

## Saskatoon's Word on the Street Festival September 2016

### *Voices of Seven Oaks*

**Myrna Intro:** In Spring of 1816, rumours swirl through Assiniboia – in today's southern Manitoba – that the Nor'Westers, men of the North West Company of fur traders, Métis hunters, Canadian *engagés* [contract employees] and clerks, are preparing for war against their commercial rivals, the Hudson's Bay Company. They face each other from their respective posts, Fort Gibraltar and Fort Douglas, near the juncture of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers known as the Forks. There are settlers a km north in a loop of the Red, named Point Douglas.

June 19, 1816: a group of Métis and Nor'Westers disembark from a canoe at the mouth of Catfish Creek, where it empties, swift and muddy, into the Assiniboine. They have with them large bundles of pemmican which they transfer to ox carts for transport overland north-east across the plain. At this point the horsemen are still well away from the Selkirk settlers on the Red, and from Fort Douglas, downstream on the Red. In fact, they are deliberately avoiding fort and settlers. Or so they will claim.

But that evening of June 19, a watchman in Fort Douglas spots a group of the horsemen, some 35 of them, armed and riding in the direction of La Grenouillère or Frog Plain. They seem to be riding toward the settlement itself. The alarm is raised, Governor Robert Semple calls for volunteers, hands them muskets and ammunition and marches out with them, some 25-strong, to intercept and confront the horsemen.

They meet at a bend in the river, in a grove of trees. What happened next has been called a battle, a skirmish, a massacre. It was over in fifteen minutes but it was long in the making, starting as early as the charter of the Hudson's Bay Company.

**MK:** From the Charter of the Hudson's Bay Company 1670

### *Voice 1: Plummy English accent*

*Charles the Second By the grace of God King of England Scotland France and Ireland defender of the faith &c*

*To All to whome these presentes shall come greeting [...]*

*doe make ordeyne constitute establish confirme and declare by these Presentes and that by the same name of Governor & Company of Adventurers of England Tradeing into Hudsons Bay they shall have perpetuall succession And that they and their successors by the name of Governor and Company of Adventurers of England Tradeing into Hudsons Bay bee and at all tymes hereafter shall bee persons able and capable in Law to have purchase receive possesse enjoy and retheyne Landes Rentes priviledges libertyes Jurisdiccions Franchyses and hereditamentes of what kinde nature and quality soever they bee to them and their Successors And alsoe to give grant demise alien assigne and dispose Landes*

*Tenementes and hereditamentes and to doe and execute all and singular other thinges by the same name that to them shall or may apperteyne to doe.*

**Voice 2: 19<sup>th</sup> century French-Canadian historian**

**Joseph Tassé:** It was the era when the Hudson's Bay Company and the North-West Company were locked in a merciless struggle – what the voyageurs called *la conteste* - in the hunting territories the exploitation of which they both laid claim to. The employees of the North-West Company, composed for the most part of our countrymen, were designated by the name of *gens du Nord-Ouest* or simply *les Canadiens* while their adversaries were called *les Anglais*, or *les gens de la baie d'Hudson* or even better, *les gens du petit Nord*.

**Voice 3: Plummy Scottish accent**

**Lord Selkirk:** Suffice it to say, that, from the first moment when the Hudson's Bay Company made a grant of land for the purpose of forming an agricultural settlement upon an extended scale within their territories, the North-West Company avowed the most determined hostility to the undertaking. The settlement in question having been formed in a district, which had been exhausted of valuable furs by the extirpation of the beaver, and the settlers, by the very tenure of their lands, being also debarred from interfering with the Fur Trade, it may appear extraordinary that any set of traders should have entertained such a determined animosity against its establishment. Nothing surely can be imagined more harmless in itself than the occupation of a farmer.

**Voice 4: Highland crofter and Selkirk settler**

Och aye, it was hard. It was so hard you could barely feature it. Locusts. Hailstorms. Floods. Blizzards. Indians. Halfbreeds. Hot as the pit of hell in the summer, and the mosquitoes as big as sparrows. Winters so cold it would freeze the breath in your throat and turn your blood to red ice. Weather for giants, in them days.

**Voice 5: Metis blogger**

**H.D. Garneau:** The Metis, with much civility, placed themselves at the service of the poor Scottish party. Peltier showed them to land already cleared and ready for cultivation. He also agreed to lend his cart and canoe for the summer to a family. Baptiste Roy received and took care of their seed grain. Francois Delorme and his Metis son supervised the building of their first dwelling. ... Fifteen Metis headed by Jean Baptiste Lagimodiere, alias Lagemodiere, Lagimodiere, and Lajimodiere (1778-1855), a French freeman, and included Bostonnias Pangman, b-1778, a Metis, conducted a hunting party to help feed and establish the Scots. The Metis Isham, likely the son of James Isham (a bigamist with a wife in Britain and Canada), supervised the preliminary work of breaking the soil and soon became their interpreter, while his son became a hunter for the Scots.

