

# The Battle of the Grand Coteau

## July 13 and 14, 1851

Compiled by Larry Haag and Lawrence Barkwell  
Translation by Paul Desrosiers

The Metis battle against the Dakota Sioux which began on the Grand Coteau in the vicinity of "Maison du Chien," (Dog Den Butte) in the Dakota Territory was a defining moment in Metis history. This butte is located to the southwest of Butte North Dakota, just east of the Strawberry Lakes. This landmark was a gathering place for the Arikara and Dakota Sioux and was of great spiritual significance to them. Jean Baptiste Falcon, Pierre Falcon's youngest son, was captain of the hunting party from St. Francois Xavier which clashed with the Sioux at the Battle of the Grand Coteau on July 13 and 14, 1851. The following account of this battle was written by Father Richer Laflèche on September 4, 1851. Father Belcourt also gave an account of this battle however he was not with the White Horse Plains Metis when the battle occurred; he was with the larger Metis group from the Forks and Pembina.



The Dog Den is one of the few landmarks that can be found on early maps of Dakota Territory. Dark in appearance and towering over the surrounding terrain like no other landmark for many miles in any direction, the Dog Den was a major point of reference for soldiers, wagon train bosses and Indians. No one traveled through that portion of Dakota without knowing the whereabouts of the famous butte.

Philippe Regis de Trobriand, commander of the Middle District of the Dakota at Fort Stevenson, knew well the significance of the landmark that bursts like a dark beacon from the surrounding prairie. The Totten Trail, the military mail route connecting Fort Totten with Fort Stevenson, passed near the dangerous Dog Den.

Many incidents that occurred on the Totten Trail happened in full view of Dog Den Butte. The butte was often described as "dark and sinister" in early journal entries of travelers through Dakota Territory. De Trobriand noted the butte's reputation in his journal entry of October 16, 1867:

*"MacDonald and one of the half-breeds came back from Fort Totten today, bringing the mail. The trip was not without dangers. Dog Den is a bad place to travel across any time. There the terrain is broken by sharp*

*hills and narrow ravines, very favorable to ambushades."*

Strawberry Lake lies a few miles to the west of Dog Den. It was there that travelers stopped to water their horses and sometimes camp for the night. De Trobriand himself made the journey down the Totten Trail not long after a couple of mail couriers had mysteriously disappeared in the area of the Dog Den. The commander was hoping to solve the disappearance. He found only a bloody sock that appeared to have been pierced by a bullet. In his journal for that day; July 29, 1868, de Trobriand wrote:

*"We are really out in the desert. In every direction, the eye ranges across empty space, merged with the sky. Only from the east the lonely silhouettes of the sinister heights of Dog Den can be made out against the milky background of the horizon."*

Early French explorers named the butte "Maison du Chien," or Dog Den. De Trobriand discounted local lore which said the butte got its name from snarling ghost dogs that lurked in ravines on all sides of the butte. Instead, de Trobriand thought the name must have come from the abundance of prairie dogs residing near the butte.<sup>1</sup>

Other historians believe that the battle may have occurred further south on the Coteau near Prophet's Mountain.

In the Dog den Butte area there were two smuggler's routes that had been used during the previous two decades. The routes are shown on a map drawn by Peter Garrioch<sup>2</sup>, one of the leaders of the illegal traders who was probably one of the many free traders on the 1851 hunt and one of several who could have given directions to nearby Fort Clark.

According to Metis legends, Gabriel Dumont and the White Horse Plains (St. François Xavier) hunters were on the north trail, there were two. The north route went around the top of Turtle Mountain and then down the western end to go due south, past the western end of Dog Den Butte to Fort Clark near the old Mandan villages (on the Missouri). The second, southern route, went across the Devil's Lake Plains to the lake then turned under and then southwest past the headwaters of the Cheyenne River and went south of Dog Den Butte as the route turned south toward Fort Clark and past Prophets Mountains. Some Metis believe that the White Horse Plains group took the trail toward Prophets Mountain—the traditional Sun Dance site of the Sioux—on the southern slope of the Grand Coteau, almost within sight of Fort Clark. Prophet Mountain is at the eastern end of the only east-west section of the Grand Coteau. Another identifier is Father Lacombe's comment that the battle took place fifty miles north of Bismark<sup>3</sup>, later the capital of North Dakota. Dog Den Butte is about 60 miles due north of Bismark another indication that the battle took place south of Dog Den Butte. Prophets Mountain is closer to Bismark. Lacombe was one of two priests on the 1850 hunt and at age 24 was with Jean Baptiste Wilkie's larger group in 1851.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> By Kim Fundlingland, Staff Writer, *Minot Daily News*, ND Saturday, April 15, 2006

<sup>2</sup> PAM MG2 – C 38, 1944

<sup>3</sup> Fr. Albert Lacombe, letter of March 11, 1852, in *L'Echo de Saint-Justin*, X, August, 1931.

