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Charles E. Hanson, Jr. Editor

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CONTENTS

COVER: "Return of the Hunters," engraving from *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, October 1860, page 605.
Red River and Other Carts, by Charles Hanson, Jr. 1
News From Council Bluffs-1845, Source Material from Harold Schindler . . 13
Book Reviews 14

RED RIVER AND OTHER CARTS

by Charles Hanson, Jr.

The Red River cart was certainly one of the most romantic vehicles used in the land transportation of the fur trade.

Carts have been used since ancient times for economical transportation, particularly in difficult terrain. They are cheap to build, easy to handle and require a minimum of animal power. In his classic, *The Oregon Trail*, Francis Parkman mentioned several occasions when their little French cart from Missouri negotiated muddy fords where the wagon of their English companions bogged down. Lewis Morgan had this to say about the Red River cart in 1861: "It is a very simple, cheap and sensible wagon for the prairie. It can be bought new for about \$10, is easily repaired, and does credit to their ingenuity."¹

Records of carts used at various trading posts in the United States are generally lacking in detail but they usually indicate a well-made, iron-bound vehicle. The inventory of the U.S. Factory of the Office of Indian Trade at Natchitoches, Louisiana in 1818 includes one "Ox cart, \$150" and a yoke of oxen worth \$58.19.² In the *Missouri Republican* for February 9, 1830, Lewis Newell of St. Louis was advertising "Boat pole sockets & hooks, hunting axes, wagon and cart boxes." In the same paper for September 9, 1837, J & E Walsh & Co. of St. Louis had "7 one horse carts" for sale.

The inventory at Fort Clark on the Missouri in 1839 included, "2 Iron bd. carts @ \$25" The Fort Union inventory in 1850 listed "5 Single Carts Iron Tire @ 20.00, 3 Ox Carts Iron Tire @ 25.00" and 2 Single Cart Bodies @ 3.00. In the same year Fort Benton had "1 Ox Waggon \$25" and "1 Cart \$20."³

The carts painted by Alfred Jacob Miller on his 1837 journey with Sublette's caravan must have been fairly sophisticated. A number of them are pulled by two horses and therefore have a tongue and single-trees to which the ordinary harness traces are attached.⁴

The cart taken from Missouri to the mountains by Francis Parkman's party in 1846 was "of the kind that one may see by scores around the market-place of Quebec, and had a white covering to protect the articles within." It is assumed that it was of the iron-bound type being sold commercially at the time.

However, these references to sophisticated carts, with iron tires and hub interiors, being made in St. Louis and shipped or driven to frontier posts, do not by any means limit the all-wood "French" cart to the Canadian plains. Mention is often made of the extemporized wooden carts used by Henry's men at Pembina in 1801-02, some of them with three-foot solid wheels, some with four-foot straight wheels with four spokes.⁵ There is little reason to believe that these carts represented any new invention even if Henry thought so. Instead, they appear to have been makeshift substitutes assembled by men in a hurry without adequate tools.

