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FAR CORNER OF THE STRANGE EMPIRE

CENTRAL ALBERTA ON THE EVE OF HOMESTEAD SETTLEMENT

WILLIAM C. WONDERS

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, what is now central Alberta was a region in transition. For centuries the area had been inhabited by native Indian peoples, but with the advance of homestead settlement, it became a marginal part of what Joseph Howard has called the "strange empire," a portion of the northern Great Plains that was marked by unrest at the end of one era and the beginning of another.¹ The changes that affected the Red River Valley and later the Saskatchewan Valley had significant local repercussions in this far corner of the "empire," the valley of the upper Battle River immediately south and east of Edmonton.

The fur trade provided the initial and dominant economic base for the European presence in the Canadian Northwest. It also contributed to the appearance of the mixed-blood people

variously known as the métis, half-breeds, or country-born who played such an important role in it. Though they were soon submerged by the flood of incoming settlers, for a few decades in the late nineteenth century the métis made a distinctive but short-lived impact on the northern Great Plains. The focus here is on this transitional period between fur trade and homestead settlement in central Alberta, an area that is also transitional in its geographic character.

SURFACE FEATURES

Central Alberta is part of the high, western sector of the North American Great Plains (Fig. 1). In the west it grades almost imperceptibly into the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Much of the area constitutes a level-to-undulating surface at an elevation of about 2,500 feet, traversed from west to east by deeply entrenched, major river valleys. Widely separated erosion remnants rise above the general surface about 600 feet to form the Hand Hills, Wintering Hills, and Neutral Hills to the southeast. In the west and southwest, resistant sandstone bedrock results in a 200-foot scarp marking the edge of rolling-to-hilly highlands.

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Continental glaciation shaped the present surface features (Fig. 2), mantling the area with till. In places the ground moraine is almost featureless, in others gently rumpled into slight irregularities. Hummocky moraine gives rise to a more hilly landscape (generally from 20 to 50 feet relief, though locally up to 150 feet), as in the western highland region and in the Buffalo Lake-Beaverhills moraine, which lies in a generally north-south axis southeast of Edmonton.

Melting ice-sheet water left areas of lacustrine sediments and also carved the great spillway valleys (locally one-half to one mile in width and 150 to 200 feet deep) in a northwest-southeast direction across the area. The major spillway valley southeast of Edmonton is occupied by the Battle River, which joins the North Saskatchewan River at Battleford.

Lakes are common. The largest and deepest of these, in the western and northern sectors, supported important fish populations in the

nineteenth century. Most of the area falls within the North Saskatchewan River basin, draining northeastward to Hudson Bay.

CLIMATE AND VEGETATION

Central Alberta is transitional between the dry plains to the southeast and the humid country to the west and north. Its continental climate is marked by long, cold winters and short, cool-to-warm summers. Precipitation decreases eastward and southeastward, with corresponding differences in the natural vegetation.

Broadly speaking, there is a natural vegetation sequence in Alberta from short grass in the southeast, through prairie and parkland, to the continuous coniferous forests of the north and west. These constitute part of the broad areas of similar vegetation patterns that occur across the southern parts of the modern-day Prairie Provinces.

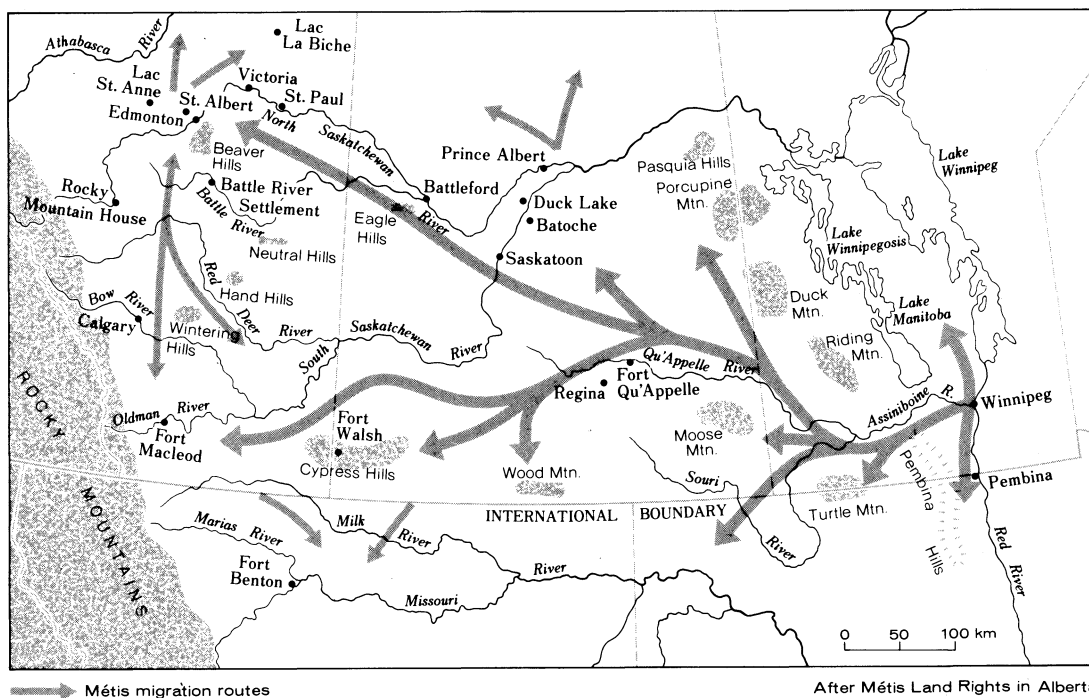


FIG. 1. The northern Great Plains in the late nineteenth century.