<sup>4</sup> Chuck Thompson, *Red Sun: Gabriel Dumont the Folk Hero*. Winnipeg: n.p. 1995: 32-33. Lafleche, in the letter which follows states that this larger group went to Dog Den Butte, which implies that the St. Francois Xavier group were near Prophet's Mountain.

RAPPORT  
SUR LES  
**MISSIONS**

DU  
DIOCÈSE DE QUÉBEC,

ET AUTRES QUI EN ONT CI-DEVANT FAIT PARTIE.

MARS, 1853. N<sup>o</sup> 10.

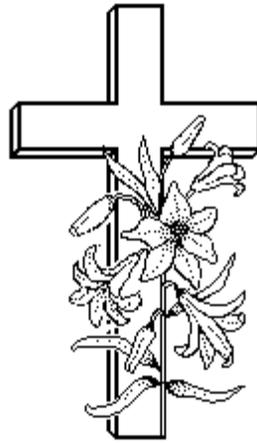
~~~~~  
AVEC L'APPROBATION DES SUPERIEURS.  
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QUEBEC:  
DES PRESSES A VAPEUR D'AUGUSTIN CÔTÉ ET C<sup>ie</sup>.  
Près l'Archevêché.  
1853.

**Report On The  
Missions  
of the Diocese of Quebec**

**March, 1858 No. 10  
with approval of the Superiors**



**Quebec  
From the Steampresses of Augustin  
by the Archdiocese Cote Co.  
1853**

**On the Quebec missions, March 1853, No. 10  
An entertaining account of an excursion which Father Lafleche made in the  
summer of 1851 with the Metis on their annual buffalo hunt.**

Letter from Mr. Richer Lafleche, missionary, to one of his friends.  
Saint Francis of the Prairie of White Horse  
“Saint-Francois de la Prairie du Cheval Blanc”  
September 4, 1851  
**Translated by Paul Desrosiers**

My Dear Friend,

I experienced a very real pleasure in receiving your letter of April 15, on my return from the prairie. The canoes from LaChine having arrived later than normal, I was forced to travel with my hunters before reception of the letters from Canada. The good news that you gave me from my beloved country warmed up my heart; we have to believe that the period of troubles has passed and the time of prosperity that has started will continue. For me, I do not have such happy news to tell you; I cannot tell you that the periods of troubles have passed for the Red River Colony; from all appearances, they have just begun. You already know how the extraordinary rise of water level has caused damages last year; however it was just the prelude to a double flood during this season; the first caused by the melting snow only delayed the seeding; but the second, which came following torrential rain fallen almost without interruption during the month of July and August has caused much more disasters. From human memory, we had never seen anything similar; the rivers are again overflowing their banks and have destroyed the crops in many locations and mostly in my parish; the abundance of rain on the land has caused considerable damage to the potatoes and peas. What escaped this disaster, especially the wheat crops, has a magnificent appearance and is now out of danger. Glory be to God because famine threatened us with all its horrors for next winter.

“But the prairie” will you say “that inexhaustible meat depot?” Well, it's mostly for the hunts that occur that the moment of crisis has arrived. I already had a chance to tell you about it, but now that I saw for myself what it's about, I can give you more details that will not be without interest.

Let's examine the position and expanse of these prairies where the Metis travel every summer in numerous caravans, to look for provisions. To this end, take a map of North America, notice the space between the Assiniboine River to the north, the Red River to the east. The Cheyenne River and Coteau des Prairie to the south; to the west by a line drawn from the mouth of the Souris River; and you will have under your eyes a region where bisons roam by the millions all year long. In this vast expanse of country, we only met a few clumps of bushes alongside the rivers. Without having seen it, we can hardly have an idea presented by these plains without borders. It is sprinkled by a few salt lakes, which have been placed there to irritate the thirsty hunter in time of great drought. The soil, which probably will never know the ripping of the plow presents a continuation of elevations and dips, less significant to the truth; it is generally sandy and this land, be it habitable would only produce meagre crops. We find in a few places mostly on the river banks of the Souris River, a few traces of iron mines. And so, it is a veritable desert, where will soon reign silence and solitude, if the progressive reduction of the buffalo herds continue. We walk entire months without noticing that we have changed places, such is the appearance of these locations offering monotony. Even though many thousands of savages roam the country in

all directions we would not doubt that there would be a human being if we did not know it before.

A few rivers which have with time dug the river bed to a depth of 300 to 400 feet, offer some very picturesque sights. From the top of their elevated banks, we like to admire the little stream that snakes pleasantly between two rows of trees. We are surprised that such little flow could cause such a displacement of soil; for between the two banks of the rivers spreads normally a two or three mile wide valley, while the river flow is only fifteen to twenty feet.

The North West and West of this territory are visited by the Assiniboines and the Saulteaux; the South East by the Sioux more numerous than first two together and their mortal enemies. The Assiniboines, as their name and language indicate clearly are from the same family as the Sioux. The Saulteaux give the Sioux the name of "Pikanak", and to the Assiniboines, the name of "Assini-Pikanak" or "Sioux of the stones". Despite the ties of relationship and languages, because they get along well together, they none-the-less have waged a mortal war for a long time. To supplement their numbers the Assiniboines made an alliance with the Saulteaux. The savages of the prairies are generally the worst species; however the Saulteaux and the Assiniboines respect the life of the White and are satisfied to rob them every time that they can do it without exposing themselves to bigger danger. These last one known for very wise thieves. But the Sioux are without doubt the crueller of these people; if they are less thieving it's because they their skills to murder. Murder is the object of their burning desire and the goal of all their moves; to achieve this they are not scared of fatigue or fasting. They kill indiscriminately Whites or savages; there is only their cowardice that stops them.

