

# Walkers reconnect with land during pilgrimage along historic NWMP Trail

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A three-week long walk through southwest Saskatchewan along the historic North West Mounted Police (NWMP) Trail was a journey of discovery for a Montreal academic who grew up in Swift Current.

Dr. Matthew Anderson is a lecturer in theological studies at Concordia University. He teaches a course in pilgrimage studies and has done walks along pilgrimage routes in various European countries.

He wanted to do a similar journey in Canada and proposed the idea for a walk along the historical NWMP Trail to the Saskatchewan History and Folklore Society (SHFS).

The walk was planned by Anderson and Swift Current resident Hugh Henry, who is the vice-president of the SHFS board of directors and convenor of the society's Historic Trails Committee.

Anderson reflected on the journey in an interview with the *Prairie Post* shortly after his return to Montreal.

"I learned so much about the land and about the people of southwest Saskatchewan by walking that trail," he said. "There's no better way to remember in my case because some of that I knew before but I've forgotten in 30 years out here — to remember and to relearn and to learn in some cases more about the land. My bed is too soft and the city is too noisy. I've been thinking I needed to sleep on the floor just to re-acclimatize myself."

He has walked on well-known pilgrimage routes such as the *Camino de Santiago* in Spain, but the trek along the NWMP Trail was special.

"I think a pilgrimage is always special when it's on land that's in your soul somewhere," he said. "It was actually a Cree friend of mine from Alberta who said to me that this pilgrimage would be important to me because this land is somehow in me."

A pilgrimage was traditionally a visit to a shrine, but he defines a modern pilgrimage as a transformative journey.

"If you undertake a long walk and you're open to the spirituality of the land and to your own faith, it can be a pilgrimage," he said. "One of the interesting things is that the Cypress Hills were absolutely considered sacred territory by many First Nations groups."

Pilgrimages are not as common in North America as in Europe. He referred to the Lac St. Anne pilgrimage in northern Alberta, which is quite popular, and there is a small pilgrimage in Saskatchewan, the *Saint-Laurent de Grandin* near *Batoché*.

"It is true that we in North America and especially on the prairies are not used to this idea of pilgrimage," he said. "People in the prairies are really not used to seeing other people walking across the prairie or down the road. We were stopped very often, especially when we were on the road, and asked if we needed help."

The simple act of walking day after day was something he was longing for after his return to the city.

"I have a to do list of about 55 items for one day and I think how nice was it to get up in the morning and only have to walk 15 miles," Anderson said. "Physically, it's quite hard to walk across some parts of the prairie, but it's mentally relaxing. ... When we were walking across the prairies, we had a lot of time to sort of meditate. You fall into a walking meditation to the rhythm of your feet and if you're with companions, as we usually were, you have a lot



Photo by James Page

Matthew Anderson (at left) walks with Rick Kotowich along the NWMP Trail. The faded background photo which shows the vastness of the prairie landscape along the NWMP Trail was taken by Matthew Anderson.

of time to get to know them."

Anderson and Henry walked the entire distance of about 335 kilometres from Wood Mountain Post historical site to Fort Walsh from July 18 to Aug. 7, but they were frequently joined by other people for a few hours or even a few days.

"There is a kind of spontaneous community that comes up when you're walking with people all day," Anderson said. "At night we would camp together and maybe we'd have a beer and we'd laugh and then everybody is tired, so then you go to sleep, but you had all of that day to get to know other members of the group."

During the day the members of the group might also walk on their own for an hour or two in silence on the vast prairies.

"In those times, it's not so much that you're thinking about anything but it's like any meditative activity," he said. "Those thoughts kind of bubble up and it helps you go gain some clarity on life and in that sense I think it's a spiritual exercise, it's a form of meditation."

High temperatures presented the biggest challenge during the three weeks and the two men carried three litres of water every day, but Henry was surprised that the walk was not as physically strenuous as he thought it would be.

"Certainly, some of the highlights were the people we met along the way, both participants on the walk and also some of the farmers and ranchers and their families along the way that hosted us and came out to meet us and talk with us at different presentations that we did," he said.

A total of 26 people joined the two men on their walk, and some individuals joined them more than once.

"That would range from one hour of walking to up to six days of walking," Henry said. "That was great and even in terms of the age range, the youngest being 12 and the oldest being 79, and pretty well balanced in terms of gender."

People were also able to learn about their walk and the NWMP Trail during presentations by the two men at four different locations, including Val Marie and Eastend. These events were well attended with

an average attendance of 37 people.

The walk was an important opportunity for Henry to collect information about the white concrete posts that were erected along the trail in the early 1960s. He has not walked along more remote area of the trail before this journey and he found between 20 and 22 previously unknown markers.

"I haven't got a final tally yet, but at least that many, which we added to our database," he said. "I know I missed some as well because at a couple of occasions we were going across these larger pasture areas where you're uncertain where the markers are in reality."

For Anderson this experience will have value on a professional level. He plans to produce a documentary about the NWMP Trail and he will return to southwest Saskatchewan for showings. He has already been writing about the walk on his blog and there will be an academic publication this fall about the trail.

"On an academic level, this is one of the first times that there has been an attempt made to walk this kind of a trail in North America," he said. "So it's going to affect my teaching because it adds to the literature about North American trails."

He wants to create an awareness about an important part of Canadian history that had a dramatic impact on First Nations.

"It's very important to recognize that the land, which is mostly empty of First Nations now, is empty of First Nations because it was intentionally emptied of First Nations by the government of Canada by the 19th century," he said. "For me, it was important to make a trek like this as an awareness of that history as well. That was not the only thing it did, but if you are connecting with the land, you are connecting with the history and you're trying to connect with the honest history of the land, which a lot of the people didn't know and don't know. As we learn about the honest history of the land, it helps us to be more at home ourselves there and to make our home there."

More information about Anderson's experiences during the NWMP Trail pilgrimage is available on his blog at [www.somethinggrand.ca](http://www.somethinggrand.ca).

