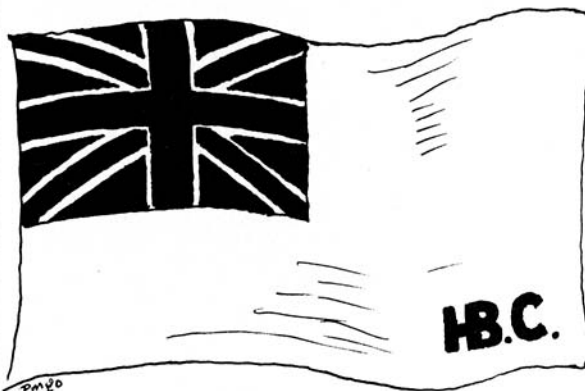


## THE SKIRMISH AT SEVEN OAKS



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# THE SKIRMISH AT SEVEN OAKS

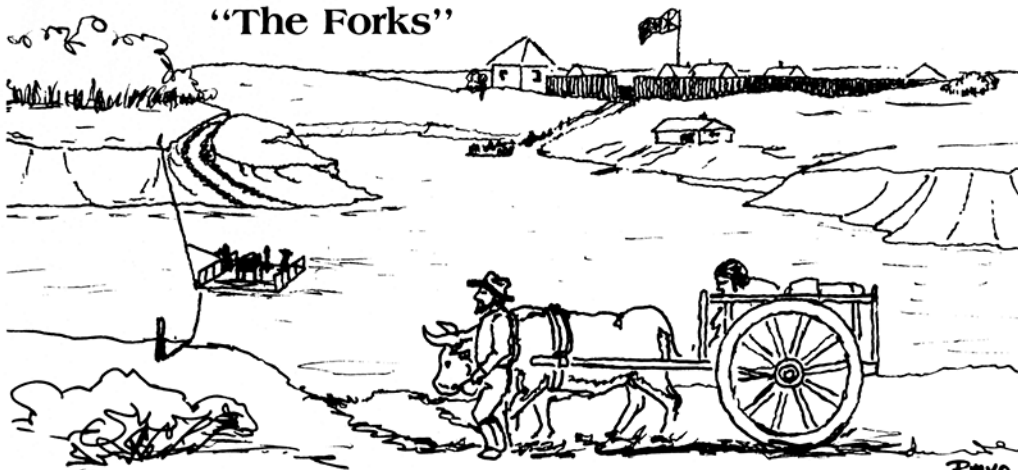
The Skirmish at Seven Oaks took place on June 19, 1816. There were two principal parties involved in the incident. One group, the Metis, was led by Cuthbert Grant and backed by the North West Company. The opposing group, the Selkirk settlers, was led by Governor Semple and supported by the Hudson's Bay Company. The skirmish itself lasted only 15 minutes and involved fewer than 80 men. Yet, it has been extensively studied by historians. To understand why a seemingly minor event would create such widespread interest, it is necessary to examine the underlying causes and events which led to the Skirmish at Seven Oaks.

## CAUSES OF THE SKIRMISH

For many years prior to the skirmish there had been fierce competition between two rival fur trading companies, the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company. Both maintained trading posts at The Forks (the junction of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers). The Hudson's Bay Company's post was Fort Douglas and the North West Company's post was Fort Gibraltar.