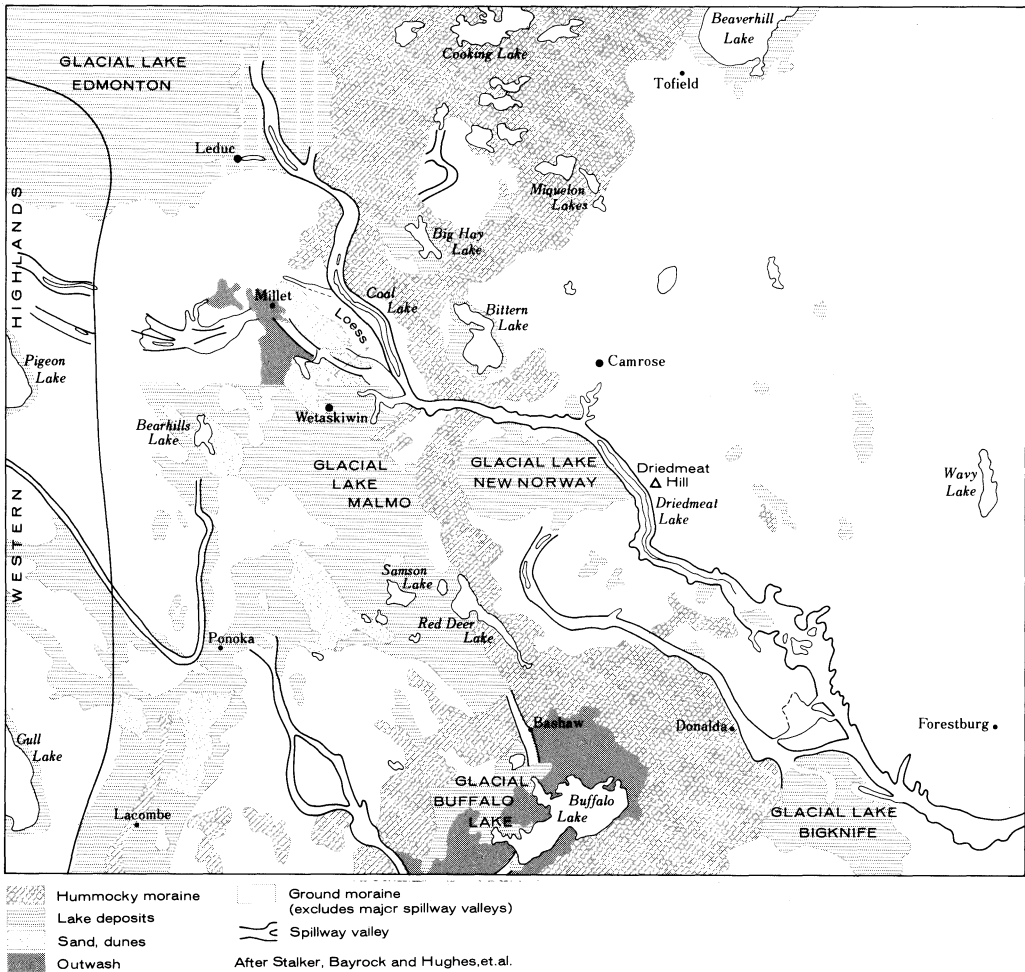


FIG. 2. *Central Alberta surficial materials.*

The area lies mainly within the parkland zone, with its characteristic original mixture of tall grass and interspersed groves of aspen poplar. In the western and northern sectors at the time of our study, however, tree cover was continuous and included paper birch, white spruce, jack pine, and lodgepole pine, as well as aspen, while in the southeast the short grass prevailed, with few if any trees.

THE NATIVE TRANSITION

Central Alberta was a transitional area also with regard to the major settlement patterns

of aboriginal tribes. Woodland culture peoples occupied the northern sectors; plains culture peoples occupied the south. The generally westward and southward eddy of the Indian tribes in the Canadian Great Plains has been well established.² The two dominant and rival Indian groups, the Blackfoot and a part of the Cree, had moved out onto the plains initially from woodland regions to the east and rapidly adapted to the new environment.

As recently as about 1730 the Piegan tribe of the Blackfoot Nation was located near the Eagle Hills south of the junction of the Battle River with the North Saskatchewan, with the

Blood and Blackfoot tribes probably on their north and east. During the remainder of the eighteenth century the Blackfoot Indians, after acquiring firearms and horses, thrust southwest, pushing the Snake (Northern Shoshoni), Flathead, and Kootenay tribes from the Canadian Great Plains, while the former Blackfoot territory in turn was taken over by the Crees and their allies the Assiniboines (Stoneys). Explorer David Thompson reported that the Blackfoot Nation held the territory from the Rocky Mountains three hundred miles eastward and from the Missouri to the North Saskatchewan River: the Piegans in the south, the Bloods along the Red Deer River, and the Blackfoot tribes from the North Saskatchewan to the upper Battle River.³

The westward expansion of the Crees and Stoneys up the North Saskatchewan drove a wedge between the Beaver Indians to the north and another group, related to southern tribes, who favored the Beaver Hills between the North Saskatchewan and the Battle Rivers. This tribe, later known as the Sarcee, allied itself with the Blackfoot.

One segment of the dominantly woodland-culture Crees adapted so well to the life of the plains people that they became identified as Plains Cree. As they spent increasing periods of time there, they tended to push the Blackfoot Indians farther south from the North Saskatchewan. Governor Sir George Simpson of the Hudson's Bay Company, however, still considered the North Saskatchewan River at Edmonton to mark the northern boundary of the Blackfoot territory in 1841.⁴

Twenty years later John Palliser noted the Plains Crees in possession of the Beaver Hills, and the Neutral Hills as lying on the boundary between Cree and Blackfoot territory. He still found the Battle River to be Blackfoot hunting ground, however, and "Flag-hanging" (Flagstaff) Hill within the elbow of the Battle to be a "rarely deserted" place of assembly of the Sarcees.⁵ The southern tribes frequently used the Blackfoot Trail leading north to the Hudson's Bay Company's Fort Edmonton. The Crees used the trail a few miles to the east

through the wooded Beaver Hills if they wished to avoid confrontation with their enemy. The "Battle River" (derived from the Cree name) was aptly named for this unstable, transitional zone between the two dominant aboriginal peoples.⁶

The North Saskatchewan River had provided the fur trade with its most important axis of westward penetration and the setting for many of its most important trading posts, with Fort Edmonton (Edmonton House) paramount. Large quantities of the more valuable furs, timber for boat building, and moose, elk, and whitefish from the northern and western forested areas were all available locally. On the south and east the enormous herds of plains buffalo provided the large quantities of meat and pemmican that were essential to those engaged in the trade. Edmonton became a major supply point for pemmican.

The buffalo normally sought shelter from the winter storms of the open plains in the parkland and the woodland fringe around Edmonton. The artist Paul Kane commented on the "thousands" of buffalo that ranged close to the fort, noting that several were shot within a few hundred yards of it, and in mid-December he found a herd of perhaps ten thousand along the river only ten miles from Edmonton. The post itself consumed huge quantities of buffalo meat. The naturalist Dr. James Hector reported that 526 pounds of fresh meat were consumed by the 109 inhabitants on a daily basis in February 1858.⁷

In 1847 Kane was impressed with the numbers and variety of Indians trading at Edmonton: "Seven of the most important and war-like tribes on the continent are in constant communication with the fort, which is situated in the country of the Crees and the Assiniboines, and is visited at least twice in the year by the Blackfoot, Sarcees, Gros-Vents, Pay-gans and Blood Indians, who come to sell the dried buffalo meat and fat for making pemmican which is prepared in large quantities for the supply of other posts."⁸ Though the Blackfoot Indians traded at Edmonton and Rocky Mountain House, they did so erratically and unreliably.

The company had abandoned earlier efforts to penetrate Blackfoot territory and concentrated on that of the more tractable Crees. Because of the availability of buffalo the Blackfoot tribes were remarkably successful in preserving their fierce independence of the fur trade.

Fort Edmonton also served as a regional transportation and supply center for the fur trade because of its geographic situation. From it radiated links southwest to Rocky Mountain House, westward to the far Columbia River district via the Athabasca Pass, northwestward to the Peace River and New Caledonia areas, and northward to the Mackenzie River basin. The fort kept large numbers of horses for overland pack trains departing from the North Saskatchewan River at this point. Boat builders at the fort used locally available spruce to construct York boats for the annual supply trip downriver. The company farm provided for variety in diet. In 1872 George M. Grant noted that wheat had been raised at Edmonton for thirty years, with a usual harvest of a thousand bushels, and that five thousand kegs of potatoes were dug.⁹

