

Métis Land Use of the Lauder Sandhills of Southwestern Manitoba

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ABSTRACT. Archaeological investigations in the Lauder Sandhills of southwestern Manitoba have revealed a series of enigmatic pit features constructed on stabilized sand dunes overlooking now-dry wetlands. These features appear to be semi-subterranean house structures, wells and storage pits. Preliminary test excavation suggests they are of mid to late 19th century derivation, and the sparse material culture recoveries indicate a pre-homestead occupation. We propose that the sites are rudimentary farmsteads that were established in ecologically productive areas where Métis families could sustain themselves by hunting, fishing, trapping and farming. These activities became important in the area after the post-1860 collapse of bison provisioning and hide hunting, the economic mainstay of the St. François Xavier Métis who utilized the area.

SOMMAIRE. Les fouilles archéologiques des Lauder Sandhills du sud-ouest du Manitoba ont révélé une série de fosses énigmatiques dans des dunes de sable stabilisées donnant sur des terres marécageuses maintenant asséchées. Il semble s'agir de structures d'habitation semi-souterraines, de puits et de fosses de stockage. Une excavation préliminaire suggère une date portant depuis le milieu jusqu'à la fin du 19^{ième} siècle, et la récolte de maigres matériaux culturels indique une occupation pré-fermière. Nous sommes d'avis que ces sites représentent des fermes rudimentaires établies dans des régions écologiquement productives où les familles métisses pouvaient subvenir à leurs besoins par la chasse, la pêche, le piégeage et l'agriculture. Ces activités devinrent importantes dans la région après la faillite de la base économique des Métis de St. François Xavier qui occupaient la région: l'approvisionnement en viande et en peaux de bisons.

Introduction

Archaeological research in the Lauder Sandhills of southwestern Manitoba (Figure 1) has revealed two sites with components that date between the middle and late 19th century. Both historic components are superimposed upon pre-contact Aboriginal occupations, and form part of a site complex that we have named Makotchi-Ded Dontipi. The post-contact occupations were not the focus of our field research. Rather, we discovered these comparatively recent deposits while investigating the pre-contact Aboriginal occupations. Preliminary examination of the material culture and some of the historic records suggests that the post-contact occupants may have been Métis.

This area is part of a zone of stabilized sand dunes that overlie the Oak Lake Aquifer (Figure 2). These sand dunes are interspersed with humid meadows, sloughs and small lakes, thereby creating an isolated zone of deciduous forest and wetlands that was surrounded by mixed grass prairie (Figure 3) (see Hamilton and Nicholson 1999). This zone was biologically diverse and highly productive on a seasonal basis. It has been significantly transformed over the past 120 years because of homestead agricultural settlement, water table declines, suppression of prairie fires, and local extinction of prairie fauna such as bison.

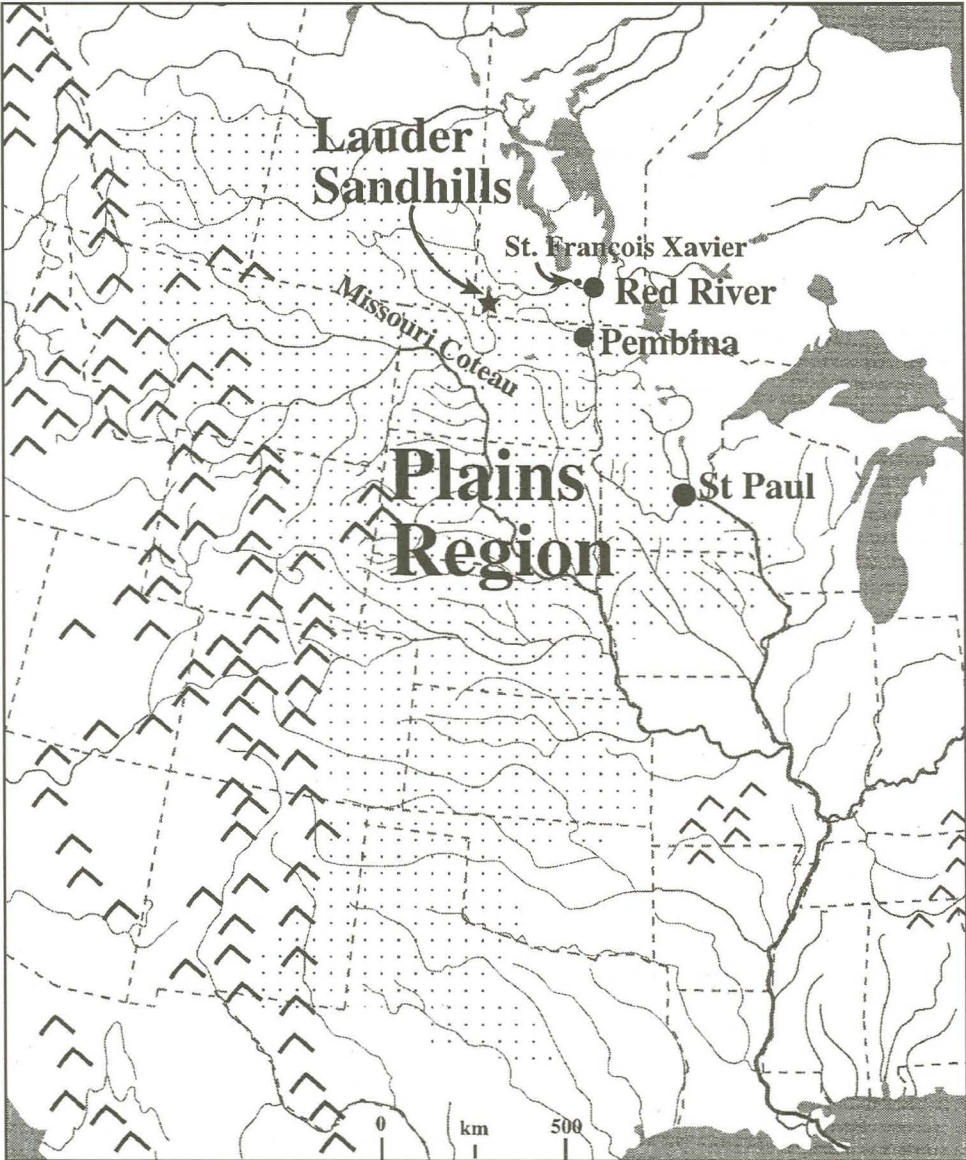


Figure 1. The Lauder Sandhills in the northeastern plains.

While human occupation of the area dates back at least 4,000 to 5,000 years, our efforts have so far focused upon Plains Woodland occupations that date to the last 800 years. Given the locally rich and reliable biomass and the intense Plains Woodland occupation, we have been puzzled by an apparent abandonment during the fur trade era.¹ This is surprising given the intense European fur trade occupation of the Assiniboine River basin between 1730 and the mid 1800s. We have tentatively suggested elsewhere that the apparent 18th century abandonment of the area by Plains Woodland people was partly due to chronic Aboriginal warfare that raged throughout the Prairie/Forest ecotone zone (Hamilton and Nicholson 1997).

Between approximately 1790 and 1861 several fur trade posts were in operation

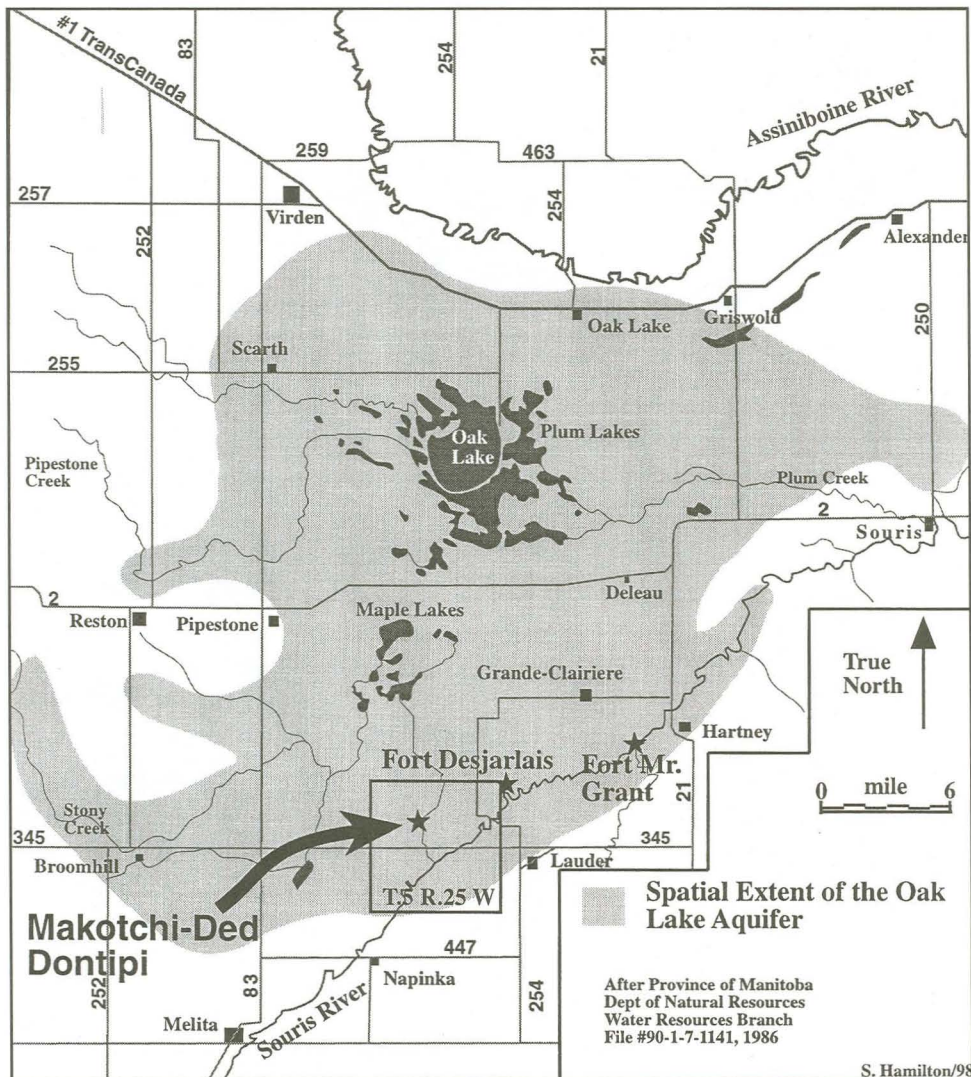


Figure 2. The spatial extent of the Oak Lake Aquifer.