At this time there was no conflict between the English and French settlers. The Metis, however, were a bit apprehensive about what the real intentions of the H.B.C. were toward the Red River community.

***Voice 6: Scottish Nor'Wester***

**Duncan Cameron**, to Cuthbert Grant, Esq., Lieutenant Grant, I hear good word of your recruitment work along the Qu'Appelle. I think I do not exaggerate my own campaign here to say that by the spring the jardinières [gardeners] will need but a small push to see them all pack off for good. And I know just the lads to do it. Tell your jeunes gens that as soldiers of the New Nation they can expect to be fed and uniformed here at Red River, along with other presents. His Honourable Governorship and that ilk will turn tail soon enough when they see you and Seraphim et al in front of your cavalry. All their fine plans of harnessing your ponies to their ploughs and stealing your homes from under you and making you their servants

***Voice 7: 19<sup>th</sup> century French writer***

**François-René Chateaubriand, London September 1822:** Only the great war of American Independence is famous. We forget that blood also flowed on account of the minor interest of a handful of merchants. The Hudson's Bay Company sold, in 1811, to Lord Selkirk, land along the Red River; it was settled in 1812. The North-West or Canada Company took umbrage at this. The two companies, allied to different Indian tribes and supported by the Boisbrûlés, came to blows. This domestic conflict, horrid in its details, took place amongst the frozen wildernesses of Hudson Bay. Lord Selkirk's colony was destroyed in June 1815, exactly at the time of the Battle of Waterloo. In these two theatres of warfare, so different in their brilliance and obscurity, the woes of the human species were the same.

***Voice 8: Red River Metis***

**Jumps High:** I never was Cree, just my mother was, and it didn't feel right to pretend like I was Cree – but a man can't just be a tribe of his own. Not for long. Sooner or later a bunch of Cree or Assiniboine or Blackfoot are going to knock him on the head."... There were a great many young men like Jumps High. They could track a lizard through a dust storm, shoot the eyes out of a squirrel, or take on a grizzly bear with a hand axe, but inside them all was the same unease and yearning.

***Voice 9: Canadian popular historian***

**Marjorie Campbell:** The sight of the great fort [Gibraltar] in flames was too much for the Métis; soon the fire which had been smouldering in every one of them also burst into flame. The ancient war spirit of their Indian mothers, augmented by many a strain of fighting French and Highland Scots paternity, urged them to defend their very existence; and the Nor'Westers were no longer in any mood to enforce restraint.

***Voice 10: Canadian writer***

**Donald G. McLean:** The Metis men, who seconds ago were astride their horses, were now concealed behind them. Volley after volley of gunfire came from Grant and his men. At the same time, some of the concealed Metis came in from behind the settlers, completely surrounding them. They were now doomed.

***Voice 11: Canadian authors of Metis history***

**Bruce Sealey & Antoine Lussier:** Experienced hunters and sharpshooters, the Métis fired a volley of shots and then fell to the ground to reload. The naïve settlers cheered for they thought that their few aimless shots had killed all the Métis. The Métis reloaded their guns and charged the settlers. With the notable exception of two or three, the settlers turned in terror and tried to escape by running to the river and hiding along the bank. The Métis horsemen then charged and shot them with the ease of men accustomed to “running the buffalo.” The battle lasted only fifteen minutes.

***Voice 12: Red River Metis balladeer***

**NWC clerk Pierre Falcon:**

Voulez-vous écouter chanter  
Une chanson de vérité?  
Le dixneuf de juin la bande des Bois-Brûlés  
Sont arrivés comme des braves guerriers

Would you like to hear me sing  
Of a true and recent thing?  
It was June nineteen, the band of Bois-Brûlés  
Arrived that day,  
Oh the brave warriors they!

Le Gouverneur qui se croit empereur,  
Il veut agir avec rigueur;

The governor thinks he's an emperor,  
Thinks he can act like a great lord.

Il s'est trompé, il s'est fait tuer  
Un' quantité de ses grenadiers,  
J'avons tué presque tout son armée,  
Rien qu' quatre ou cinq se sont sauvés.

For his mistake with his life he paid;  
Most of his grenadiers they were slain.  
Four or five at most escaped that day,  
While all the rest to our guns fell prey.

Qui en a composé la chanson?  
C'est Pierre Falcon, poète du canton.  
Elle a été faite et composée.  
Chantons la gloire de ces Bois-Brûlés.

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-Brûlés.