A few Metis, while isolated had been massacred from time to time by the Sioux, but peace had not been openly broken between them. Until this present year, have always travelled this territory as masters, that they consider their homeland because many of them were born and have passed a big part of their youth here. Before settling at Red River, no savage nation had occupied this desert that formed a wall of separation between the warring tribes. Also the bison grazed in peace in countless numbers and were the only proprietors. They were only worried by the passage of war parties, which were looking for scalps. This is the reason these animals were so numerous at the arrival of the Metis.

While talking about war parties, I have to remind you happily that military art amongst the savages is far from being perfect. When it comes to start a campaign it is not necessary to make major preparations that ruins a nation; each soldier takes his "pakamagam" or tomahawk ( casse tete – head breaker), his bow and his rifle and he leaves following his chief who only has the name of chief. The supplies present themselves on the trail, a horn dangling from the shoulder of each soldier is used as a supple case. The number of warriors in those war parties varies greatly; 60 and 80 men form a normal contingent; 300 to 400 constitute a large party. Amongst them we do not talk about meeting the enemy but at his surprise, as they are such cowards that they would not want to openly attack an enemy that would have but one fifth or sixth of their numbers. Consequently, the excursion always is made with great precautions; and if it happens that they are discovered, the only convenient outing is to run away, Here is an example...One day the Metis, arriving at "la Maison du Chien" (House of the Dog) a butte (hillock) that hold a few

wild chokecherry and Saskatoon trees.<sup>5</sup> Two hundred Sioux warriors were ambushed there; assuming that they were well hidden, they were waiting for their prey in complete silence. Luckily, our Metis, suspecting nothing take time to unharness their horses; and here they are, men, women and children, scattered and without rifles, rushing towards the bushes battling as to whom would get there first. “All of a sudden we were discovered” thought the Sioux “here they were charging at us.” And without that the greatest number were women and children, and that the men are without guns, pushed by terror, they run away with such haste that they abandon their light packs, in the middle of which is a magnificent ceremonial bonnet, all decorated with feathers. From this outing, they run up to the fort of Missouri where they relate still terrified the danger to which they have escaped and the chase given to them by the Metis. These, on the contrary, arriving behind the butte were very surprised to find the war bonnet, and understood with fear the peril to which their foolishness had exposed them.

When a party has discovered an enemy camp, they stop immediately and carefully hide while waiting for nightfall to come to their help. When thick darkness spread on the land, and a deep silence reigns in all the lodges, the warriors prepare themselves carefully for the attack. The chief encourages them and reminds them not to expose themselves to danger; thereafter we offer ourselves some recommendations, we bid our farewells to our friends and parents, we mourn in advance those who will stay on the battlefield. After all these ceremonies, the braves crawl wolf-like to the lodges; they stop shortly; they listen and hear only the beating of their heart troubled only by fear and hope; sometime protected by the snoring of heavy sleepers, they move with less fear. They are at two steps from their enemies; the first ray of light appears in the orient, it is the signal for the attack. In that solemn moment, everybody gets up; they discharge their muskets, accompanied by dreadful yelling; a second and third succeeds before the unfortunate attacked have time to realize what is happening. If they do not resist, and if they try to run, the assailants rush them with the “pakamagan” in hand; they beat without pity those that the gun has spared or merely wounded, and cut them up right away. The most courageous eat the heart and drink the blood still warm of their enemy; the scalps, the feet and the hands are threaded on sticks and worn in triumph. The massacre barely over that the band imagines having in pursuit the avengers of death the take headlong flight, each taking what he thinks is the safest route. You would not believe the excessive joy caused by the sight of those bloody remains scattered in the middle of camp; you have to be a witness to understand. The war chant start at once, the dances start and restart until the change of the season.

These are in general, the war expedition of the savages. They look upon spring and fall as the most favourable seasons for these exploits. These barbarian scenes that you seem to find only in books, and that the tale alone makes you tremble are far from being rare over here. There have been more than six that happened around us in less than a year, and without a special protection from God your friend would inevitably become victim to this on-goings.

Even though my letter is already long, you will not be angry if I add a few details on these matters.

Last year (1850), I took the route to the prairie for the first time. The meeting place is always on

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<sup>5</sup> *Amelanthier Canadensis*, or *Pyrus Arenia*