within the Lauder Sandhills about 5 to 15 km northeast of Makotchi-Ded DONTIPI (Figure 4) (McMorran 1950). This historically documented fur trade occupation began with the expansion of Missouri River based American fur traders into Rupert's land during the 1790s (McMorran 1950; Nieuwhof 1990; Hems nd). The Hudson's Bay Company countered this opposition with its trade posts along the Assiniboine River, most notably Brandon House. With the final closure of Brandon House in 1823, the southwestern flank of Rupert's land was exposed to competition from Missouri River traders. Governor George Simpson responded by licensing Cuthbert Grant Jr. to trade in the disputed territory in the early 1820s, and eventually appointed him as "Warden of the Plains" in 1828 (McLeod and Morton 1974). This license was granted on the condition that Grant prevent other Métis from engaging in fur trading (Ens 1996: 51). Grant was a prominent Métis leader during the "Pemmican War" and the Battle of Seven Oaks (or La Grenouillere in Métis tradition) of the previous decade. He established Fort Mr. Grant in 1824 in direct opposition to the American establishments, most notably Fort Desjarlais.

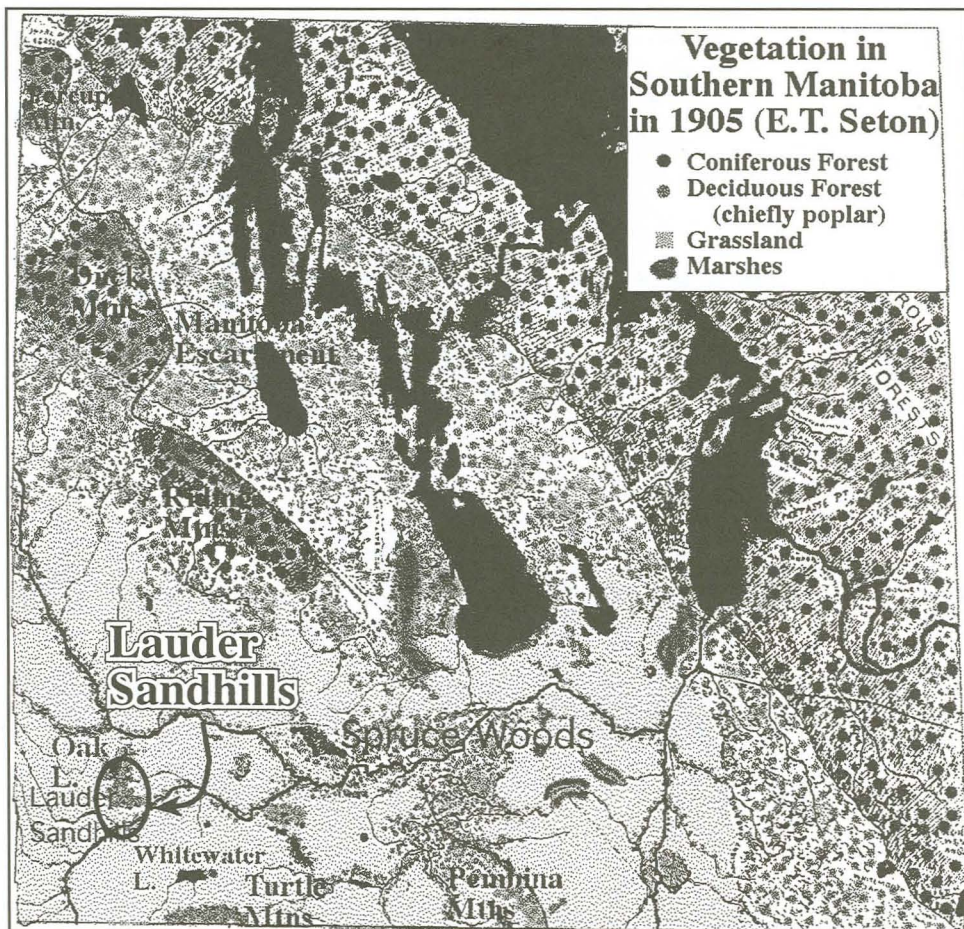


Figure 3. The pre-homestead configuration of vegetation in southern Manitoba (after Warkentin and Ruggles 1970: 456).

These competing posts were predominately garrisoned by Red River or American Métis, and it is unclear just how successful Grant was in protecting the HBC monopoly. Indeed, J.E. Foster (1995: 430-431) asserts that the HBC took little interest in the trade activities of the Red River Métis since the furs generally ended up in the HBC warehouses at Red River in any case. Trade at Fort Mr. Grant continued until about 1861 when it was finally closed by Grant's grandson, Thomas Breland (Clarke 1976: 91). The nature of this fur trade activity is not well known,

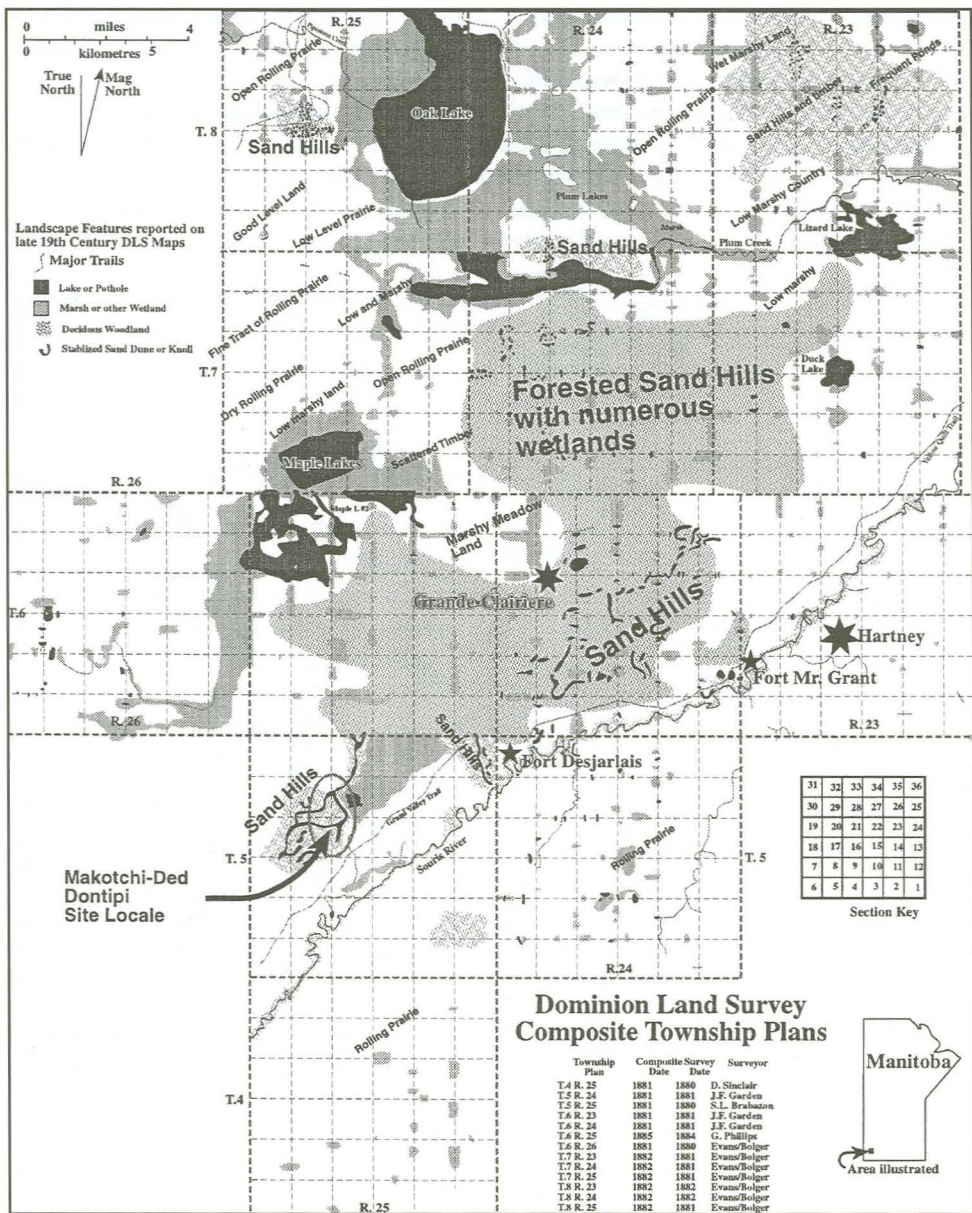


Figure 4. Makotchi-Ded Dontipi, Ft. Desjarlais and Ft. Mr. Grant in the Lauder Sandhills, c. 1885.

but is thought to have been a comparatively minor trade in furs, bison hides and provisions.