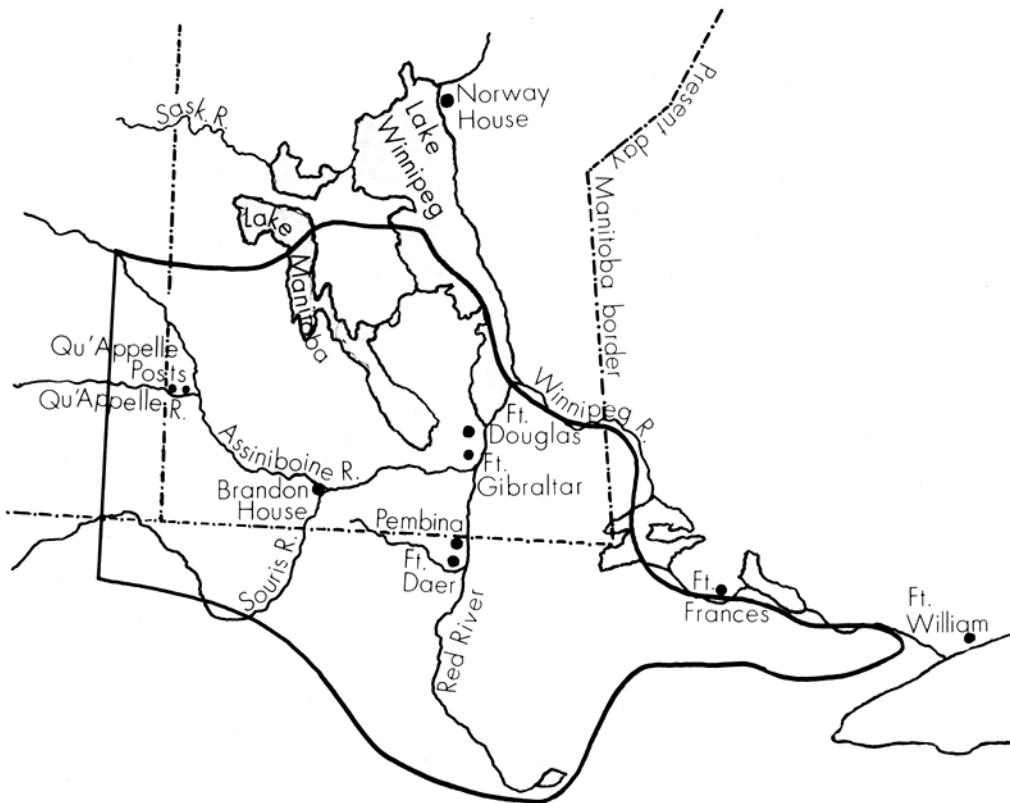
Red and Assiniboine Rivers

"The Forks"



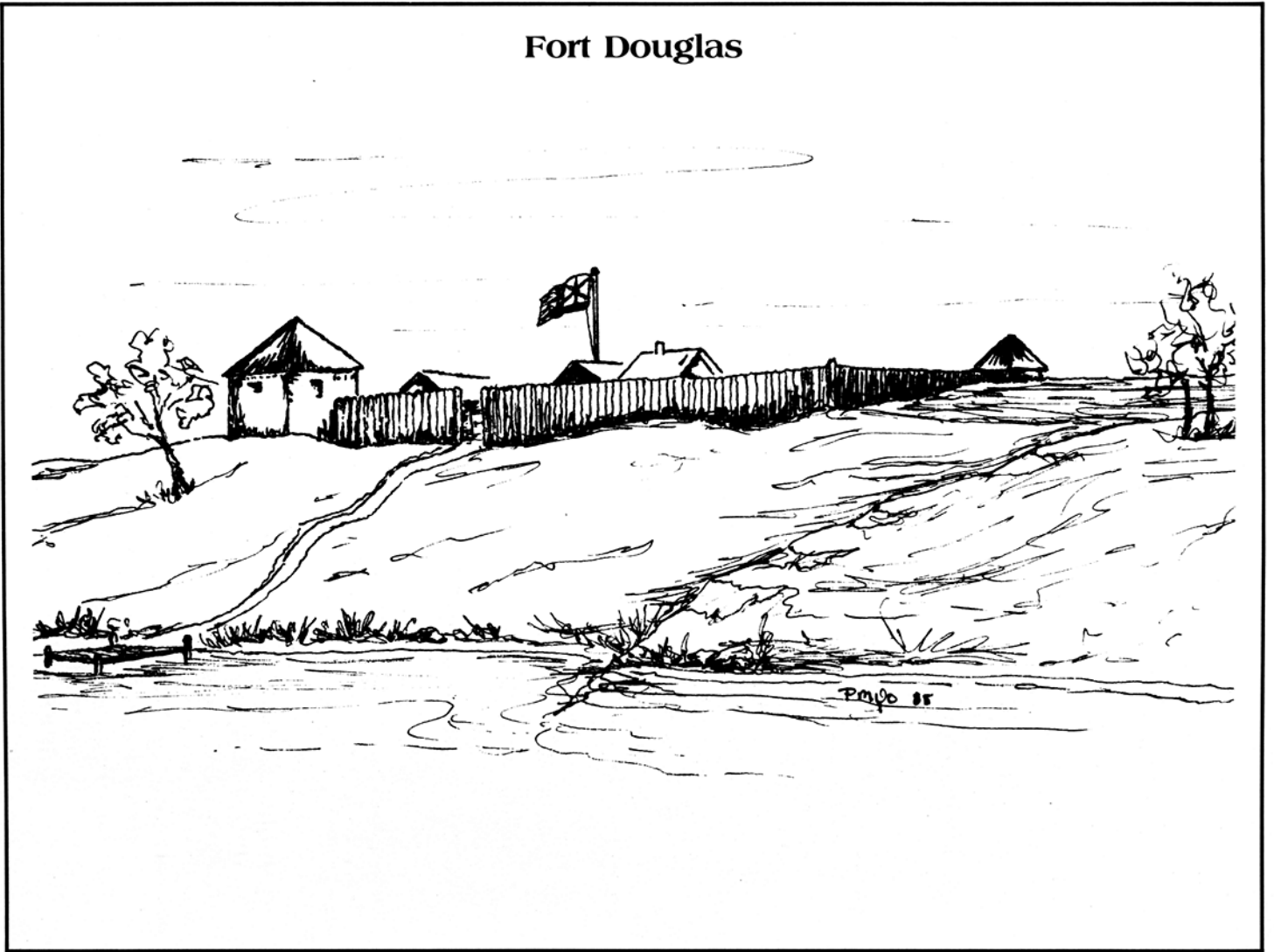
Although the area around The Forks was no longer a significant fur producing region, the two companies were interested in it for other reasons. The plains in and around the Red River area were the main buffalo hunting grounds of the Metis. From the Metis buffalo hunt came pemmican, the main food staple of the fur company employees. The area also contained the Assiniboine River, a valued waterway system. The river was used for transporting goods and pelts to and from the prime fur producing areas in the Athabasca region to the north and west.