the banks of the Pembina River; we come from all parts to organize the camp and to take to the prairie, everybody together. Ordinarily there are two camps, the camp from the Forks and Pembina, and the one from Cheval-Blanc (White-Horse) which is much less numerous. The organization is made in a general assembly and consists in the election of a leader charged in the direction of the camp, of a few guides to lead the march, and a certain number of captains who each take 10 men and have to enforce the rules of the camp, to maintain order, and to stand guard during the night, when the caravan is in the neighborhood of the Sioux. In each camp there is always a certain number of Saulteaux who are very awkward when the Sioux happen to come by. The caravan of Cheval Blanc (White Horse) was made up last year of 120 horsemen and 340 carts. As the buffalo were rather scarce we had to enter the hill (Coteau) of the Prairie. It is the most dangerous part, because of the facility to hide for the war parties, and to sweep down unexpectedly as the caravan often stopped and slowed down in its march by the numerous ravines. We received some meat from two Sioux, who arrived in the middle of our camp, before being recognized since their clothing closely resembled those of the Saulteaux. It was with the greatest difficulty that we managed to save their lives by covering them with our bodies from the guns of the Saulteaux. We were forced to guide them up to a distance of two leagues (6 miles) to protect them. After giving them a few presents we suggested to them not to step foot in the Metis camp, by telling them that even though we had no bad intentions towards them, we could not guarantee their safety, as we had to take up arms to defend them from the Saulteaux.

A while after, our Saulteaux with a number over a 100 decided to go to the Fort of the Prairies in peace, or rather in search of presents rather than for peace. The chief then came with great ceremony to beg me for a letter of introduction addressed to the bourgeois (Lord). I accepted with reluctance, after having made the liveliest recommendations to look after his young men, as a few of them were very suspicious. On August 4, they left for the fort and arrived there the next morning. They were noticed behind a butte (hill), they are busy cleaning up, seven Sioux come forward to acknowledge them. Arriving at the butte, they find themselves face to face with the Saulteaux, who having finished the difficult task of prettying themselves once again started their march. Running away would be what would please the Sioux, very surprised to be surrounded by such a large number of enemies; however flight is impossible, they therefore courageously come forward and present their hand without saying a word. "Pwanak...Pwanak paskinutak" (the Sioux! The Sioux! Let's kill them ) cry a few Saulteaux. The chief succeeds in stopping the explosion of hate that these words are about to produce. We take the road of the Fort with the newcomers; questions upon questions are put to them, but they do not answer. One of them finally takes the risk of talking; on his first word he is recognized and in a moment more than a hundred gunshots are directed at the seven unfortunates. Five are knocked down right away, and two have the strength to travel a few acres before falling. The brave Saulteaux, amazed at their own courage, had taken the precaution of fleeing while firing. Seeing their enemy fallen, they take heart, and knife in hand they fall upon their victims. One of these unfortunate, still very much alive screams with howling sounds while they cut him up. The slaughter completed our braves, who already believe seeing avengers behind them take flight at full speed bringing carefully the bloody spoils that they have taken.

What horror to see arriving in camp these fanatics drunk on the double pleasure of having massacred their enemies and having also escaped from danger. The emotions that we experience in such circumstances are felt rather than being expressed. If you could be a witness to the

joyous emotions, with which they carry in triumph these cut up body parts still dripping with blood; if you could observe the frenzy with which they kiss these scalps, you would have an idea of the passion of vengeance that dominate the heart of our Saulteaux savages.

However the Sioux, that we were subject to complain about their inhuman massacre, are not any more worthy than their enemies. One of the two scoundrels to whom we had saved the life with so much trouble had gone directly to form a war party to attack the other camp; and of the two Metis horsemen that had gone away without precautions; the first fell pierced by bullets and arrows and the second wounded at the knee only owed his life to the cowardice of the enemies, who took flight leaving behind blankets, coats, etc, etc, so scared to be followed. And so for the last summer; let' now see about this one. (1851)

From what we hear, the Sioux had asked for help to their American agent to repel the Metis and he had answered; "If the lands where the Metis hunts belong to you defend them." And so these scoundrels decided to hit us during the summer. With these intentions, they have sent themselves tobacco from all sides during the winter, in order to unite as many people as they could during the hunt, and make their attack more successful. What was most unfortunate, was that, not receiving their newsletters, we did not know anything about those menacing preparations. In ordinary time that is on June 15 we took the route of the prairies; we were going with the simplicity of the dove but we did not have the caution of the snake. Although if the events of the last fall and those of this spring, where they attacked a lodge and killed 3 people, did not have the good effect to make us suspicious of the fate that was being prepared for us, at least was it such as to place us on our guard. After four days of march in the prairies we rejoined the camp of the Forks and Pembina, and two days later we met a large quantity of buffaloes; and so we could according to the divine providence, provide to the pressing needs of such a large camp that was in a state of fasting. We had to separate in that location in two camps, common at the time because by staying together we would not get full loads. However, the big camp declared that they had decided to proceed at the "Maison du Chien" (House of the Dog) that we normally followed; they adopted this plan, not on a whim or bad faith but for safety, "because" we had heard it said "we had learned that the Sioux wanted to attack us, and there was too much danger to go that way." For myself, I admit I had a lot of trouble persuading myself that they would dare attack our camp, and that is why I answered to the one who made these observations; "We run much less danger in a camp of 80 to 100 horsemen, than in the large camp. Being less numerous, each had sooner killed the number of animals that suited him, and after we are better on our guard. In a big camp, the opposite happens; we are sometimes obliged to follow the animals up to two leagues (6 miles) and so distanced from one another we are more exposed; furthermore we rely on the large number and the guard is made less carefully."

