survive the rigors of long weeks on the trail? No way.

I had tried to deal with my pain, but I didn’t have a lot of hope when I asked my doctor if I’d qualify for new knees. “Why not?” she replied. After a few false starts with COVID cancellations, I got my shiny titanium implants. So—easy carting for 500 miles to St. Paul, right?

It turns out that someone else needs some metal body parts to keep those big wheels rolling. It’s Zik’s turn to wait in line for his prostheses. Before our journey, a local veterinarian, Alan Dalton, tried to solve a problem that the Métis cart drivers didn’t have to worry as much about: hooves wearing down over long distances on hard surfaces.<sup>16</sup> He put a thick epoxy coating under each of Zik’s eight claws. Good idea, but it wore off by the time we left Winnipeg.

We continued on Zik’s natural hooves as we crossed into the States, but they were wearing down much too fast. Help came from John Nyegaard, a farrier in northern Minnesota. His solution involved repurposing his wife’s Pampered Chef cutting board into claw-shaped pads. Another good idea that outlasted the epoxy—by a day.

Luckily, there’s still one blacksmith in North America who makes a living forging ox shoes. Nick Brown moved us to the front of his queue of ox-loving customers and overnights those shiny steel enhancements from Nova Scotia to an impatient Zik. With our “bionic” upgrades, we two cyborgs will finally head back to the trail.





## WEEK SIX

### ***A Perfect Campsite***

The “perfect campsite” changes when you’re traveling with a two-year-old who happens to be an ox. Long grass for grazing and a swamp for water take priority over solitude in the woods. Our second day in Northern Minnesota, we found just the site, exactly where Zik’s energy ran out and right at the spot on the map where three lines from Manitoba to Minnesota pass by. The Red River Trail was probably the loudest of the three, but now the off-key creaking of our cart is the only hint of earlier days. The Enbridge pipeline, which brings oil to the Port of Duluth-Superior, will remain silent unless there’s a leak. Then, we’ll hear a justified uproar. The third line—the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) was quiet until 3 a.m. *Uff da!* (A new word I learned in Minnesota.) Zik didn’t seem affected. He measures contentment by mouthfuls of grass.

## WEEK SEVEN

### ***Whither Thou Goest, I Shall Go***

When Jean-Baptiste Lagimodière married Marie-Anne Gaboury in 1806 in Maskinongé, Quebec, he may have assumed she would wait patiently at home for those odd times his wanderings might bring him back to her. *She* assumed differently. Everyone tried to convince Marie-Anne of the folly of a French Canadian woman going on a months-long canoe trip with wild-living voyageurs. By stepping into that canoe, she entered history books as the first white woman to live in the western territories. Whenever she could, she joined her husband: traveling by cart, canoe, and horseback; participating in hunts; or sojourning far into the interior on diplomatic missions. She had babies here and there. The seventh of her eight children, Julie, would become the mother of Louis Riel.

My wife Patty’s relationship with me has some similarities to Marie-Anne with Jean-Baptiste. I once bought a home with the intention of bringing guys in off the street. It didn’t turn out so

Terry Doerksen works on a loose shoe as Zik waits patiently. The pair became quite close over the course of the two-month journey. Both images courtesy of Patty Doerksen.

well. One evening when Patty and I were dating, the phone rang. It was Abraham, a man who used to live there. He was high and stated he intended to kill me. Absorbing the news, I thought it time to ask an important question. "Patty, I don't know where God is going to call me. I have no guarantees that it will be a safe place. Would you be willing to enter an unknown like that with a guy like me?" I gave her the poem I had written months before. *My Patty. Come fly with me. Enough are satisfied with walking, and will not take the risks which give them air.* By the time I was done, Patty's eyes were moist. Instead of a verbal "yes," she simply nodded her head.

We did fly together through turbulence and beautiful skies. But when I started thinking about undertaking a months-long bumpy trip on a Red River cart, I was pretty sure Patty would be less thrilled with the idea than Marie-Anne. In fact, she laughed. Out loud. But before she could say "No way," I jumped in and said that I didn't want an answer right away. "Let's just see if God speaks anything into your heart." I didn't want to be the one to convince her. Imagine trekking three days down the road when the rain was pouring and the ticks were crawling if I had talked her into it.