In 1811 the Hudson's Bay Company granted a large piece of land to a Scotsman, Lord Selkirk. It is important to note that Lord Selkirk, together with his brother-in-law, Andrew Colville, owned a controlling interest in the Hudson's Bay Company.<sup>1</sup> The land granted, called Assiniboia, was situated in the very heart of the Red River District.



**Map of Assiniboia: Selkirk's Grant**

# Fort Douglas



Lord Selkirk had taken an interest in alleviating the harsh living conditions of his fellow countrymen and had previously established a settlement of dispossessed Scots in Prince Edward Island.<sup>2</sup> The clan chiefs of Scotland were in the process of changing from a small leasehold type of farming to more profitable sheep raising enterprises. These clan chiefs simply evicted and left homeless the tenant farmers who had occupied the lands for generations. A colony in the Red River area would provide a home for these dispossessed people.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, they could become food producers for the Hudson's Bay Company.<sup>4</sup> A less publicized reason for establishing a colony in this location was that it would strengthen the Hudson's Bay Company's claim to the area and thereby be a decided advantage in the fur trade wars.<sup>5</sup>

Naturally, the North West Company strongly opposed this settlement. A settlement in the Red River area, they argued, would sever the communication lines between their western posts and their headquarters in Montreal. It would also disrupt the profitable buffalo hunt business.<sup>6</sup>

During this same period Cuthbert Grant, who was to become one of the principal figures in the Seven Oaks Skirmish, returned to the North West Territories. Grant was born in 1793 at Fort Tremblante, which is northeast of the present site of Yorkton. His father was a Scottish fur trader and his mother Indian, most likely Cree. While still quite young, he was sent to Scotland to be educated. When his schooling was complete, he returned to Montreal where he entered the service of the North West Company. In 1812, at the age of 19, he travelled west to take a position as clerk with the company's post, Fort Esperance, on the Qu'Appelle River. Because of Grant's ancestral ties and because of marriages made by his sisters to leading Metis families in the area, he was quickly accepted into the Metis and Indian societies. Historians Macleod and Morton suggest that the North West Company, by sending Grant to the Red River area intended to capitalize on these bonds of kinship and trust and therefore more firmly align the Metis with the North West Company.<sup>7</sup>

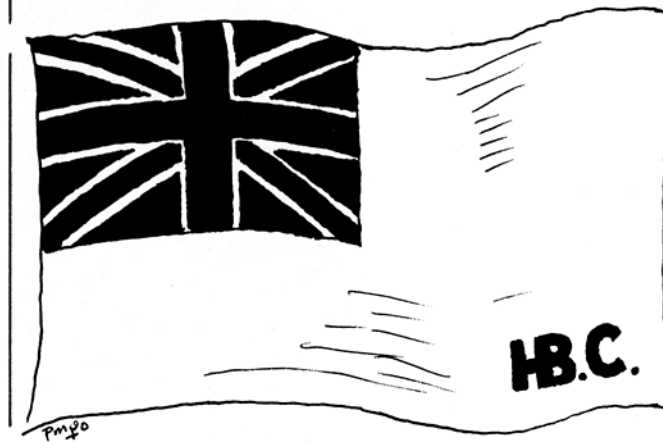
In 1812 the first group of Selkirk settlers arrived at Red River with Governor Miles Macdonell. It is reported that the settlers were met by "a party of armed men, painted, disfigured...and that [they] warned them that they were unwelcome guests and

that they must depart...."<sup>8</sup> In actuality these men were North West employees in disguise.

