

## Dog Sleds and Travois

The Metis were very proud of their dog teams, and their gear was highly ornamented. Metis hunter and trader Norbert Welsh (1845-1932) gives this description:

*I had my dogs well harnessed, plenty of bells on them and ribbons flying all over. These dogs were of common breed—we could not get Eskimo dogs—but they were strong. Each dog could pull four hundred pounds and race with it. I had a young Indian driving one team. We went very fast over the plains. Sometimes we would ride on the sleigh, and sometimes we would run beside or behind it.*<sup>1</sup>

The dog sleds used seem to have had two basic designs—the open ‘sledge’, and the enclosed ‘cariole’. Sleds were used routinely in the fur trade as early as 1797. Dog sleds usually travelled in ‘trains’ of several dog sleds, with each dog team following the track of the one in front of it. Most or all of the men travelling with the train would wear snowshoes and run along with the dogs. Paul Kane gave a good description of dog sleds on the road.

*'...Two men go before [the lead dog] on the run in snowshoes to beat a track, which the dogs instinctively follow: these men are relieved every two hours, as it is very laborious.'... 'We had three carioles and six sledges, with four dogs to each, forming when en route a long and picturesque cavalcade : all the dogs gaudily decorated with saddle-cloths of various colors, fringed and embroidered in the most fantastic manner, with innumerable small bells and feathers...Our carioles were also handsomely decorated...'*<sup>2</sup>

In his North Dakota history book Clement Lounsberry gives the following narrative:

Prior to 1800, the only means of transportation used on the plains of North Dakota was the dog sledge in winter, the Indian travois in summer, and the packs by men or animals. The dog sledge was much like the toboggan, flat-bottomed with a guard or dash-board in front, wide enough to seat one person, and long enough so he could recline if desired, as the dogs skipped along over the prairie. The driver could jump on or off when the animals were moving at high speed. A passenger, wrapped in furs, could sleep in perfect comfort as the sledge glided along from seventy-five to ninety miles a day, each sledge drawn by three dogs, with a driver to each sledge. There were frequently as high as twenty-five sledges in a train. The dogs were held in check by a strong cord attached to the leader. The dogs responded to a motion of the whip or hand, to indicate the direction, every dog knew his name, and all became attached to their masters, especially when treated kindly. They were fed a pound of pemmican a day. A trained leader was worth \$20, and others from \$8 to \$10. Their life of usefulness on the train ran

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Weekes, *The Last Buffalo Hunter* (Account of Norbert Welsh), Calgary: Fifth House, 1994: 9.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Kane, Paul. *Wanderings of an Artist among the Indians of North America* Edmonton: Hurtig, 1967: 270-271.

from eight to twelve years. A dog sledge would carry about four hundred pounds.

In winter dog sledges were used for both freight and passenger service; the allowance of load per dog on a long journey being 100 pounds. One of the traders claimed that he had transported 1,000 pounds by the use of six, and, part of the way, eight dogs, from the Mandan villages on the Missouri, to the Red River posts. In summer the dogs were frequently used to carry buffalo meat from the place where the animals were killed to the points where the women were engaged in curing the meat for the trade or for the winter store.

Two poles were crossed and fastened over the shoulders of the dogs, with a piece of hide underneath them to prevent chafing; the other extremities dragging on the ground. It was secured to the animal by strings- around the body, while a bar was fastened to the poles at the rear, keeping them a proper distance apart, and serving to support the meat.

The travois for use on the ponies were made in substantially the same way, except that the poles about sixteen feet long were fastened to the saddle on either side of the animal, the rear end dragging on the ground, and were capable of carrying about five hundred pounds. They were also called the traville and by some the travees.<sup>3</sup>



Dog sled near Fort Clark. Watercolor by Maximilian zu Wied-Neuwied 1833.

<sup>3</sup> Clement A. Lounsberry, *North Dakota History and People; Outlines of American History* (Volume 1). Washington: Liberty Press, 1919: 143-144.



Charles M. Russell print, Montana Historical Society  
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Dog Team with Cariole at St. Paul Minnesota, 1800s.



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