



## The Wheels That Keep Plattsburgh Turning

by Colin Read

**T**he wheel was an amazing invention. By creating a device that allowed people to move things great distances with almost no friction, first regions and then whole continents were opened up. At first the wheel, trade was by necessity local. Because of this, ideas too were local, and there could not be much diversity of thought or of production and consumption.

With the wheel, humans (and all our material trappings) were all of a sudden able to traverse great distances, and through this increased mobility, spread new ideas, new

materials, new processes, and new products across our continents. With the invention of shipping, these ideas and processes could spread between continents, creating the first 'World is Flat' opportunity.

Over the thousands of years since land and water transportation were perfected, our economies have continued to grow. Much of this growth can be attributed, not to our capacity to absorb our own production, but to our capacity to buy and sell from others. Of course, the only reason why we would want to buy from others is that they have a better product, at a better price (or

both), which are the same reasons why others ultimately will buy from us.

Because transportation costs are the only barrier to complete geographical transparency, these innovations in transportation costs have vastly improved our abilities to sell to others, and others to buy from us. Indeed, every 30 percent decline in transportation costs doubles the area of the world that can profitably trade with us. These advantages arising from transportation improvements exist regardless of whether we embrace the possibilities or re-trench under fears of free trade. Of course,

the question is not whether free trade exists, but whether we will let ourselves benefit from it.

Now the new wheel of commerce is the Internet, which moves ideas and services around the world just as freely as the wheel helped us move goods around the world. With the innovation of the Internet, our horizons broadened almost limitlessly almost immediately, and this will allow us to obtain perhaps 30 percent to 40 percent of what we consume in services from anywhere around the world, directly or indirectly.

Still, the bulk of our consumption will remain in the form of goods that must be transported to us, or delivered by people that are necessarily local to us. We cannot transport a house (well, I guess we can, but not typically) and we cannot import a haircut or a nurse or a car mechanic. Most of the things we enjoy will be local, perhaps made up of some combination of goods or services that originated elsewhere, but were ultimately brought here, sold here, and enjoyed here.

Our community is a crossroads community. It is a part of a centuries-old network that tied Lower Canada to the original 13 colonies, first by ship and road, then by rail and air. The North Country still maintains this important role, as evidenced by our leading position in cross-border trade and our continued investment in the improvement of each of our four modes of transportation.

There are other areas of the country that play this significant role in international commerce. Our parallels are with Blaine, Washington and San Diego, California. Our region may one-up these two other regions in that we are on the verge of adding wheels-to-wings as our next transportation innovation. I foresee a day when it becomes recognized that the Plattsburgh International Airport is an ideal hub for such organizations as UPS and FedEx to move goods from wheels to wings and back to wheels for a region that penetrates 250 miles — well into Quebec, Eastern Ontario, and much of New England and New York. It would take no longer to bring a shipment from Montreal and load it onto an air transport at Dorval or to the Plattsburgh International Airport (once traffic and airport logistics are included in the equation).

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Logistics providers could also avoid a second flight and additional expenses for the other cities in our perimeter. This wheels-to-wings-to-wheels opportunity makes even more sense when we consider that Plattsburgh does not have many bad weather days, which of course was one of the reasons why the original Strategic Air Command base was placed here in the first place.

Our region has also been a leader in little wheels to big wheels consolidation, or from the break down of big wheel shipments into smaller deliveries, as evidenced by our many warehouses in this region. Because of our natural role as a shipping consolidator and deconsolidator, and our expertise in cross-border movement of goods and services, we are an important supply chain region. While it is true that globalization will involve inevitable and sometimes painful transitions, a true supply chain region will almost always stand to benefit, so long as we understand our important role in the process and continue to invest in the improvement initiated by the many generations that came before us, and depended upon by the many generations that only we can determine will follow.

So, just as every tourism area at some point learns to embrace and appreciate the tourists that come to town, we must appreciate those enterprises that see our contribution as a transportation leader and in turn contribute to our economy. I have been noticing how courteous truckers have become on the highway, often moving into the other lane to allow us to merge onto the highway. They recognize that they share the highway with us – just as we recognize and appreciate the important role that transportation, trucking, cross-border customs clearing, and the whole Supply Chain Region concept has in the vibrancy of our economy, past, present, and future.

So keep those wheels turning! ■



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