

The Prairie Schooner

What on earth is it? What is it for?

Familiar inquiries often heard from visitors to the Rocanville and District Museum when Everett Rice's machine is on display.

They are good questions. At first glance the machine presents a squat, low slung appearance suggesting something from an age far removed. The boiler stands out as the most prominent feature with chimney extending, funnel like, beyond the canopy and skyward.

We have been asked at times if it was some kind of an amphibious vehicle. One humorous type, apparently with his eyes on the pipes and tubing, wondered if it was a mobile still. But on closer examination one will notice the wheels and driving arrangement, the antiquated engine which obviously provides the motive force, the fuel box, water and steam pipes and convenient seating accommodation, and will realize it is some form of a steam powered car.

Completely designed, engineered and built by Everett, it is a masterpiece of improvising, imagination and mechanical knowhow and ability. It indicates what can be done with a few old parts - an idea - and a great deal of work and patience.

We never did know what to call this strange machine or its operator. It was uncertain whether he was a driver, an engineer or whatever until one day the thing came around the end of the steel building at top speed, loaded with happy, cheering children and one bystander shouted "Hi Ho Captain." That settled the issue. From then on the operator became the Captain and the machine has since been known as the 'Prairie Schooner'.

But the part of this machine with the most historical interest is the engine; as well, it is possibly the oldest artifact to be found at the museum.

In the days before the railroad came to the country in the year 1882, there were two main travel arteries through the west and north. One was the Winnipeg to Edmonton Ox Cart trail - there is still

evidence of this old route in places - and the other was the River and Lake routes. The most significant of these used the Red River and Lake Winnipeg to Grande Rapids, a 7 mile portage was manipulated past the rough water and the York Boats, laden with goods, were placed in the Saskatchewan River en route to The Pas in Manitoba, Prince Albert and The Battlefords in Sask., and later to Edmonton in what was to become Alberta.

A third, and much smaller system, began at Winnipeg and was routed up the Assiniboine River to the Junction of the Qu'Appelle and Assiniboine Rivers at the present site of St. Lazare. Some smaller boats are said to have navigated even farther up river to points like Fort Esperence and even further west; others went North on the Assiniboine as far as water depth permitted.

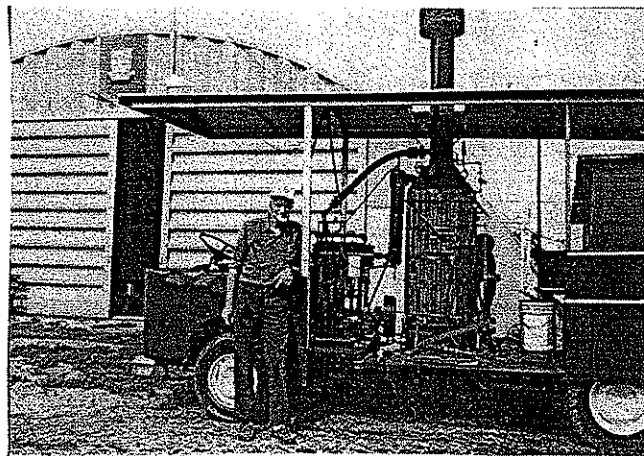
Although a great deal of heavy freight was transported in this manner, the Assiniboine Route proved to be not too

reliable - as the water was only deep enough for a short time during run-off period in the spring or in a season in which heavy rains prevailed until later in the summer. Many of the more heavily laden vessels or scows became stuck on one of the many sand bars from which they were difficult to release. Many became stranded up stream and had to be abandoned until high water again next season.

The path followed by the twisting and turning Assiniboine must be seen from the air to be appreciated. Throughout its length, it is noted for many switch-backs and horse shoe bends. It is possible in places that a boat from any given point could sail for considerable time and still be no further in its direction of travel than on the hour previously.

Stories have been told of a hunter leaving the boat a point going into a bend, cutting across country, to meet the boat again in a couple of hours with fresh game for the galley.