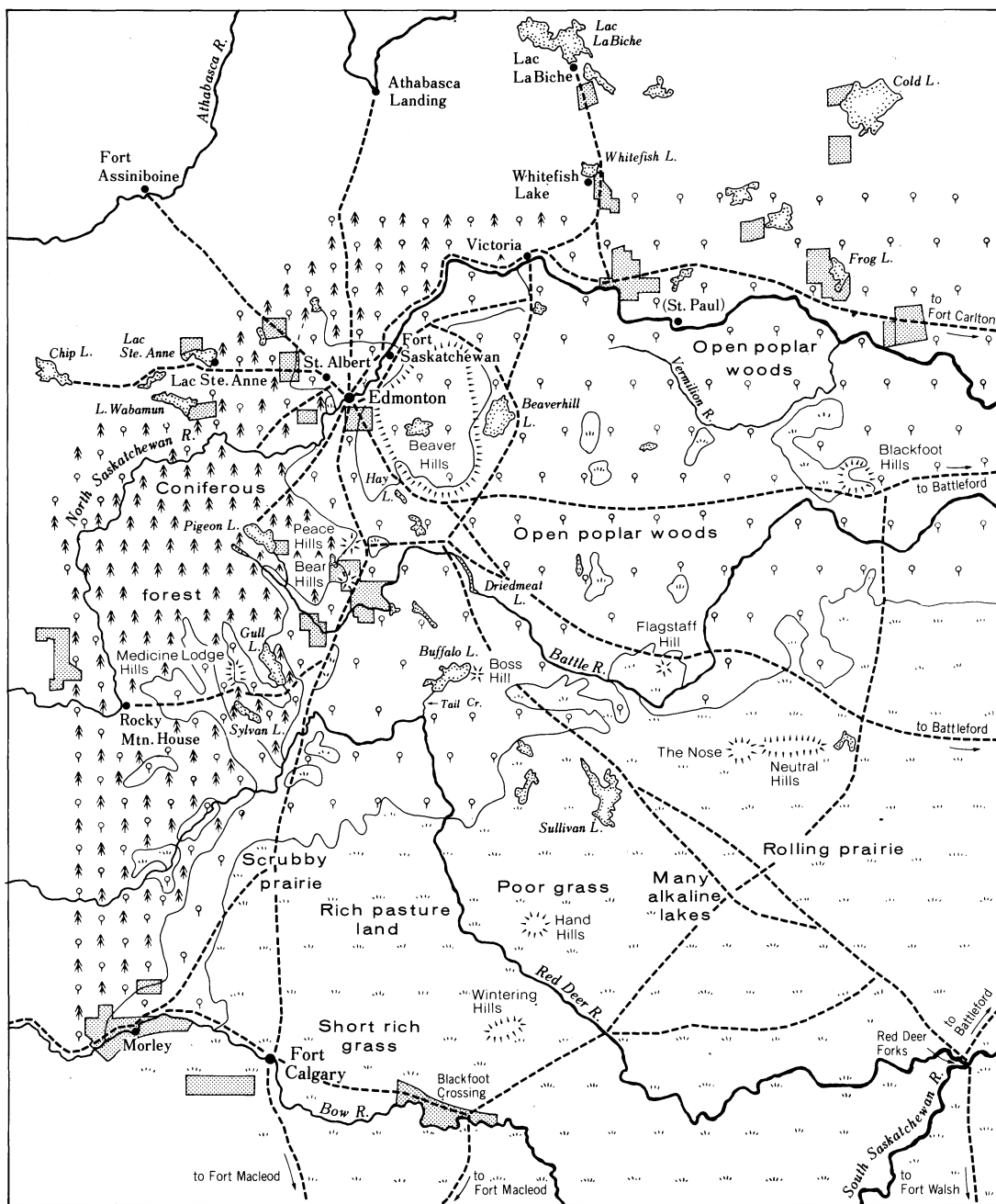
Because the North Saskatchewan River provided the main east-west routeway across the Canadian Great Plains and Fort Edmonton was the most important post on the river, most travelers visited the fort. Explorers, European gentlemen travelers and hunters, and scientific investigators all passed this way. This diversity reflected a growing awareness of and interest in the West among persons outside the fur trade as they began to see the potential advantages of the area for individual and corporate benefit. Their increasing interest and presence accelerated the decline of the fur trade era. As early as 1862 two hundred Overlanders passed through on their way to the Cariboo gold fields west of the Rockies. Several of those subsequently returned to work in the local river bars. Other miners from the Peace River and Omineca areas were reported in Edmonton by Grant.

In seeking a North Saskatchewan route for the proposed transcontinental railway, the Sandford Fleming expedition, of which Grant was a member, contributed significantly to the

attractions of the Edmonton area for prospective white settlers. The community developing there was neither directly connected with, nor much interested in, the fur trade. Farmers (initially former Company men), merchants, miners, churchmen, and freighters saw the future in terms of linkages with the "outside world" rather than in preserving the fur trade past. The establishment of a telegraph link between Edmonton (Hay Lakes) and Winnipeg in 1877 and of Edmonton's first newspaper, the *Edmonton Bulletin*, in 1880 were symbolic of the new linkages and the developing new society. In 1878 an unofficial census of adult males, including Indians, gave the Edmonton Settlement proper a population of 148, with an additional 455 in nearby tributary settlements; by 1881 the comparable figures were 263 and 503.¹⁰

As early as the middle of the nineteenth century the great days of the fur trade and of Indian nomadic life were on the wane; and though the repercussions for native peoples were delayed in central Alberta compared with the Red River valley, they were inevitable. The various factors involved in the transition from a nomadic to a settled economy have been set out by many authors.¹¹ By 1870 the disastrous decline in the buffalo was under way. Though Canadian authorities made some gestures toward conservation of the buffalo in 1877, it was already too late. Ruthless commercial exploitation and the American government's deliberate policy of extermination decided matters. For the Blackfoot Indians the year 1879 was remembered as *Itsistsitsis/awenimiopi* (when first/no more buffalo).¹² The buffalo era ended with the decade, although a few straggler animals survived into the '80s.¹³

Deprived of the very basis of their nomadic life, decimated by disease, and dissipated by American whisky traders from the south until the latter were routed by the North-West Mounted Police (who arrived in 1874), the Indians reluctantly agreed to treaties with the newly constituted Dominion of Canada. With varying degrees of hope they agreed to give up the old way of life and settle down on reserves



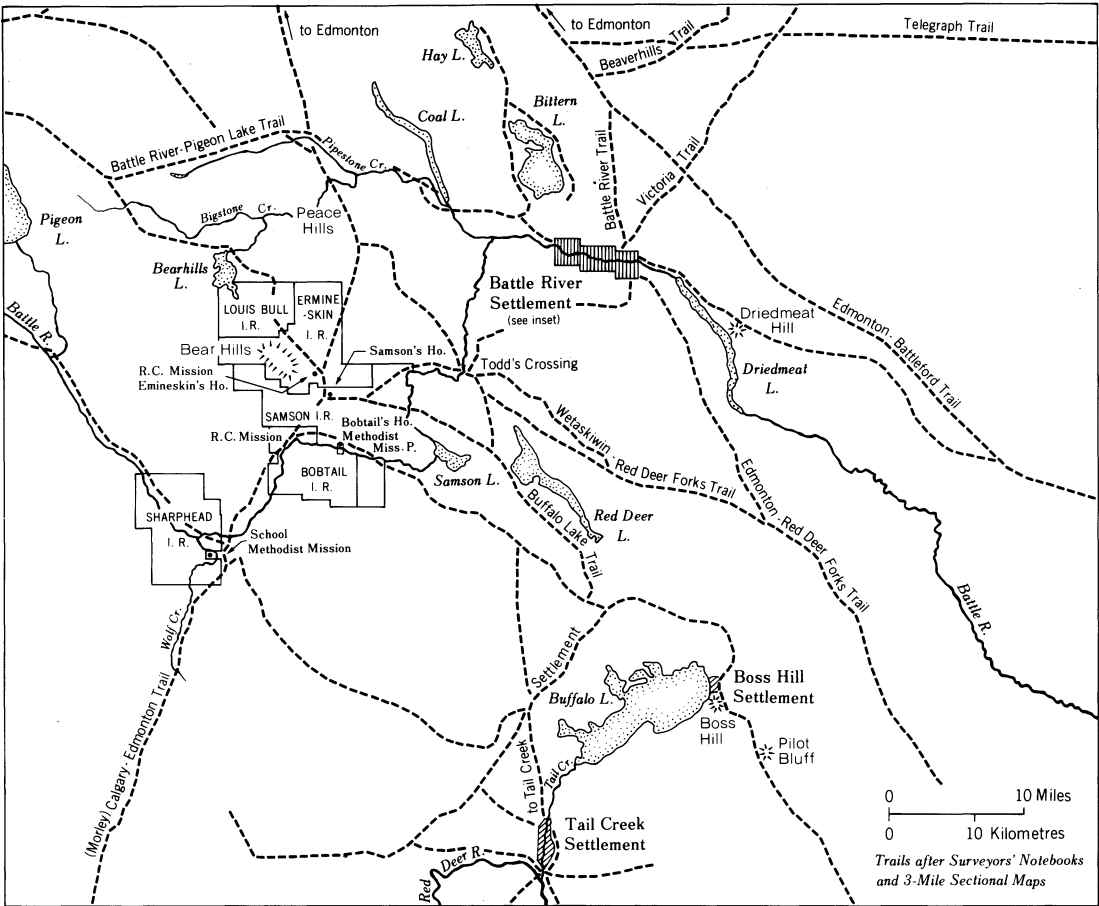
- Region generally wooded
- Partly wooded
- "Prairie"