The Hudson's Bay Company's plan to use the settlers as food producers was a failure from the start. The first year the settlers arrived too late to plant crops. In subsequent years, crop failures caused by floods, hail, drought and early frost forced the settlers to rely on pemmican. This meant that the settlers were dependent on the Metis buffalo hunters for survival.

The settlers' need for food helped escalate the rivalry between the fur trading companies. In order to ensure an adequate food supply for the starving settlers, Governor Miles Macdonell issued a proclamation on January 14, 1814. The proclamation prohibited the export of pemmican from the Assiniboia district. This, in effect, cut off the North West Company's food supplies for their posts in the Athabasca region.

Further fuel was added to the fire, in July 1814. Governor Miles Macdonell, fearing the Metis technique of hunting would drive the buffalo from the Red River region, issued a second proclamation. This proclamation forbade the Metis from hunting buffalo on horseback, a practice known as "running the buffalo". The Metis were justifiably angered by this further proclamation as it threatened their very livelihood. They began a "systematic harassment of the colonists"<sup>9</sup> which consisted of such acts as firing upon workers in the fields, driving off their cattle and setting stacks of hay on fire.<sup>10</sup>



**Hudson's Bay Company Flag**

Metis "Running the Buffalo"





In the hope that the Metis would challenge the authority of the Hudson's Bay Company, the North West Company began promoting the idea of Metis nationalism. Because this "New Nation" would need a military leader, Duncan Cameron, a North West Company agent, appointed Grant "Captain of the Metis".<sup>11</sup> Cameron further urged the Metis to run the buffalo as they had always done, because Grant, not Governor Macdonell, was the leader of the Metis people.<sup>12</sup> This reinforced the idea that the new nation of Metis had rights which could not be overruled by the Governor of Assiniboia. In the spring of 1815, after repeated harassment of the settlers by the Metis, Miles Macdonell surrendered to the Metis and was sent to Canada under arrest.<sup>13</sup> Grant and the Metis ordered all settlers to leave the Red River area and representatives of the Hudson's Bay Company signed the following treaty with the Metis:

1. All settlers to retire immediately from this river, and no appearance of a colony to remain.
2. Peace and amity to subsist between all parties, traders, Indians, and freemen, in future, throughout these two rivers, and on no account any person to be molested in his lawful pursuits.
3. The Honorable Hudson's Bay Company will, as customary, enter this river with, if they think proper, three to four of their former trading boats, and with four to five men per boat as usual.
4. Whatever former disturbances has taken place between both parties, that is to say, the honorable Hudson's Bay Company and the Halfbreeds of the Indian territory, to be totally forgot and not to be recalled by either party.
5. Every person retiring peace-able from this river immediately, shall not be molested in their passage out.
6. No person passing the summer for the Hudson's Bay Company, shall remain in the buildings of the company but shall retire to some other spot, where they will establish for the purpose of trade.<sup>14</sup>

