



"You throw the reins on your horse's neck and let him jog on at will, while your eyes roam over the waste and your thoughts wander as the winds. This has truly been called "The Great Lone Land". Its silence and its solitude weigh on you like a mechanical power. The breeze circles around your brow and bears no odour of flowers on its wings. There are no green trees even on the water's brink, and hence no wild birds carolling among the boughs. It is a real desert; a land of desolation; and it will remain such until the white man settles upon it and turns the waste into a garden."

Henri Julien (1852 - 1908)

Along the Red Coat Trail

In the summer of 1874, Henri Julien, an artist and reporter for the Canadian Illustrated News, travelled across the hot Canadian prairies with a contingent of red-coated North West Mounted Police.

One hundred and twenty-five years later, in the heat of mid August and early



Sketch by Henri Julien 1874

http://www.ourheritage.net/julien_pages/Leavingcolor.html

September, Maureen and I cycled the Red Coat Trail as part of our trip across Canada. Though we travelled almost the same route as the NWMP, we experienced the prairies very differently than Mr. Julien.

Everyday we bought fresh food, energy drinks and always had meal replacement bars at

hand. The NWMP of 1874 carried little more than pemmican; a terrible sounding mixture of dried beaten meat mixed with fat, flour and molasses of which the flour and molasses are optional.

With plenty of food and water available, we enjoyed viewing peaceful prairie bulrush marshes filled with a variety of softly quacking, busy ducks. The NWMP also appreciated these areas by filling their water containers and feasting on duck dinner.



Sketch by Henri Julien 1874
http://www.ourheritage.net/julien_pages/Duck_hunt.html

The Prairies have changed. The wastelands of 125 years ago are now large golden fields of wheat, bobbing heads of sunflowers and fields of delicate blue flax flowers. Everyday we rode with a variety of dragonflies and little white butterflies. We always had the company of birds picking at the endless supply of grasshoppers

and crickets on the road and warm crosswinds brought the smells of life from fields and marshes.

The warm crosswinds also brought the smells of dead animals. A multitude of dead rodents, squished birds of prey, frogs, snakes and salamanders rot on the roadside. Some days the abundant and seemingly unstoppable deaths brought tears to my eyes. I would ride with a lump in my throat trying to think of ways to save innocent animals from high-speed collisions. They are unfortunate victims of the new prairie lifestyle.

Most motoring tourists we met at campgrounds were unconvinced the Prairies have any charms. Isn't it too hot and boring? It is not. The unrestricted view of wheat can fool a traveller into thinking the road is straight but Prairie roads along the Red Coat Trail often descended into a gulch and then ascended back up to prairie level.

We learned about gulches in Manitoba. We were planning to lunch and buy groceries in Wawanesa and knew we were in the right area because we kept seeing highway signs indicating we were close. A highway sign indicated we were two kilometres from town and we still couldn't see houses. A sign one kilometre from town pointed off the highway but there was still no sign of life or lunch. Around a corner and

down a steep decent we coasted into a small town cut out of prairie dirt and serving up surprisingly good omelettes.



Prairie restaurateurs know how to cook meals for hungry people. From Manitoba onward food portions were more generous and affordable but there were still some surprises. Sometimes, as we journeyed across Canada, I lusted for hard to get food items.

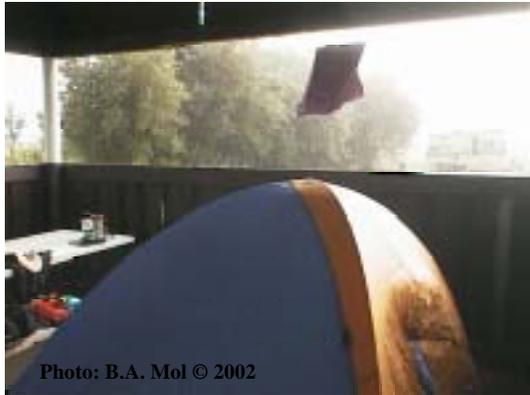
On our way into Souris, Manitoba we passed The Chocolate Shop Restaurant. Chocolate cake and ice cream immediately came to mind and, after weeks of pasta or rice, we looked forward to something different. We talked about chocolate and all its possible configurations as we set up camp. We showered and changed as quickly as possible and walked into town, directly to the Chocolate Shop Restaurant.