We propose that the Métis occupation of the region is more significant than is generally thought. Surface inspection of Fort Mr. Grant and Fort Desjarlais indicates that they were both quite large, and were occupied for over 40 and 20 years respectively.² Local oral tradition suggests that upwards of 75 men were stationed at Fort Desjarlais in the 1840s (Clarke 1976: 35). If this estimate is correct, then much more than a limited trade in furs was involved. These posts likely served as important rendezvous points for the annual bison hunts, and as depots for Métis traders seeking to circumvent the HBC monopoly.

By the mid-19th century many Métis were becoming increasingly antagonistic towards the HBC monopoly. Foster (1995: 431) observes that with the establishment of alternative American trade opportunities at Pembina and St. Paul (Figure 1), many young Métis men became less inclined to accept the HBC monopoly. This is evident with the sharp decline of Cuthbert Grant's influence, and the development

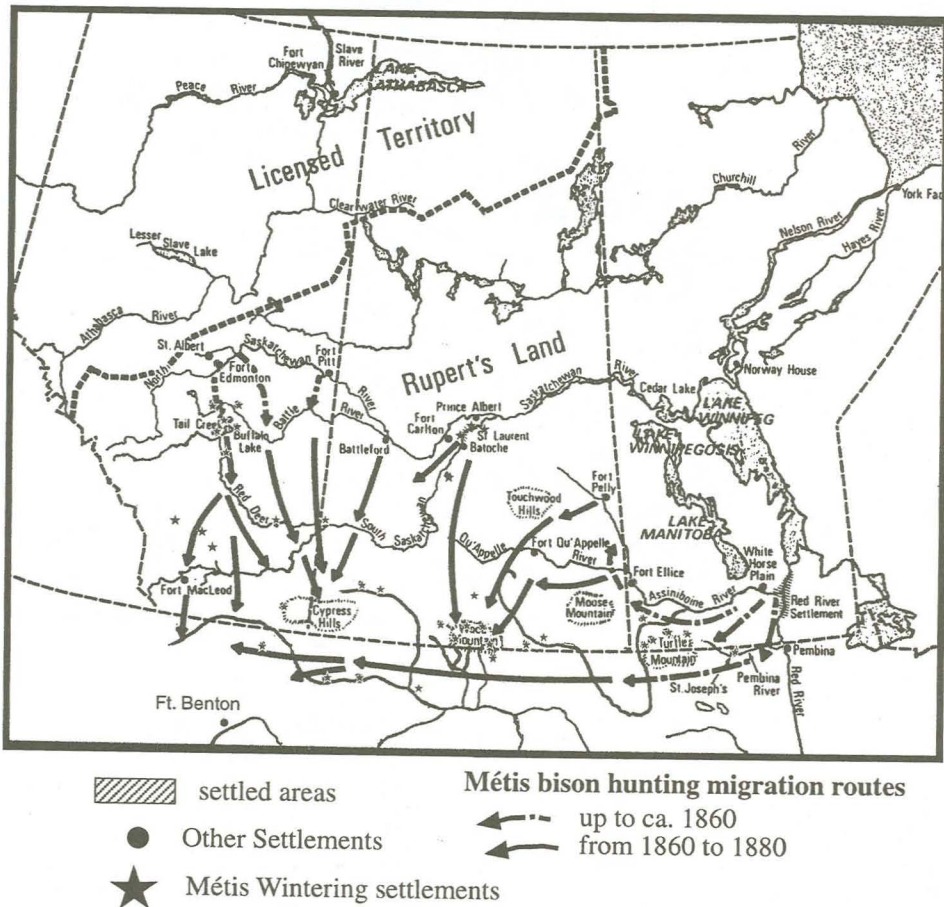


Figure 5. Métis wintering settlements and migration routes across the northern plains (after Ens 1996: 79, and Foster 1995: 424).

of a flourishing trade at Pembina (Foster 1995: 431; Morton 1967). This forced the HBC to react in order to protect their economic position, and culminated in the 1849 trial of Guillaume Sayer and several other Métis for trading in violation of the HBC Charter. While Sayer was found guilty, mindful of upwards of 300 armed Métis surrounding the courthouse, the HBC dropped additional charges and released Sayer and the others without punishment (Foster 1995: 432). This effectively ended any pretence of HBC monopoly, and further encouraged the development of the provisioning and hide trade (see Burley, Horsfall and Brandon 1992; Foster 1995; Sprague and Frye 1983; and Ens 1996). By the 1850s many Métis were actively engaged in free trading, and exported the produce from the bison hunt to the emerging American markets (Ens 1996). Given the remote and unpoliced nature of the Souris River basin with its proximity to the international boundary, we can safely assume that considerable unlicensed trade occurred in the Lauder Sandhills.

Beginning in 1837, at least 60 Métis families from St. François Xavier began making annual trips to the Lauder Sandhills region in organized bison hunting brigades (Clarke 1976: 99).³ On the basis of information from local descendants of these Métis, Clarke (1976: 99) indicates that the hunts grew larger throughout the 1840s as Fort Garry hunters joined them, and they ranged throughout the Souris River Basin as far west as the Moose Mountain (Figure 5). Apparently bison hunting continued locally until about 1865 when the bison herds had been virtually exterminated.

The Métis bison hunt was highly disciplined and carefully organized (Foster 1995). From a production perspective, Ens (1996) argues that it should be treated as a kind of "cottage industry." Whole family groups left Red River each summer in horse-drawn cart brigades. These operations were orchestrated equestrian hunts, with the men doing the hunting, and the women carrying out the balance of the butchering and processing of the meat and hides. The summer hunt generated dried meat, fat, pemmican and a few robes for sale to the Hudson's Bay Company, while the fall hunt served to procure fresh meat needed to sustain the Métis through the upcoming winter (Ens 1996).

From the 1820s through to the 1840s, it is generally thought that these annual treks onto the Plains were mobile operations, and that most families returned to Red River for the winter. By the late 1840s, with the collapse of the HBC monopoly, many Métis became increasingly involved in the bison robe trade with American traders based at Pembina and St. Paul (Figure 1) (Ens 1996). This trade had a profound effect upon some Métis parishes such as St. François Xavier. Ens (1996) suggests that the bison provision and robe trade became the first true surplus-producing industry at Red River. It involved entire families in the hunt, and from the 1840s through to the 1870s, it had the effect of drawing large numbers of Métis away from subsistence farming in Red River, and out onto the plains for virtually all of the year.

In summary, the earlier bison hunt of the 1820s through to the 1840s focused upon generating preserved meat and fat for sale to the HBC. The HBC was uninterested in bison robes because they were uneconomical to transport to European markets via York Factory. After the early 1840s this changed dramatically, with the development of a bison robe market in St. Paul to supply the developing industrial

capacity of the United States. By 1870 the bison robe trade had reached the level of 100,000 robes per year (Foster 1995: 432). Not only did the Pembina and St. Paul merchants offer the Métis alternate markets for their produce, but were also an alternative to the HBC for purchasing supplies. This new hide market primarily involved prime bison robes produced in the winter (Ens 1996: 77). These winter robes were tanned with the hair on, and were particularly valued for the production of sleigh throws, wraps, bedding, boots and coats (Ens 1996: 75).

The robe trade infused new economic vitality into some Métis parishes including St. François Xavier (Ens 1996). It introduced new prosperity for Métis men whose aspirations were stifled by the traditional economic options offered at Red River. It also transformed the demographic profile of these communities, and young men and women were in a position to marry earlier without first establishing independent farm holdings at Red River. As more people were attracted to the robe trade, there was an associated decline in population and cultivated land in some Red River parishes (Ens 1996).

As time passed, and more Métis engaged in the commercial hide hunt, they began "wintering" on the bison ranges at a number of temporary wintering villages scattered throughout the northern plains (Ens 1996: 79; Burley, Horsfall and Brandon 1992; Baldwin 1980; Bonnicksen, Horan, Doll and Baldwin 1973; Doll, Kidd and Day 1988) (Figure 5). The best documented of these wintering camps are those on the plains of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Montana which date to the 1870s and 1880s. The earlier wintering camps of the St. François Xavier Métis were located in the Pembina Hills, Turtle Mountain, Moose Mountain, the Souris and Qu'Appelle River valleys and at Wood Mountain (Ens 1996: 79). Foster echoes these observations in his discussion of Hivernant Métis post-1850 settlement of the northern Plains whereby "*wooded oases* such as Moose Mountain, Wood Mountain, Wood Mountain and, in time, the Cypress Hills" were sought out as wintering grounds (1995: 433 emphasis ours). Interestingly, we have independently used the term "ecological island" to refer to the Lauder Sandhills as a productive forest-wetland microhabitat that attracted intensive occupation by Plains Woodland people (Hamilton and Nicholson 1999). Given the sustained occupation of Forts Desjarlais and Mr. Grant, and in light of the biotic richness of the Souris River basin, we propose that many early Métis wintering camps remain undocumented in the Lauder Sandhills.

Lawrence Clarke's informants offered some insights into these camps. They were described as

tents or often rude log cabins located in a sheltered spot along the [Souris] river. The men would set off each day in search of buffalo. Occasionally they would be trapped by severe blizzards, but were adept at making shelters out of snow blocks in order to survive the storm, or they might find a sheltered spot along the river and dig into the bank (Clarke 1976: 100).