- Indian reserves
- Trails

0 50 Miles
0 50 Kilometres

"Vegetation after Tyrrell"

FIG. 3. Central Alberta in the late nineteenth century.



THE BATTLE RIVER SETTLEMENT, ALBERTA (TP 46-R 21-W 4)

J. BLANC First settlers identified by name and date of filing, according to homestead records
 T. PARE* Identified at time of original survey (1883)
 N.W.H.B. North West Half-breed scrip lot

20 River lot number - River crossing
 18 Section number ■ Store/trading post

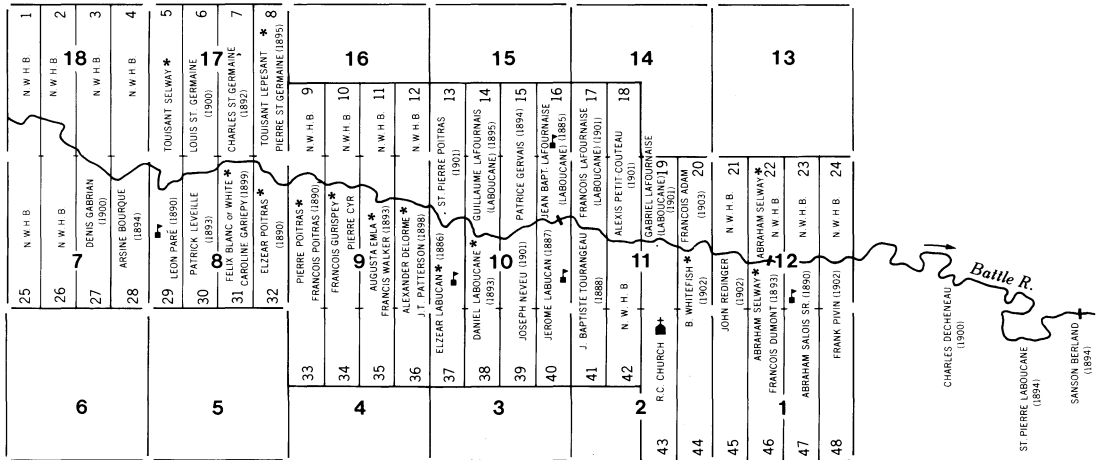


FIG. 4. Late nineteenth century Indian and métis settlements, central Alberta.

of their selection in exchange for modest annual payments and the opportunity to acquire farming skills from government-paid instructors.¹⁴

TREATY INDIANS

Under Treaty Number Six in 1876, the Crees and Assiniboines (Stoneys) ceded to the Crown all central Alberta as far south as the Red Deer River. The lands to the south were ceded in 1877 under Treaty Number Seven with the three tribes of the Blackfoot Nation and with the Sarcee and Stoney tribes.

Three clusters of Indian reserves were established in Central Alberta (Fig. 3). In the vicinity of the North Saskatchewan one group extended northeast from Victoria to Lac La Biche, while north and west of Edmonton was another group. In both cases missions and fishing lakes were important locational factors. The reserves involved Crees primarily (both Plains and Woodland), but Stoneys were included in the Alexis Reserve on Lake Wabamun west of Edmonton, and Iroquois (mixed-blood descendants of Caughnawagha Indian trappers brought out fifty years earlier by the Hudson's Bay Company) in the Michel Calahoo Reserve west of St. Albert.

Finally in uncontested possession of the upper Battle River valley, four bands of Plains Crees selected the vicinity of the Bear Hills for their reserves (Fig. 4). These bands were led by two brothers, Bobtail and Ermineskin, by Muddy Bull (a close relative), and by a fourth chief, Samson. It is reported that these people had previously wandered widely over Alberta and even beyond, generally wintering in the Kootenay Plains in the Rocky Mountain foothills but sometimes down to the Bow River, to Pincher Creek, or even into present-day Flathead County in Montana.¹⁵ In spring they moved out to the edge of the plains (and Blackfoot country), where they hunted buffalo from the upper Bow River eastward to the Hand Hills, thence northward to Buffalo Lake, and sometimes as far eastward as modern Battleford. By summer they usually ended up

in the valley of the North Saskatchewan south of St. Paul. In the fall they traded at Fort Edmonton before moving southwest toward the foothills. During the smallpox epidemic in the summer of 1870 they took refuge in the Bear Hills, where they found the elk and deer numerous. They also were only a day's journey from the buffalo plains to the east, yet were well west of the main Blackfoot trail to Fort Edmonton. Chief Bobtail and his band had not been present at the signing of Treaty Number Six. In mid-September 1877 they came in from the upper Bow River country, somewhat apprehensively in the midst of the Blackfoot Treaty assembly. The chief signed adhesion but requested a reserve near Pigeon Lake within the limits of Treaty Number Six.¹⁶

THE BEAR HILLS RESERVES

The Bear Hills Indians experienced the same difficult times as others during the early "starvation years" of the 1880s in attempting to come to terms with a new world without buffalo. Some still hunted other game on Crown land (see Table 1), unable to accept the boring responsibilities of farming, even though the first settlers were already beginning to appear in former hunting areas.¹⁷ The Crees were vaguely uneasy also about the government's apparent slowness in surveying their reserves, particularly when they learned that the reserves of some of their old enemy the Blackfoot had been surveyed as early as 1879. The local reserves were not surveyed until 1885.

Other problems beset the local Indians. Stoney Indians of the district usually camped near Pigeon Lake or on Wolf Creek near its junction with the Battle River, south of Bear Hills. While allied with the Crees, they were never close friends, and the Stoneys were increasingly crowded from the Pigeon Lake hunting grounds by them. Muddy Bull's band of Crees and some métis families also lived on the shores of the lake, hunting and fishing. With the failure of the fisheries in 1883 and with starvation threatening, the two bands were induced to relocate to reserves at Bear Hills.

TABLE 1

Indian Reserves between Edmonton and the Red Deer Crossing, 31 December 1882

Name of Band	Location of Reserve	Tribe	Number on Reserve	Number Being Absent	Total Number of Indians	Whereabouts of Absentees
Pas-pas-chase	Edmonton	Cree	100	88	188	Working for settlers
Sampson	Bear's Hill	Cree	50	113	163	Hunting deer
Ermineskin	Bear's Hill	Cree	100	32	132	Hunting deer
Bobtail	Bear's Hill	Cree	40	45	85	Hunting deer
Chee-poos-ta-quan	Pigeon Lake	Stoney	100	17	117	Hunting in mountains
Muddy Bull	Pigeon Lake	Cree	80	—	80	

Source: *Annual Report 1882*, Department of Indian Affairs.