No chocolate! The menu offered only souvlaki, pizza, and pasta. Upon questioning, our server explained the restaurant had just changed hands and was being turned into a Greek restaurant. After the initial disappointment wore off, we had a good meal in the restaurant and, to satisfy our desires, we stopped for chocolate bars on the way back to the campground.

Besides unusual restaurants, Prairie residents are a friendly mixture of inquisitiveness and thoughtfulness unknown anywhere else. At our first stop in Saskatchewan two young women at the Redvers information booth were fascinated about our cycling trip and urged us to tell them about cycling across Canada. We stayed at the info booth for hours drinking coffee, eating Saskatoon pie and answering questions. Afterwards, Maureen and I went to the local grocery store where at least a dozen people were interested to hear where we came from and where we were going. The manager of the store introduced himself and offered to help us find whatever we wanted. We felt honoured and welcomed by all the attention in Redvers and didn't know then that it would happen again and again.

While in Redvers we witnessed a violent prairie summer storm. We were settling in for the night when we heard thunder rumbling and saw dark clouds quickly blowing in.

We had barely moved our tent into the campground cook shelter when heavy rain blew in at a forty-five degree angle soaking everything at the edge of the cook shelter. The hail started small but within minutes it was the size of golf balls.



Under the wooden roof of the cook shelter we felt like we were inside a drum. We kept our fingers in our ears and watched the clouds and hail whip past. Ten minutes after the storm began, it was gone.

The next morning I thought it wise to listen to the weather forecast on my portable radio and heard that a farm, sixty kilometres away, had been ripped up by the storm. Having witnessed the force of the wind and hail it was easy to imagine how the combination could destroy a farm, I didn't want to be caught in weather like that.

When we began our trip in May, I listened to news on my portable radio at least once a day. I brought a radio to listen to weather broadcasts but always ended up listening to the world news. No matter what weather was forecast, we kept on riding. The news became a way of keeping in touch with the world, or so I thought at first. As we crossed the country I realised I needed to wean myself off the news to enjoy every moment of our trip. Idle chatter about world events seemed so ridiculous out in the great spaces of the Prairies. I re-learned that it is OK to be quiet for hours and absorbed myself in watching the clouds and grain elevators come and go while sharing the day with the woman I love.

The rhythm of cycling is unconnected to the hectic news world. The newspaper, radio and TV are instruments to record the passing of life and death. We gathered the news as it happened. The look, feel and smell of the wind whispering over the crops, the sun crossing the sky and the abundance of wispy clouds, new but oddly familiar roads and a rhythm of riding so compelling we were drawn to no other place than where we were. Maureen and I would look at each other and smile and then turn our gaze back to the prairies.

Even without searching out the news we learned that twenty thousand people died in a Turkish Earthquake. Prince Edward and Sophie Rhys-Jones got married, students in

Taber were buried, politicians stepped down, bombings stepped up, Quèbec nurses went on strike, gas prices got a hike, Clinton was found innocent and Kervorkian found guilty. There were space walks and peace talks, news about NATO and Nisga'a, Kosovo and Kennedy, scores and stocks, on the hour and the half-hour, in the daily paper and the local weeklies. Mostly, it seemed to me, the news announces little more than whose luck has run out or how well someone's luck is holding out.



Photo: B.A. Mol © 2002

With the exception of one day, our luck was pretty good. In the five weeks we were on the prairies we ran out of water once and were never short of food. The NWMP rode for days without finding fresh water and when their supply of oats ran out, twenty of their horses starved to death.

We learned a little about how difficult it must have been for the NWMP to cross the prairies. We left Ogema in the cool of the early morning after a postcard beautiful sunrise that included a red and orange sky with silhouettes of grain elevators. It was to be our worst cycling day

across Canada. We prepared for the long hot day to Assiniboia by gathering more supplies than usual because we knew we wouldn't pass another town all day long.



Photo: B.A. Mol © 2002

In the heat of the sun, we snacked at the roadside and ate lunch in the shade of three hay bales. We tried resting in the shade of some low bushes but biting flies made us move on. Though we left Ogema with what appeared to be an over abundance of liquids, we ran out water because we were on the road two hours longer than planned.