Such camps would likely have been comparatively short-term occupations, housed several Métis families, and were supplied with a comparatively sparse array of goods transported in the Red River carts. Such camps might also be characterized by large quantities of butchered animal bones. This assumption might, however, be

unwarranted when it is kept in mind that hides and dried provisions were the primary economic product, and that individual animals might be killed and butchered at some distance from the camp. Perhaps field butchery and transport of carcass portions to the camps might not involve significant amounts of bone except in situations where marrow and bone grease were needed in pemmican production. Given the intensity of the commercial bison hunt, we believe that the Souris River basin hunts probably did not flourish for more than a few decades.

Upon the local bison extinction within the Souris River basin by the 1860s, it is generally thought that the Hivernant Métis continued their activities by moving west into Montana and southern Saskatchewan and Alberta (see Granger and Ross 1980; Burley, Horsfall and Brandon 1992; Ens 1996). However, some Métis families continued to utilize the Lauder Sandhills after the end of the bison hunt because of its continued utility for subsistence farming, trapping and hunting activities. This latter occupation is believed to be the origin of the mid to late 19th century deposits at Makotchi-Ded Dontipi.

Historic Occupants of Makotchi Ded Dontipi

During the 1997 field season a series of semi-subterranean features were discovered at the Vera Site, and at the nearby Twin Fawns Site (Figure 6). Initial investigation of these features has revealed a puzzling depositional sequence. While the material culture reflects middle to late 19th century occupation, some artifacts also indicate early 20th century affiliation. This indicates two discrete phases of historic occupation: the first is a pre-railroad and pre-homestead occupation; while the second is consistent with a late 19th and early 20th century homestead agricultural settlement. There are several early 20th century homesteads documented within half a kilometre of the Vera and Twin Fawns sites. The more recent materials on the Vera and Twin Fawns sites likely represent a thin veneer of material culture deriving from casual use of the area for haying, wood cutting and refuse disposal. The middle- to late-19th century deposits are the focus of the balance of this article.

While our sample size is quite small and ambiguous, we believe that the semi-subterranean structures at the Vera Site were constructed after the 1860s, but were abandoned by the post 1885 homestead period. These structures are quite impressive in terms of size and requisite construction labour (Figure 7). For example, House Feature #1 at the Vera site is located upon a low sand dune. It is rectangular with raised ridges forming the margins, and with a central area that was excavated about 30 cm down. At least one central post supported the roof ridge pole, and the thick accumulation of mottled sediment within the structure indicates that sod or earth formed part of the walls and roof. It remains to be seen whether these structures were wholly of sod construction, or whether they were half timbered. Given the coarse sediment texture, we believe that the upper walls were likely logs since the sandy sods would not have offered much structural integrity. The roof likely consisted of poles and brush covered with sods to produce a warm winter habitation. Deeply stratified pre-contact components underlie the 19th century structure. They include the extensive Vickers Focus component, plus much more localized Sonota and Duncan/Hanna occupations.

The Vera Site contains widely dispersed semi-subterranean structures of two

sizes: three large structures averaging 65 m² each, and three small depressions that average 6 m² each (Figure 8). The larger square or rectangular features are tentatively interpreted as house features, while the smaller depressions may represent storage pits or ice houses. They are dispersed over about 4,700 square metres on a series of low stabilized sand dunes overlooking a densely forested wetland hollow

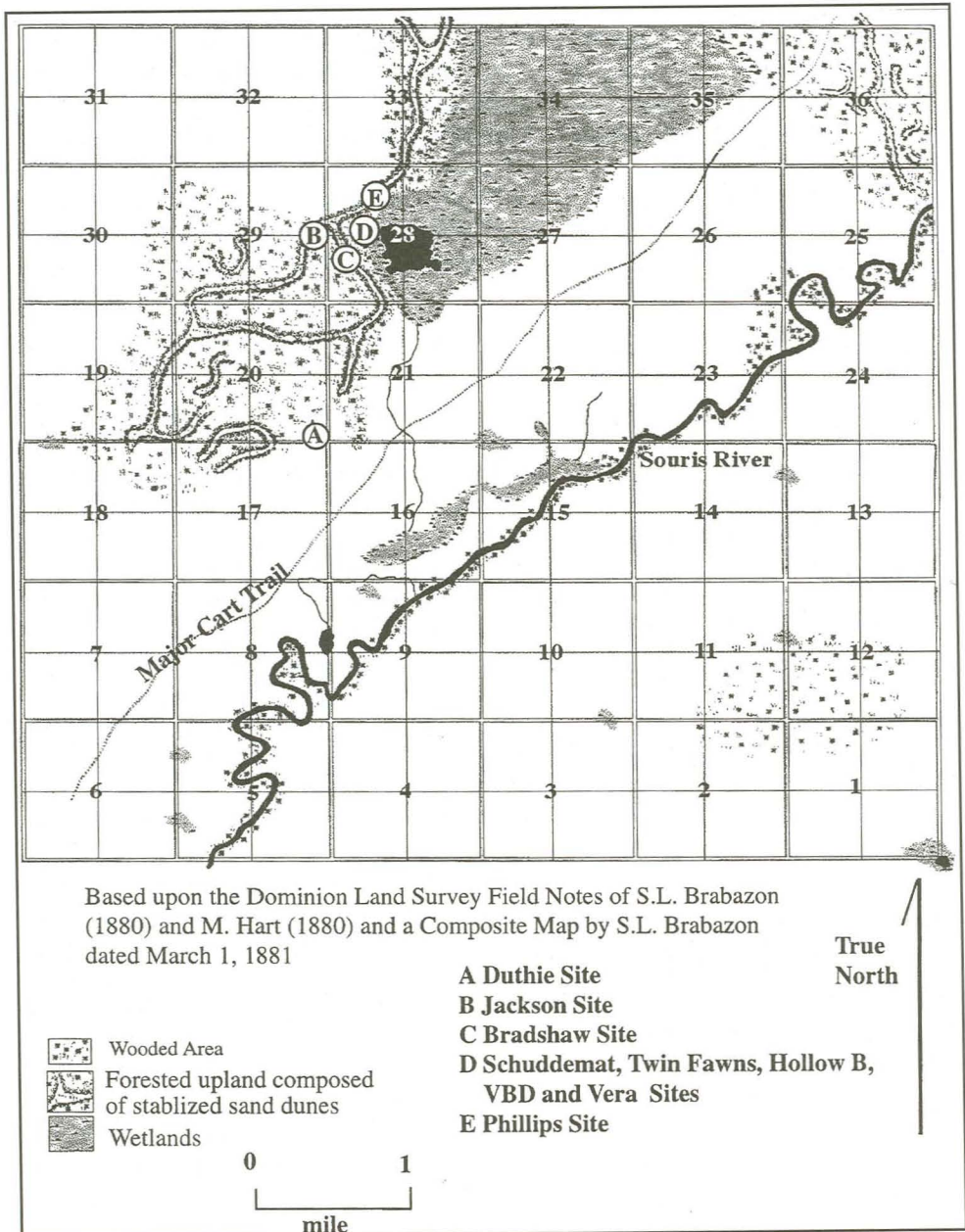


Figure 6. Township 5 Range 25 W1 as it appeared in 1880.

