

Walking the Patrol Trail

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Two men from southwest Saskatchewan are walking more than 300 km as a way of paying homage to the history of the North West Mounted Police Trail.

Matthew Anderson has lived in Quebec for 30 years, now working as a professor in Montreal, but his roots begin in the southwest. Born in Shaunavon and raised in Swift Current, Anderson has returned to Saskatchewan and begun a pilgrimage across the NWMP trail from Wood Mountain to Fort Walsh.

Anderson teaches a course on pilgrimage in Montreal and has talked about it all over the world – taking part in pilgrimages in Spain, Norway, and Scotland.

“It occurred to me one day, even those of us who study pilgrimage in North America, none of us were talking about trails in North America,” he said. “Then I remembered that there was something called the NWMP trail [where I grew up] and I thought ‘I wonder if you could walk that?’ and I thought nobody walks on the prairie you’d have to be crazy to walk across the prairie.”

However, that didn’t deter Anderson who then contacted Hugh Henry with the Saskatchewan History and Folklore Society. Henry is the convener of the trail, so the idea of walking it fit right into his job description.

“As a trail convener his very specific job is to make sure the public knows about the NWMP trail and other important trails in Sask.,” Anderson said. “So when he found there was somebody crazy enough to walk the length he thought that was a great idea and even volunteered to come along.”

The pair started out in Wood Mountain on July 18 with a proper send-off from the RCMP as well as with a smudging ceremony held by Wood Mountain First Nations to bless their journey. Different people are joining Anderson and Henry as they make their trek. Anderson said people from Montreal, Regina and even some local ranchers are joining them for a leg or two.

Anderson, also a documentary filmmaker, is prepared to document their travels in hopes of shedding some historical context onto the trail.

“For me it’s also important to walk this land and remember the Metis and the First Nations who used it even before the NWMP,” he said. “It was the most, I think, the most important trail west of Toronto for that brief period between 1875 and 1885, it was the most important trail in Canada and we’ve almost forgotten it.”

Anderson mentions the history of the Lakota who sought refuge in Canada after their battle in America, as well as the Metis and their Red River Carts.

“This trail is very much tied to a history and no

one has walked it as far as I know probably since the Lakota, the NWMP used horses and a number of Lakota would have used horses as well,” he said. “No one has really walked it in 135 years.”

“You can call it a patrol trail, or the Metis trail or the Lakota trail - that all says a little bit about the history of it.”

Anderson and Henry have various accommodations lined up for their trip and have a number of events planned at various towns along the trail.

On July 20 they plan to be in Mankota where there will be a public presentation about the history of the NWMP trail markers.

On July 24 they will have a rest day on Val Marie where they plan to visit the Grasslands and attend a presentations at the Prairie Wind and Silver Sage museum. Trevor Herriot will be doing a reading and the Roman Catholic Bishop, Donald Bolen; along with a couple professors from Ontario will start walking with them.

On August 1 they will stop in Eastend for a full day of activities. Anderson will show a short film on the NWMP trail and Scott Parker, with the National Film Board, will talk about the NFB’s project: Grasslands. A buffet supper will then take place at Jack’s Café.

“If everything goes properly we should be walking 21 days with the breaks in town...we are scheduled to arrive in Fort Walsh on August 7,” Anderson said. “It’s not a religious pilgrimage per say, the definition of pilgrimage is trans-formative journey, one of the definitions, and I think a pilgrimage like that can be transformative for the people that walk it.”

Anderson said Henry will also be looking to find all 260 posts that were placed along the trail by Everett Baker, a Shaunavon historian.

“Some of those posts are now missing and one of Hugh’s reasons for going is to find the missing posts,” he said. “So in some ways it’s kind of an adventure, there is a trail, there are markings, but we don’t know where all of them are.”

For Anderson, the walk is a chance to reconnect with his roots and pay respect to the history and people of the land.

“A walking pilgrimage is a chance to go slow in a world that goes very very fast and also for me it’s good to be in touch with the land again,” he said. “I’ve lived 30 years in Quebec I’m looking forward to being close to the prairie, when you walk you really see things that you cannot see from the car and you’re going so slow that it’s kind of meditative to walk.”

For more information about the pilgrimage you can check out Anderson’s blog at somethinggrand.ca. To join the pilgrimage or learn how you can help, you can phone Henry at 306-778-2531.



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