

Eyewitness Account of the Battle of the Grand Coteau
By Melvin Beaudry as told by Agnes Smith née McGillis Beaudry
Collected by Larry Haag

This is an article written by Melvin Beaudry, a Metis Elder from Seattle, Washington. It is a good account of the rescue of the St. Francois Xavier hunting party by the St Boniface-Pembina hunting group at the Battle of the Grand Coteau.

Letters from My Aunt
By Melvin Beaudry

My Aunt, Mrs. Agnes Smith, passed away in Wenatchee, Washington. She had been born in Opheim, Montana, on May 21, 1913. She was the daughter of Marie (McGillis) Beaudry and Noel Beaudry. Among her papers was this hand written article, it appears as though someone had copied it from a newspaper. Agnes knew and remembered well her grandmother, Isabelle (Fayant) McGillis (1838-1933) who played a part in this episode of Metis history. My great grandmother, Isabelle (Fayant) McGillis was in the party that came from Saint Boniface parish, she would have been a girl of thirteen in the year of 1851. Angus and Isabelle left Saint Francois Xavier in 1870 after the first Riel uprising. The Malaterre that was killed in the famous battle with the Sioux in 1851, was, Jean Baptiste Malaterre. He was the brother of my great grandfather, Louis Malaterre. My great grandfather, Louis Malaterre was living at Saint Peters Mission in Montana when the men (Gabriel Dumont, Moise Ouellette, Michel Dumas, and James Isbister) came down from Canada to induce Louis Riel to return with them to Batoche, in June of 1884.

Here is the story that was written in long hand:

Much ado has been made over the American frontiersmen. Compared to the Canadian variety they were nothing special although their descendants rate tops in the field of public relations.

Now I am here to tell you that there was nothing in North America that could hold a candle to the Red River fur brigades. They could out-fight, out-shoot, out-ride, any other breed of humans that has ever lived. And just to prove that they had other accomplishments as well, they produced enough descendants to form for a time a nation of their own.

The children never disgraced their fathers or their Indian mothers for that matter. They dominated the northern plains so completely that the fur trade lived off the produce of their hunting and operated under the protection of their guns.

Although there were Metis bands living throughout the whole northwest the largest concentrations were within a one hundred mile radius of Fort Garry (now Winnipeg). Here they formed the cavalry that protected the Hudson's Bay heartland, and from here

they sallied forth every year to hunt buffalo and make the pemmican that formed the iron rations of the fur trade.

The fur country needed no protection from the Cree or Saulteaux. They were no threat; they were cousins of the Metis and in-laws of many of the traders themselves. It was the Sioux —“the tigers of the plains”— that had both the inclination and the power to destroy both the fur trade and the settlement at the Red River. The Sioux who were to fight three wars against the U.S. Government before it was safe for the Yankee frontiersmen to venture into the lands of the Dakota.

The Sioux had a great contempt for the U.S. Cavalry, the protectors of the invaders of their lands. They had learned by bitter experiences however not to hold the Metis of the Red River fur brigades in disdain. Every year it was necessary to venture further west in pursuit of the buffalos. The sale of the pemmican was a supplement to incomes made from the sale of furs and work as 'voyageurs'. It was also a social event, a time to meet and visit once more. Most all of these people held some kinship to one another through blood or marriage or just as friends and all had a common bond as Metis.

The Metis with their women and children annually moved to the Sioux country where the herds were now located. As can be imagined it was a humiliation to the war like Sioux, who had no fear of the American army, to have been defeated by the Metis in past skirmishes.

From 1844 until 1851, a precarious peace had existed between the two peoples. The year 1851 would be the largest battle ever fought between the two and as it turned out the final one. As in the past, the large hunting party of 1851 was comprised of three brigades. One was from Pembina which is on the Red River on the American side of the line. Another from Saint Boniface parish and the one from the White Horse Plains, which was the Saint Francois Xavier parish, west of Fort Garry. Among this group was a girl of thirteen, Isabelle Fayant (my great grandmother). Also in the brigade from Saint Boniface parish, was a young lad of fourteen, he would become famous in Metis history. His name was Gabriel Dumont.

As they moved further west there seemed to be no danger from the Sioux, so the large party separated into smaller parties. Near the big bend of the Souris (Mouse River), and the headwaters of the Sheyenne River, south and a little east of present day Minot, North Dakota. Somewhere near the land mark (*Maison du Chien*) Dog Den Butte, on the Grand Coteau of the Missouri River, five scouts from Saint Francois Xavier met the largest band of Sioux anyone had ever seen. Some were to say later the number could have been over two thousand.