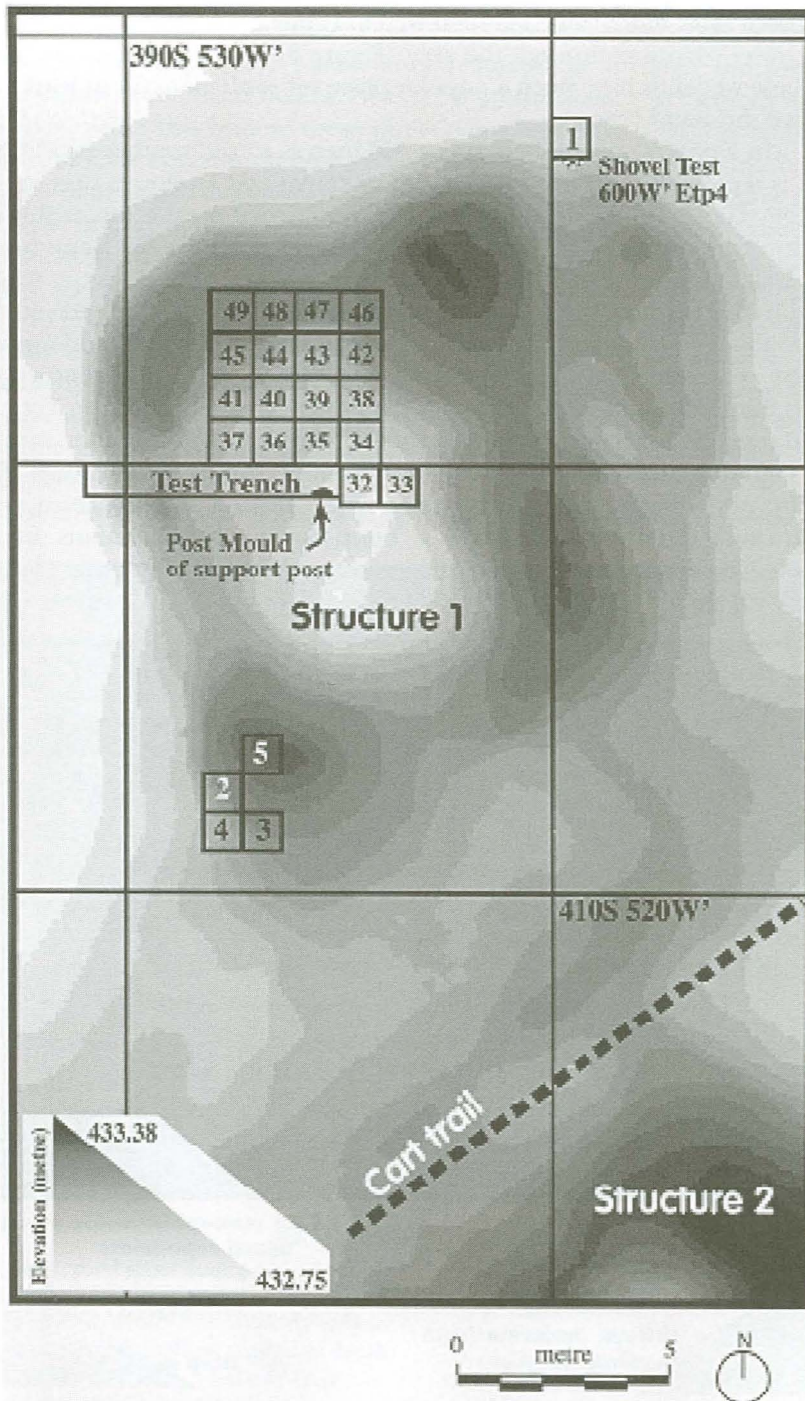


Figure 7. Digital Elevation Model of Structure 1 at the Vera Site.

(Figure 8). An overgrown trail meanders through the middle of the complex. This trail follows a sand dune ridge between wetland zones, and represents one of the few easy travel corridors through the area (Figure 8). Clearly, the low dunes adjacent to these wetlands have been a popular place for settlement for at least the last four or five thousand years.

The Twin Fawns Site is located about 500 metres to the southwest of the Vera Site, and is separated from the adjacent Schuddemat and Hollow B sites by a sand dune ridge (Figure 9). Two dug-out features are located on the top of this ridge. The larger one is about 80 m² in extent, and is located on the flat dune top, with the back wall cut into the high flank of the dune. A single shovel test pit was excavated within this feature, and a square cut nail was recovered associated with wood fragments about 40 cm below the surface. Continued shovel testing and one metre square test excavations have confirmed the late 19th or early 20th century affiliation. This thick overburden of mottled sediment is consistent with the Vera structures, and suggests a dirt or turf-covered roof. The structure faced to the southeast, with the high dune flank offering protection from prevailing winter winds (Figure 9). On the north facing dune slope immediately behind this structure are two earthen features (Figure 9). The first is a “ramp-like” mound that abuts the north dune flank. The second feature is a small rectangular depression that is also cut into the north dune flank, and is reminiscent of a root cellar. A number of small

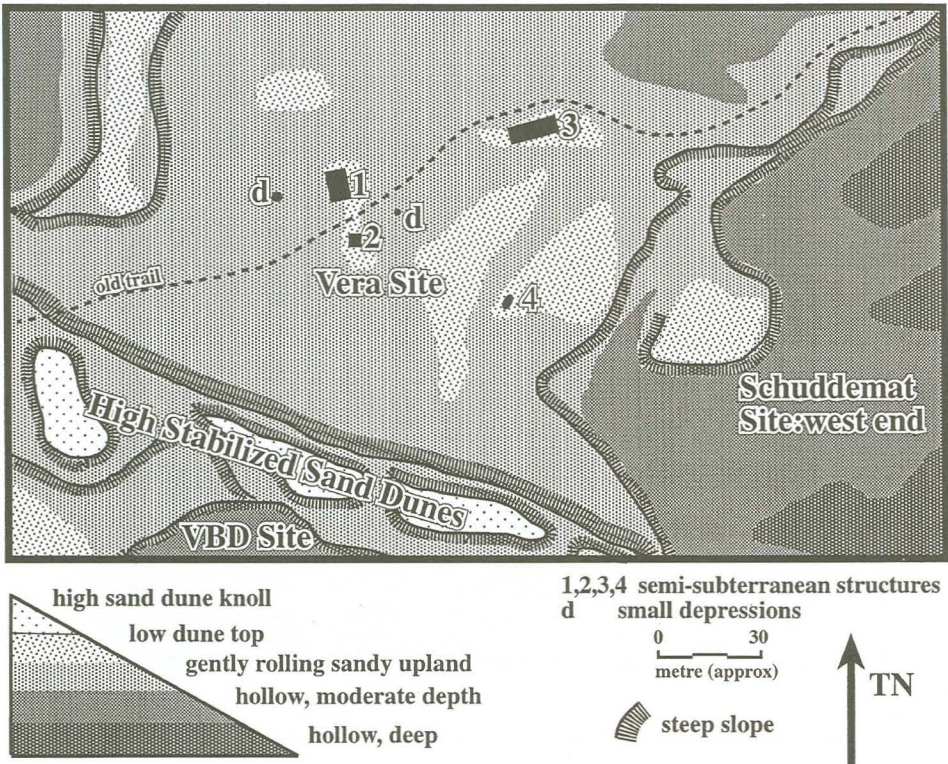


Figure 8. Sketch map of historic features at the Vera Site.

depressions have also been noted in the west and south sides of the adjacent wetland hollow that contains the pre-contact and proto-contact components of the Twin Fawns site (Figure 9). These latter features cut through the pre-contact deposits within the wetland hollow. Given that groundwater was formerly at or near the surface within this hollow, these depressions may have served as rudimentary wells for domestic consumption or for watering livestock. Test excavation in one of the largest depressions exposed ground water and water-saturated organic materials and a metal bucket. A single stalk of asparagus has sprouted in each of the past four years that we have visited the site. The junior author cites his farming/gardening experience to point out that this perennial domestic plant requires human intervention to become established, and cannot reproduce and spread without deliberate replanting. However, once established asparagus is quite resilient and will repeatedly sprout from the original root. As there are no nearby gardens or recent farmyards, we propose that this plant represents a relic of a small garden plot that was contemporaneous with the nearby semi-subterranean house and livestock watering holes.

The semi-subterranean features at both sites are remarkable for their expanse

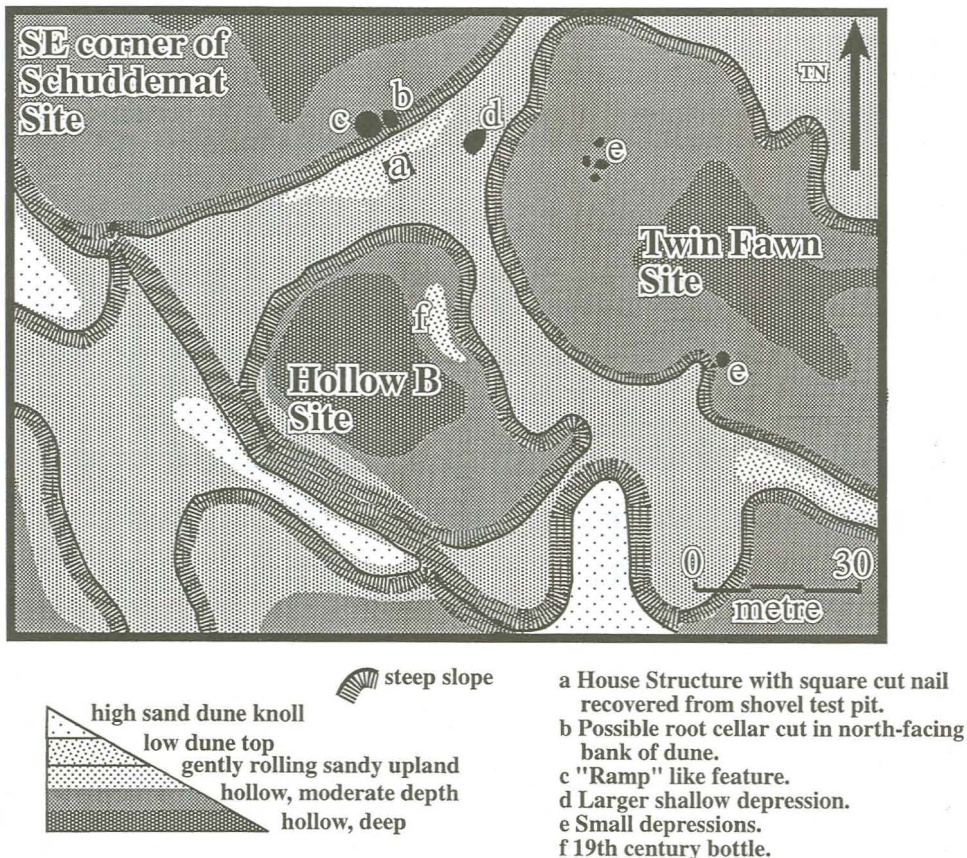


Figure 9. Sketch map of historic features at the Twin Fawns Site.