What changed her mind? Patty worked as a companion to an elderly woman, a proper

English lady, whose response to anything unusual was, "That's just terrible!" So, Patty felt safe telling her my crazy cart proposal. Freida's reply? "I think that's just marvelous! What are you going to do? Sit on a couch the rest of your life?" A response *that* out-of-the-blue must be the word of the Lord! In church a few weeks later, I scratched a revised poem on the bulletin. *Come cart with me. Enough are satisfied with flying, and will not take the ox that slows them down.* I showed Patty. She checked off, "Yes!"

## WEEK EIGHT

### *The Flag of Protection*

I'm writing this the day before the Fourth of July. Patty suggested I should probably add a "Stars-and-Stripes" US flag to the Manitoba flag on my willow-stick mast. That *would* be respectful to all the kind people we've met on our journey, and I might avoid trouble on a day of patriotic fervor.

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

I'm not the first person to be protected by this flag. Little Crow, leader of the Dakota people, had been promised by the British that if he should ever run into trouble with the Americans, "the red flag of the north would wrap them round, and preserve them from their enemies."<sup>17</sup> When trouble did come and Little Crow retaliated, he deliberately spared Georgetown. The town, though technically on the American side of the border, flew the Red Ensign. Little Crow saw this, the forerunner of Manitoba's flag, and returned the kindness he had been shown.

On our journey down the trail, we have encountered some serious weather. Besides our flag, Vincent Van Go has kept us safe and sound as the storms raged. It has even provided a haven for our ox. There was the time in May when the brutally cold wind drove the rain against an exposed Zik. In the middle of the night with lantern in hand, I relocated him into the lee of the RV. In June, when the ox-stopping heat hit, we needed to get to a camping spot. Patty drove the RV alongside Zik as he labored down the road. In that moving wall of shade, he gained enough strength to walk one last mile.

Then, there was a freakish rainstorm. The sky was alive with lightning, but it was all within

The Doerksens and Zik endured cold frosty mornings, excruciating heat, and rain. During one storm, Terry Doerksen and Zik sought protection from the elements next to the RV. Zik, who had never seen the inside of a "people stable," took the opportunity to check things out. To his disappointment, the couple enforces a strict "No oxen inside the RV" policy. *Courtesy of Patty Doerksen.*





the clouds, so Zik and I kept moving. Suddenly, a bolt hit the ground with a crash that spooked Zik into a run. Patty was following behind, so I waved her up with the RV—a mobile lightning rod. Zik and I huddled by the open passenger door to wait out the storm.

## WEEK NINE

### *Tribute to a Famous Ox*

The oxcart trek was often a family affair, with women and children part of the procession. A Minnesota journalist of the time noted that “the carts of the women are painted; and have a cover with other appearances of greater attention to comfort than is displayed in the carts appropriated to the men.”<sup>18</sup> Knowing that, I asked our daughter, Mischa, to bring blue fingernail polish with her when she came to ride with us for a bit. Only I wasn’t planning to have her paint the cart. Just some fingernails. Ox-sized “fingernails.” I wanted to pay tribute to the most famous Minnesota ox of all.

You might remember stories of the winter that was so cold that words froze before they reached a person’s ears. People had to wait till spring to hear what was said. That was the winter that Paul Bunyan, legendary lumberjack, found a little ox so chilled that it had turned blue. Bunyan named it Babe and warmed it by the fire, but the ox kept its unique color. Like Bunyan, Babe grew to be HUGE! “. . . forty-two ax handles and a plug of tobacco between the horns.” While walking his way through Minnesota, Babe’s giant hooves are said to have formed the 10,000 lakes that this state is known for.<sup>19</sup> Today, just beside the Red River Trail, another ox cooled his hooves in one of those lakes created by Babe. And like Babe, Zik’s hooves were blue.

## WEEK TEN

### *The Buffalo Wool Company 2022, Inc.*

Red River’s first attempt at an export business was butter. A writer who sampled this delicacy felt it was so bad it wasn’t fit for axle grease on an oxcart.<sup>20</sup> But things have changed. I saw a lot of high-quality Manitoba exports as we traveled through Minnesota—from Agassiz trailers to Westeel grain bins; from Versatile tractors to Westfield augers.