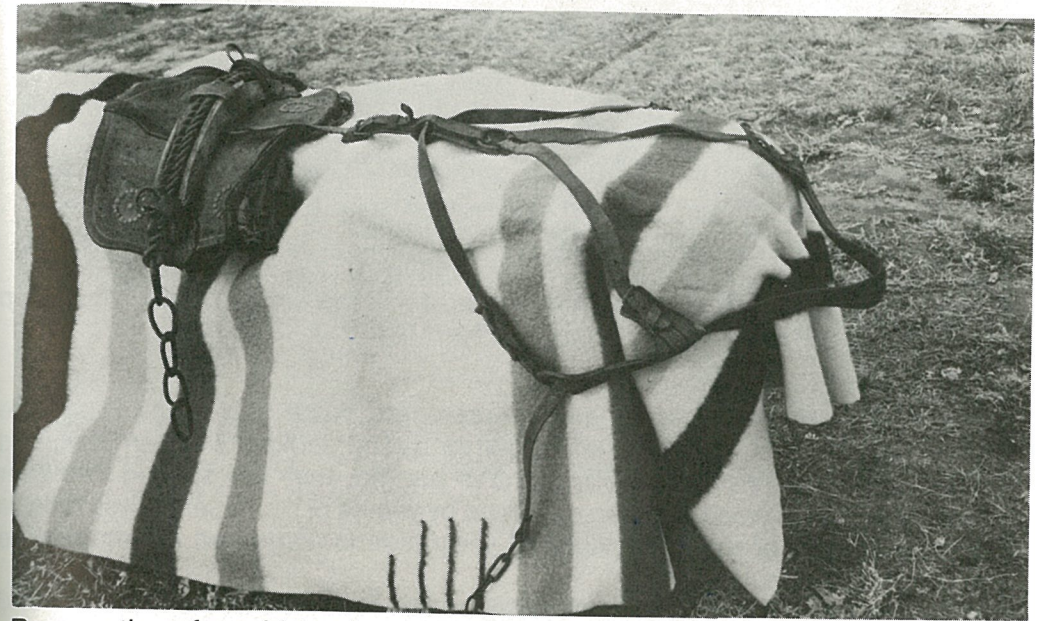


Engraving of cart with ox in harness at a cart brigade encampment, with group of "Bois Brules" (metis) boys.—Harper's New Monthly Magazine, January 1859, page 172.

In 1745 Peter Kalm noted that all the common people of Quebec used "open two-wheeled carts."⁶ A watercolor, "The Market Place, Upper Town, Quebec," made in 1830 by Robert Sproule, shows two carts in the foreground. One of them has a solid, framed box and smaller wheels. The other has side stakes and appears to be regular "Red River" style.⁷ John Reynolds, who was born in 1789 and removed in childhood to Kaskaskia, wrote in later life that the French cart there was "rather a curiosity, it was constructed without an atom of iron. When the Americans first came to Illinois (to the 'American bottom') they called these carts 'bare-footed carts,' because they had no iron on the wheels." The historian Billon went on to say that these carts or "Charettes" were made of "two pieces of scantling some ten or twelve feet long, framed together by two or more cross-pieces, upon one end of which the body, of wicker work was placed, and the front ends rounded to serve as shafts, and the whole set on the axle-tree of the wheels."⁸ In his *Views of Louisiana* published in 1814, Henry Brackenridge wrote that the only vehicle in Ste. Genevieve, Missouri was the wooden French cart without tires. It was made light and strong, long and nar-

row. It had strong, heavy shafts, to which a horse was attached.⁹ These descriptions of carts in Missouri and Illinois could just as well have referred to the Red River cart of Manitoba and demonstrate that the all-wood cart was typical of French country settlements from the Mississippi valley to southern Canada.

In November 1833 Francis Larpenteur was using a Red River cart, obtained from some half-breeds, at Fort William near Fort Union on the Missouri.¹⁰ It is probable that Sublette and Campbell built Red River carts there because Robert Campbell noted in his journal on December 16, 1843 that a crew was getting out cart timber. He intended to make up 8 or 10 carts "as they are very useful here." On December 31 Campbell noted that 5 carts with harnesses were completed and material was on hand for 6 more.¹¹



Rear portion of an old cart harness collected in Ontario; more sophisticated than the Red River rawhide harness but performs the same functions. In use this would connect with a padded collar fastened to the front ends of the shaft.—MFT.

In the 1840's the Chouteau company was making extensive use of carts between Fort Pierre and Fort Laramie but so far no descriptions of those carts has been found. In the same period traders Lancaster Lupton and David Adams had carts at Fort Platte and no detailed information is available for them either. At that time the Red River cart was already common in Minnesota. In 1866 John S. Collins noted that a caravan of half-breeds in Red River carts stopped once a year at Fort Berthold with robes and pemmican.¹² Red River carts must have been popular in the Dakotas because Captain Poole, Indian Agent at Whetstone Agency above Fort Randall, asked permission in 1870 to issue to the Indians "30 small French carts and 28 sets of Cart Harness" which he "received from the late agent." General Harney said they were intended for use with Indian ponies.¹³

Literature of the time is replete with references to Red River carts. U.S. Geologist David Dale Owens made a survey of Pembina Mountain in 1848 and had his first experience with a Red River cart:

By the assistance of Mr. James M'Dermott, I succeeded in engaging a guide and a conveyance. This latter consisted of an equipage somewhat novel to



Close-up of the "saddle" on the Ontario harness. The flat chain lays in a deep groove in the curved wooden cross-piece.—MFT.