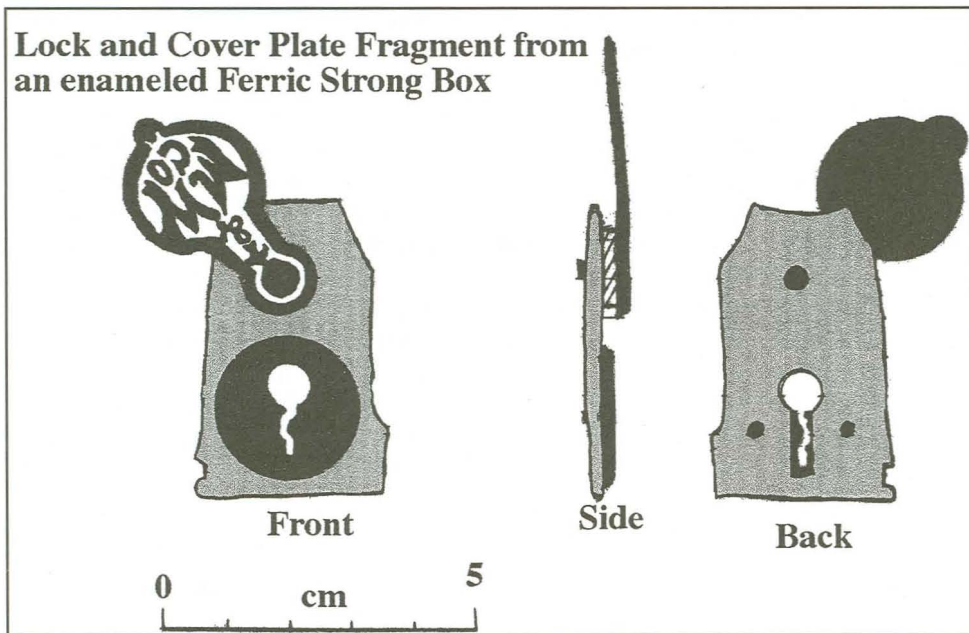


Figure 10. Sketch of "strong box" lock assembly, Vera Site.

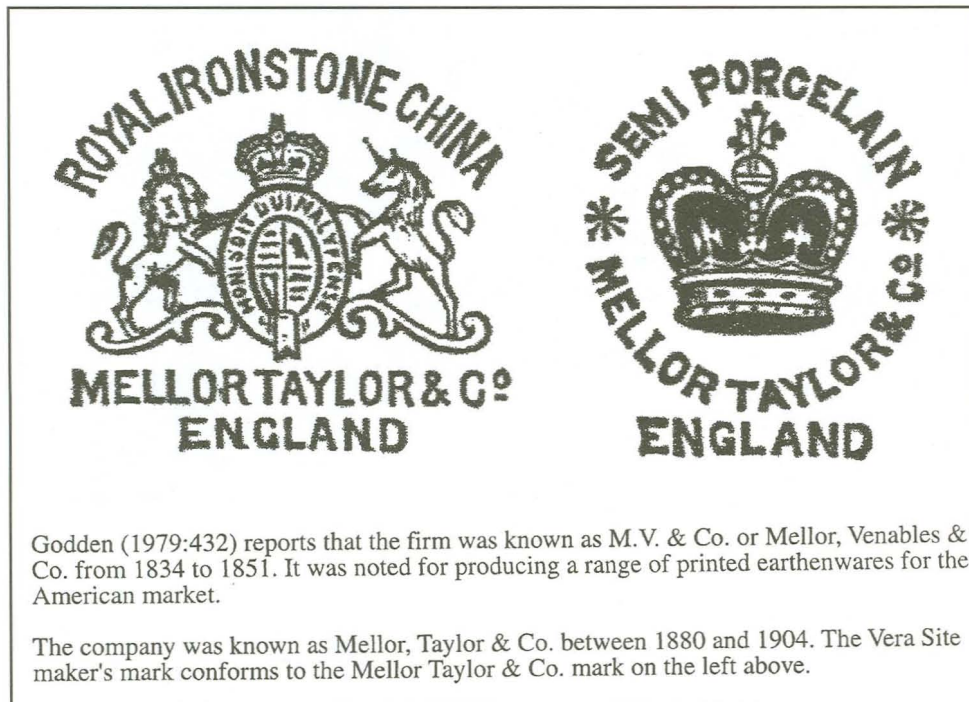


Figure 11. The Mellor, Taylor & Co. pottery of Staffordshire, England.

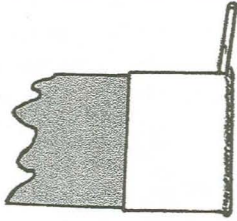
and labour investment. Both groups of features are located on localized uplands overlooking former wetland hollows, and enjoy shelter, firewood supplies, and easy access to water. The construction effort is greater than is implied with the temporary Métis winter hunting encampments described by Clarke (1976). They indicate some level of commitment to winter occupation, and the possible root cellars or storage pits imply year-round occupation.

The very small sample of post-contact material culture is quite narrow in its diversity, and seems to reflect some degree of curation and recycling. Few temporally diagnostic objects have been recovered from our test excavations. They consist of square cut nails, wire drawn nails, some utilitarian British refined white earthenware, some small scraps of cut ferric sheet metal, several brass and paper 'pin fire' cartridges, a metal tobacco seal, and a few fragments of bottle glass. Also of interest is a portion of a lock assembly from a metal box with an ornate lock cover plate (Figure 10). This ferric box was covered with black enameling. A brass lock assembly was riveted to the box, and the ornate key hole cover is decorated with the raised letters *M & W Co.* Peter Preiss of Parks Canada (1997: per. comm.) observed that he knows of no storage box manufacturer of that name, but a British cutlery company named *Mappin and Webb Co.* used those initials, and was in operation after 1866. Perhaps the lock assembly derives from a cutlery "presentation box." The lock assembly was chiseled off the main box in a way that minimized the amount of wasted ferric sheet metal. In conjunction with other ferric sheet metal scraps, this indicates some concern for sheet metal curation and recycling. We also recovered one ferric sheet metal fragment cut into a trapezoidal form. This item is reminiscent of pendant and jangler preforms recycled from brass sheet metal pots that are common in 18th and early 19th century fur trade assemblages. These clothing decorations were common with 18th century Indian and Métis groups, and are still found on Native "jingle dresses."

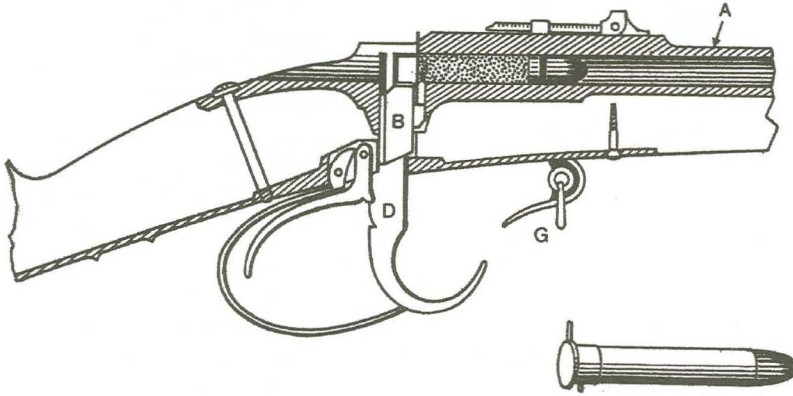
A white earthenware fragment has yielded the stamped mark from the Staffordshire-based *Mellor, Taylor and Co.* pottery (Figure 11). The Mellor firm was in operation under the name *Mellor, Venables and Co.* between 1834 and 1851, but the recovered specimen likely dates to between 1880 and 1904 (Godden 1979: 432).

The pin fire cartridges are perhaps the most informative for dating purposes. These early brass and paper cartridges were first produced in 1836 for use in breech loading firearms (Figure 12) (Whitney 1914; Daumas 1979). The cartridge was discharged when the firearm hammer struck a brass pin that was loosely fitted into the side of the brass cartridge base. This forced the pin into the cartridge where it struck and exploded an internal percussion cap, thereby setting off the main charge. Apparently this early form of fixed cartridge ammunition was quite unstable and dangerous to use, and was rendered obsolete after the 1870s with the widespread availability of rim or centre fired cartridge ammunition.

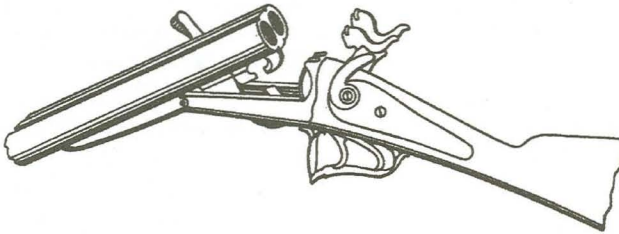
The most temporally sensitive of the artifacts suggest a mid-19th century occupation date, with some persistence of use into the late 1800s. The narrow range of material culture indicates a very brief occupation. The curation and recycling of sheet metal implies that supply logistics were difficult, further indicating a time prior to railroad-based commerce. While the occupations were undeniably brief,



Sketch of pin-fired paper cartridge with brass base recovered from the Vera Site
Not to scale.



Detail of Breech-loading musket adopted by the Chasseurs Guard in 1854. Note the Lefauchaux pin-fire cartridge used in this weapon. The military was slow to accept breech loaders with fixed ammunition. (after Daumas 1979:419)



Detail of Breech-loading hunting rifle perfected by Maison Lefauchaux in 1832. This hinged breech weapon used pin-fired cartridges which were placed in the breech with the cartridge pin oriented upwards. When the breech was closed, the pins were alligned in vertical grooves in the receiver. The pins protruded slightly above the breech, and when the firing hammers were released, they snapped down onto the pin top, causing ignition (after Daumas 1979:420).

Figure 12. Pin-fired cartridges from the Vera Site.

the labour investment in semi-subterranean construction suggests that intentions were to the contrary. Interpretation is also complicated by the recovery of a few objects reflecting late 19th century and early 20th century homestead agricultural settlement.