**SEVEN OAK PERSONALITIES**



**Cuthbert Grant**



**Lord Selkirk**

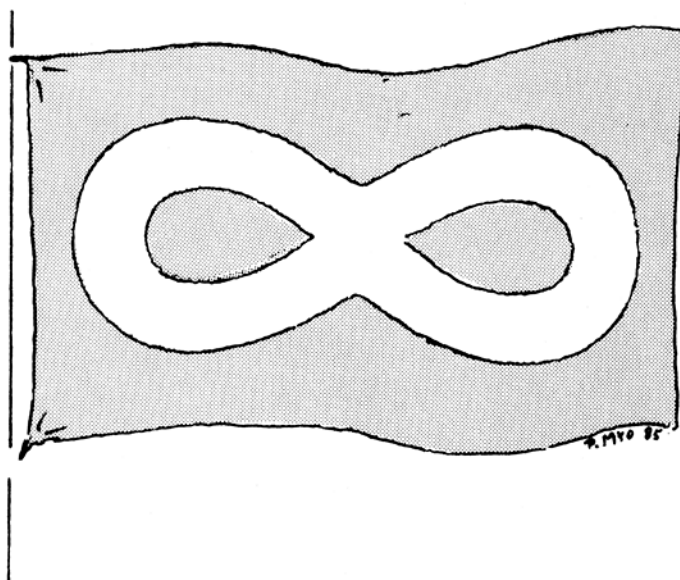


**Governor Semple**

At this time the Metis also for the first time hoisted their flag. James Sutherland of the nearby Hudson's Bay post described their return to the Qu'Appelle region:

...the other Company were Half Breeds headed by Cuthbert Grant....This Tribe had another Flag hoisted of what Nation I know not. It is red with a figure 8 placed horizontally in the middle of it and is said to be a present from the N.W. Co. along with Some Swords and a few pairs of Pistols to these deluded young men, the Half Breeds, as a recompense for their exertions against the colony, Spring 1815....<sup>15</sup>

From this account we are led to believe the first flag of the Metis Nation was not something of their own invention, but rather a gift from the North West Company, a gift which was intended to further the idea of nationhood among the Metis.



**Metis Flag**

However, victory for the Metis was only temporary. The fleeing colonists met a new group of settlers who were on their way to the Red River settlement. The groups combined and arrived in the region to re-establish the colony on August 19, 1815. Their new Governor, Robert Semple, arrived in the fall of 1815. He immediately went to Qu'Appelle and demanded the surrender of the North West Company and forfeiture of their supplies of pemmican. On March 17 of the following year, Fort Gibraltar was seized and on March 23, 1816 the North West post at Pembina. Preparations for war began in earnest both on the Qu'Appelle and at the Red River settlement.

Semple, in order to enforce Macdonell's proclamation restricting the export of provisions from the Assiniboia region, ordered a gunboat to patrol Lake Winnipeg at the mouth of the Red River and he set up battalions of men along the river banks.

### **THE SKIRMISH AT SEVEN OAKS**

In order to break the blockade set up by Semple, Grant gathered his force of about 60 young men at Qu'Appelle. Grant intercepted a boatload of pemmican which had left the Hudson's Bay post at Qu'Appelle. He later met up with the North West boats and both groups proceeded from Qu'Appelle, in effect taking with them all of the pemmican from the Qu'Appelle region. The Metis rode guard in two parties, one on either side of the river. They proceeded along the Qu'Appelle River to the Assiniboine River where they captured the Hudson's Bay post at Brandon House.

Meanwhile, at Fort Douglas, Governor Semple had been warned of the North West party's approach. Semple, having captured the North West Company's Fort Gibraltar and being already in command of Fort Douglas, controlled The Forks. He had encouraged the settlers to plant crops two miles down river from Fort Douglas and "...thus challenged assault by the Nor'Westers and exposed to their attack the people whom he was bound to protect."<sup>16</sup>

