

Immediate release

Edson Trekker remembers retracing historic trail in '66

What sends seven young Edson Kinsmen, not an accomplished cowboy among them, riding horseback for 12 or 13 days through the bush from Edson to Grande Prairie in 1966?

For Edson resident Tony Grant, the reason begins with his wife Rosa and an idea she had in 1965. And like all good ideas, some of the best happen when friends get together.

And that's really how this story begins about the 1966 trek that took a group of young Edson Kinsmen and retraced that most historic of trails, the Edson-Grande Prairie Trail.

Sitting at his kitchen table in his Edson home today, Tony Grant remembers how in the summer of 1965, fellow Kinsmen Tom Brown dropped by and talked about the provincial Kinsmen convention that would be held in Grande Prairie the following year.

Tony remembers Rosa saying, "Let's get a bunch of Kinsmen and Kinettes and go by covered wagon on the old Grand Prairie Trail to the convention." That seed of an idea germinated into a more detailed plan as summer turned to fall and fall to winter.

But as with all ideas, necessity gave way to practical need: "[we] realized covered wagons wouldn't be the way to go," reflects Tony. "The major river, the Athabasca, would require barges to carry over wagons, it wouldn't have been feasible."

The Edson-Grande Prairie Trail: an estimated 240 miles through the brush and bush of the northwest leading to what in early years of the province, was then the newly opened Peace country. Today Edson residents can still hear about the trail, commonly spoken of as a road located to various properties to the northwest of town. You hear people comment about living "out on the Grande Prairie Trail," but what you find northwest of town today is a criss-cross of well maintained roads, dissecting their way through land that's been tamed and well managed over the past century.

Not so for the pioneers who disembarked at Edson 100 years ago, and who had to turn north and northwest and go overland to Grande Prairie and to find new land and opportunity in the Peace Country. There were no convenient highways to whisk people there with all their possessions in a matter of hours. And for Tony Grant, Lorne Kroetch, Mel Soltys, Dick Topott, Bob Joy, Nino Chiesa and Tom Brown they would soon discover just what it meant to cover that historic ground and those many miles.

The memories are captured in photos and news clippings sitting on the coffee table in Tony Grant's home, of a trek taken some 44 years earlier when he and six other Kinsmen mounted horses and traveled from Edson to Grande Prairie in 1966.

News stories of the day tell in greater detail what unfolded that first Saturday morning when in the cold of a typical day in May, the Trekkers started their 240 mile journey overland, on the historic Edson-Grande Prairie Trail.

In good civic spirit, the trek began with a speech from the mayor at the CN Depot, and presentations to be carried to the mayor, Chamber of Commerce president and postmaster of Grande Prairie. The riders mounted their horses and with the snapping of many flash bulbs, the whirling of TV cameras, and a band, the Singing Strings, the riders paraded north on Main Street.

Tony Grant looks at a photo of the riders sitting on a fence rail out at what became Trek headquarters northeast of Edson, all looking very much like cowboys, all wearing slouch hats. The riders even took nicknames in good fun.

There was "Gallopings" Tony Grant, "Jingo" Bob Joy, "Cordite" Nino Chiesa, "Knobby" Lorne Kroetch, "Sagebrush" Mel Soltys, "Brushman" Tom Brown and "Tumbleweed" Dick Topott.

"We did some riding before we went," remembers Tony. "And we all grew beards with the exception of Bob Joy because he was working with Hudson's Bay Oil and Gas at the time and had to be able to wear a protective gas mask."

In one of the news stories covering the trek, a correspondent mentions how Mr. Joy was a licensed mortician and the writer goes on to wryly suggest that this could be of help while on the trail.

And it wasn't just the Edson Kinsmen who supported this historic retracing of the trail on horseback: a long list of area residents contributed 14 horses for the first phase of their trip to the Athabasca River crossing.

And guiding them to the river would be Johnny Hackett, an Edson area resident who had traveled the trail many times and who looked every inch the real cowboy.

“We rode for two days with some of our local friends to the Athabasca River, and then we had boats meet us there and take us across,” says Tony. “We [followed] the original trail as much as we could because we wanted it to be an authentic ride of the old trail.”

Looking over his photos taken on the trail, Edson resident Tony Grant recalls just how dangerous retracing the Edson to Grande Prairie Trail could be in 1966, especially for horses.

“We lost a horse or two,” says Tony looking at a picture of a horse sunken into the mud up to its flanks. “In many spots, it was a rough, tough ride. We were in some pretty mushy terrain.”