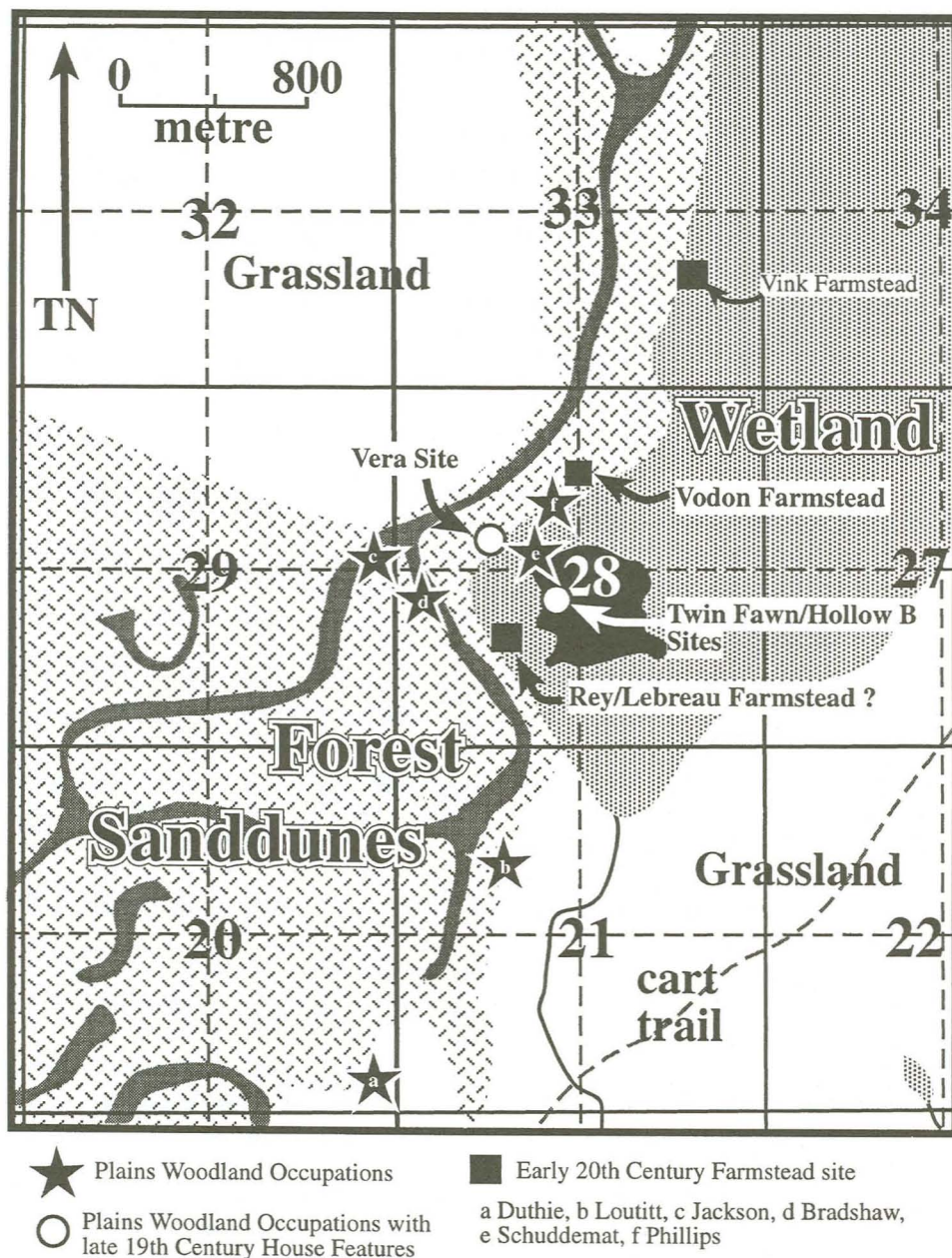
Who Were the Historic Occupants of the Sites?

Neither local historic records nor the memories of the local farm families have aided in identifying the occupants of these structures. This is surprising given the comparatively recent homestead settlement of the region (post 1885), and since many of the contemporary residents can trace their lineage to French-speaking Belgian and English-speaking Anglo Saxon homestead families. To address this question we investigated the Land Registry records housed in the Provincial Archives of Manitoba (specifically Microfilm Reel 955) and locally produced histories (Anonymous 1988; Clarke 1976).

The earliest record of a homestead claim on Section 28, Township 5, Range 25 W1 (the legal description of the section containing the Vera and Twin Fawns Sites) indicates that a Mr. Edwin Snider attempted to establish a homestead in 1886 (Figures 6 and 13). The land titles records indicate that he claimed the southeast quarter section, but lost it by 1890 because he failed to establish a house and make significant "improvements" (PAM, Land Registry Microfilm Reel R-955). Mr. Benoit Merle, another immigrant homesteader, claimed the southwest quarter in 1890 but also did not make improvements, and gave up the claim to return to the "old Country" shortly thereafter. A similar fate befell Mr. Francois Bonivard who attempted to homestead on the northwest quarter in 1889. He abandoned his claim within a year and returned to Europe. Mr. R. Cancade took over the claim in the northwest quarter section in 1890, and is reported to have built a house and plowed some land. However, he declared the land unfit for cultivation and resigned his claim in 1891. Mr. Francoise (Frank) Vodon entered the northwest quarter of section 28 in 1892 after first attempting to farm on the nearby section 30. By 1896 he gained patent to the land. The land registry document describes the improvements as valued at \$100. They consisted of a "house with a cellar (12 by 20 feet), a sod stable (20 by 40 feet), a well, two horses and two cows, about 60 acres of broken ground, about 100 acres fit for cultivation, with the remainder useful as pasture" (PAM, Land Registry Records, Reel 955).

"Frank" Voden initially established his claim as a single man, but married Philomene Lafontaine in 1894. The Vodon family figure prominently in the remainder of this paper. Some time after Frank gained patent in 1896, he sold the land to his brother Achile "Archie" Vodon, whereupon Frank and Philomene moved closer to the Francophone Catholic community of Grande Clairiere (Figure 4). Archie Vodon remained on the land and expanded his holdings to the northeast quarter section by 1905. At about this time Archie Vodon and Roseanna Jeannotte⁴ got married, and lived for a time on the homestead until Roseanna became ill and returned to Belcourt, North Dakota, where she died (Anonymous 1988: 222). Apparently Archie remained on the land for much of the rest of his life.

Frank and Archie Voden were the sons of Belgian homesteaders who settled at Grande Clairiere after 1888, and both men married Métis women. A member of



This is a detail of the 1880 DLS Township plan illustrated in Figure 6. The landscape features were accurately plotted along the section lines, but were only estimated for areas removed from the road allowances. The archaeological sites that appear to be located within the wetland zone actually overlooked former wetlands, or the now-dry small lake.

Figure 13. The distribution of archaeological sites within Section 28.

the Voden family pointed out the original homestead farmyard used by both Frank and Archie Voden (Mrs. J. Vodon 1997: per. comm.), and this has been confirmed by another local resident (Mrs. J. Vinck 1997: per. comm.).⁵ This farmyard was located during our reconnaissance surveys close to the boundary between the northwest and northeast quarter boundary, and it is at least a half kilometre from either cluster of semi-subterranean features (Figure 13). Given the very short duration of the homestead attempts by Bonivard and Cancade (collectively less than 2 years), we do not believe that they are responsible for the house features observed at Vera and Twin Fawns. It is possible, however, that these men reoccupied old structures located on their homestead claims. This would certainly be consistent with the mix of late 19th and early 20th century material culture observed at the Vera and Twin Fawns sites.

A second early 20th century farmstead is located about 500 metres south of the Twin Fawns Site (Figure 13). Perhaps this is the farmstead established by Victor and Claude Rey, who gained title in about 1905. By 1922 the south half of section 28 was taken over by Mr. Claude Lebreau who maintained his "ranch headquarters" on the southwest quarter section. As this early 20th century farmstead is the only one noted during our reconnaissance on the south half of Section 28, we believe that Lebreau may have taken over the farmstead initially established by the Rey brothers. These early 20th century farmsteads are quite visible, and conform to our expectations of post-railroad era farmyards. They are defined by abandoned farm machinery, concrete house and barn foundations, and an abundance of wire drawn nails, barbed wire, discarded galvanized sheet metal and ferric objects, glass and ceramic items of clear 20th century origin. While these homesteads were occupied by people of limited financial means, the recoveries reflect significantly improved access to European manufactured goods compared to the earlier post-contact assemblages deriving from the Vera and Twin Fawns sites. We believe that the comparative wealth of material culture associated with the early 20th century homesteads reflects the improved railroad-based logistics system after branch rail lines had been established through the area. The earlier occupations are more consistent with a supply system based upon cart or wagon transport.

The Métis Occupation After 1860

This begs questions about who constructed the semi-subterranean features associated with both the Vera and Twin Fawns Sites. One explanation might derive from the Métis heritage of Philomene and Roseanna Vodon, the wives of Frank and Archie Vodon. Both the parents and maternal grandparents of Mrs. Philomene Lafontaine Vodon were St. François Xavier Métis who participated in the mid 19th century bison hunts in the Souris River basin (Clarke 1976; Sprague and Frye 1983). She was also the great granddaughter of Pierre Falcon and Mary Grant (Cuthbert Grant's sister). Various members of the Lafontaine family were the primary informants for both Mr. Lawrence Clarke (1976) and Mr. G.A. McMorran (1950) regarding the Métis occupation of the region (Mrs. Philomene Jannot Lafontaine, her daughter Philomene Lafontaine Voden, her son Pierre "Pete" (or perhaps Antoine) Lafontaine and her granddaughter Mrs. DePevre).

