

# *The Red River Ox-Cart — Transporting Transportation*

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MANITOBA LAND



**ASSOCIATION  
OF MANITOBA  
LAND SURVEYORS**

# THE RED RIVER OX-CART—TRANSPORTING TRANSPORTATION

by E.C. Tacium

This is the story of an ox-cart meant to elicit publicity for the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Institute of Surveying held in Winnipeg, Manitoba in 1976. The Institute, since renamed as the Canadian Institute of Geomatics, is a non-profit organization that represents the interests of all groups in the geomatics community, including individuals, corporations, educational institutions, government agencies or associations. Membership is voluntary and the membership at that time was structured in mostly provincial or regional chapters. During the 1970's, the Institute was particularly vibrant.

It was then customary to alternate annual meetings of the Institute between eastern and western locations. In 1975, the meeting was held in Fredericton, New Brunswick, and the following year it was slated for Winnipeg. Part of the custom was that the chapter hosting the following meeting be responsible for presenting a skit or some sort of promotion stunt.

The Winnipeg organizational committee brain-stormed various ideas for the proposed promotional program, ever mindful of the limited budget. After a number of suggestions, someone came up with the idea that an ox-cart would make a suitable theme for the Fredericton meeting. The novel concept was readily accepted in spite of obvious problems to be faced in actually acquiring an ox-cart and transporting it to Fredericton.

The Red River ox-cart revives reminiscences to Manitobans of convoys of these vehicles creaking along with their Metis drivers across open prairies carrying their trade goods or on their annual buffalo hunts. They served as a means of transportation as well as mobile homes. Ox-carts were well suited to primitive prairie terrain, constructed without a single nail or a piece of metal. Wooden pegs and all purpose buffalo hides were used to hold the vehicle together. The wheels, standing six feet high, were made of burr oak trimmed with wet rawhide, which when dried, stuck tightly to the rims making them tough and durable. Because the prairie dust would soon clog up the wheels if lubricated, no grease was applied to the axles, resulting in an incredible noise that could be heard for miles.

Acquisition of the ox-cart was made possible by means of a loan from a local museum. For crating the ox-cart, a loan of lumber was obtained from a friendly contractor. Since the lumber was on loan, it could not to be cut up and consequently, it was necessary to make the crate quite large. This proved to be somewhat of a blessing in that there was no need for the total dismantling of the ox-cart for crating. A minor problem was faced when it was discovered that the shafts were slightly too long to fit the crate, but this was overcome by small trimming and with an intention of somehow repairing the damage later. Since the crating of the ox-cart left much empty space, it was suggested that this could be stuffed with sheaves of wheat, which could be obtained from a farmer friend. Thus, the ox-cart was prepared for shipment.

As soon as the concept of the ox-cart presentation was proposed, the problem of transporting it to Fredericton came up. Someone suggested that this could easily be dealt with by contacting Mr. James Richardson, a Manitoba Member of Parliament and the Minister of Defense, for permission to fly the ox-cart on one of the Department's Hercules transport planes. Unfortunately, this vision of Manitoba's first ever flying ox-cart proved to be wishful thinking. Since the ox-cart couldn't very well wheel its way to New Brunswick, an alternate means of transportation was needed and the railway was the viable alternative. Without going into detail,

arrangements were soon made with the railway to transport the ox-cart at no cost to the Winnipeg chapter. To transport the crated ox-cart to the railway loading yard, a low bed vehicle was borrowed for the occasion. Once the railway employees saw the size of the crate, they decided that for convenience's sake it needed an entire boxcar to itself.

There being no way to ascertain the time frame of delivery, the ox-cart was shipped well in advance of the event, some three weeks ahead of actual need. As it turned out, the railway in this instance proved all too efficient, delivering the ox-cart to Fredericton within a week. With the boxcar sitting at the Fredericton railyard siding addressed to an unknown individual, the railway employees were at a loss as to what to do with it. Eventually, a message came across company wires inquiring as to the identity of the shipper and what to do with the freight. Upon contact with the shipper, and being assured that the matter would be attended to within a week, the people at Fredericton agreed to allow the mystery freight to stay till the shipper arrived.

Upon arrival in Fredericton, the shipper found railway employees awed over the purpose of the project; they were cooperative and agreed to letting the boxcar remain for a further week to reload the ox-cart and return it to Winnipeg. Unfortunately, through lack of communication or oversight, no provisions had been made with the Fredericton chapter to provide suitable means of transportation to deliver the ox-cart to the University where the event was being held. Eventually a work-worn pick-up truck of uncertain vintage appeared with a single individual having no clue as to what he was supposed to be picking up. This meant dismantling the crate and delivering the ox-cart piece by piece. Somehow the ox-cart finally made its debut at the Annual Meeting amid wild-eyed stares and gaping mouths of the attendees, no doubt wondering what was this or more likely how did it get here.

At the end of the meeting, the presentation was dismantled and the ox-cart taken back and replaced in the crate. As the dismantling process was being carried out, the wife of the Dean of Engineering asked if she could have the sheaves of oats for her horse. Her request was readily granted and it was hoped that the horse appreciated its treat of western grain. Yes, no one on the committee had noticed that the so-called wheat was actually oats. In a matter of days the boxcar arrived safely back in Winnipeg, the low bed truck returned the ox-cart to the Museum and the crate to its owner without further incident. Thus, ended one promotional display not likely to be repeated.