These scouts were surrounded by the Sioux, although there was a peace pact it was tenuous at best. It did not take long for the five men to realize they were to become prisoners. Two of them made good their escape at this time and were able to return to the hunting party and give the alarm. Preparations were made in the event that there should be a battle between the two factions. In the meantime the other three scouts, a McGillis,

James Whiteford and Jean Baptiste Malaterre were taken to the Sioux camp as prisoners. All the males in the Metis camp over the age of twelve years numbered only seventy six. The defensive tactics were traditional; carts were circled hub to hub to serve as a corral for the horses and oxen. Beneath the carts, pits were scooped out for the protection of the women and children. Outside the ring of cars rifle pits were scooped out with dirt piles serving as rifle rests as well as protection. As an omen of impending doom, there was an eclipse of the moon that Saturday night, of the 12th of July.

The plains Indians did not attack at night, thus the Metis had nothing to do but wait for morning. Jean Baptiste Falcon was in charge of the camp. Reverend father, Louis Laflèche, was there to minister to his people. In the morning the Sioux were in no hurry to attack as they knew the main party of Metis hunters was a long way off. This gave them plenty of time to paint themselves, sing songs, and make medicine. The priest had time to say mass, confess the sinners, and distribute the sacraments to those that wished to die in grace. The Sioux still in no hurry allowed further preparation for the coming assault.

During the darkness of the night two Metis had been sent off in hopes that they might locate the other hunters who would come to the aid of the pinned down camp. Suddenly down the slopes of the Grand Coteau came the advance party of Sioux followed by the pride of the huge camp.

The Metis offered the customary gift of tobacco and suggested the Sioux depart in peace after the release of the other two prisoners they had taken. They scorned the gifts and scoffed at the idea of retreat, saying they would soon have all that these Metis now owned. Then the main party moved in. At the head was a young chief in a beautiful "War Bonner" calling to the warriors, "this is a good day to die". Falcon ordered the camp to answer with a volley. Several warriors fell from their horses and the party fell back. In the meantime the two remaining prisoners, Whiteford and Jean B. Malaterre were under the guard of a white man that was living with the Sioux. This man allowed the two to escape. Whiteford on a fast horse was able to make it back to the circle of carts. Jean Malaterre however was on a slower horse; he managed to kill or wound three of his pursuers, but was overtaken and became a fatality.

The Sioux attacked again, unmounted they would fire into the camp hoping to hit things they could not really see. The Buffalo hunters of the camp being better shots and having clearer targets exacted a heavy toll on the attackers. Hours later and after many casualties the Sioux withdrew. After the enemy saw how few it took to repel the huge party they were shamed. The humiliation turned to anger. They again mounted a full scale attack and were again repulsed. They pulled back out of rifle range. This allowed the Metis to assess the damage done to them. (There was) one dead, the unfortunate, Jean Baptiste Malaterre, whom they now had to bury. The other damage was twelve horses and four oxen killed (the two men who served as witnesses to this burial were, Pascal Breland and Charles Montmini).

As night fell the Metis could hear singing from the Sioux camp, they were mourning those killed and no doubt preparing for the next days battle. Not being certain if the two

riders sent out for help ever found the main body, the Metis council decided it would be prudent to withdraw and seek them, Early the next morning camp was struck and they headed south. After an hours march the scouts reported the Sioux were in pursuit and an attack was again eminent. Once again the Red River carts were circled, pits hastily dug. Again the Sioux came in a dismounted attack.

This time the battle went on for five hours. Unlike the way the white men fought wars the Indians were not out to see how many they could kill or be killed. To retreat was the better part of valor. They could not resist one final mounted attack however. They circled the carts on horseback and fired one last heavy volley. This caused the slight wounding of three Metis. No one knows how many Sioux died but there have been estimates of as many as eighty or ninety. Before they left one of the Chiefs said they did not know the French, as he called the Metis, were protected by the "Black Robed Manitou" so well and from this time forward they would never bother them again. He lifted his long lance high in salutation and then galloped off.

Shortly after the Sioux had left, a party from the main camp arrived. However, the battle was over by this time.

In the seventh chapter of the book, *'These Are The Prairies'* by Zachary and Marie Albina Hamilton, in an interview with Mrs. Isabelle McGillis in 1928, Isabelle states she was in the party that came in a rescue and was able to help tend to those wounded.

Father Laflèche returned to Eastern Canada in 1858 and later became Bishop of Three Rivers.

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