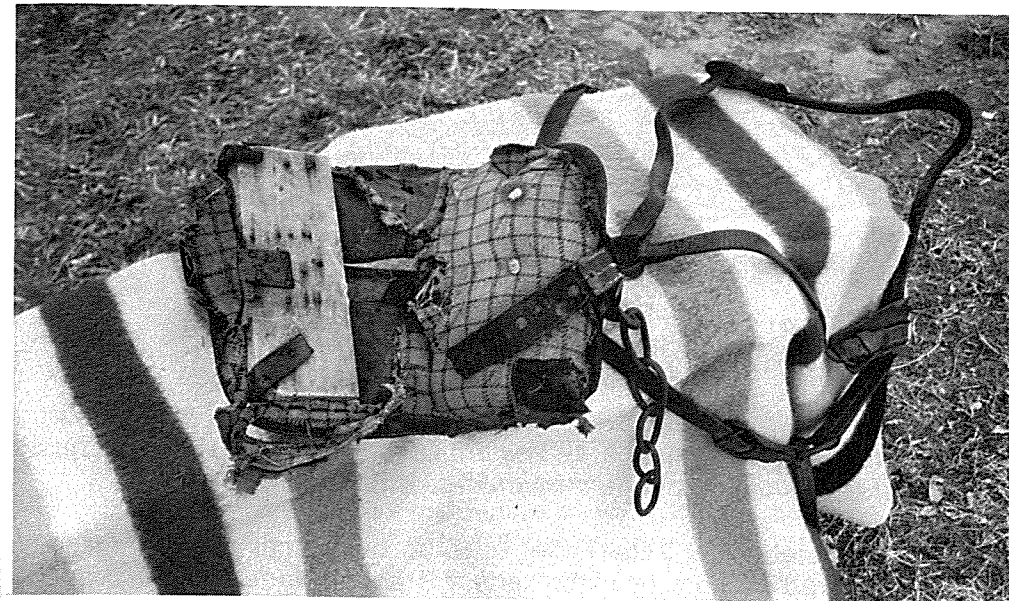
me, a real Canadian-French, single-horse cart, made entirely of wood. The segments of the wheels are held together by the spokes, wooden pins, and wedges. When they exhibit any signs of parting, they are spliced on either side by pieces of wood, and wound round by withes of raw hide; or they receive a complete tire of the latter material. Raw hide is also used to harness the horse to the cart.¹⁴

In 1861 at Pembina, Lewis Henry Morgan saw many of them in use. He said the wheels were strong and larger than common wagon wheels. They had heavy wooden felloes "put together in a circle with pins inserted in the ends of each." Heavy "fills," three or four inches square, were inserted on the axle and upon them a platform of boards about four by six feet was placed. A rack of round sticks about four feet high held the load and the cart accommodated as much as a horse or ox could draw.¹⁵

While the standard cart remained in use by the metis until late in the 19th century, the Hudson's Bay Company had improved carts in its service by the 1860's. HBC clerk Walter Traill described the carts used by the Fall Brigade out of Fort Garry in 1866 as being built of native oak with 7½-foot wheels having hubs ten inches across lined with iron bushings. The oak felloes were three inches wide with the segments joined together with oak pins. The open-ended body was six feet by three feet with a floor of inch boards. The shafts, or "trams," were three inches thick, 9½ feet long and tapered from six to four inches. The collars, "of rawhide, usually buffalo" were stuffed with hay and attached to the shafts with iron pins through holes in the wood. These pins and the wheel bushings were the only metal used.¹⁶

Peter Erasmus, an "old-time" metis buffalo hunter, said that one Alexander Kennedy had an iron-bound cart, "the first to make an appearance in the trade" in 1876. He bought it because it would carry heavier loads and it turned out to be a very serviceable cart.¹⁷

Another extremely unusual variation in cart construction was painted ca, 1863 by William G.R. Hind, artist and brother of a noted explorer, Henry Youle Hind. While on a trip across western Canada to the gold fields of British Columbia he made a watercolor of a cart being ferried across Battle River, Saskatchewan. The wheels are massive, with 7 or 8 spokes and felloes that appear to be at least 6 inches wide and are made 4 to a wheel, joined at the ends by a half-lap