Preparing for our trip, I had wondered what product I could export down the Red River Trail,

when I almost stepped on it while doing electrical work at FortWhyte Alive—a clump of wool that had been shed by one of the resident bison. Within thirty seconds, I learned two things about bison wool: it was soft and warm, and it stank. I placed the specimen straight into the box of my truck until I could figure out how to de-scent it.

I’ve never been a businessman, so I was nervous about taking a risk with this export. I know that the original Buffalo Wool Company failed miserably in 1824 because of start-up and production costs.<sup>21</sup> My only financial outlay was for a few squirts of Febreze. The first thought was to transport my export-grade wool by paddle wheeler to St. Louis, where most of the early fur products from Red River ended up. But I saw an opportunity near the end of our journey when a few new friends met me at Banfill Tavern in Fridley—an original watering hole on the Red River Trail. I announced that I was putting my bison wool up for auction and started the call at one dollar. I may have discovered my new calling as an auctioneer. The winning bid came in at one-hundred US dollars. Flush with cash, I offered free shots of another successful Manitoba export: Crown Royal, the pride of Gimli and top-selling Canadian whisky in the USA.



After nearly two months on the trail, Terry Doerksen (right front) shares pemmican with new friends from Anoka County Historical Society and Fridley Historical Society & Museum, as well as the two folks who willingly picked up a crew of hitchhikers for the last leg of the Red River Trail journey—Dennis Lindner and his son Jacob (standing). Pemmican, a mixture of dried, pulverized bison meat and rendered bison fat, was the perfect food for the trail. It was high in energy, didn’t spoil, and didn’t need any preparation unless you wanted to go gourmet and make rubaboo (stew) or richeau (stir-fry). Courtesy of Patty Doerksen.

## A Final Mile of Joy

The most stressful section of our oxcart journey was the first—the six-hour trundle through city traffic from downtown Winnipeg. How would Zik handle the assault on his bucolic senses? Would we get in trouble for leaving pie-shaped souvenirs on the street? Would we make it out of the city in the required time? Apart from refusing to cross manhole covers and briefly freezing in place at the sight of a cement truck, Zik did awesome. It probably helped that he noticed another ox working just as hard as him every time we passed a store window. The two of them had a lot to “com-moooo-serate” about. After a friend scooped the first cowpie, I stopped worrying, and we crossed the south perimeter with minutes to burn.

After two months on the trail with some city miles on the odometer, I looked forward to the final stretch of the journey to the heart of St. Paul. Our local contact had warned us that we would not find a rainbow at the end of the road; instead, we’d pass through a small urban encampment. She did not know that that we felt more at home among the unhoused than among the wealthy living on Summit Avenue, where we planned to start our last day’s travel. Like the Métis from Red River who pioneered the trail that would become Kellogg Boulevard and the people asking for help at its intersections now, we felt like an aberration on the sensibilities of a vaunted State Capital.

Those previous cart drivers who rolled through here 150 years ago may have shocked the local inhabitants. Their bizarre clothes, indecipherable jargon, and sometimes lawless living were likely jarring to all that was proper. Only when the steamboats full of supplies had arrived from St. Louis, the carts had been loaded, and the Métis drivers had left for their homes in the north, could the city exhale and return to normal life.

Like the Métis waiting for the boats to arrive, I had hoped to camp our last night on the shores of what had

been Larpenteur’s Lake—long since dried up. Instead, it seemed that the nearby James J. Hill House property would be perfect. But the staff at this historic site showed no interest in having a rickety cart enhancing their parking lot or a biomass-producing ox mowing their lawn. Figures. It was Hill himself, with his steamboats and railways plying to Winnipeg, who had helped bring an end to the Red River Trail. Instead, we were invited to Gibb’s Farm. Maybe not an old Métis campsite but the setting was authentic—Zik had a pasture to graze in, and we were away from city bustle.

To avoid the need of a police escort, we started our final approach to Lambert’s Landing—the terminus of the Red River Trail—at six the following morning, July 17. Unlike the start of our journey, this last ride was one of pure joy. We harnessed at the parking lot of the Cathedral of St. Paul and took a quick photo at the Hill house to demonstrate that despite Hill’s efforts, one Red River cart was still rolling. Heading down Kellogg, we blew through red lights in the spirit of our lawless predecessors, and we chatted with curious folks passing by us. Turning right onto Jackson Street, Zik grew nervous about losing his footing on the steep asphalt slope. I walked backwards in front of Zik with my hand braced against his head, with Patty and a friend putting on the brakes from behind the cart as we inched toward the Mississippi.