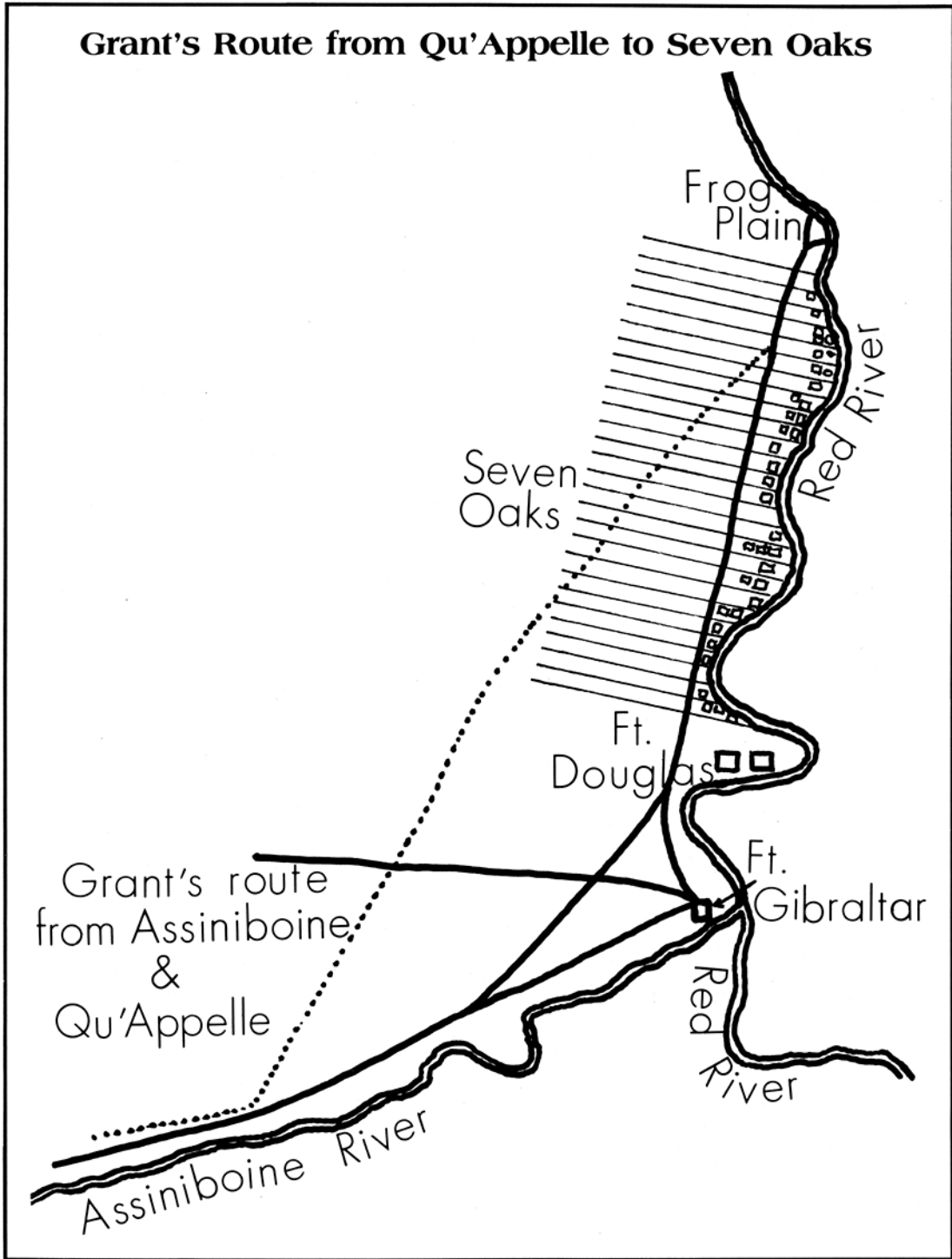
The Metis stopped at Prairie Portage to organize for an advance on The Forks. Because Fort Douglas barred further movement by water, Grant and an advance party set out from the river across the prairie ahead of the main body. They

intended to meet the Montreal canoes at a location ten miles above The Forks. News reached Semple at Fort Douglas of the approaching Metis party, who were passing within 1½ miles of Fort Douglas.

Eventually they came alongside a ravine known as Seven Oaks. It was at this point that the two parties met. The Metis flanked Grant on both sides in a crescent shape. Semple lined his men up in a single straight line and attempted to keep the Metis forces in front of this line. Initially Grant was accompanied by a force of only 15, whereas Semple had 24 men. However, Grant's party was strengthened when more Metis arrived to back up the initial forces. Grant sent Francois Boucher out to talk to Semple and demand his surrender. After an exchange of words, tempers flared and Semple grabbed Boucher's reins and gun. Boucher immediately slipped off his horse and ran for the Metis line. "A shot rang out, it was fired by Semple's men..."<sup>17</sup> and the skirmish at Seven Oaks had begun. The battle lasted 15 minutes and, in all, 20 settlers and Semple himself were killed while Grant lost only one man. Aside from the advantage of superior numbers, the Metis were also superior men at armed hand-to-hand combat. From years of running the buffalo, the Metis were well trained marksmen. Sealey and Lussier offer this explanation for their overwhelming defeat of Semple's forces:

Experienced hunters and sharp-shooters, the Metis fired a volley of shots and then fell to the ground to reload. The naive settlers cheered for they thought that their few aimless shots had killed all the Metis. The Metis reloaded their guns and charged the settlers....The Metis horsemen then charged and shot them with the ease of men accustomed to "running the buffalo".<sup>18</sup>

**Grant's Route from Qu'Appelle to Seven Oaks**



The Metis, shouting their victory cries, returned to their camp on Frog Plain where Pierre Falcon composed this song in honour of their triumph over the settlers.