The vessel from which this engine was taken is said to have been a tug-boat used for towing scows. Long ago it had become lodged on a sand bar in the Miniota area, was abandoned and in due course of time became completely submerged by shifting sands.



Years later, as circumstances and currents changed it was partly exposed again, its engine was removed and taken to a junk dealer's yard in a nearby town. From there, it fell into the hands of the late Mr. E. Symons who saw its value as an antique. It eventually became the property of Everett.

There was a time before the internal combustion engine became perfected that steam provided the most reliable source of power. It was cumbersome to a degree. Although it depended on a huge boiler for the generation of steam and required large quantities of fuel, coal or wood for operation, it was still the most suitable power for all marine use.

This particular engine is unique in a sense as it is designed in what is known as the compound principle. In more simple terms it is built to use the same steam twice; once in the small high pressure cylinder and then through a complicated valve system, the partly condensed steam is directed to a larger cylinder where the power from further expansion is used before remaining vapour is exhausted to the open air.

Experiments were even conducted in those times to go further into what was called triple expansion. Steam men to this day still argue the merits or advantages of the compound system as compared with simple design. The argument is usually concluded with the reminder that the railroads, the largest users of steam, remained with the simple principle.

From research done on the equipment it was learned that the engine was designed and built in England by the Vosper Company of Portsmouth, now known as Vosper Thornycroft Ltd., some time after the year 1872. It was interesting to learn that some of these units are still in use in some parts of the world. The Company still gets calls for repairs.

So beginning with a '57 Ford truck chassis, a steel deck was welded to the frame to accommodate the boiler and engine. The boiler, formerly used in a shop in the Yorkton area, is a 3 H.P. vertical dry top type. New tubes were fitted as well as valves and fittings to bring it up to safe operating condition and approval by the Dept. of Labour to be fired to a max. of 100 lbs. pressure. It is equipped with the usual injector as the principle boiler feed device but in addition it has a manual pump built on as well as having a cross head pump with water from the latter two sources fed through an exhaust heater system then to the boiler.

The engine, with a few minor modifications, is connected by a chain drive to a gear mounted just ahead of the original transmission on the truck. The steering system was altered some, fuel storage and water tanks added and a canopy was built above to offer weather protection for boiler and engine. Rated at about 30 H.P., this reliable old engine is capable of

driving the car to a top speed of about 10 M.P.H., or would it be more appropriate to use the term 'Knots' to measure its performance?

So the Prairie Schooner is another interesting artifact to see and study when you visit the museum. It is a one and only, you will never see another like it.

Secondly it makes use of an engine, brought back to life from the distant past, which figured prominently in a part of our early history. It is hoped that at an early date there may be a brass plate mounted on this engine to mark its historical interest for generations to come.

Wm D. ● ● ●



PETER FOFONOFF

Thank YOU

The Rocanville and District Museum Society wishes to thank all those volunteers who turned out to help make our part in Family Days a success.

A special thanks to Mr. Peter Fofonoff, who came quite a distance to help with the sod turning.

Mr. Fofonoff, a farmer, has been secretary/treas. of the Society of Doukhobors of Verigin since 1962. He was influential in the setting up of the National Doukhobor Heritage Village in Verigin in 1981. He is now serving his second year as a director of MAS.

Neighborly Notes

Spy Hill museum will hold a craft show and flea market on Aug. 8th, from 10AM to 3PM. The museum will be open from 10-12 and 1-3. Lunch will be available. For information, contact Linda at 534-4534 or Cindy at 534-2178.

A three day celebration will mark the 100th anniversary of Kaposvar Church, Esterhazy. Aug. 14 will feature a Thanksgiving service and social evening in Our Lady of Victories Church. Aug. 15 is slated for a Canada 125 picnic at Kaposvar Historic Site. On Aug. 16, a pilgrimage service will be held from 2-4 PM, followed by a cold plate supper at 5.

Welwyn Museum will be open on Sunday afternoons during July and August. At other times, call at the Coffee Bar for assistance.