After years of envisioning this moment, we suddenly found ourselves staring down at that great river. I symbolically unloaded the buffalo robe from our cart and brought it down some steps to the dock while Patty and Zik watched from above. Two months to the day from when we first climbed aboard our oxcart, with tired limbs and overflowing hearts, we had finally come to the end of our journey.



Exhausted drivers rest on St. Anthony Hill above the new city of St. Paul in 1858 before taking their carts down to the Mississippi. *Photograph by Benjamin Franklin Upton, courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

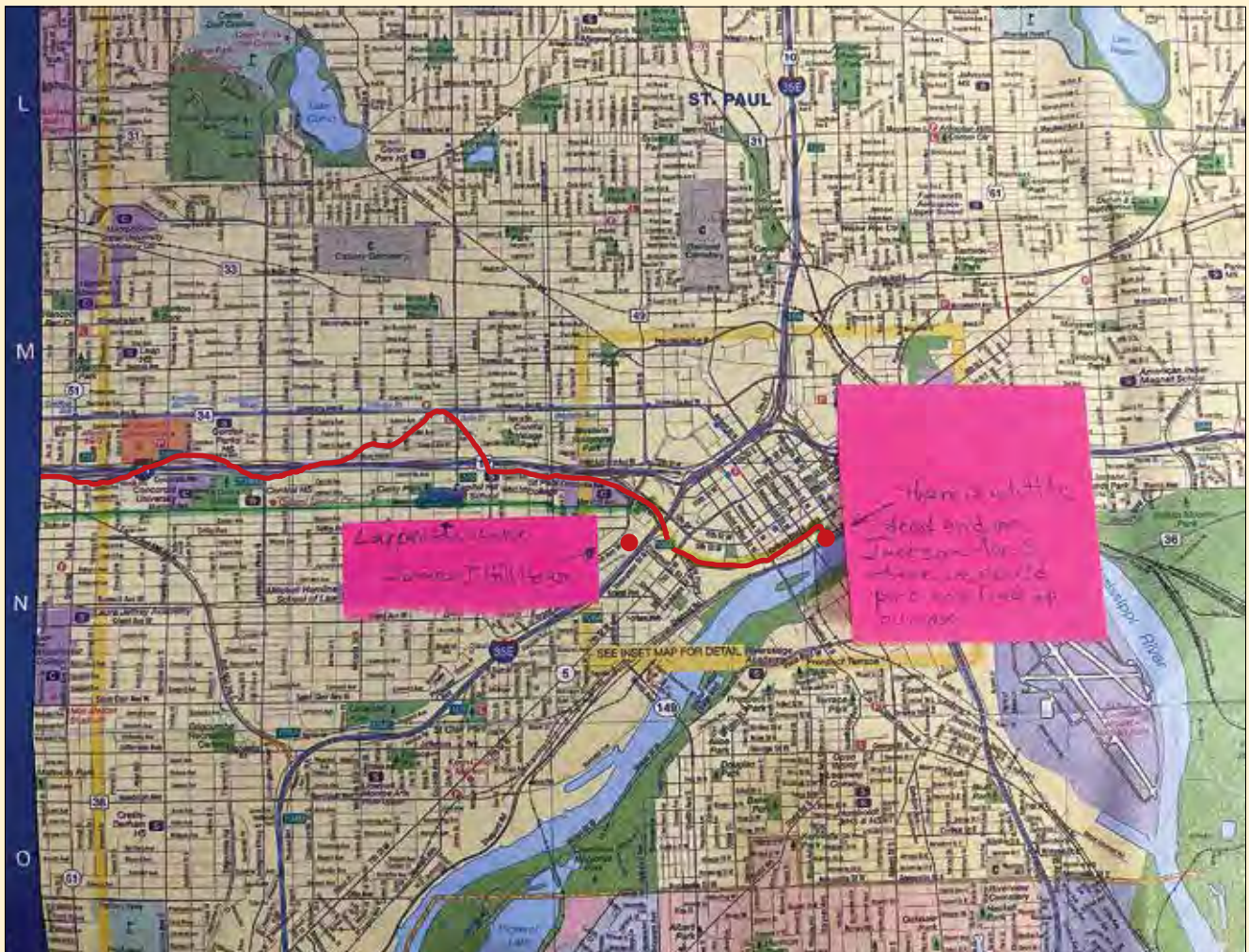


The Doerksens and their trusty ox spent their last night at Gibbs Farm in Falcon Heights. The trio was welcomed by new friends, some looking like Terry and Patty in dress from a bygone era. *Courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society.*





