

Red River Carts/Lii Shaaret

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Today, Red River carts¹, known as Lii Shaaret in Michif, are an important Métis symbol, demonstrating the Métis' freedom, ingenuity, and skill as entrepreneurs. Representations of Red River carts appear on logos, such as those for the Clarence Campeau Development Fund, the Métis Nation of Alberta, and the Métis Nation of British Columbia.

Red River carts have a long and storied history. Before the advent of railways, freight and other goods were transported in North America's western interior by boats (freight canoes, York boats, and later steamers) and Red River carts. Developed in the Red River area by Métis in the early 1800s, the Red River cart was the Métis' main source of inland transportation. Noisy but versatile, Red River carts crisscrossed what are now the Prairie provinces, North Dakota, Montana, and Minnesota along a series of well-worn trails during much of the nineteenth century.

Among First Nations and Euro-North Americans, the carts became associated with the Métis. In fact, Plains First Nations even referred to the Métis as "half-wagon, half-man." Métis traders travelled in large groups extensively across the Plains, hauling their goods in these carts. Red River carts were often joined together on long trains, tied together with leather, and traversed across the numerous cart trails, which linked settlements together before the coming of the railway. Many of these Red River cart trails would later become roads and highways in Western Canada.

As the Métis became free traders in the 1830s and 1840s, Red River carts eventually superseded York boats in the volume of freight hauled. By 1869, approximately 2,500 carts left the Red River Settlement for St. Paul, MN, outside of the Hudson's Bay Company's jurisdiction. Carts transported goods from St. Paul to Lac La Biche, AB, and then York boats hauled the cargo down the Athabasca River.

Oxen could haul more freight, but they covered less distance than horses. A Red River cart pulled by a horse could transport the same amount of cargo as four pack horses. Horses were able to carry more than 200 kilograms at a rate of up to 80 kilometres a day. The same carts pulled by oxen could carry almost 500 kilograms at a rate of about 30 kilometres a day. Red River carts hauled such goods as pemmican, buffalo hides, furs, moccasins, decorated tanned skin clothes, sugar, tobacco, tea, powder, shot, bullets, point blankets, cloth, vermilion, axes, knives, files, copper kettles, guns, and alcohol.

Although there were no standard measurements for a Red River cart, it typically had a box measuring two metres in length, one metre in height, and approximately 84 centimetres in width. Its axles were two metres long, its wheels one to two metres in diameter, and its shafts, measuring four metres each, ran from the box to the horse or ox.

¹ Lawrence J. Barkwell, "Red River Carts," Encyclopedia of French Cultural Heritage in North America. http://www.ameriquefrancaise.org/en/article-59/Red_River_Cart.html.

Red River carts were made entirely of wood. The hubs were usually made from elm, wheel rims from white ash or oak, and the axle from hard maple. All the carts' wooden pieces were fashioned together by sinew and rope. When the carts broke down, all that was needed for their repair was a bluff of trees, such as poplar, elm, willow or Manitoba oak, an axe, a saw, a screw auger, and a draw knife. While trees are not plentiful in some parts of the Prairies, they can be found in coulees and along river and creek banks. Even the nails on a Métis-made Red River cart were wooden. The wooden wheels would sometimes become stuck, which made any movement impossible. Red River carts made a loud squealing noise when they moved because their wooden axles and wheels could not be effectively lubricated without collecting dust. A First Nations' legend maintains that the bison deserted the Plains because they wanted to escape from the hideous noise of the carts!

For the Métis, the Red River cart was an all-purpose utility vehicle and a makeshift home. Métis families used them to move their possessions while migrating or resource harvesting. The carts also provided migrating Métis with temporary living quarters and shelter from the elements. Women fashioned decorated covers for the carts from bison hides or canvas, which were supported by an arched frame of cut saplings. In the winter, the Red River cart's passenger box, when placed on runners, served as a temporary horse-drawn sleigh. When disassembled, Red River carts also became temporary rafts for water crossings. Once the wheels of the cart were removed and its bottom was enclosed in a buffalo hide tarp, the cart and its cargo could be rafted across rivers and streams. Red River carts were also used as a defensive mechanism when the Métis were threatened. Inside a protective circle of carts, women, children and animals could hide safely, while the men defended them from rifle pits around the carts' perimeter.

With the coming of railways, opportunities to haul freight on Red River carts greatly diminished. However, even as settlers entered the Prairies, the Métis used Red River carts to haul wood, Seneca root, bison bones and other raw materials to market.

Many Métis artisans, most notably George Fayant, build Red River carts of various sizes to honour their ancestors' prowess as traders. George's Red River carts are displayed throughout Western Canada, including at the Gabriel Dumont Institute and the Saskatchewan Native Teacher Education Program, both in Saskatoon. He also conducts workshops which allow Métis to build their own Red River carts, and thus keep the Red River cart building tradition alive among the Métis for generations to come.