

Buffalo Economy and Red River Carts

Lesson 2

Guiding Question for the Lesson

- How did the Red River cart impact Métis lifestyle and economy?

Standards

Essential Understandings Regarding Montana Indians

EU 1 There is great diversity among the twelve sovereign tribes of Montana in their languages, cultures, histories, and governments. Each tribe has a distinct and unique cultural heritage that contributes to modern Montana.

Social Studies Standards

SS.E.6-8.6 Explain how changes in supply, demand, and labor standards cause changes in prices and quantities of goods, services, and other capital.

SS.G.6-8.5 Explain the role and impact of spatial patterns of settlement and movement in shaping societies and cultures, including Indigenous cultures.

SS.G.6-8.6 Identify how the historical and contemporary movement of people, goods, and ideas from one area can impact change, conflict, and cooperation in other areas.

Materials

Images of Red River carts (Appendix A)

[Red River Carts](#) (2 minutes), APTNDigitalNations, c. 2009.

“Cart Trails” essay by Chris La Tray (Appendix B)

[Video](#) (2 minutes) about reproducing Red River carts in modern times, Global News.

[Red River Carts](#), Minnesota Historical Society, October 24, 2017, modified July 11, 2023.

[The Red River Cart and Trails: The Fur Trade](#) by Harry Baker, Manitoba Historical Society, MHS Transactions, Series 3, Number 28, 1971-72 season.

[Red River Cart](#), National Museum of American History Behring Center (Smithsonian).

[The Métis and Red River Carts](#), North Dakota Studies, State Historical Society of North Dakota.

[The Red River Buffalo Hunt](#), Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research.

Length

One class period



Indian Education for All Unit

Montana Office of Public Instruction

Steps

Step One

Provide print copies of images in Appendix A. Without giving any clues (not even the name of this lesson or the guiding question), ask students to make note of what they observe in each one. Then ask them to talk with a partner or guide the discussion on what each student noticed. If nobody states it, ask what similarities they notice in the images. (answer: a two-wheeled cart) Direct students to look carefully at the carts. What do they notice? What is shown and not shown? What do they appear to have been used for? Share the lesson's guiding question with students.

Step Two

Play the [Red River Carts video](#) from APTNDigitalNationsa. Ask students to note anything they heard that interested them or they had questions about. Facilitate a brief discussion about these observations.

Coach students through the "Cart Trails" essay. You may need to help with vocabulary or concepts such as Manifest Destiny. In particular, ask students to watch for descriptions of Red River carts – How did they sound? What were they used for? What happened to the trails they left? Note: there is one instance of light profanity, "hard-ass." As a result, or for other reasons, you may choose to teach only the first half or so, as this is where you will find most of the references to Red River carts.

Review with students, using the following questions: How did the Red River carts support Métis life in the 1800s? What innovations were they known for? How did they impact the world we know today?

Your students may wonder about the cart noise referenced in both La Tray's essay and the introductory video. Here is an explanation, from *Stories of the Land*, the Montana Historical Society's history textbook, along with a bit more context about the role these carts and Métis people played during the fur trade:

As the fur trade pressed westward, the mixed-descent people moved with it. They supplied furs, bison robes, and pemmican (a traditional Northern Plains food made of dried meat, fat, and berries) to trading forts from the lower Missouri River region north to central Canada. Many military forts and trading posts increasingly depended on the Métis.

The Métis delivered hundreds of thousands of pounds of supplies per year using Red River carts. These two-wheeled carts were made entirely of wood lashed together with bison hide and sinew (animal tendon). The axle was usually an unpeeled log. They did not grease the axle because in that dusty environment grease would attract enough grit to grind the axle off in a day's travel. As the ungreased wheels turned against the axle, they made a terrific screeching noise that echoed across the grasslands for miles" (p 84).

Step Three

Share more Red River cart images (visit the websites included in this lesson to find images of red river carts) Make sure there is a cart in every image, although some are more obvious than others. If you print these out, provide small groups of three-four students with sets of images. Ask students to make a guess about what each picture represents: Does it show families moving? Do they think there is a trading operation happening? Is there any indication of buffalo in the images? The goal is to get students to apply what they learned about the carts to these images.

If you have time remaining, show the second video which depicts a Canadian man who has made it his life's craft to re-create Red River carts.

Assessment

Return to the guiding question from the beginning of the lesson and revisit it. Then ask students to answer the question, "How is having a car today like having a Red River cart back in the 1800s?"

Extension Options

Build your own miniature Red River cart! [These kits](#) are sold at Fort Union Trading Post for an affordable price, if you have a classroom budget.

Suggest a brief research project on various roadways influenced by pre-existing trails, such as the Mullan Road that La Tray mentions in his essay.

Invite students to study this [1864 map of Montana territory](#) and locate some of the places they know today.

Appendix A: Red River Cart Images

Image 1



Paul Kane, *"Half Breed Encampment"* Plains Métis; Pembina River region, 1849–56 (depicting 1846). Royal Ontario Museum, gift of Sir Edmund Osler, 912.1.25. This image shows clearly the Aboriginal and EuroAmerican mélange of cultural attributes.