Showing the underside of the "saddle" on the Ontario harness. Torn padding permits view of flat wooden sidebars.—MFT

joint. A second painting in oil, dated 1862, depicts an "Indian or Metis at work on Red River Cart." The man is working at a bench with a carpenter's jack plane. Two felloes about 6 inches square are laying nearby and beside the worker is a completed wheel with 4 felloes joined by lap joints and 10 spokes. If these paintings are accurate, they represent a very heavy type of cart, possibly developed for the prospector traffic. No other mention of wheels constructed like this has been noted.¹⁸

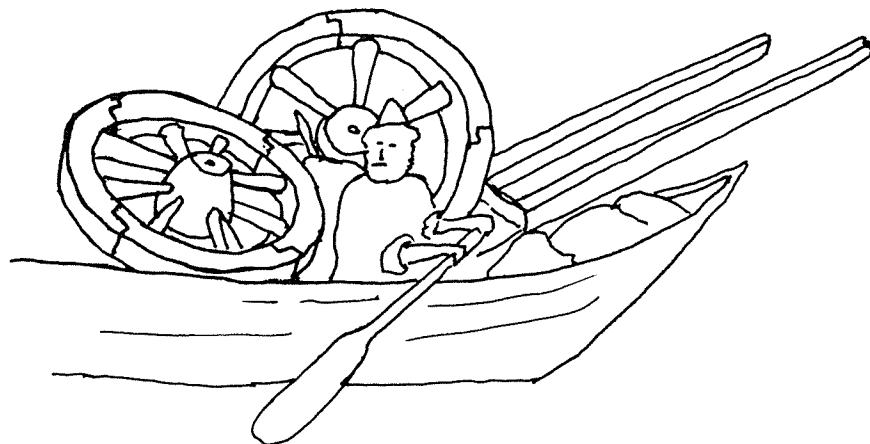
Much could be said about the cart in use. Both horses and oxen were used to draw carts, the horse was faster but the ox could pull heavier loads. The driver normally sat in the front end with his feet hanging over. However, teams often tied animals to the cart in front and one driver guided several carts. Then stakes might be placed in the ends to handle a larger load. On trips the carts were sometimes fitted with bows like a "covered wagon" and had canvas or skin covers.

The book, *The Red River Trails*, published in 1979 by the Minnesota Historical Society has many photographs of carts on the trail from Fort Garry to St. Paul, and they provide a good idea of the harness arrangements. The book also reproduces a 19th century sketch of the wheels tied end to end in a pole frame and then covered with skin or canvas to make a raft for ferrying across rivers.

Most modern writers do a poor job of explaining how a Red River cart was constructed or how it performed in service. The wheels squeaked constantly but the use of grease was avoided because there was no way to keep out dust or mud which could bind the wheels if the hubs were oily. Various types of wood

were listed for carts in old accounts. Oak is often mentioned for all parts. Other woods cited include elm for hubs, maple for axles, white ash and birch for felloes.

The tools needed to make a cart included an axe, saw, auger bits, draw-knife and a special tapered borer for the hubs.



Sketch of cart wheels after the watercolor, "Crossing Battle River, North Western Prairies, Saskatchewan District," by William G.R. Hind ca. 1862. Note heavy construction of wheels and variant method of joining felloes.

The famous notebook of Peter Fidler, HBC surveyor until his death in 1822, contains measured dimensions of the carts at Brandon House. This is probably the earliest accurate record of a fur trade cart. It compares very closely with the cart illustrated in the plans accompanying this article, the only real variation is the somewhat smaller and thicker wheel:

- Box—5'10" long
- 2'10" wide
- 2'2" deep
- Wheel—4'8"
- Shafts—11'6" long
- Axle—5'10"
- Nave (hub)—1'3" long
- 9" to 10½" diameter
- Axle ends—3½" inner end
- 3" outer end
- Felloes—3½" broad and 3" thick

Length of spoke same length as the felloes, 6 felloes in one wheel, 12 spokes.¹⁹

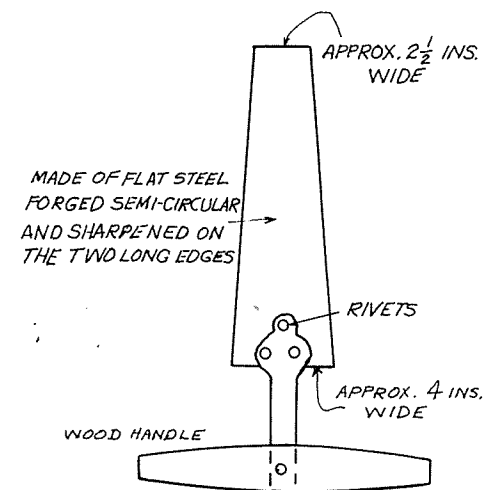
One of the few surviving Red River carts is in the collections of the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. It was collected in 1882 and is illustrated in the accompanying photograph. Dr. James Hanson recently made careful measurements of every part of this cart and we are deeply indebted to him for the information needed to make the four detailed drawings given here. These plans are a significant contribution to the published information on the material aspects of the fur trade.