St. Paul looks a bit different than it did to cart drivers 150 years ago, but the feelings Terry and Patty Doerksen felt as they finished their trek at the river's edge must have been similar to the relief experienced by drivers so long ago. *All photos courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society.*



Referring to historic and modern maps, including this 2022 AAA Minneapolis/St. Paul map, Terry Doerksen plotted every step of his journey. Note the blue oval he inserted to represent the previous location of Larpenteur's Lake and the arrows on the sticky notes pointing to the location of the James J. Hill House and the end of the trail. Doerksen's route, originally inked in blue, has been redrawn in red for clearer visual reference. *Courtesy of Terry Doerksen.*



## ***Hitchhiking on the Red River Trail***

### ***Hitchhiking Rule of Thumb:***

Traveling alone—wait twenty minutes for a ride.

Traveling with a companion—wait two hours.

Traveling with two companions, one weighing 1,600 pounds—wait for a miracle.

Four days before our May 17-departure day from Winnipeg at the start of our journey, Patty and I had driven down our planned route on St. Mary's over the floodway and stared in dismay as our trail disappeared into the flooded Red River. I prayed God would part the "Red Sea." He had done it before. I pictured a ribbon of black asphalt slowly emerging out of the water. Then, just as you might expect, God did something unexpected. I had been hoping for Moses, but He provided Noah with his ark to get one more animal past the flood. I didn't realize that Noah looks exactly like my friend Tim from Stonewall; nor that the ark could pass for a cattle trailer.

A few weeks later was when Zik started having trouble with his hooves. I had arranged to meet a farrier the next day, but that was still twelve miles down the road. And just like that, a truck and trailer pulled up. "Do you guys need a lift?" We hadn't even had time to ask for a miracle. So, a friendly farmer spent the morning transporting Zik and me to our destination,

going home and changing his trailer to a flatbed, and then delivering the cart. Miraculous kindness! We were back on schedule—but not for long. Zik had more shoe problems. Then, he caught pneumonia. With a young ox and heavy heat bogging us down, we made miles but never did hit the fifteen-miles-a-day I had originally planned. We couldn't just keep plodding forever until we reached the Twin Cities. We had a paddle wheeler to catch to St. Louis.

So, I arranged a ride to take us to St. Paul. We wouldn't be dependent on a miracle this time. The day before the trailer was expected, we reached the Crow Wing River, 350 miles from Winnipeg. That's when we got a phone call—our ride had fallen through!

I mentioned our situation to a few people we had recently met. One responded with a text, "Try Dennis." It turns out Dennis Lindner had driven past Zik and me the day before. When he got home, he saw a Facebook post about us that mentioned we were getting trailered the 150 miles to the cities. His thought was, "I'd like to be the guy who trailers them down." And so it came to be. Another miracle.

On July 17, two months after we had left downtown Winnipeg, we parked the trailer on Summit Avenue in St. Paul and picked up the Red River Trail again for the final mile to the river. We departed from the spot where previous cart drivers had camped while waiting for their

Father John Ubel, rector of the Cathedral of St. Paul is an amateur historian and knows much about the early history of the church in St. Paul. In July 1843, Canadian-born Norman Kittson, who once owned a mansion on the hill where the cathedral now stands, proposed to build an American trading post at Pembina. Many traders were of French-Canadian descent. Eventually, some of those involved in the fur trade settled in what is today Ramsey County, including Vital Guerin, who donated land for the first Catholic chapel in the area. *Courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society.*





paddle wheelers to arrive at the Lower Landing.<sup>22</sup> As we approached the majestic Cathedral of St. Paul, it was our turn to pick up a hitchhiker. As in olden days when monks caught rides on oxcarts heading into town, there was Father John Ubel, the rector of the cathedral, waiting with his thumb out at six on a Sunday morning. We dropped him off and then completed our journey to the banks of the Mississippi.