Image 2



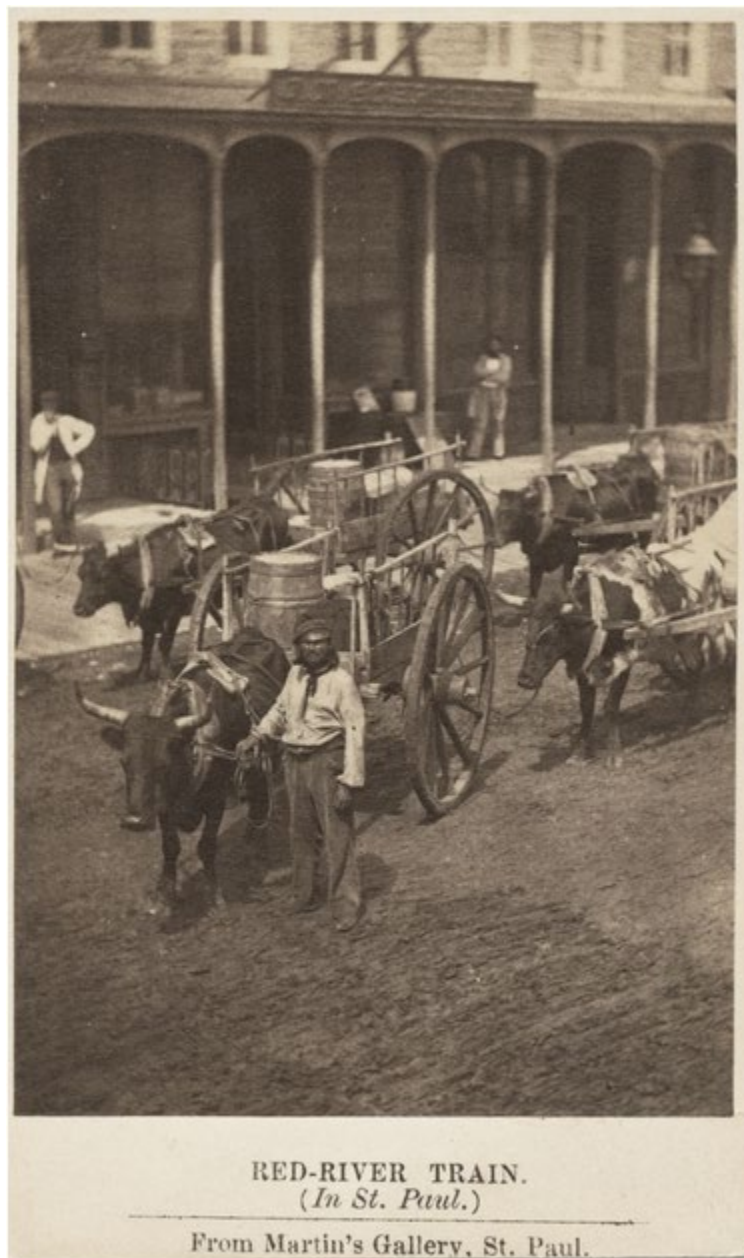
Paul Kane, *Half Breeds Travelling*, 1849–56 (depicting 1846).
Royal Ontario Museum, 912.1.24.

Image 3



Upton, B. F, photographer. Red River carts. [Between 1867 and 1875] Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/2022651022/

Image 4



RED-RIVER TRAIN.
(*In St. Paul.*)

From Martin's Gallery, St. Paul.

Appendix B: Cart Trails by Chris La Tray

Before I drink my coffee, I must answer to the insistent trills of the red-winged blackbirds awakening the season with their noisy return, so I am out to fill my bird feeders. The cold feels like winter when I step out onto my front porch, and I must move carefully because of the thin layer of ice that has formed on the boards overnight. This early spring morning, the pale light just before full dawn is so sharp it almost hurts. I gaze west across a few wide fields and linger. From here, I can see the remains of the paper mill where my late father worked for more than 40 years. I say “remains” because ever since it shut down more than a decade ago, it’s been steadily stripped for scrap. Now all that is left from its previous sprawl are a few crumbling shapes that resemble skeleton-like hulks of stone and rebar.

The birds aren’t the only noisy ones outside. A few miles northeast, a jet prepares to take off from the Missoula airport, while similarly distant on Interstate 90, which runs east/west through the valley, the rumble of cars and trucks is a constant. It is this cacophony—combined with the faded industry of the mill, and the airport with its business travelers and bustle—that reminds me how this place has always been a landscape for commerce. How the Mullan Road, the route just up from my driveway that takes me by the old mill, is the namesake of the original Mullan Road, a rough passage started in 1859 for the military but quickly turned over to vehicles of trade. Today’s road approximates the route carved out before Montana was its own defined U.S. territory. Even before then, the road was largely a cart trail made by the devilishly, *infamously* squeaky wheels of the carts of my Indigenous ancestors, the Red River Métis. Those wooden wheels rolled all over Montana from their origin in the Red River Valley of what is now Canada, hunting and trading, making a sound perhaps best described by the writer Joseph Kinsey Howard: “As if a thousand fingernails were drawn across a thousand panes of glass.”

