

Crossing the Red River — ferry passengers were greeted by a scow that

by Bruce Cherney (part 1)

Winnipeg came to life as a child of its two major rivers — the Red and Assiniboine. In particular, it was the meeting of the two rivers that allowed Winnipeg to emerge as the “Gateway to the West,” beginning in the waning days of the fur trade, when the future city was known as the Red River Settlement and was soon afterward first given the name it is known by today. The *Nor’Wester* in its September 11, 1865, issue, contained for the first time on its front page masthead, “Town of Winnipeg, Red River Settlement.” It was the first written reference to Winnipeg as the name of the community, which at that time, was more often simply designated as Fort Garry in absence of calling it the Red River Settlement.

It would be another seven years before Winnipeg became the official name of the community, but in the meantime the creation of the rivers had one underlining problem associated with its location — getting from one side of a watery barrier to the other. Initially, it wasn’t much of a problem, as the settlers were — or eventually became through necessity — well-versed in the ways of river transportation, and a canoe or scow was invariably on hand at each riverside home to allow residents to get to the opposite bank. It was only later, when the community was in the midst of an influx of people from the East, that the problem really began to manifest itself.

The newcomers were not Métis, former Hudson’s Bay Company employees, French-Canadian voyageurs or aboriginals who earned their living from the rivers and lakes of the West. The newcomers were “tenderfoots” who had to be helped to the other side of a wide river that could not be forded. The solution was a simple one and involved a common feature of Eastern Canada when a too wide and too deep river was encountered — a ferry.

It was the HBC-appointed Council of Assiniboia, the civil administration of the settlement, which issued a contract for the first ferry across the Red River when no bridge was in place to permit people to pass over the river without getting their feet wet.

In his book, *Red River*, Joseph James Hargrave described in the company of Dr. Morgan, “along with a considerable number of our fellow travellers,” taking “passage in the local ferry boat” on August 4, 1861. Hargrave arrived in the settlement aboard the steamboat *Pioneer* and had disembarked on the St. Boniface side of the Red River, while his “destination ... lay on the opposite side of the river and no bridge existed.”

Hargrave was born in York Factory, but had been



The Forks, an oil painting by W. Frank Lynn (1835-1906). Note the ferry midstream on the Red River (Western Canada Pictorial Index).

sent away at a young age to attend school in Scotland until 1861, when he entered service with the HBC.

Hargrave said the ferry was positioned at the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine rivers, and was used by foot passengers and wagon drivers to cross to either side of the river. Duncan Macdougall, who ran the ferry, lived in a house, “situated close to the scene of his labours,” on the south side of the Assiniboine River, “where boats touch in making the crossing of the Red River.”

Macdougall’s was the only ferry for hire permitted by the council to operate “within a radius of several miles from the site of the ferry.” The ferry brought passengers and freight across the Assiniboine and Red rivers, operating from its main landing at The Forks.

The ferry was actually two “scows” worked by a system of ropes and consisting of a canoe and a passenger skiff. Hargrave described the skiff as a “dugout,” common to the country, which was made from the trunk of a large tree. The trunk’s centre was “scooped out” and its exterior was shaped to resemble a canoe. It had no seats and patrons “were obliged to kneel down, one behind the other, on some damp straw hastily scattered over the wet interior, while a boy,

seated in the stern of the docile craft, with a single oar, worked alternately on either side of the canoe, paddled us quickly across.”

Hargrave said Macdougall was a “linguist, being competent to speak English, French, Cree and Gaelic,” the languages spoken in the settlement.

His language skills should have gained him employment as an interpreter, but Hargrave said the man was “inclined to conviviality, which circumstances has interfered as much with the progress of his fortunes as with the dispatch of his business.” In other words, Macdougall was prone to visit the “public houses” — drinking establishments — that had sprung up near the centre of traffic for the community.

“In the latter the ferryman has spent a good deal of his time, while some of the idle men around were stationed in the boats. The eye of the master not being on the subordinates, much laxity prevailed in working the scows, while the canoe and skiff were frequently appropriated by idle boys desirous of enjoying aquatic sports by stealth. The result was that during the day passengers were obliged to wait for a shamefully protracted period before getting across, and after six o’clock in the evening, the silence was broken by shouts



leaked so badly that the bottom was always full of water

of angry Englishmen (HBC employees and Ontarians), calling across the rivers for the means of transportation, mingled with the entreaties of belated Frenchmen that 'Mac Doug,' as the latter pronounce the ferryman's name, would come to their assistance."