After Zik and the cart were loaded onto Dennis's trailer for the ride back home to Canada, it seemed fitting to head back to the cathedral for Mass. Like cart-driving worshippers from the past, we gave thanks to the Good Shepherd for bringing us safely down the long Red River Trail—and for the many miracles He had provided along the way.

## Postscript

On July 20, 2022, a very tired but grateful Patty and Terry Doerksen began Part II of their summer adventure. They boarded the American Countess paddle wheeler for what they hoped would be an uneventful and relaxing eight-day trip down the Mississippi River to St. Louis. Of course, that's not what happened—and more adventures ensued. *Uff da!*

**Terry Doerksen** was born of pure Mennonite stock in Steinbach, Manitoba, on October 31, 1961, and spent his formative years in Alberta and Saskatchewan before studying at Winnipeg Bible College in Otterburne, Manitoba. As a young man, he decided that if he ever lived in a city, he hoped it was Winnipeg. Soon, he met Patty Wiens. One of the two fell deeply in love;



*the other said she just wanted to be friends. In the early 1980s, Doerksen adventured his way from Tuktoyaktuk to Titicaca, where he caught an infection with the symptom of wanting to see around just one more bend of the trail. It was never fully cured. In 1985, he became an electrician with Jorey Electric in Winnipeg, and, two years later, Patty married him. Leif was born in 1992. In 1994, the trio moved to Mongolia, where Terry and Patty taught English and drank lots of fermented horse milk. Sim was born, followed by Mischa. In 2006, the family returned to Canada, and Terry continued to work as an electrician. In his free time, he read lots of Manitoba history. He began thinking about an "Epic Sov Pat," which he accomplished in July 2022—in a Red River cart—with the woman of his dreams.*

With the end of the journey drawing near, Terry Doerksen knew saying goodbye to Zik would be difficult. *Courtesy of Patty Doerksen.*

## NOTES

1. The Métis are the children of Indigenous Americans and Europeans. In Canada, the Métis are one of three recognized Indigenous groups, along with First Nations and the Inuit. For more on the Métis and the Selkirk colony, see Clarence Rife and Holly Walters, "Those Squealing Red River Ox Carts: Norman Kittson and the Fur Trade," *Ramsey County History* 37, no. 3 (2002): 22-24; Dennis Hoffa, "How St. Paul Came to Lose the 'Red River War,'" *Ramsey County History* 12, no. 1 (1975): 14-18; "Boats, Carts, Rails, Roads—The Trailways of History," *Ramsey County History* 8, no. 2 (1971): 15-18; Rhoda Gilman, Carolyn Gilman, and Deborah M. Stultz, *Red River Trails: Oxcart Routes Between St. Paul and the Selkirk Settlement 1820-1870* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society,

1979); Bill Lindeke, "Tracing the missing stories of the Red River Ox-Cart Trail," *MinnPost*, June 2, 2016.

2. Terry Doerksen, email correspondence with editor, September 20, 2022.

3. Ted Stone, *The Legend of Pierre Bottineau and the Red River Trail* (Stony Plain, AB, Canada, Eschia Books, 2013), 259.

4. Terry Doerksen, email correspondence with editor. According to Doerksen, he and his wife, Patty, are the first to attempt the entire oxcart trail from Winnipeg to St. Paul and the first with a cart designed to the specifications of an actual Red River cart. Interestingly, Doerksen caught a ride at one point along the way with Delmar Hagen's grandson and met Orlin Ostby and most of his

To read about the Doerksons' experience "fording a river" with their cart, visit our publications page online at [www.rchs.com](http://www.rchs.com) and click the link, "Adventure on the High Seas of Central Minnesota."

entourage along the way. Note: The original trail measured 469 miles, but given changes and the necessity to take some modern roads, Doerksen estimated his trip at about 500 miles. He measured distance using miles instead of kilometers, as that is what the Métis cart drivers who charted the trail used. Also, while he refers to his trip down the “Red River Trail,” there are multiple trails that the original carters followed.