So many of the roads we take for granted today are built along tracks first made by Red River carts. Starting in the early 1800s, we Métis migrated back and forth from our homes in Canada, Minnesota and North Dakota, chasing buffalo. In those days we were the Pembina Band of Chippewa, named after the high cranberry that we combined with buffalo meat and fat to make pemmican, for a time the most valuable trade item in the region. We traveled in cart trains, numbering as few as a few score to over a thousand.

Think of entire villages on wheels: men, women, children and cattle. Everyone pitching in to transform the hides and meat of the buffalo into not just an economy but an entire culture.

It didn’t last. American commitment to “Manifest Destiny” left the Métis homeless when our land in North Dakota was stolen out from under us. When the United States decided not to recognize “Métis” as a unique Indigenous people as Canada did, we were essentially erased from U.S. history. Those of us stranded in Montana, scrabbling to survive, became known as the “Landless Indians.” We were that for 156 years, until we finally gained federal recognition as the Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa Indians, in December of 2019. Montana has 12 tribes with federal recognition today, spread over seven reservations. In a technical sense, the Little Shell Chippewa, as the 574th tribe recognized by the United States, are the newest of them. Our history entwines with Montana for as long as that name has existed, and before, and we have

relatives married into every reservation in the state. In an important sense, my people traced many paths that would define and bind together this far-flung state.

No one knew the country like us. Many of us were happy to show others the way around, from places like, for example, Fort Hall—a Hudson’s Bay Company outpost—all the way down near Pocatello, Idaho, just off the Oregon Trail. It was from there that a young Métis guide named Gabriel Prudhomme and several of his kinfolk delivered Father Pierre-Jean De Smet and two other priests north to what is now Stevensville, Montana, not far south of where I live, to establish St. Mary’s Mission in 1841. There is a historical site there: a mission [not the original one] and a cemetery, even a replica of a Red River cart, though there is no mention of Prudhomme of the Métis at all.

Then there is John Mullan, who, as a lieutenant in the United States Army, led the building of the road that would bear his name. He and the men he commanded achieved this feat—a road connecting Montana’s Fort Benton, the highest point steamboats could reach on the Missouri River, with Fort Walla Walla in Washington—in an unimaginable two years, through some fiendishly difficult terrain ... including my present-day neighborhood.

John Mullan was no stranger to the region and its challenges. Isaac Stevens, . . . appointed by President Franklin Pierce in 1853 to be the governor of the new Washington Territory [which included today’s Montana], headed west shortly thereafter, with Mullan under his command. Along the way, Stevens was tasked to survey a railroad route to the Pacific Coast. He also negotiated with Indian tribes between here and there. Most infamously, in my neighborhood, Stevens orchestrated the Hellgate Treaty of 1855 with the Bitterroot Salish, Upper Pend d’Oreille, and Lower Kootenai tribes. This treaty, which achieved the United States’ theft of the Bitterroot Valley from the Salish while reneging on every single one of its promises to the Indians, was argued over and signed at a location along the Clark Fork River, west of Missoula, called Council Grove, now a state park. If not for fences between me and there, I could walk overland and arrive inside of an hour. Instead, I drive there. Almost every day. Using Mullan Road.

Mullan didn’t spend a lot of time with Stevens. Instead, he explored the area to find a route for the railroad. He traveled vast swathes of territory, logging thousands of rugged miles. One of his most important guides in this task was a Métis man named Gabriel Prudhomme—the same guide who had delivered the Catholics to the Bitterroot a dozen years earlier.

I grew up in the area and never heard of Gabriel Prudhomme. Or of Jocko Finley, for that matter, another Métis guide—this time in the employ of the legendary British Canadian adventurer David Thompson—whose name is attached to the landscape up and down the Flathead Reservation to my north. I never knew, either, that my hometown, Frenchtown, just down the road from where I live now, was a Red River Métis resettlement place beginning in the late 1850s, about the time Mullan was building his road through there. Or that Plains, Montana, where my grandparents are buried, is another. I grew up never hearing the word “Métis.” Not until I started looking and listening in the wake of my father’s death in 2014. It was then that I decided I needed to know more about who we are, where we came from, because he was notably close-lipped about it. Like my grandfather—and so many other Métis of his generations—my dad denied any Native heritage, or any relation to anyone else in the state

sharing our name. Since I started researching our story, I find us everywhere, in every part of the state.

I am often given pause in this connection I discovered with this place where I grew up. Not just how the desk and chair and computer in my room facing the western horizon are the engine of my personal economy, the same way noisy carts and wanderlust were to my ancestors. Or how my own footloose nature drives me to duck my head and explore those faint paths veering away from the more beaten one, literally and figuratively. Like my ancestors, I often struggle to find means to support a livelihood in this beautiful landscape. And like them, I am still here.

Chris La Tray is a Métis storyteller and an enrolled member of the Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa Indians. His third book, *Becoming Little Shell*, will be published by Milkweed Editions in 2023. He is the author of “An Irritable Métis” on Substack and live near Missoula.