If the ferry scows could be secured, the passengers were greeted by "craft ... in a very dilapidated condition. The flooring of the scows had been reduced to such a state of disrepair, that every step of the horses, or motion of the carts, deranged the boarding, sometimes to such an extent that, owing to the intervention of a tolerably central fulcrum underneath, one end of the board went down under pressure of a foot, while the other flew up with a certain degree of violence against the face of some neighbouring beast of burden.

"While the animal, whose leg had sunk through the flooring, was on his knees trying to recover himself, the other, who had received the stroke on his proboscis, might be on his haunches, the passengers shouting for mercy and assistance, the boatmen contemplating a leap into the water, and a scow floating in midchannel of the river."

Hargrave said there were continual outbreaks of public indignation about the state of the ferry ride. Foot passengers were cramped and wet to the knees in boats that leaked so much that the bottoms were perpetually full of water. They were further inconvenienced when oxen drivers urged their beasts forward in order to gain the impetus needed to make the steep ascent from the ferry and over the riverbank.

The *Nor'Wester* continually carried reports about the "ferry nuisance."

On April 26, 1865, the newspaper reported the ferry was idle despite the river being free of ice for two weeks.

"The boats are lying idly on the beach, and a solitary canoe is playing from shore to shore. Nothing seems to be done — no preparations made. Yet stay. While we censure we must be just — give praise where it is due: for while the larger boats seem to be quite neglected, justice compels us to add, that one of the canoes has been provided with a new paddle, which gives a cheering hope that the ferry guardians will do

something more when the weather is settled," the newspaper ended with a tint of sarcasm.

The *Nor'Wester* also heavily criticized the public works department of the Council of Assinboia. On May 13, 1865, an editorial tried to impress upon the department that the river was indeed open and that many people and animals would cross if they could. The editorial writer wondered why a scow was left uncaulked on the beach, and why no ropes had been stretched across the river.

The newspaper contained the accusation that the means of transportation consisted "of one boat, rotten; one canoe, leaky and muddy; two assistants, small boys; and one Ferryman, drunken."

If the ferry operator was unable or unwilling to do his job, the editor urged him to give it up and let someone else do it.

In lieu of action, the editor suggested a pontoon bridge be built to span the river.

"While it is a fact that the Assiniboine River could be crossed under favourable circumstances — viz, if the boat was bailed out, the canoe not adrift, and the ferryman not drunk, it is also a fact that the frequency of one or more of these conditions rendered the probability extremely uncertain," was the commentary in the November 15, 1864, *Nor'Wester*.

The writer complained about having to wait time and time again on the bank, "shivering and shouting alternately," for the coming of the "muddy, seatless canoe" in order to be conveyed to the other side of the river.

The writer said the situation was even worse for animals due to the miserable condition of the boats and the steepness of the banks. The ascent or descent into the ferry was so dangerous for animals that an accident involving the loss of a horse occurred.

The newspaper columnist called for the burning of the existing boats and the construction of better craft that draw little water so they can land closer to the banks, and that the new boats be either a common punt or square-ended skiff so that they could be operated by one person. There was also the proposal to re-

place the hemp ropes with metal wire and use pulleys to help propel the boats across the river.

"As to the Ferryman, we can only say that he is utterly incompetent. Habitual intoxication may, possibly, not interfere with his duties as Constable, but it unfits him for his position as Ferryman."

Hargrave wrote that from time to time the residents of the settlement circulated petitions to end the career of ferryman Macdougall.

Finally, the council relented and Macdougall was replaced by another who fixed up the boats and "engaged trustworthy subordinates."

"The new man ... addressed himself to the giant difficulty of the undertaking before him," wrote Hargrave, "that of securing from each foot-passenger patronizing his craft the small sum of one halfpenny, and from the owner of each horse and cart the sum of fourpence per trip."

The collection of the ferry fees ruffled customers, and new petitions were sent to the council. In particular the French-speaking residents of the settlement signed petitions calling for the "re-instatement of the generous 'Mac Doug,' who scorned to touch the

(See **RED RIVER**, page 6)

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