The last ten kilometres took forever. The headwind was stronger than usual and we experienced the worst pavement anywhere we'd been in Canada. Unable to feel comfortable on her saddle, Maureen tried walking but her bike was hard to control in the

wind. I tried pushing her so she could coast, but the wind made that difficult too. Maureen said she would stop the next motorist and ask for a ride but no one drove by.

Two kilometres from Assiniboia, after eight hours of cycling, Maureen stopped at the roadside and began crying. The few small tears her body could afford drew lines down her dusty face exposing bright red sunburnt cheeks. I held her loosely, not wanting to warm her further, and blocked the sun from her face. I tried to cheer her, but there was nothing I

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could say to make her feel better. I too was hot and tired but the worst feeling was that my best friend was unhappy and I was right beside her but there was nothing I could do to make her feel better. In suffering silence we rode the last two kilometres into town.

Of all the places we rode to across Canada, nothing compares to our two-day stay in Assiniboia. Perhaps the condition of our arrival, our genuine heartfelt relief to be somewhere that wasn't miles from nowhere, makes us recall Assiniboia so fondly. The friendliness of Assiniboia people transformed us from two cyclists defeated by heat and wind, into weather conquering cycling heroes.



We set up camp at the municipal campground and met a local cyclist who was distributing tourist information. He sympathised with our weather and road troubles, congratulated us on our fortitude and agreed it was wise to spend a couple of days in town recuperating.

The next morning a reporter from the local newspaper came to take photos and ask questions about our trip. After interviewing us she promised to send a copy of the newspaper in the mail. We made front-page news in The Assiniboia Times. "Across Canada cyclists stop in Assiniboia."

More Saskatchewan friendly inquisitiveness awaited us at the 1 Hour Photo where I was asked to recount our visit to Parliament Hill in Ottawa. Then, at the Laundromat, the owner plied me with ice cream bars to retell our cross Canada adventures.

No two towns are the same. Assiniboia was a much-needed oasis for the body and soul. It remains, in my mind, as one of the very special places we visited riding across Canada.

Some towns are special for what they have and some for what they don't have. We passed life size mock-ups of dinosaurs, a huge horse, a huge camel and the largest smoke-able pipe in the world. In Gull Lake, our last stop in Saskatchewan, we discovered there was no lake.



Superintendent James Morrow Walsh

The wind was hot and dry when we rode into Walsh Alberta. Walsh was named after Major James Morrow Walsh, of the NWMP, who gained notoriety after he allowed Sitting Bull, and more than 1,000 Sioux, to stay in Canada despite news they had wiped out Custer in the Battle of Little Big Horn. We stayed two nights in Walsh; Sitting Bull stayed for five years.

Sitting Bull left because there weren't enough resources to provide his people with a decent life. The town of Walsh, we were told at <http://www.rcmpmuseum.com/museum/Topic2> the Wild Rose Café, isn't what it used to be. The folks in small prairie towns are feeling the same resource pinch that Sitting Bull felt but for different reasons.



Chief Sitting Bull

Service resources, both civic and health, are being centralised to save money. Many people are moving to larger towns in search of a jobs, medical care, safe water and better schools. The Prairies are still changing and people are still adapting.

We passed through many towns, and through many people's lives, and found the happiest people were those who had found peace with their surroundings regardless of what others had elsewhere or what others felt was important.

We could feel the arrival of Fall by the time we reached Medicine Hat. For the first time in months we wore our jackets and tights all day long as we rode south and west to Fort McLeod, the final stop on the Red Coat Trail.

Henri Julien changed. Biographers claim he achieved a new level of artistic maturity because of his trip west. At the edge of town, a fort in 1874, we wondered what

the members of the NWMP thought of their new surroundings. Had they changed in the process of getting there? Had we?

Once you've see acres of nodding sunflower heads bidding you good day, once you've seen the wind blow ripples through miles of harvest ready wheat, once you've seen the forever horizon of blue sky and met the warmth of prairie people, once you've used hay bales for shade and day dreamed of water, you are never the same.

At the edge of Fort McLeod, with the sight of foothills on the horizon, we longed to be home. Like many before us - our hearts tugged us west.