### **THE BATTLE OF SEVEN OAKS**

1. Would you like to hear me sing  
Of a true and recent thing?  
It was June nineteen, the band of Bois-Brules  
Arrived that day,  
Oh the brave warriors they!
2. We took three foreigners prisoner when  
We came to the place call Frog, Frog Plain.  
Who'd come, you see,  
To rob our country.
3. Well we were just about to unhorse  
When we heard two of us give, give voice.  
Two of our men cried, "Hey! Look back, look back!  
The Anglo-Sack  
Coming for to attack."
4. Right away smartly we veered about  
Gallopig at them with a shout!  
You know we did trap all, all those Grenadiers!  
They could not move  
Those horseless cavaliers.
5. Now we like honourable men did act,  
Sent an ambassador—yes, in fact!  
"Monsieur Governor! Would you like to stay?  
A moment spare—  
There's something we'd like to say."
6. Governor, Governor, full of ire.  
"Soldiers!" he cries, "Fire! Fire."  
So they fire the first and their muskets roar!  
They almost kill  
Our ambassador!

7. Governor thought himself a king.  
He wished an iron rod to swing.  
Like a lofty lord he tries to act.  
Bad luck, old chap!  
A bit too hard you whacked!
8. When we went galloping, galloping by  
Governor thought that he would try  
For to chase and frighten us Bois-Brules.  
Catastrophe!  
A bit too hard you whacked!
9. Dead on the ground lots of grenadiers too,  
Plenty of grenadiers, a whole slew.  
We've almost stamped out his whole army.  
Of so many  
Five or four left there be.
10. You should have seen those Englishmen—  
Bois-Brules chasing them, chasing them.  
From bluff to bluff they stumbled that day  
While the Bois-Brules  
Shouted "Hurray!"
11. Tell, oh tell me who made up this song?  
Why it's our own poet, Pierre Falcon.  
Yes, she was written this song of praise  
For the victory  
We won this day.  
Yes, she was written, this song of praise—  
Come sing the glory  
Of the Bois-Brules.

**Pierre Falcon**

Translated by James Reaney<sup>19</sup>



## **THE AFTERMATH**

Grant escorted the colonists safely out of the Red River area and then returned to his men at Frog Plain. Together with Alexander Macdonell, they took command of Fort Douglas and were in temporary control of the area. Victory was once again short lived. Selkirk was already on his way to the colony, accompanied by a group of ex-mercenaries. A commissioner was dispatched from Upper Canada to investigate the matter and the result was that Grant surrendered and was sent to Montreal to stand trial. Eventually Grant was freed and returned to the north west. Although he never actually stood trial, he was cleared of all charges through the influences of his powerful friends in the North West Company.

The Skirmish at Seven Oaks was the high point of the fur trade wars. Years of fierce competition had pushed both companies toward bankruptcy, and a merger was effected in 1821. The result of this merger for the Metis was widespread unemployment. For every two trading posts which had once existed there was now only one, which meant fewer employees and less provisions would be required. A golden era for the Metis had come to an end.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Lois Halliday McDonald, *Fur Trade Letters of Francis Ermatinger* (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1980), p. 43.
2. Ibid, p. 43.
3. Ibid, p. 204.
4. Thomas W. Paterson, *Canadian Battles and Massacres*, (Altona, Man.: Stagecoach Publishing Company Ltd., 1977), p. 204.
5. Ibid, p. 204.
6. D. Bruce Sealey and Antoine S. Lussier, *The Metis Canada's Forgotten People* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Metis Federation Press, 1977), p. 36.
7. Margaret MacLeod and W.L. Morton, *Cuthbert Grant of Grantown* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), p. 19.
8. Robert B. Hill, *History of Manitoba*, (Toronto: William Briggs, 1890), p. 22.
9. See Bruce Sealey and Antoine S. Lussier, p. 39.
10. Ibid, p. 39.
11. See Margaret MacLeod and W.L. Morton, p. 23.
12. Ibid, pp. 39-40.
13. See Bruce Sealey and Antoine S. Lussier, p. 39.
14. Ibid, pp. 39-40.
15. See Margaret MacLeod and W.L. Morton, p. 32.
16. Ibid, p. 44.
17. Ibid, p. 48.
18. See Bruce Sealey and Antoine S. Lussier, p. 41.
19. Margaret Arnett MacLeod, ed, *Songs of Old Manitoba* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1959), pp.5-7.

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