5. C. W. McCall, “Convoy,” *Black Bear Road*, MGM Records, 1975. The author creates a variation of the McCall song using two different stanzas in the 1975 single “Convoy” from the album *Black Bear Road* by C. W. McCall (Bill Fries) and Chip Davis: “By the time we got into Tulsa Town we had eighty-five trucks in all; But they’s a road-block up on the cloverleaf, and them bears was wall-to-wall” and “Well, we shot the line and we went for broke with a thousand screamin’ trucks; an’ eleven long-haired Friends a’ Jesus in a chartreuse micra-bus.”

6. McCall.

7. Ogden Tanner, *The Canadians: The Old West Time-Life Series* (New York: Time-Life Books, 1977), 133; Amy Tikkanen, “What’s the Difference Between Bison and Buffalo,” *Britannica*, accessed September 26, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/story/whats-the-difference-between-buffalo-and-bison>. Early French explorers named the animals they saw *boeuf*, which translated to buffalo. However, buffalo do not roam the American west. Rather, American bison do. Water buffalo and Cape buffalo are native to Southeast Asia and Africa, respectively. The term buffalo in the US is a common misnomer, corrected today, but 150 years ago, the term used consistently was buffalo. For the purposes of this article, we use buffalo or bison depending on the context. The Red River Colony was located around the Red and Assiniboine rivers extending from what is now southern Manitoba into today’s North Dakota.

8. “A Definition of Smudging,” Indigenous Corporate Training, Inc., February 16, 2017, accessed October 3, 2022, <https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/a-definition-of-smudging>. Smudging is a sacred Indigenous practice meant to cleanse the soul using a shell (water) as a vessel; sacred plants, including sage, cedar, sweetgrass, and tobacco (Mother Earth); fire used to light the plants; and the resulting smoke (air).

9. Louis Riel, grandson of oxcart trail drivers Jean-Baptiste Lagimodière and Marie-Anne Gaboury, is considered to be the father of Manitoba and a Métis leader. He was hanged by the Canadian government in 1885 after being accused and convicted of high treason. See “Louis Riel,” University of Saskatchewan Library, <https://library.usask.ca/northwest/background/riel.htm>; “Memorable Manitobans: Marie Anne Gaboury Lagimodière (1782-1875),” Manitoba Historical Society, accessed September 19, 2022, [http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/people/gaboury\\_ma.shtml](http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/people/gaboury_ma.shtml).

10. Larry Gormley, “Because It’s There,” ehistory at The Ohio State University, accessed August 30, 2022, <https://ehistory.osu.edu/articles/because-its-there>.

11. Emilie Bordeleau-Laroche, email correspondence with Terry Doerksen, September 8, 2021.

12. Note: In this article, some people are identified by first name only for privacy and/or, according to Terry Doerksen, “I noticed a difference in Minnesota and Canadian culture as we traveled. In Canada, people almost always introduce themselves using their first name only. In Minnesota, it’s almost always first and last. It took me a little while to adapt.”

13. *Miigwech* (Thanks) to *Ogima* (Chief) Craig Alexander for receiving us, Kirby Nelson for organizing the ceremony, and Jim and Zongiday Nelson for their prayer, gifts, and stories.

14. In Canada, Winnipeg is known as the heart of the continent.

15. “The Canadian Rangers,” Office of the National Defence and Canadian Armed Forces Ombudsman, accessed September 19, 2022, <https://www.canada.ca/en/ombudsman-national-defence-forces/education-information/caf-members/career/canadian-rangers.html>.

16. See “Draft Animal Celebration: Shoeing Draft Animals,” Billings Farm and Museum, accessed September 21, 2022, <https://billingsfarm.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/draft-animal-shoeing.pdf>.

17. Joseph James Hargrave (1871), 1977, *Red River*, Montreal: John Lovell, Reprint, Altona, Manitoba: Friesens Corporation, 91. Citations refer to the Friesens’ edition.

18. Jane Grey Swisshelm, quoted in Gilman, Gilman, and Stultz, 15.

19. Norman A. Rubin, “The Tall Tale of Paul Bunyan,” Travel Thru History, accessed September 21, 2022, [https://americanfolklore.net/folklore/2010/07/babe\\_the\\_blue\\_ox.html](https://americanfolklore.net/folklore/2010/07/babe_the_blue_ox.html); “Babe the Blue Ox: Minnesota Tall Tales,” retold by S. E. Schlosser, American Folklore, accessed September 21, 2022, [https://americanfolklore.net/folklore/2010/07/babe\\_the\\_blue\\_ox.html](https://americanfolklore.net/folklore/2010/07/babe_the_blue_ox.html).

