

OF OX CARTS AND HITCHHIKERS: INTREPID PIONEERS AND SACRIFICE

It is officially vacation season. Despite high gas prices, families who have delayed **road trips** for the past two summers are out and about. My favorite games to play in our Olds **Vista Cruiser** included the “Alphabet” game and “Twenty Questions”. The former kept my eyes peeled for letters A-Z on road signs, seeing who could **complete the alphabet** first in proper sequence. It passed the time magnificently— but spotting that “**X**” could be a real game changer, as a solid lead vanished while the siblings caught up. Even though the station wagon was crowded and warm, we brimmed with anticipation of the **Howard Johnson’s** pool when we pulled off the road for the night. Our pioneers in Minnesota had no such luxuries on their journey. A three-mile stretch of Coon Rapids Boulevard follows the exact route of the **Pembina Ox Cart Trail**. Ox Carts were large two-wheelers made entirely of non-metallic materials and were the lifeblood of the Red River Valley fur trade.

On May 17, a couple from Winnipeg embarked upon a most unusual road trip and experienced many of the same challenges of the pioneers who helped found the city of Saint Paul about 170 years ago. **Terry and Patty Doerksen** retraced the route of the fur traders. Terry, Patty, and their ox Zeke left from Upper Fort Garry in downtown Winnipeg where the trail started and arrived in Saint Paul on July 17. It was not all fun and games! They ran into some **unforeseen** problems, one of which only shows how much we have in common with animals! If you are a walker (or runner) and discover a problem with your **shoes**, you know how difficult that can make your exercise routine. Terry shared the challenge in finding proper shoes for Zeke, due to the pavement wearing away at his hooves. Farriers aren’t exactly as ubiquitous as a Starbucks or Holiday Gas station! Once, Zeke just stopped in his tracks, **refusing** to budge. Done for the day!

A **farrier** (alt. *ferrier*) deals in horseshoes—one presumes oxen as well! The word derives from *ferrier*, which in turn evolved from the Latin *ferrarius* (blacksmith) which derives from the Latin *ferrum*, the word for “iron”. The chemical element **iron** is abbreviated *Fe* for the same reason. Whew! Reggie McCloud at the Minneapolis Riverfront Partnership noted that: “Early on, fur traders coming from the U.S.-Canada borderlands followed the Red and Minnesota rivers. As conflicts between Ojibwe and Dakota people heated up, the Métis shifted their route to follow the **east bank** of the Mississippi from what is now Brainerd.” The furs traded included the 3 “M’s”—not the 3M of Scotch® tape and Post-it® note fame, but the three “m’s”— **muskrats, mink, and marten**. Routes were also chosen based on locations where crossing streams and rivers was easier. I saw pieces of the historic trail when visiting Crow Wing State Park near Brainerd.

When French Canadian fur traders married native women, they became known as **Métis**. More than two centuries ago, the long-debated issue of the demarcation line between U.S. and British North America was settled by the **Convention of 1818**. The **49th parallel** of latitude served as the **border** west of Minnesota. The town of **Pembina**, in present-day North Dakota (pop. 512 in 2020) is situated then less than a mile from the new border. Suddenly, those living in Pembina became Americans! As St. Paul grew, the fur traders had good reason to venture south to sell their wares. In July 1843, Canadian-born scion of the fur trade **Norman Kittson**— yes, he who once owned the **mansion** on which our Cathedral sits— proposed to build an American post at Pembina. Generally peaceful, there were occasional **skirmishes** and at least one serious incident in which the métis mistakenly attacked some Dakota hunters, whom they mistook for marauders. They apologized and offered restitution, but tensions remained.

Would you believe that by the late 1840’s, Pembina could **boast** that only Saint Paul counted more residents than its **1,100**? According to Jeff Blanchard, supervisor of the Pembina State Museum, Métis ingenuity created carts able to haul up to 1,000 pounds, pulled by oxen. Wheel diameter was

increased by several feet and were **spoked** rather than solid. The wheels were **dished**, or curved inward, to add stability and better handling. By 1830, the carts had replaced canoes as the primary means of shipping goods between Winnipeg and St. Paul. The route was carefully selected so that at day's end, a ready supply of wood for repairs and cooking fires, and water for the animals was on hand. Terry's research unearthed tales of monks from St. John's hitching rides on the ox carts journeying to St. Paul.

I can relate! As a **freshman** in high school in Mendota Heights, if our soccer games went late and ended after the last bus, occasionally we would **hitchhike** the **eight miles** home. **Can you imagine** a parent today telling a 14-year-old to do that? It was a different world. When they saw my school uniform, I waited but a minute or two—typically I was dropped off no more than a block away! When Terry and Patty arrived at the Cathedral parking lot at 6:00 a.m. for their **final mile** to the river, Terry invited me to hop on for a ride (see sidebar). Twist my arm! The couple attended our 10:00 a.m. Mass, thanking God for safe passage throughout their 420-mile journey. After all, French-Canadian families helped build the **log chapel** of Saint Paul in 1841! The connections run deep. I presented the couple a book detailing its construction. Zeke was loaded up and driven back to Winnipeg, while the Terry and Patty embarked upon a celebratory river boat cruise to St. Louis! Congratulations— you've earned it!

- Pope Francis met with **Métis and Inuit** elders in Maskwacis, Alberta on his recent penitential pilgrimage to Canada. It was occasioned by a sincere attempt to meet with and apologize to indigenous Canadians for **abuses** committed at Church-run residential schools. The Canadian government contracted with churches to operate the schools—the Catholic Church operated 66 of the 139 schools. Presbyterians, Anglicans and the United Church of Canada operated the remainder.
- If there is **sufficient interest** and support, the Cathedral music department desires to re-launch a **Children's Choir** this fall. For it to be successful, we need **commitment** and a common vision for the choir. Ideally, the choir would meet on Wednesday afternoons. After an initial period of rehearsal, it is hoped that the choir could sing at some **Sunday** and special occasion Masses. More information will be forthcoming soon.
- Gone in **60 seconds!** As a matter of protocol, please **do not** leave any valuables in your cars, when attending Mass. We have eyes on the lots, but it is amazing how quickly thieves can break into cars or even steal them! Do not become a target!
- Be sure to check out the Shrines of the Nations after Mass. Say a prayer, light a candle. New **protective glass** on the outside of the windows has replaced the old and extremely cloudy glass. This allows much more natural light to enter from the outside, making the **Bancel LaFarge** windows even more brilliant!

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,

Rector