It should be borne in mind that all measurements are only approximate. The cart was built with rough carpentry, much of the lumber is not uniform and most edges are rounded. The exact size of some pieces, like the pins holding the felloes together, could not be determined at all. Anyone who attempts to build

a cart must lay out the various pieces carefully before final assembly to insure perfect fits.

NOTES

1. Lewis Henry Morgan, *The Indian Journals 1859-62*. Ann Arbor, MI, 1959. 123.
2. RG 75, Office of Indian Trade, Misc. Accounts, Box 2, Inventory-U.S. Factory at Natchitoches, Dec. 1818. National Archives, Washington, D.C.
3. *Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana; Volume Ten*. Helena, 1940. 205, 222.
4. Marvin Ross, ed. *The West of Alfred Jacob Miller (1837)*. Norman, OK, 1968. Plate 181.
5. Elliott Coues, ed., *The Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry and of David Thompson 1799-1814*. Minneapolis, 1965. 191, 205.
6. Adolph Benson, ed., *Peter Kalm's Travels in North America*. New York, 1966. II, 476.
7. Barry Lord, *The History of Painting in Canada*. Toronto, 1974. 48.
8. Louis Houck, *A History of Missouri*. Chicago, 1908. II, 235-6; quoting Reynolds' *Pioneer History of Illinois* p. 50 and Billon's *Annals of St. Louis*, I pg. 85.
9. Quoted in: J. Thomas Scharf, *History of St. Louis City and County*. Philadelphia 1883. I, 281.
10. Milo Quaife, ed., *Forty Years a Fur Trader on the Upper Missouri*. Chicago. 1933. 43.
11. George Brooks, ed. *Robert Campbell's Journal*. St. Louis, 1964. 29, 34.
12. John S. Collins, *Across the Plains in '64*. Omaha, 1904. 51.
13. Microcopy 234, Roll 895-Upper Platte Agency 1870. 1/12/70. National Archives, Washington D.C.
14. David Dale Owen, *Report of a Geological Survey of Wisconsin, Iowa and Minnesota*. Philadelphia, 1852. 178.
15. Lewis Henry Morgan. 123.
16. Mae Atwood, ed., *In Rupert's Land, Memoirs of Walter Traill*. Toronto 1970. 51.
17. Peter Erasmus, *Buffalo Days and Nights*. Calgary 1976. 262-3.
18. See: J. Russell Harper, *Everyman's Canada*. Ottawa, 1962. pp. 72-3 and Barry Lord, *The History of Painting in Canada*. Toronto 1974. pp. 97-8.
19. Peter Fidler—Original Notebook, MGI D3-Manitoba Provincial Archives, Winnipeg.



Very old hand-made tool for boring out auger holes in cart hubs.—Private collection.