The horse in the picture had to be unpacked and abandoned, dying in the mud because a tree branch had pierced its side. “The outfitters were very practical; what could you do? We had never experienced anything like that,” Tony says.

A news story from 1966 describes some of the wild terrain faced by original trail travellers: river crossings, grizzlies, cougars and timber wolves might all pose a threat. Even mosquitoes would be experienced on a scale unknown by most travellers today.

But it wasn’t all hardship Tony says: the Kinsmen from surround clubs were able to meet them on all terrain vehicles to bring them supplies. “After 10 days of this, in good and bad weather, ultimately we were within range of four wheeled vehicles, and at the end of each day we would meet Kinsmen from Grande Prairie and other clubs in the area.”

And, Tony celebrated his 31st birthday on the trail. “It was quite unusual,” he says. “They made me a cake out of mud and of course we had beers.”

And how did he spend a typical day on the trail? It would begin early, and end after a full day of riding.

“We would get up at daybreak, eat breakfast sitting on a log . . . then we would pack up,” says Tony. “The outfitters were so efficient at it—they had half a dozen pack horses—so we stretched out a long way. They cooked two meals: a big breakfast and then later in the day a supper. We would ride until late afternoon and we had three or four huge tents to sleep in, but not always in the driest of spots.”

“It was physically tough because none of us were cowboys or riders,” recalls Tony, “but you know within a couple of days you were toughened up. But we had an advantage then that we don’t have today: we were young.”

And one morning the Trekkers awoke to see a very special sight: a young colt born sometime in the night. “One of the horses had a foal,” says Tony. “We didn’t know [a horse was pregnant], and one morning we woke up and there was this horse with a colt.”

After covering 240 miles of the Edson-Grande Prairie Trail, Grande Prairie received the Edson Trekkers in style: with a parade through town. The Edson Kinsmen had arrived in time for the Kinsmen convention 12 days after departing from Edson.

Sitting over a cup of coffee at his kitchen table, Edson resident Tony Grant remembers how their reception had been anticipated for two weeks and people were undoubtedly thinking, “those crazy fools are going to be here. But we did make it on time, and the city had a parade for the convention, and we paraded through the city. We had some fun, and it was a relief.”

A news story from the day reports that “the boys” would be interviewed by a magazine, radio and television. This was no small feat and it made headlines in both Edson and Grande Prairie. And Tony says that no Edson Kinsmen have attempted to re-trace the trail or the footsteps of the Trekkers since.

And what was the great significance of retracing that historic route in 1966? Why do it at all? One photo in Tony’s collection captures it this way. It shows a horse with a sign that reads “The Grande Prairie-Edson Trail, 240 miles, Our Common Heritage.”

“[The trail] was the only connection from Edson to Grande Prairie. The railroad ended here at Edson. The trail was the connection to the Peace Country. It’s a historical tie between Edson and Grande Prairie. I’m sure there are many people who have no idea what the Grande Prairie Trail really means. Today there are the highways and the airways, but at the turn of the century there was just the trail. That was the pioneer trail to connect the communities.”

And undoubtedly there were and still are any number of people on both ends of that trail who could attest to the truth of this in their own family histories: stories of pioneers passing through one more arduous trek to open up a new future. It’s a classic story that has remained popular in Western Canadian history. And it’s made its way into the language of Edson residents today, describing an area north and west of town.

And how did the trek affect Tony and his companions?

“The significance was we were retracing history over an historical road, but nobody really gives a damn except those people who study that sort of thing. Certainly it was a highlight after the fact when you think about it: it was pretty ambitious for us. We were called all sorts of names; some of them included ‘stupid’ and ‘fools’,” says Tony. “But we formed quite a relationship among the group of us. It’s a singular thing you’ve done together, and it’s quite exciting to think back to it.”



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In 1966 the Trekkers undertook the journey as the Kinsmen's contribution to Edson's Centennial Project, to celebrate the first century of a nation. As the Trekkers undertook their adventure and rode into a history of their own, Trekker Lorne Kroetch described their journey in a song, and a verse captures well why Edson celebrates its own Centennial today:

“Through muskeg and wild river,

in every kind of weather,

Those hardy men of yester-year,

Never ever thought of failure.

Onward our Centennial needs us,

We will go if you feed us.

Onward let our history lead us,

Edson to Grande Prairie.”

Submitted by Edson 100th Anniversary Committee
