

Montagne de Bois; Coulée Chapelle and Talle de Saules (Willow Bunch)

Wood Mountain (elevation 1000 metres), is located about 135 km southwest of present day Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, near the Canada-U.S. border on the 49th Parallel. It has flat-topped hills, dissected by coulees, which rise some 400 metres above the surrounding prairie. The Métis settled on the slopes of Montagne de Bois in 1870, building houses from the plentiful poplar trees. In 1871 the HBC trading post at Wood Mountain became the prairie depot of the Boundary Commission. The Fort Qu'Appelle – Wood Mountain Trail was a provisional supply route during the height of the fur trade. It was approximately 250 km in length across vast expanses of southern prairie. From east to west it followed a general southwest direction from Fort Qu'Appelle, going south of Regina, through the Dirt Hills ending in Wood Mountain. The trail was an important provisional route supplying Hudson's Bay Company posts southwest of Fort Qu'Appelle. Lebreton missionaries also used the trail extensively, as it was their only access to numerous Métis settlements.

En 1869, un Métis nommé George Fisher avait visité certaines familles métisses qui hivernaient dans la région de la Montagne de Bois. Selon Fisher, cette région était enchantée; le territoire en question étant traversé par une vallée où abondaient le bois et les sources d'eau et où il y avait beaucoup de bisons et de gibier. Une caravane de 300 charrettes avait donc quitté Pembina. Elle transportait 75 familles métisses venant de Pembina, de Saint-Joseph et de Saint-François-Xavier. Tous se dirigeaient vers la Montagne de Bois. Jean-Louis Légaré, traiteur et futur fondateur de Willow Bunch était avec ce groupe de Métis.

In 1869, a Metis named George Fisher¹ had visited certain Metis families who wintered in the area of the Wood Mountain. According to Fisher, this area was inviting; the territory in question was crossed by a valley where wood and sources of water abounded; and where there were many bison and other game. A caravan of 300 carts had thus left Pembina. They transported 75 Metis families coming from Pembina, Saint-Joseph and Saint-François-Xavier. All moved towards the Wood Mountain. Jean-Louis Légaré, a trader and future founder Willow Bunch was with this group of Metis.²

Les nouveaux venus s'établissent premièrement à un endroit appelé la Coulée-Chapelle.

¹ George Fisher (1830-1898) was born in Prairie du Chein, Wisconsin in 1830, the son of George Fisher and Genevieve Courville. George married Emilie Boyer, the daughter of Baptiste Boyer (b. 1805) and Helene McMillan (b.1811) and had 11 children. He passed away on 1898 in Lebreton, George was a nephew of Hudson's Bay Company Chief Trader Henry Fisher.

² On April 15, 1873, Jean-Louis married Marie Ouellette, the daughter of François Ouellette (born August 7, 1832 at SFX) and Josephine Bottineau (born 1833 at SFX). On October 5, 1875, Marie gave birth to their only child Albert Joseph. Tragedy struck this new family on December 4, 1876, when Marie Ouellette passed away after falling off a horse while she was visiting her father at Fort Walsh. Seven Ouellettes led by Old Joseph Ouellette signed the Cypress Hills Metis Hunting Band petition for a reserve along the border in 1878. Four of the Ouellettes later signed Louis Riel's petition of August 6, 1880 to Nelson A. Miles, (Musselshell River MT), asking for a Métis reservation in central Montana. These men were all sons of Old Joseph Ouellette (b. 1872) and Theresa Houle (b. 1794): Antoine Ouellette (b. 1835), François Ouellette (b. 1832), Joseph Ouellette (b. 1834) and Moise Ouellette (b. 1830).

Dans son histoire de Willow Bunch, l'abbé Clovis Rondeau explique que la Coulée-Chapelle se trouvait dans la paroisse de Saint-Victor, à quelques milles de Willow Bunch. Dans son article dans le Patriote de l'Ouest, Louis Schmidt, ancien secrétaire de Louis Riel, donne un autre nom à la Coulée-Chapelle. «Ainsi, si je ne me trompe, St-Victor se trouve tout près de la “Coulée des Prêtres”, c'est-à-dire l'endroit où le premier missionnaire de ces régions - la Montagne de Bois - s'est d'abord établi et a passé l'hiver; je crois que c'était le Père Lestanc, qui a été remplacé peu après par le P. St-Germain.»

The newcomers establish firstly at a place called the Coulée-Chapelle. In the history of Willow Bunch, Abbot Clovis Rondeau explains that the Coulée-Chapelle was in the parish of Saint-Victor, some miles west of Willow Bunch. Louis Schmidt, former secretary of Louis Riel, give another name to the Coulée-Chapelle. “Thus, if I am not mistaken, St-Victor is very close to the “Coulée des Prêtres”, said to be the place where the first missionary of this area - the Wood Mountain - established and overwintered; I believe that this was Father Lestanc, who was replaced shortly after by the Pere St. Germain.”

In 1870 the Metis came to Willow Bunch to settle with their families. At that time the little Saskatchewan town was called "*Talle-de-Saules*" in honour of the bark from the abundant willow trees in the area used for smoking.

In 1870, Antoine Ouellette sent Louis Legare to trade with the people in the area between Wood Mountain and Willow Bunch, a distance of approximately 40 miles known as *La Montagne de Bois*. Jean Louis Legare was hired by his Metis employer, Antoine Ouellette³, at a salary of \$25.00 a month to establish a business in this area. He organized a camp at Little Woody which is approximately 15 miles south of Willow Bunch and spent the winter of 1870-1871 collecting furs. In the spring he travelled to Pembina to sell the furs he had collected over the winter months. He continued on to St Francois-Xavier, Manitoba, where he became a partner with George Fisher, who had previously been interested in establishing a post in the Willow Bunch Area. Fisher provided the merchandise, the horses and carts, two men, and promised Legare one third of the profits. Legare and his party arrived to establish a trading post in the area 3 miles east of the Police Post at Wood Mountain. He remained there for 9 years.

During the fall of 1879, a vast prairie fire destroyed all of the grazing area in a considerable portion of *La Montagne de Bois*, resulting in many of the Metis moving east and setting up camp in the St. Victor and Willow Bunch areas. In 1880 Legare constructed a temporary building (a store and adjoining house), the first wooden house in Willow Bunch. A private water line existed to the Legare Home. Legare's efforts resulted in many French Canadian settlers coming to this area.

In 1884, Legare drove one hundred horses to Manitoba and received forty five head of domesticated cattle in return. This began the establishment of ranches in the Willow

³ Antoine “Ratte” Ouellette was an independent trader operating back and forth to St. Paul. He was heavily involved in the Metis/Dakota/Lakota trade. He was a scout and guide for the North West Mounted Police and when Sitting Bull came north in 1876 he was reliant on Ouellette and Legare for supplies.

Bunch area and served as a viable means of livelihood for some of the Metis there.

Nevertheless, many Metis remained in half starving condition owing to the collapse of the trade in buffalo skins. Many Metis moved northward and set up camps in the Moose Jaw area. When the Resistance of 1885 was building momentum citizens of Moose Jaw became perturbed. In response Lieutenant-Governor Dewdney came to Moose Jaw and telegraphed Jean Louis Legare to come from Willow Bunch to induce these Metis to return south. Legare told the Metis that he wanted them to take something back to Willow Bunch and that it was top secret. Of course, they were not happy when they reached Willow Bunch and found out that they had been brought here under false pretences.

Legare was able to settle them down by hiring forty men, which represented all Metis families in the area, at \$2.00 a day as scouts. Legare scattered these families around at such a distance apart as to render them harmless.



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