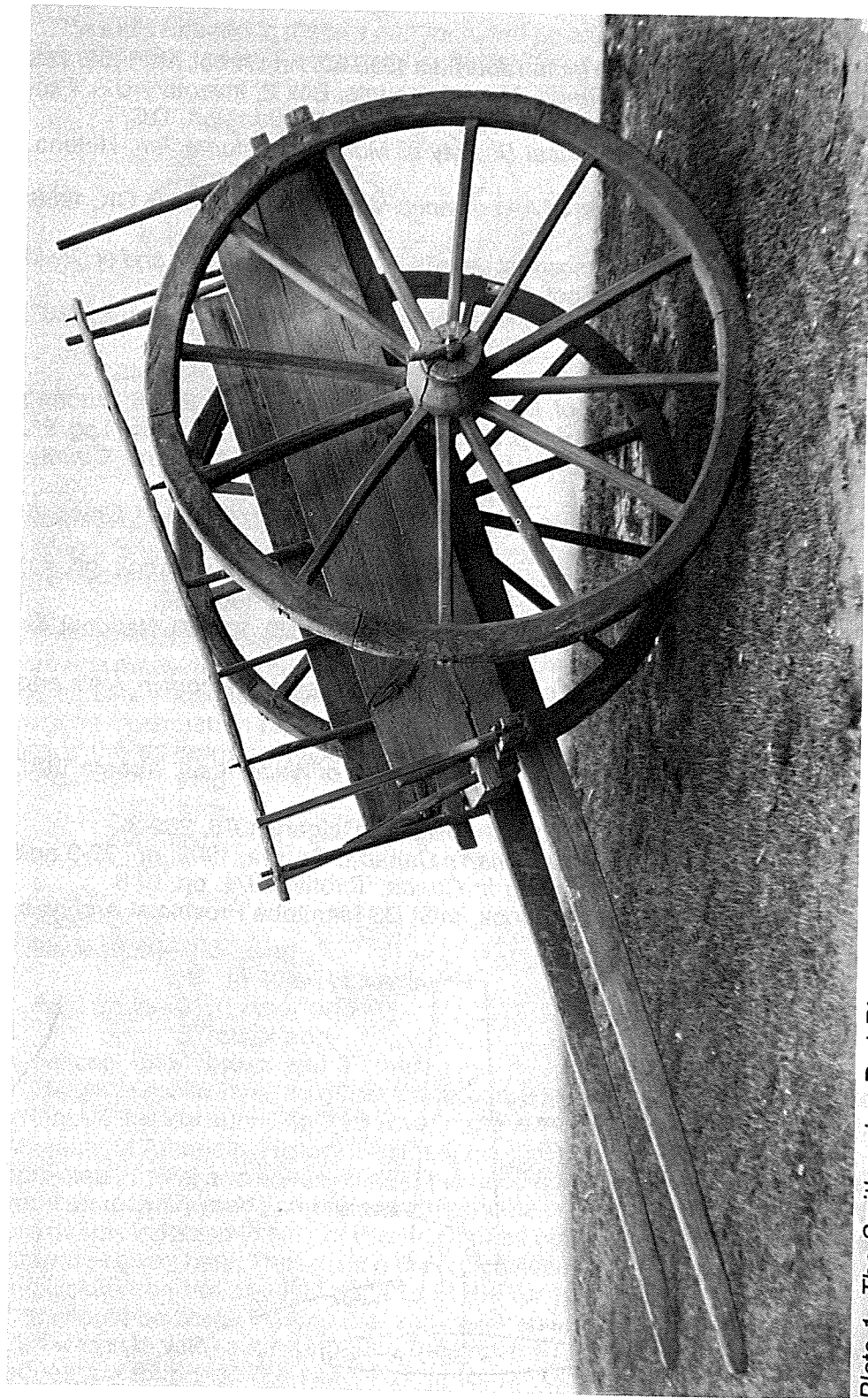