Muddy Bull took up a reserve adjacent to Ermineskin on the northwest. The Stoney, under peaceful Chee-poos-ta-quan (Sharphead), found they could not get along with the Cree as close neighbors and chose a new site to the southwest at the junction of Wolf Creek and Battle River, two miles west of modern Ponoka.

The government training farm had been established in 1879 on Bigstone Creek at the Peace Hills, several miles north of the Bear Hills reserves. This location was central for all the reserves south of Edmonton, but it was found to be too distant for maximum effectiveness. Treaty payments had been made there, but on Ottawa's instructions this function was relocated to the reserves proper, despite the Indians' attachment to those hills and fears that their limited crops on the reserves would be destroyed by the animals of the assembled bands. Finally, interdenominational rivalry among missionaries for Indian souls on the reserves resulted in bitterness and jealousy among the few Europeans, divided band members, and undoubtedly aggravated a sensitive situation.

Though the major centers of hostilities in the 1885 Riel Rebellion lay in the Cree and métis districts farther east, an undercurrent of excitement ran through those populations in

central Alberta. Their bewilderment and disillusionment in this depressing era of transition might have spread the conflict, had it not been held in check by trusted local leaders, both native and white. Bobtail alone among the Bear Hill chiefs wavered in loyalty, although several members of other bands were sympathetic to the rebels. The only active local participation in the rebellion consisted of incidents in which rebel sympathizers looted the Hudson's Bay Company store at Battle River and broke into the teacher's residence and government stores. Although the trouble quickly passed, the problems for the Indians remained—finding a place in the new settled landscape of the homesteaders.

MÉTIS SETTLEMENT

The métis, or mixed-blood people, were at once a product of the fur trade, an essential element in it, and a factor contributing to its demise.¹⁸ They had been present in central Alberta since at least the early nineteenth century. Both as *engagés* and as freemen they made up the largest group among the non-aboriginal population of the area. The Hudson's Bay Company relied on them as boatmen, freighters, trappers, and fishermen. Once their

contracts were up they followed their own whims and did not hesitate to go into trading on their own. Their Indian blood came particularly from the Crees. They traded readily with all Indian tribes, but there always was considerable distrust, mixed with respect, between the *métis* and the Blackfoot Indians.

Protestant and Roman Catholic missionaries arrived in present-day Alberta in the 1840s. Utilizing the trading posts of central Alberta as bases, they focused their attention on both Indians and mixed-bloods. Under their auspices, *métis* missions were established by the Catholics at Lac Ste. Anne (1843), Lac La Biche (1853), and St. Albert (1861), and by the Methodists at Victoria (1863). Some *métis* families had been living permanently at Lac Ste. Anne at least as early as 1830, having lost their usefulness to the fur trade after the 1821 amalgamation of the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company.¹⁹ Invariably the land in these settlements was taken up in the narrow river lot pattern characteristic of the Red River valley, which originated in the rang pattern of the St. Lawrence valley.²⁰

MÉTIS IN CENTRAL ALBERTA

The Red River Rebellion of 1869–70 reflected the tensions involved in changing economies and societies of the Canadian Great Plains. In its outcome, as William L. Morton states, "The *métis* . . . had won a victory for their land rights, language, and faith. . . They had not, however, won a victory for their mode of life. The old order by which they had lived was disintegrating before the inflow of Ontario settlers and the rise of a new society founded on agriculture, the railway, and the complex commerce of the nineteenth century."²¹ Many *métis* left their homes on the White Horse Plain twenty miles up the Assiniboine River from its junction with the Red, in the hope that they could preserve old ways farther west, a hope that was to be proved futile in less than two decades. While most reestablished themselves along the rivers in what was to become central Saskatchewan, some continued on farther west

to join the existing mixed-blood settlements and to establish others (Fig. 1). One of these was the Battle River Settlement southeast of Edmonton (Fig. 4). Some even crossed the international boundary and went to the United States as political exiles.

Métis buffalo-hunting parties from the Alberta settlements were regularly found in this area. Hector had visited a Lac Ste. Anne group camped at Hay Lake in March 1858 to recruit men for the Palliser expedition. While successful in this objective, he found the "motley crew with loaded horses and dog's . . . travelling in a style hardly different from Indians."²² The south end of Beaverhill Lake also was a favored base for *métis* hunters and trappers. In the final phases of the buffalo era the animals were not as readily available along the Saskatchewan. Seasonal settlements of *métis* came to be established to the southeast in the immediate vicinity of Buffalo Lake at Boss Hill, on the northeast shore of the lake, and on either side of Tail Creek, which drained the lake, immediately above its junction with the Red Deer River, where a crossing existed. Here, amid the hills at the edge of the open plains, *métis* from the Ste. Anne and St. Albert settlements and Fort Edmonton congregated in crude log cabins for the fall hunt in the early 1870s. They were joined by other *métis* from farther east and by Indian hunters as well.

In addition to the hunters and their families the settlements included private traders, an outpost of the Hudson's Bay Company operated by one of the Scots-Cree Whitfords, and priests from St. Albert during the winter months of 1874–75 and 1875–76. In October 1875, when the McDougalls, father and son Methodist missionaries, met here, they found in the "many camps gathered at this time people from all over the central portion of the Saskatchewan country." These included nomads from as far as the Red River, to the south branch of the Saskatchewan, to the Athabasca River.²³ Peak population has been placed as high as two thousand at times, and the potential market was sufficient to attract American whisky traders from the south. To forestall them the

North-West Mounted Police paid a visit in January 1875 from Fort Edmonton; they noted four hundred cabins in the settlement. A four-man police subpost was established at Tail Creek the same year, but a manpower shortage forced its closure in 1878.²⁴ By that time these settlements probably were being deserted already as the dwindling numbers of buffalo withdrew to the south. As early as 1875 the severe reduction in the supply of buffalo farther east had prompted 260 families, including one-tenth of the traders from St. Laurent, south of Prince Albert, to take up winter quarters at Buffalo Lake. The decline even there was so obvious that the local *métis* of St. Albert and of Ste. Anne demanded the banning of the nomadic *métis hivernants* in order to provide some safeguard for their own hunts.²⁵ Prairie fires largely obliterated the Tail Creek settlement remains soon afterward.

THE BATTLE RIVER SETTLEMENT

Thirty miles north of Buffalo Lake a longer-lived *métis* settlement became established along the mile-wide valley of the Battle River. The first families to locate here were those of Francois Dumont, his brother-in-law, the famed buffalo hunter Abraham Salois (Selway or Selvais) and those of the latter's two grown sons. All these relocated from Lac Ste. Anne in 1875, probably in order to be closer to the contracting buffalo herds.²⁶ During the winter of 1874-75, Abraham Salois, described as "the most successful of the half-breed hunters" at Buffalo Lake, made a kill of six hundred.²⁷ Instead of trading the products of the hunt at Fort Edmonton, a few *métis* transported them east to the Red River. There they passed along information on the attractions of the Battle River area to relatives and friends. Thus in 1878 the six Laboucane brothers and their families, with their mother and two sisters, set out in Red River carts from the White Horse Plain west of Winnipeg and settled in the new community. The earlier name, Selvais Crossing, soon was replaced by the Laboucane Settlement, or the Battle River Settlement.