We split up; but as our party had to move towards the Sioux, and such neighbouring had nothing inviting, we found ourselves reduced to 67 horsemen, while the other camp had 318. Even though weakened we hoped to make our charges very promptly; and without much risks being careful to always have a good watch. Furthermore, our friends from the big camp promised to come to our rescue, if they found out that we were being attacked by the Sioux.

As soon as we were on our way the last horsemen of the other camp gave chase to a small group of a Sioux party that they had discovered nearby; the latest events had made them resolve not to

endure them close to us. We received news of these happenings right away, which did not greatly surprise us, because we were convinced that their war party had already discovered us. It was one more reason for us to redouble our vigilance. The march continued without other incident up to near Coteau-des Prairies (Hill of the Prairies or Big Hill) that we reached Saturday evening, July 12. As we were about to set camp after having climbed the first butte (hill) our scouts announced the discovery of a large camp. Who were those people? The Sioux? The Assiniboines? Or our friends from the other party? That is what the distance did not allow us to distinguish. However, the caravan chief gave the order to come back and to go find a camp in the prairie easier to defend; at the same time a few horsemen using binoculars went forward to recognize our neighbours; it was easy to accomplish that mission without being seen, by using a bit of caution. But caution is a virtue that does not match very well with the Metis behaviour. They simply group themselves on a butte (hill) where they cannot help but to be noticed. From there, with the help of binoculars, they recognize the Sioux, and notice that they are very numerous.

Despite all recommendations made not to go too far forward, and to come back as soon as they had achieved their mission; well! Many push their folly by wanting to make sure, from their own eyes, that the binoculars had not deceived them; they move forward straight toward the Sioux camp, with perfect indifference; instead of taking flight when the Sioux come to meet them they move towards their enemies! Three of our scatterbrains are made prisoners, two others escape to come and announce such bad news. What to do? To drive the Sioux at first sight, like we had done before was not practical; we have to think of a way to obtain the freedom of our men. To capture the first of the enemy band that present themselves seems the best reasonable plan. And so it was the one that would bring most success. However the savagery of a few of ours, to whom the death of three of their parents massacred a while back, had left a bleeding sore in their heart, forced us to renounce that plan. They could not see themselves close to the murderers of their children without firing on them. During deliberation three Sioux appear in sight of the camp. Ten of our hunters go and meet them. After many ceremonies, they finally approach peacefully. "The French who are in our camp" say the visitors, "are well; they drink and eat without fear. We came to camp here farther than ordinarily, to trade with the Metis." They promise to immediately return the prisoners, on the enquiries that we made in regard to the worries of their families. However, this they did not accept. We made them promises to give them the next day tobacco, balls and powder; because they described pleasantly their misery. We recommended to them to come in small numbers and not to come close to camp. They announced us also that their band consisted of 600 lodges. Finally this encounter took place peacefully, and we split up with some nice words. We could right then appreciate the danger of our position. There was no doubt as to the treachery of these barbarians; having been discovered and not willing to openly attack our camp, they had made them prisoners in order to enter on the pretext of peace treaty, and to surprise us with less danger to themselves. Also we would have to be more simpleminded than the savages to be taken in by their plan; it was unanimously resolved that they would only enter the camp at the end of the gun. Right away we started to fortify our flimsy and moving ramparts of carts, and we hand each other through the wheels some poles that we attach as solidly as possible. We dig holes under the carts to place the women and children in shelter from the bullets; outside the circle, we raise some earthen redoubt to protect our hunters in case they found themselves overwhelmed by enemy fire. We better believe that we kept good watch all night.

It was precisely at the time of the full moon, and we could leisurely contemplate the solemn spectacle of the eclipse, that I had predicted to my people.

While my friends from Canada observe at their pleasure this admirable phenomenon of nature, I told myself, here I am...me, forced to face during this long and sad night a death which, even though seen through a cloud of doubt appeared nonetheless horrible. Ah! My dear friend, I will admit to you that I made there my sacrifice; because I expected to be cut up in pieces by the barbarians tomorrow. Humanly, it was the only conclusion I could arrive at. A camp of 600 lodges would give at least 2000 warriors; and what did we have to oppose them? Roughly 80 hunters, from which some of them were no more than 12 to 15 years old. We had a rampart, for sure, but what a rampart! Some carts placed side by side could stop our horses from fleeing; but how could they defend us from a hail of bullets. It was then, almost for sure, that there would be no chance of salvation for us; and without obvious protection from God ... the hand that writes these lines would now be suspended from a pole, and subjected to the plaything of the wind on top of a Sioux grave.