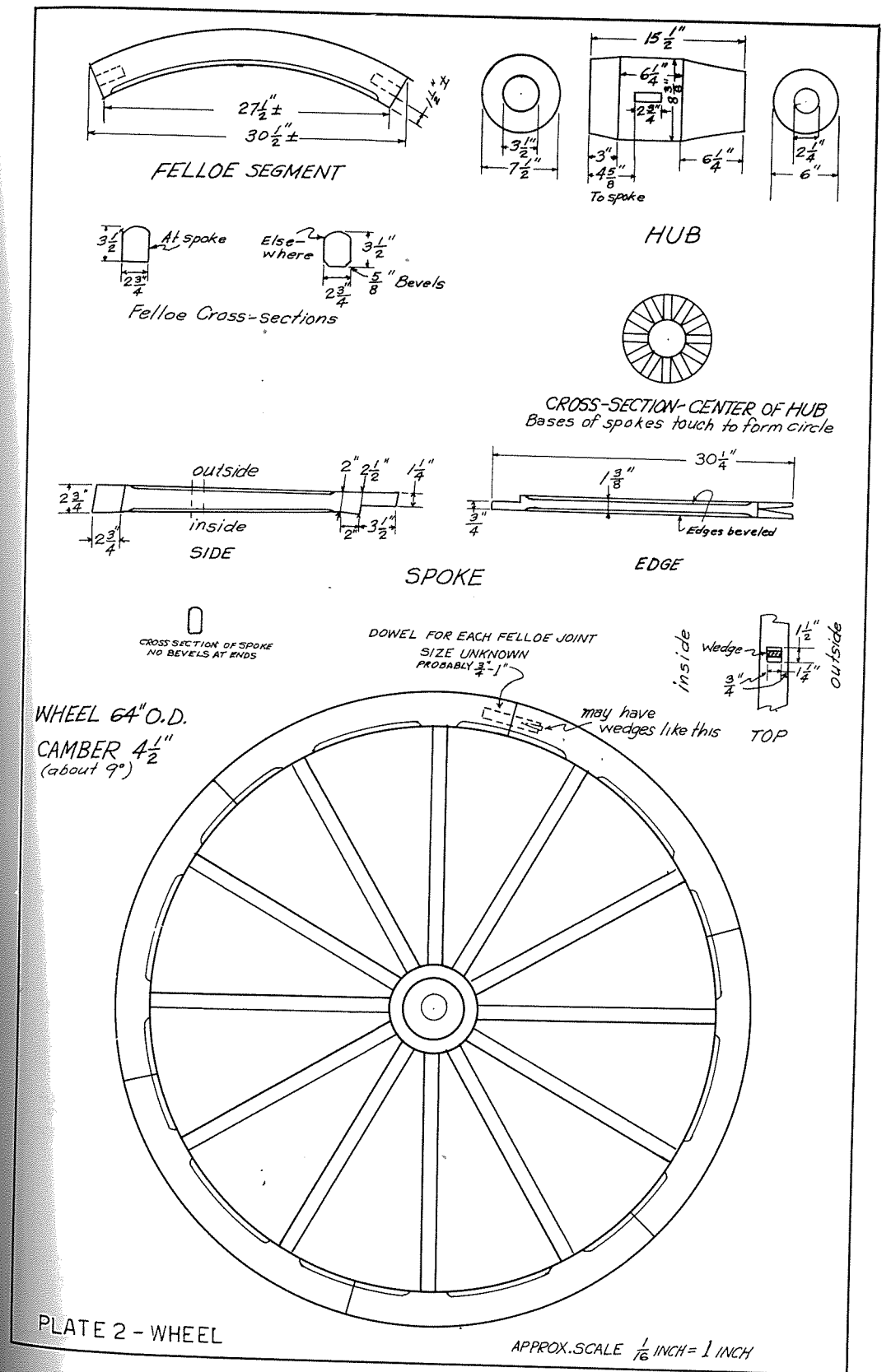