The benefits of the area that were associated with buffalo hunting disappeared with the buffalo. Fortunately other situation advantages came into play to support the settlement. Overland trails on the Canadian Great Plains displaced the old river routes for transportation. These were utilized for approximately two decades until they in turn were reduced to a secondary and ultimately minor role by the railways. During that transitional period the Red River carts dominated the freighting business.²⁸ First described by Alexander Henry the Younger at Pembina in 1801, their useful qualities were quickly recognized by the *métis* for buffalo hunting and subsequently for general freighting. These cheap, sturdy, noisy two-wheeled carts soon came to be commonly associated with the *métis* people of the plains. Their furrowed tracks between the major trading centers and settlements can still be found in isolated places. Though the initial location of the centers reflected the earlier importance of the water routes, the carts made it possible to take overland shortcuts between them.

Missions and the Hudson's Bay Company began to make extensive use of Red River carts along the Saskatchewan in the early 1860s. This development was linked to the increasing reliance on the Minnesota cart route in preference to the York Factory boat route (the latter being totally displaced in 1875). Despite the shift in outside supply routes, Winnipeg on the Red River still remained the dominant base point for the Canadian plains. The initial cart track kept to the north bank of the Saskatchewan to minimize contact with the Blackfoot Indians. As these risks declined, other more southerly tracks were opened up. Several of these tracks passed directly through or close to the Battle River Settlement on their way to and from Fort Edmonton.

The early Blackfoot Trail providing access to the southern plains swung southeast from Edmonton, skirting the more heavily wooded Beaver Hills by way of the Hay Lakes and Bittern Lake; crossed the Battle River in the vicinity of the Laboucane Settlement; and continued south to the Red Deer crossing at Tail

Creek. (From the Battle River crossing a trail led northeast by Beaverhill Lake to Victoria Mission.) For a time after the arrival of the NWMP this trail was the patrol route southward to the Blackfoot Crossing of the Bow River and on to Fort Macleod. Métis traders and freighters used it in traveling as far south as Montana supply points on the Missouri River. The Hudson's Bay Company sent an experimental cart train of furs from Edmonton south to Fort Benton, Montana, in 1870 but did not continue the practice. In 1873 John McDougall established a trail just east of the Bear Hills, south along the eastern edge of the wooded country to the vicinity of present-day Olds, and then southwest to his new Stoney Indian mission station at Morley on the Bow River. After the establishment of Fort Calgary in 1875 by the NWMP a trail was made north to join the earlier one. This more direct link between Edmonton and Calgary soon displaced the earlier Olds-Morley sector of the north-south trail. It remains the primary highway artery of the Province of Alberta to the present day.

Three major trails to and from the east came through or very close to the Battle River Settlement. The Battleford Trail from Edmonton swung southeastward, passing north of Flagstaff Hill within the Elbow of the Battle River and on north of the Neutral Hills. When the Dominion Telegraph Line came through Battleford, it followed a more direct route westward, north of the Battle River, to end at Hay Lakes in 1877, before finally being extended to Edmonton two years later. A cart trail followed the line. Finally there was the important Red Deer Forks or South Saskatchewan Trail leading southeastward from the Battle River Settlement. Passing north of Sullivan Lake, it led to the junction of the Red Deer River with the South Saskatchewan River at Red Deer Forks. There the Bull's Forehead ford provided a safe crossing from which several trails radiated out across the plains.

THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

Three shallow river crossings existed within three or four miles on the Battle River west of

Driedmeat Lake and immediately above the junction of Camrose Creek. These determined the site for the métis settlement that developed and provided a focus for the cart trails. From the earliest years many of the residents were as interested in freighting and trading as in hunting buffalo. The Laboucanes, for example, bought furs and pemmican over a wide area during the winters. Three of the brothers had their own stores at the settlement (on River Lots 16, 37, and 40), where the loads were made up for spring departure of the carts. The long return trip to the Red River, where the loads were sold, commonly took up six months. After leaving the Hudson's Bay Company employment at Fort Qu'Appelle, where he heard of the new community, French-Canadian Leon Paré came to Battle River Settlement in 1878 and opened a store on River Lot 29. Other families moved in from Tail Creek and from Red Deer Forks. Still others passed through the community while freighting for the company between Red River and Edmonton, were attracted by it, and decided to make their homes there. Some of the local freighters had as many as 150 Red River carts and only the poorest had fewer than 25.

In this fashion métis families located along the Battle River for about nine miles west of the head of Driedmeat Lake. Land was occupied in the traditional river lot pattern, although there were many gaps in the holdings, especially in the more easterly part. Houses and outbuildings were built of logs. It is noteworthy that the few surviving relics show no evidence of the "Red River frame" technique of building, despite the origins of the builders. Instead, dovetail cornering was used for the squared log houses.²⁹ Homes were built on both sides of the valley but were more numerous on the south side. This probably reflected the availability of spruce for construction on the forested north-facing valley slopes compared with the brush cover on the south-facing slopes.

The Battle River itself, here only about fifty feet wide, meandered in a tortuous course across the floor of the mile-wide spillway valley. Little if any direct use seems to have been

made of it. It could be troublesome to cross, especially at times of high water. The flat valley floor in some years was transformed into a lake, and was covered with grass and "high willow, popular bluffs, with patches of scrub."³⁰ At best it might have provided some grazing land for domestic animals and natural hay crops. Avoidance of flood risk probably was the reason for the positioning of buildings on the upland, usually about one hundred feet from the lip of the river valley. The local claim that such sites have a warmer microclimate has no proven scientific justification.

The upland consisted of "rolling prairie with thick scrub and scattered poplar bluffs." A few acres were cultivated casually by the métis near their homes to provide winter oat feed for the horses, and there were some vegetable gardens, though these often received little or no attention once they were planted in spring. The focal point of the community was the Catholic church, Nôtre Dame des Sept Doleurs, erected in 1883 on the south side of the valley on River Lot 43, above the river crossings. An early photograph of the log structure before it was covered with siding reveals the "Red River frame" type of construction, with squared horizontal logs fitted into slotted vertical posts. Father Hippolyte Beillevaire, born in France, was successfully deflected from his first mission post, which had begun in 1881 at the Bear Hills Indian reserve, to shepherd the young métis community. He remained with it throughout its brief life.

The last, limited buffalo hunt involving local men was in 1883, when five animals were shot at the north end of Sullivan Lake. Although the hunting era was over, freighting continued. The need for the former long-distance cart haulage was progressively reduced, however, by the steady westward construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Shorter hauls still were available northward from the railway. Even after the railway's arrival at Calgary in 1883, local freighters continued to haul north to Edmonton. External pressures on the métis community now increased from the south rather than the north, as the railway and its new settlements

displaced the North Saskatchewan as the major route of outside contact. Calgary, which had a population of four hundred at the beginning of 1884, passed the one thousand mark by the end of that year.³¹

Joseph Burr Tyrell described the Battle River Settlement in 1885:

At Salvais' Crossing, four miles above [Dried-meat] lake, there is a flourishing settlement of French half-breeds, consisting of about forty families. They are living in substantial log houses, and there is sufficient land under cultivation to raise all the field produce that can be used in the settlement. In July, 1885, wheat, barley, oats, potatoes, turnips and Indian corn were well advanced, and I was informed that for the last seven years there had been no failure of crops. . . . A considerable number of horses, cattle and sheep were also seen around the houses, and all were in excellent condition.³²

THE FINAL YEARS

By the 1880s, shadows were being cast on the future of the métis community, and much of the earlier Red River experience was repeated. The Indians now were confined to the reserves. Surveyors were sent out to document the extent of the métis settlement already existing before the arrival of the railways and the homesteaders. In 1883 David Beatty surveyed the extent of the Battle River Settlement for the Dominion Lands Survey, designating the river lots in the midst of the surrounding township and range system. In Township 46, Range 21, West of the 4th Initial Meridian, forty-eight river lots were surveyed astride the Battle River valley. Only thirteen persons were identified as being in possession of these lots at the time of the survey. Although several other lots were known to be occupied at that time, the residents probably were away freighting, hunting, or trading. In Township 46, Range 20, immediately to the east, another twenty-one river lots were surveyed, but no names were identified, and these lots were soon converted to the sectional norm.³³

The local métis became increasingly disturbed by the obvious signs of change—the disappearance of buffalo, the coming of the railway, the surveying of land for homesteaders— as 1885 approached. The more numerous and politically active Saskatchewan métis sought support from their friends and relatives in the Battle River Settlement. Catholic church authorities and their beloved parish priest managed to counter much of the revolutionary propaganda, but the rebels commanded considerable local sympathy, and the community remained very much an uncertain factor until the rising was quelled.