However, at the break of dawn, we had sent two runners towards the big camp to let them know of our critical position.

The next day, July 13, our scouts noticed the Sioux who had started to march; but what numbers! It is not only a few men, as we had acknowledged but a moving mass of men, women, and children. Halfway, they make a stop. However, about 30 from our camp leave to meet them. Barely on their way one of the three prisoners appears. What will he announce us? Death and an inevitable death! As a few laugh at his fear;" Ah! My friends, you do not have to laugh; you do not have a life to hope for. We are facing a camp of 1800 lodges; and they told me that they wanted to enter our camp to raze everything." It was probably 1800 warriors and not 1800 lodges that the Sioux had in this location. Our horsemen had joined the most advanced of the Sioux horsemen, and after having given them a few presents they want to try and make them turn back. Impossible to stop them. A few paces farther our men notice from a rise, the crowd coming towards them; they then understand that the only thing to do is return to camp where they arrive before the Sioux horsemen that they had not met. The die is cast, we have to fight, and there is not a moment to lose. "Courage! Courage my friends!" I repeated while circling the camp "you see that our enemies are numerous; but you also know that they are cowards. Remember that God is on your side and you have a father in heaven who sees how unjust is the attack of those people against you; fight courageously, it is He who commands you to defend your wives and children, and to protect your lives. Let us die like braves as long as we have a breath of life in our chest, let us use it to defend ourselves." What do you say, my friend? Isn't that nicely acting like a general? And if the deceased Napoleon Bonaparte had heard me, wouldn't he have in passing thrown a few Legion of Honour crosses. At the same time I made a vow to make a solemn fast and to sing three high masses.

The Sioux were getting closer to the camp; we warn the closest one to turn back; we threaten him with a gun; but instead he brazenly tries to find a way to throw his horse inside the camp. Seeing that words and threats are not sufficient to scare him off, and that his people are joining him in great numbers force is upon us to act. We fire, and he falls after a few steps pierced with bullets.

This unfortunate is precisely one of the two Sioux to which life we had saved with so much trouble last year. He just received his just punishment for his ingratitude since not content to have made “coup”<sup>6</sup> almost out of our hands, that he was coming at the head of his own kind to cut our throat. We did not forget the fate of the two other prisoners left in their power. But to what would have benefited to let the Sioux enter our camp? Our death could not save their life. These first shots resonated in the large band of Sioux; and an American, or an American Metis, who had under his guard one of the prisoners, asked him why we were firing at the camp. He told them even though he had he had his doubt about the affair answered him without trouble, “It's a discharge of happiness announce the peace; let's go ahead to be with the first one.” At the time he spurred his mount and moved a little to the right to get away from the crowd, the other one followed, whether he did not understand his intention or that he wanted to favour his escape. Seeing a chance for success, our man decided to flee, though perilous it may be, as the road to the camp was sprinkled with horsemen. He throws his horse in flight; the American Metis fires and misses by design or clumsiness. Each Sioux horseman who sees him throws himself in front to cut off his escape; the bullets whistle by his ears; already he is in sight of our camp where he is recognized. Like lightning, his companions run to meet him; his enemies take flight, he is saved and rejoining his friends, he wounds, at the same time, the horsemen, who just shot at him, as well as his horse. We had a few moments of respite, from which I took advantage for encouraging our people. But while I was going around the camp, the Sioux already had surrounded the camp from all side and encircled it like a belt; their bullets criss-crossed above our heads. Our hunters skilful shooters, answer with more accuracy and accompanied their discharges with cries of joy, which push discouragement in the heart of their enemies, surprised by such unexpected resistance. Soon the bravest of these cowards having received their passport to the other world, the others have the wisdom not to imitate them and consequently keep themselves at a respectful distance. However we see them gathering at different points, we hear them yell their war cries, continuing their fire without much effect.

They appear to want to organize and advance as a body up to us; that is what we mostly feared as not being one against twenty we could not resist hand to hand. Fear takes over in their councils and they do not dare come closer; convinced that death awaits the first to open the route. As a matter of fact, the gap that they would have achieved in our weak rampart would have cost them dearly; we were all well decided to prove to them that a white values his life and does not give it away cheaply. Each with his knife on his belt, ready to replace his gun and your friend who had not considered convenient to his character to grab a gun, had decided at the supreme moment that he would raise his axe on the first scoundrel who would dare to raise his hand on my cart. Happily it did not come to this end. After a fusillade of approximately six hours one of the chiefs cried out “Hola warriors, we cannot kill the French and they are crushing us; we would be better off to leave. They could get mad for good and then they could come after us. Warriors let us go”. It did not take more to discourage them and you better believe that their harangue clearly hear from our camp, redoubled our cries of joy. They immediately start their retreat, and resume gloomily their way from which they had triumphantly advanced. They were so sure to raze our camp, that they drove their horses harnessed to the shaft, in order to carry our spoils. But what a setback! Instead of our luggage, they only have to transport their wounded and their dead.