Plate 1—The Smithsonian Red River cart collected in 1882—the cart detailed in the four following sheets of drawings.—Smithsonian Institution photo.



NEWS FROM COUNCIL BLUFFS—1845

EDITOR'S NOTE—Our good friend, member and indefatigable researcher, Harold Schindler of Salt Lake City, has sent us this letter from the MISSOURI REPORTER, St. Louis, Missouri, Friday, July 4, 1845. We are indebted also to member Jack B. Tykal, author of an article in our last issue, for making a search in St. Louis directories. He wrote: "I found no references in any of the Missouri Historical Society indices to Beatty's Powder, nor did I find any reference to a James D. Jeffries. In the 1840-41 City Directory I did find a James Jeffrey listed as a Merchant, with a business address of 52 N. 1st, and a residence address of 46 S. 5th. In the 1845 Directory there is listed a James Jeffrey, Merchant with but one address shown—at 12 S. 6th. The only reference I found in the Directories to a Beatty was to a Thomas Beatty, apparently the owner of the Globe Tavern."

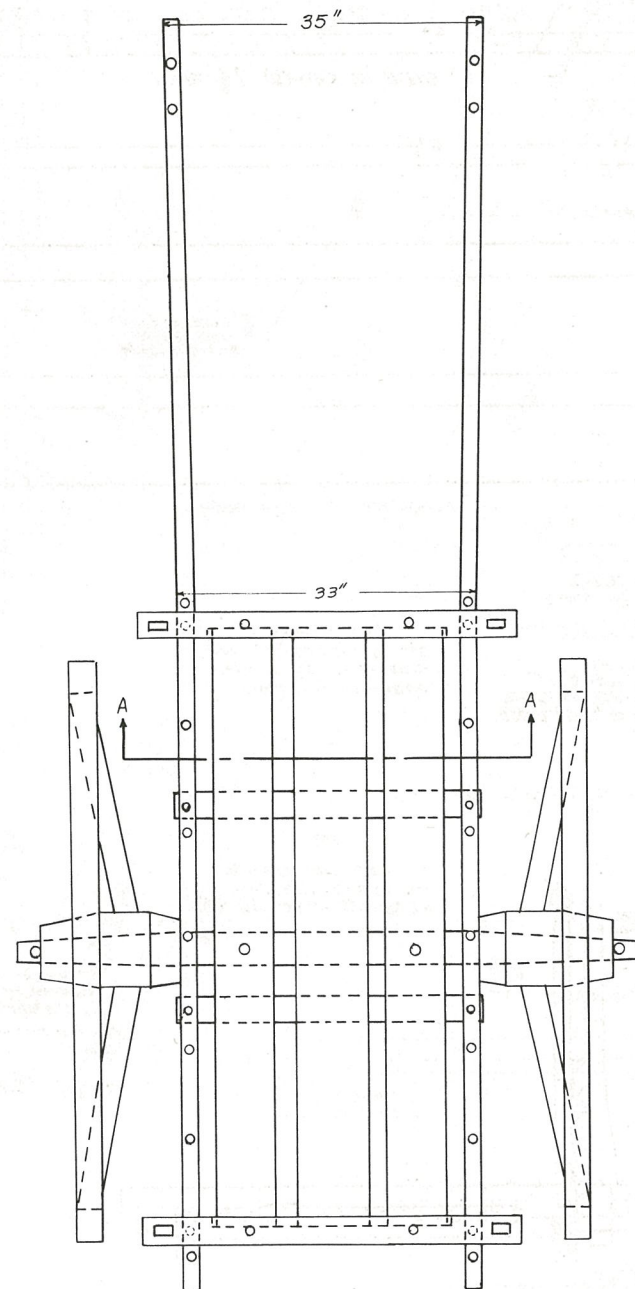
COUNCIL BLUFFS, ON THE MISSOURI
June 9, 1845.

To the Editor of the Reporter,

Dear Sir—Major T.H. Harvey, Superintendent of Indian Affairs, arrived here a few days ago, on his way to visit the Pawnee Indians, about 120 miles west of this, on the Platte river. In about ten days, he will return to this place, and open a negotiation with the Chippewa, Ottawa, and Pottawatamie Indians, for the purchase of their lands northeast of the Missouri river. These Indians own five millions of acres, bounded on the east by the lands recently ceded to the United States by the Sacs and Foxes, in the Territory of Iowa; on the north by lands of the Sioux Indians, and the Little Sioux river; on the West by the Missouri river, and on the South by the State of Missouri. They hold these lands under a treaty made at Chicago, in September, 1833. It was then supposed that this country would afford the Indians a permanent home, but it is found that the interests of both Indians and whites now require their removal. They will be located somewhere south of the Missouri, probably on the waters of the Osage river, if they make a treaty. They have relatives now in the region, who claim to be part owners of these lands, although some of these Indians are disposed to question the validity of their claims.

Many of the Indians are now collected round the trading houses, and more are daily arriving from the distant villages, to await the return of the Superintendent. A commissioner to negotiate with Indians is generally well received by them, whether they are favorably disposed towards the object of their visit or not, as it is usual for the tribe to be subsisted at the expense of the Government during a negotiation.

Some of the young fellows were amusing themselves on Saturday by shooting at a mark—a sport in which they frequently indulge. They choose a large tree, strip off the bark from a surface about ten inches square, and in the center of this, make a round black spot, about the size of a dollar. At this target they fire from about 150 yards distance. A few shoot off-hand, but the most usual mode is to rest the gun against a small hickory stick, used to swab out the gun after firing, and to shoot from a kneeling position. I noticed that nearly all the bullets entered the white area, and many of them struck the black spot. The scenes of these shooting matches are gay and animated, the young fellows frequently giving vent to their exuberant animal spirits in sharp yells, and sometimes even exerting



PLAN VIEW OF CART WITHOUT BOX OR TOP SPOKES

PLATE 5 - PLAN VIEW

APPROX. SCALE $\frac{3}{64}$ INCH = 1 INCH