20. Alexander Ross, (1856), 1957, *Red River Settlement: Its Rise, Progress, and Present State: With Some Account of the Native Races and Its General History, to the Present Day*, London: Smith Elder & Co., Reprint, Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, Inc., 116. Citations refer to the Ross and Haines’ edition.

21. Ross.

22. Also known as Lambert’s Landing.

### Notes to Sidebar on page 19

a. “Cogito, ergo sum,” *Britannica*, accessed September 19, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/cogito-ergo-sum>. Philosopher René Descartes used the Latin phrase: Cogito, ergo sum—“I think, therefore I am,” in his *Discourse on Method* from 1637 as he tried to “demonstrate the attainability of knowledge.” Note: The Doerksens’ cart, with a Mennonite church pew for a seat, was constructed by “cartiste” Phil Doerksen, a cousin who poured in over 200 hours of dedication and skill to craft the beauty. The design and guidance came from Armand Jerome and his wife, Kelly—foremost Red River cart makers. See Gloria Thomas, “The Revival of the Red River Cart,” *Readers’ Digest Canada*, <https://www.readersdigest.ca/travel/canada/red-river-cart/>.



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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

A PUBLICATION OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Preserving our past, informing our present, inspiring our future.

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The Society was established in 1949 to preserve the Jane and Heman Gibbs Farm in Falcon Heights, which the family acquired in 1849. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974, the original programs told the story of the Gibbs family. In 2000, with the assistance of a Dakota Advisory Council, RCHS also began interpreting Dakota culture and lifeways, now telling the stories of the remarkable relationship between Jane Gibbs and the Dakota people of Heyáta Othúnwe (Cloud Man's Village).

In 1964, the Society began publishing its award-winning magazine *Ramsey County History*. In 1978, the organization moved to St. Paul's Landmark Center, a restored Federal Courts building on the National Register of Historic Places. An expansion of the Research Center was completed in 2010 and rededicated in 2016 as the Mary Livingston Griggs & Mary Griggs Burke Research Center.

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Mnisóta Makhóche, the land where the waters are so clear they reflect the clouds, extends beyond the modern borders of Minnesota and is the ancestral and contemporary homeland of the Dakhóta (Dakota) people. It is also home to the Anishinaabe and other Indigenous peoples, all who make up a vibrant community in Mnisóta Makhóche. RCHS acknowledges that its sites are located on and benefit from these sacred Dakota lands.

RCHS is committed to preserving our past, informing our present, and inspiring our future. Part of doing so is acknowledging the painful history and current challenges facing the Dakota people just as we celebrate the contributions of Dakota and other Indigenous peoples.

Find our full Land Acknowledgment Statement on our website, [www.rchs.com](http://www.rchs.com). This includes actionable ways in which RCHS pledges to honor the Dakota and other Indigenous peoples of Mnisóta Makhóche.



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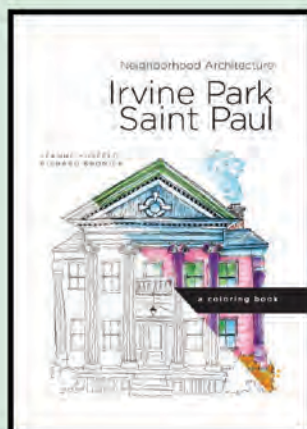
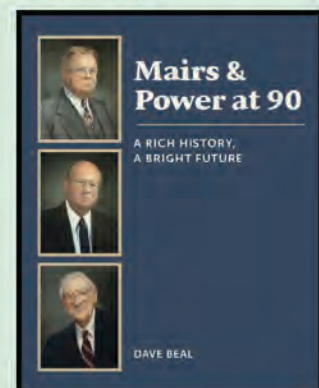
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*A Man, a Woman, an Ox, and a Cart*  
**Retracing the Red River Trail**

**TERRY DOERKSEN, PAGE 17**



After two months traveling several hundred miles from Winnipeg to St. Paul along the Red River Trail, Terry Doerksen and his trusty ox, Zik, take their final steps along the banks of the Mississippi River to reach Lambert's Landing in Lowertown. *Courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society.*