In 1888 it was reported that “the population of the settlement is made up almost entirely of Half-Breeds, who make a living by freighting, hunting, and farming. A few years since many of the families now here were residents in and around Calgary and other southern places of settlement, but the incoming settlers bought the improvements and land claims of the Half-Breeds and they moved north to the still distant but verdant valley of Battle River, to join their own people.”³⁴ By 1891 the railway was constructed north from Calgary to Edmonton and the same process was to be repeated in the local influx of homesteaders.³⁵

Some indication of the extent of population growth, reflecting the influence of the railway and incoming settlers, has been demonstrated by Lewis H. Thomas from census data. In 1881 the total non-Indian population numbered 5,400 in the Northwest Territories districts of Assiniboia, Saskatchewan, and Alberta—the area east of the Rockies, west of Manitoba, and south of 55°N. By 1885 the population had increased to 28,192, and by 1891 it was 51,799.³⁶

Many of the local métis had neglected to register to gain title to their properties, as provided for by the 1885 Half-Breed Commission. The CPR threatened to take the lots within the settlement for which entry still had not been made as late as 1893. William Pearce, the superintendent of mines at Calgary, was instructed by the secretary of the Department of the Interior in Ottawa to proceed to the Battle River Settlement and to attend to the matter.

He found that twelve of the forty-eight lots were still vacant at that time. With the disappearance of their old economic base, hard times were upon the residents and many had difficulty in providing the ten-dollar entry fee.³⁷

A minority of the métis retained their property and intermarried with the incoming homesteaders. Others prolonged their former role as freighters for a few years, hauling north from Edmonton to Athabasca Landing. The majority, confused by the strange new world and unable to adapt, repeated their former course of action. As Pearce had anticipated, these sold out their improvements even before making entry and scattered northward into other métis communities or sought escape to the Peace River area. Before the turn of the century the transition had ended and the homestead era had begun for central Alberta.

CONCLUSION

By the middle of the nineteenth century major forces operated to persuade the Hudson's Bay Company of the inevitability of change and withdrawal.³⁸ On the Pacific Coast it withdrew from the Oregon Country to Vancouver Island, only to have its grant of the island subsequently revoked, and mainland British Columbia removed from its jurisdiction, thanks to the great influx of gold miners. On the plains, at a time when most of the agricultural land of central Canada had already been settled, there was abundant evidence that vast areas of the company's lands could be used for farming. At the political level there were fears that the Canadian plains would come under the control of the United States unless something was done. In response to the recommendation of a select committee of the House of Commons, the company declared its willingness to cede land to Canada wherever required for settlement. Although negotiations did not result in the actual transfer of title of the Hudson's Bay lands to Canada until 1870, the results were inevitable. As Edwin Rich observes, “the fur trader as such became relatively unimportant. . . . In 1857 the Company had yielded its

case; in 1859 it had forfeited its License for Exclusive Trade."³⁹

In central Alberta the full impact of the changes was delayed almost a quarter century because of its remoteness from the Red River valley, where the process had already taken place. Even so, the changes proved inevitable, and followed the same sequence that had occurred farther east. For Indian and métis alike, the late nineteenth century was but a brief transition between the old fur trade era and the new homestead era. Arthur J. Ray has pointed out that the diminishing buffalo range forced the parkland Indians to travel ever greater distances during the latter half of the nineteenth century. It became impractical for such Indians to trap furs in late autumn and early winter and hunt bison in the middle of winter.⁴⁰ The annual winter congregations of woodland and plains Indians ceased in the Saskatchewan parklands as they had earlier farther east, and as they did later in Alberta. Indeed, central Alberta saw the last survivals of such hunts. The ultimate disappearance of the buffalo was serious for the woodland Indians with their "rather generalized economies," but it was disastrous for the highly specialized plains Indians (Blackfoot and Plains Cree), whose way of life was centered on the animal. For them, there were few alternatives but to enter into treaty with the government and hope for survival.

The métis traditionally played an especially important role in the fur trade. They excelled as trappers, buffalo hunters, boatmen, and guides. The western métis of central Alberta, however, experienced the same sequence of events that had occurred earlier in the Red River: a declining fur trade, the disappearance of the buffalo, and an influx of agricultural settlers. For a time freighting provided them with a livelihood, even as the railway extended westward across the southern Canadian plains. Some of the western Canadian métis "pioneered new enterprises and new economic activities, while many more collaborated" with the newcomers, but the Battle River people remained "irreconcilable nomads."⁴¹ As homesteaders

increasingly took up lands around them in the 1890s, most of the métis chose to sell out rather than settle down as farmers, and once more they sought to escape into the unsettled north. Their traditional skills were no longer in demand in the new era. They could not or would not develop new ones so long as a non-settled frontier offered the illusion of refuge.

NOTES

1. Joseph Kinsey Howard, *Strange Empire* (New York: William Morrow, 1952).

2. This movement and the major characteristics of the local Indian tribes can be found in Arthur S. Morton, *A History of the Canadian West to 1870-71*, 2d ed., ed. by Lewis G. Thomas (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973); Diamond Jenness, *Indians of Canada*, 3d ed., National Museum of Canada Bulletin no. 65 (Ottawa, 1955); Hugh A. Dempsey, *Indian Tribes of Alberta* (Calgary: Glenbow-Alberta Institute, 1978); Oscar Lewis, *The Effects of White Contact upon Blackfoot Culture*, American Ethnological Society Monograph 6 (1942; reprint, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973); David G. Mandelbaum, *The Plains Cree*, Canadian Plains Studies, no. 9 (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1979).

3. Richard Glover, ed., *David Thompson's Narrative, 1784-1812*, new ed. (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1962), p. 252.

4. Glyndwyr Williams, ed., *London Correspondence Inward from Sir George Simpson 1841-42*, Publications of the Hudson's Bay Company Record Society, no. 29 (London, 1973), p. 45.

5. Irene M. Spry, ed., *The Papers of The Palliser Expedition, 1857-1860*, Publications of the Champlain Society, no. 54 (Toronto, 1968).

6. As late as 1866 Father Lacombe found himself in the midst of a night attack of Crees upon a Blackfoot hunting camp near the Battle River southeast of present-day Wetaskiwin when he was visiting the latter tribe. In 1870 a Cree ambush of a small Blackfoot party on the trail just south of Edmonton resulted in the descent of a large retaliatory Blackfoot war party to the south bank of the river with shots

fired at the fort opposite, but Father Lacombe was able to influence them to withdraw.