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<sup>6</sup> coup – to make a blow.

For me, in such an unexpected success, I only see a surprising protection of God. Still if we had come out with a slight chance, by losing just a few of our own. But no! Our good father had wanted to show us in a clearer manner with what affection he protects those who have confidence in him, and who asks for his help by the powerful intercession of Mary. The Sioux themselves, forced to recognize it, were crying in the heat of the battle;” You have with a Manitou who defends you.” Not a single man was killed in our camp; only three were slightly wounded. And however thousands of bullets had crossed in all directions the narrow space that we occupied. Praise be given to the divine Providence! As for the loss of the Sioux, we did not know them but we estimated about a dozen dead.

I can assure you as we saw them leave that my heart felt very relieved. We could then breathe at ease, and roam on the battlefield. Each hunter went to examine the spot where he believed that he had seen an enemy fall under his shots and the blood clot that he would find, almost everyone realizing that he had not been wrong.

A sadder spectacle presented itself on the spot where our third prisoner had been shot, and who had not been able to escape! From the camp we had noticed his execution. His remains were there all mutilated; three knives were left plunged in his body, which had been pierced by 67 arrows and 3 bullets. The hands and feet had been taken, the arms were broken, his scalp taken, his skull fractured, his brain scattered all around. We gathered carefully scraps of his flesh and bones, and where we buried them with the usual ceremonies.

We were expecting the Sioux to come back to the attack *durant la nuit*; but they were satisfied to keep us awake by imitating the calls of different animals around our camp.

However our two runners sent to the other camp had their route cut off by a Sioux party, and had returned without fulfilling their mission. We were hoping however that two young men who had taken flight at the start of the firing would be more successful; actually this is what happened. Whatever the goal of their trip, we had nevertheless to retreat. To avoid a surprise during the march, we prepared the following arrangements. Four parties of horsemen would stay around one mile from the caravan, one in the back, one in the front, and the two others on the sides. They were to signal us as to the sight of the enemy, by crisscrossing two horsemen on a butte. (hill) This way, we had enough time to camp. For faster movement, we proceeded with the carts on 4 columns, so that at the first alarm two ranks would move to one side and two ranks would move to the other, it would only leave to close the two ends to the ordinary width of the camp, and our rampart was ready in an instant. Barely were we on our way for half an hour that two of our horsemen from our rear crossed each other and the Sioux appear. They are less numerous than the previous day and also less passionate. We put our first lesson to the test; our carts are placed on double rank; our redoubt are raised at approximately half an acre from the rampart; which has the effect of keeping the enemy far enough so that they could not kill our horses. Like the night before, they encircle the camp, but they were careful to keep themselves out of range; it appears however that they had two people killed or wounded. They never reached anybody on our side; a few horses were slightly wounded. This time the firing lasted roughly five hours. Towards the end of that period, one of them advanced crying;” Stop! Stop!” He then asked to enter our camp. But as we could not answer for his life we did not want to let him in. He then told us that he would not return to attack us; but that they would break camp and go back.

Barely had he finished talking that his companions ride flat out, and passing at a short distance, send a volley of shots screaming like some disparate person. It was the most terrible of their fusillade; the bullets hit the carts like hail. I thought that for the camp it would cost us dearly. It was not so; it was not more effective than the others. Our hunters responded to the best of their ability by crying for joy a thousand times repeated. The attack was ended.

The scoundrels were leaving at the right time. If they had continued for another half hour, their march would have been quickly accelerated. Our hunters from the other camp, warned by the two young men who had run away, were coming to our rescue and were already close enough to hear their last discharge; they joined us three quarter of an hour after the departure of our assailants. These poor people, shaking hands with us, cried with joy, as they expected us to be massacred by the Sioux. For me, I felt at this moment a very deep emotion.

As we were this last encampment, we sent a letter to the Sioux, that we tied at the end of a pole. It was written in English, so that the American who was with them could translate it to them. Here is the rough translation.