7. Spry, ed., *Palliser Expedition*, p. 219.

8. Paul Kane, *Wanderings of An Artist among the Indians of North America . . .*, new ed. (Edmonton: M. G. Hurtig, 1968), p. 256. For a general overview of Fort Edmonton at this time, see Morton's *History of the Canadian West*, pp. 699-703.

9. George M. Grant, *Ocean to Ocean: Sandford Fleming's Expedition through Canada in 1872*, new ed. (Toronto: Radisson Society of Canada, 1925), p. 197.

10. James G. MacGregor, *Edmonton: A History* (Edmonton: M. G. Hurtig, 1967), pp. 90-93.

11. In addition to Morton, these include Edwin Ernest Rich, *Hudson's Bay Company, 1670-1870*, vol. 2, Publications of the Hudson's Bay Company Record Society, no. 22 (London, 1959); George F. G. Stanley, *The Birth of Western Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960); Irene M. Spry, "The Transition from a Nomadic to a Settled Economy in Western Canada, 1856-96," *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada* 6, series 4, section 2 (June 1968): 187-201. Local historian James G. MacGregor has included many aspects of the transitional era in central Alberta in his numerous books, among which may be noted *The Battle River Valley*, *John Rowand, Czar of the Prairies*, and *Senator Hardisty's Prairies, 1840-1889*, all published in Saskatoon by Western Producer Prairie Books in 1976, 1978, and 1979, respectively; *Edmonton Trader* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1963), and *Edmonton: A History*.

12. Hugh A. Dempsey, *A Blackfoot Winter Count*, Glenbow Foundation Occasional Paper no. 1 (Calgary, 1965), p. 17.

13. Frank G. Roe, *The North American Buffalo* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951), pp. 467-88.

14. D. Aidan McQuillan, "Creation of Indian Reserves on the Canadian Prairies, 1870-1885," *Geographical Review* 70, no. 4 (October 1980): 379-96.

15. "Mask-wa-ki-Sik, Correspondence des Principaux de Ermineskin's Indian Residential School, 1896-1944," Oblates Archives, B-VIII, 320, p. 6, Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton.

16. David Laird, "Special Appendix C," *Annual Report, 1877* (Ottawa: Department of the Interior, 1878), p. xxxviii.

17. On assuming responsibility for the former Hudson's Bay Company territory, the dominion government established a Department of the Interior in 1873, to facilitate the orderly disposal of dominion lands in the west. Within the year a land office was established in Winnipeg, with two branch offices in southern Manitoba. Homesteaders began to flock in, first to the Red River valley, and progressively westward in the following decade as railways shifted the transportation focus from the Saskatchewan River to the southern plains. No longer were the small NWMP posts such as Forts Walsh, Macleod, and Calgary to provide the only significant white presence in former Blackfoot territory. In 1875 there were 1,021 entries made on dominion lands, involving 163,277 acres. By 1882 the comparable figures were 16,740 and 2,699,145 (*Annual Reports, 1875 and 1882*, of the Canada Department of the Interior). For a summary of conditions on the Canadian plains shortly afterward, see John H. Warkentin, "Western Canada in 1886," *Papers of the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba*, series 3, vol. 20 (1965), pp. 85-116. In 1883 the Canadian Pacific Railway reached Calgary and ranchers and homesteaders took up more and more Alberta land.

18. For the background of these people, see John E. Foster, "The Origins of the Mixed Bloods in the Canadian West," in *Essays on Western History*, ed. by Lewis H. Thomas (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1976), pp. 71-80; Marcel Giraud, *Le Métis Canadien* (Paris: Institut d'Ethnologie, Université de Paris, 1945); and Joe Sawchuk et al., *Métis Land Rights in Alberta: A Political History* (Edmonton: Métis Association of Alberta, 1981). First-hand accounts of their activities in the Northwest include M. Weekes, *The Last Buffalo Hunter* (Toronto: Macmillan Co. of Canada, 1945); Peter Erasmus, *Buffalo Days and Nights* (Calgary: Glenbow-Alberta Institute, 1976); Jock Carpenter, *Fifty Dollar Bride* (Sidney, B.C.: Gray's Publishing, 1977).

19. Archives Committee, Lac Ste. Anne Historical Society, *West of the Fifth* (Edmonton: Institute of Applied Art, 1959), p. 12.

20. D. Wayne Moodie, "Alberta Settlement

Surveys," *Alberta Historical Review* 12 (Autumn 1964): 1-7; R. Geoffrey Ironside and E. Tomasky, "Agriculture and River Lot Settlement in Western Canada: The Case of Pakan (Victoria), Alberta," *Prairie Forum* 1 (April 1976): pp. 3-18.

21. William L. Morton, *Manitoba: A History*, 2d ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), p. 150.

22. Spry, ed., *Palliser Expedition*, p. 221.

23. John McDougall, *Opening The Great West* (Calgary: Glenbow-Alberta Institute, 1970), p. 22.

24. John Peter Turner, *The North-West Mounted Police* (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1950), 1: 427.

25. Jules Le Chevalier O.M.I., Annexe II 6, Oblates Archives, Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton.

26. J. R. Stanley Hambly, ed., *The Battle River Country* (New Norway, Alberta: Duhamel Historical Society, 1974), pp. 11-12.

27. Samuel B. Steele, *Forty Years in Canada* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), p. 87.

28. For information on the Red River carts and trails, see Olive Knox, "Red River Cart," *Beaver* 272 (March 1942): 39-43; Harry B. Brehaut, "The Red River Cart and Trails," *Transactions of the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba* 3, no. 28 (1971-72): 5-35; R. C. Russell, *The Carlton Trail* (Saskatoon: Modern Press, 1955); J. F. Klaus, "Early Trails to Carlton House," *Beaver* 297 (Autumn 1966): 32-39.

29. William C. Wonders, "Log Dwellings in Canadian Folk Architecture," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 69 (June 1979): 187-207.

30. Surveyors' Field Notes, Surveys and Mapping Branch, Alberta Transportation, Edmonton.

31. J. P. Dickin McGinnis, "Building in Calgary, 1875-1914," in *Frontier Calgary*, ed. by Anthony W. Rasporich and Henry C. Klassen (Calgary: University of Calgary and McClelland and Stewart West, 1975), p. 10.

32. Joseph Burr Tyrell, *Report on a Part of Northern Alberta and Portions of Adjacent Districts of Assiniboia and Saskatchewan*, Geology and Natural History Survey of Canada, Annual Report, 1886, new series, vol. 2, report E (Montreal: Dawson Brothers, 1887), p. 38.

33. Homestead Records (#70-313), Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton.

34. G. Fitzgerald, *Alberta, Canada* (Ottawa: Canada Department of Agriculture, 1888), p. 5.

35. For an account of the rapid homestead settlement of this part of central Alberta, see William C. Wonders, "Scandinavian Homesteaders in Central Alberta," in *The New Provinces: Alberta and Saskatchewan, 1905-1980*, ed. by Howard B. Palmer and Donald B. Smith (Vancouver: Tantalus Research, 1980), pp. 131-71.

36. Lewis H. Thomas, *The Struggle for Responsible Government in the North-West Territories, 1870-97*, 2d ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), p. 104.

37. Battle River Settlement, October 28, 1893, William Pearce Papers, Box 45, File 14-D-1, University of Alberta Archives.

38. Edwin Ernest Rich, *The Fur Trade and the Northwest to 1857* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967).

39. *Ibid.*, p. 296.

40. Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), pp. 223-24.

41. Spry, "Transition from Nomadic to Settled Economy," p. 190.