*“The Metis to the Sioux:— Poor people: It was against the inclination of our heart, and even with great reluctance, that we were forced to fight with you; it is your doing; it is you who placed us in this cruel necessity. It is not necessary here to remind you our previous behaviour towards you, in order to convince you that we have no bad intentions in coming to hunt in the prairie; you know very well that we come peacefully to find our life. How many times did we not save your life, when you entered our camp even forced to quarrel with our Saulteaux parents to stop them from harming you! Each time that the occasion would present itself, you well know, we always tried to prove to you that we were good brothers to you hoping that finally you would have the spirit to do the same for us. On the contrary, you never missed an occasion to show yourself our enemies, slaughtering our fathers, our mothers, our brothers, and other parents, and that not only in the prairies, but right around our houses. Still even this spring did you not attack, as traitors, one of our families that had been separated, and where you have killed three people and wounded three more? However we have always forgiven you. To come back to the matter of today, we were informed of your cruel intention to enter our camp to raze it. And so were we forced to ask the justice of God by the force of arms; and evidently God declared Himself on the issue of this matter. We only had 80 armed men in our camp; you know how numerous you were on your side; you had possibly no less than 2000 warriors. See now the results of two attacks. You did not kill a single person in our camp; only 3 were slightly wounded. From the 3 prisoners, that you captured at our arrival, two also escaped safe and sound; and the third, that you massacred with such barbarianism is the only person that we have to be sorry for. For your dead and wounded, more than us you know the numbers. And now, poor people, you clearly see that you have acted against the will of God, since he came to our defence so well. We have thanked him from the bottom of our heart, for the protection he has given us; and as long as we love him, he will be our protector; he will be your enemy, as long as you are so cruel as you are and you do not want to follow his law. You have to fear Him. As of the future, we are warning you never to enter our camp and never to roam around it; we know too well that you do not have other intentions to ambush a few of ours and to kill them.”*

Here, exactly and honestly, how this affair happened. As I fear that it might be reported by a few

American newspapers, who would have received their information from the Sioux, I thought I would tell you in all the details, to put in your hands the necessary documents for our defence if they wanted to attack us.

Maybe they will say that the Sioux have hatched this plot to the Metis from destroying the buffaloes and their land: here is what it is. The lands between the Cheyenne River and the Pembina river on which the Metis make their hunt, are neither the Sioux, nor the Saulteaux. From human memory, none of these nations ever properly resided. The fear made it a desert; land that had never been crossed by sometime the Sioux, sometime the Saulteaux. The first who dared to sojourn are the Metis; the Saulteaux only go under the protection of the Metis; the Sioux thought to justify having come to camp in a location where we never saw them in fear that we would suspect their evil design. A few years ago one of their chief had asked the Metis, as border for their land, the Cheyenne River. And so the rights that the Metis have on the land are the same as the savages in general on the lands where we find them; the rights founded on occupation and possession of the vacant lands. They started to settle there, about 40 years ago; many amongst them were born there; they always enjoyed the land peacefully until now, and this is where they find their subsistence. Most certainly, those who would strip them of this property without compensating them would be guilty of a grave injustice. It is on these lands that the Sioux had come to attack them.

Our two camps after their reunion would consist of roughly 700 men from which 200 were Saulteaux. It was appropriate to go and tell the Sioux to respect a bit more the rights of the people. However these opinions were divided. Some of them wanted to pursue them right away. I looked this party as the best. I did not believe even so that it would be appropriate to counsel them. A large number, on the contrary, I thought that it would be better to let them go rather than to expose ourselves to miss our hunt in pursuing them. This advice prevailed, and we were satisfied to go and pass in front of their camp to show them that we did not fear them. They were already gone, and a few horsemen, who went to visit the place they had occupied, found a rampart made of soil and stone. This labour testified that they also had been scared. Ten days later a few Metis having gone to the fort of the Mandan's with Mister Lacombe, brought us the following news. In the two attacks the Sioux had 18 wounded men and 15 dead; we also killed 9 of their horses. After the last action, on the influence of fear, they hurried to leave; believing that we were getting ready to pursue them, they broke camp, and marched one day and one night without stopping in order to place themselves out of reach. Everywhere in the fort of the Missouri, we knew they gathered to make a foray on our caravan, and it was feared that they would succeed in their ugly design. They blamed themselves to have acted so awkwardly. "But also" did they add, "we did not think they would have the boldness to wait for us; we were hoping that they would run, in seeing us so numerous and that we would only have to knock them out and to take care of their spoils; that is why we had driven our horses all in harness." Furthermore, they had sent a war party up to the Pembina river to watch our march and to keep their camp informed. They had all the chances possible in their hands.

What would have become of us if one good morning they had swept up on us without warning? Even though we had not seen them again for the rest of our trip, this incident had bothered our hunt so much that we only brought back half a load.

They promise us a regular post, of two months between Pembina and the Entree; this measure will have the effect to expand our land of exile and to bring us closer to the civilized world. I will take advantage to follow more closely the affairs of my beloved country.....

I am sincerely  
Your devoted friend

Louis Richer Laflèche  
Priest, Missionary