In 1934 Mrs. Philomene Jannot Lafontaine reported to G.A. McMorran that her

father (Francois Jannot) had been employed at both Fort Desjarlais and Fort Mr. Grant, and that she lived at Fort Desjarlais as a child in the 1840s (Clarke 1976: 100). Her daughter, Mrs. Philomene Lafontaine Vodon, was born in St. François Xavier in 1868 (Sprague and Frye 1983), but spent much of her life in the Lauder Sandhills, and likely grew to adulthood during the time in question here.

With the decline and collapse of the commercial bison robe hunt in the Souris River basin by the early 1860s, many of the Métis moved further west, and some returned to St. François Xavier (Clarke 1976: 114). However, an unknown number of families remained and settled in the Lauder Sandhills, in the Oak Lake area, at Whitewater and Pelican Lakes, and in the Turtle Mountains (likely including the Belcourt area). Lawrence Clarke (1976: 114-115) asserts that the old homesteads are still to be found along "20 miles" of the Souris River, and northwards for about 12 miles. He was referring to the main Lauder Sandhills area where the balance of the fur trade posts are located (Figure 4). Uncited local informants indicated that some of these subsistence farmers were descendents of the old St. François Xavier bison hunting families, while others were Métis who left Red River after 1870.

About twenty Métis families remained in the area (Clarke 1976: 105) during the twenty years between the end of the bison hunt and the early 1880s when the homestead surveyors reached the area. These families likely engaged in subsistence farming supplemented with hunting, fishing and trapping. This is consistent with Foster's observations regarding post-1885 Métis agricultural practices on the open prairie. This involved establishment of a

home base near a prairie lake or slough with small plots of land planted to grains and root vegetables. The produce of the gardens was supplemented by gathering eggs of waterfowl or hunting and snaring birds and animals found in the vicinity. Livestock — a few cattle and horses — were moved as pasturage and other factors dictated... (1995:436).

Apparently the Métis were sole residents of the Lauder Sandhills in 1888 when Father Gaire visited the area, and established his Catholic mission on the "open plain to the east of Maple Lakes" (Anonymous 1988:8). This mission became the hub of the community of Grande Clairiere, named for the open panoramic view. In fact, the Thomas Breland family vacated their home and moved into a tent in order to provide the newly arrived priest with a residence in the winter of 1888-89 (Anonymous 1988:8-9). Father Gaire initially reported only three Métis families in the area: the Thomas Breland, the Napoleon Whiteford and the James Whiteford families, consisting of six adults and ten children (Anonymous 1988: 8-9). Within a few months, as he learned about his new parish, he reported the presence of eight Métis families, and the arrival of two French immigrant families (Anonymous 1988: 9). Within one year Father Gaire was actively encouraging the emigration of a number of French Catholic families from France, Belgium and Luxembourg, and by 1891 400 people were resident in the community (Anonymous 1988: 10).

The homestead records indicate that a number of Métis families held homestead claims or used their land script to establish land holdings in the area. These Métis homesteaders were among the first to gain ownership of their land (see also Anonymous 1988: 8). They likely supported the parish church and commercial

services at Grande Clairiere and also at Filteau's General Store that was located about two miles south of Grande Clairiere (Mrs. J. Vodon 1997: per. comm.) (Figure 14). Lawrence Clarke (1976: 115) even reports the 1875 establishment of a ranch owned by a Métis in the Sandhills country. Perhaps this ranch was the one operated by James Whiteford before his death in 1888 (Anonymous 1988: 8). This "open range" ranch was extensive and may have encompassed much of the Souris

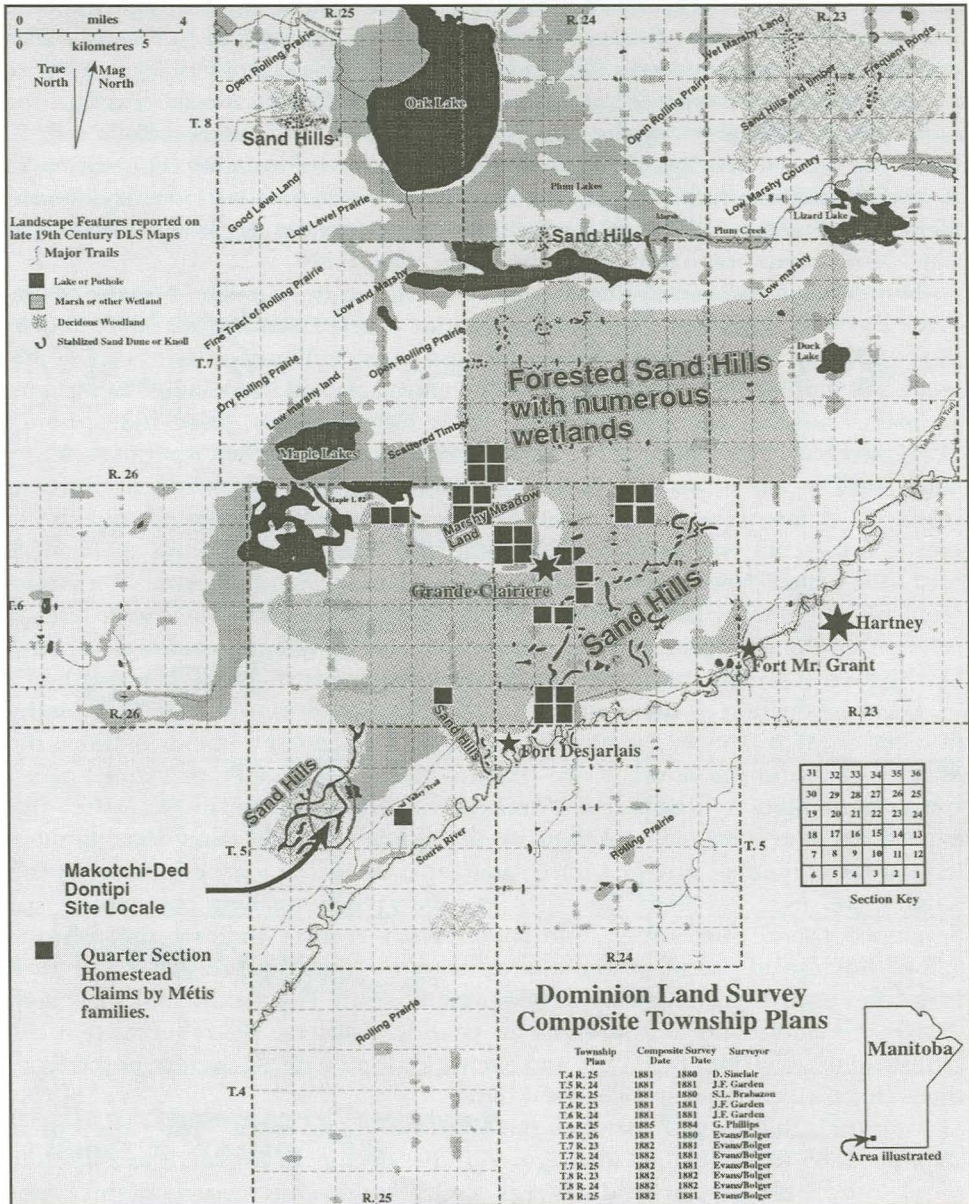


Figure 14. Homestead and land scrip claims by Métis families in the Land Registry Records. This is a conservative estimate representing identifiable Métis individuals rather than "French" surnames.

River basin. This is consistent with observations by G. Ens (1996: per. comm.) who reports that a descendent of Cuthbert Grant Jr. also briefly engaged in horse ranching in the area prior to homestead settlement. It is possible that the post-contact occupations at the Vera and Twin Fawns sites represent elements of these ranching operations.

While the Métis appear to have played a prominent role in the initial homestead occupation of the Lauder Sandhills (Anonymous 1988: 8), the majority of the prominent family names disappear from the land registry records by the early 20th century. What happened after 1885, which rendered these families virtually invisible and forgotten in both living memory, and in the written record? Perhaps the apparent abandonment of the sandy wetlands of the Lauder Sandhills reflects upon the limited viability of subsistence agriculture and foraging. Our review of archival documents indicates that the water level within the Oak Lake Aquifer was already declining by 1915, and perhaps these groundwater declines rendered the small Métis farms untenable within the Lauder Sandhills.

However, it is more likely that they became historically “invisible” because of dramatic social changes that occurred throughout prairie Canada after 1870. Shortly after 1870, the Métis of Red River confronted considerable sectarian hostility, violence and intimidation from both Ontario immigrants and the Militia that was sent to assert Canadian sovereignty (Shore 1991, 1997; Sprague 1980, 1988). Foster (1995: 434) observes that by 1874 a flood of Métis families left Red River to seek new lands in what was to become Saskatchewan and Alberta. This reflects efforts to retain old economic and social practices associated with bison hunting, and also to escape the racism and hostility of the post-1870 Red River. Some of these Métis established small farmsteads in the Oak Lake/Lauder Sandhills area as a consequence of the historic pattern of use during the bison hunt era. Some were already resident on the land prior to legal subdivision, and their farmsteads are recorded on the township plans, particularly in the Oak Lake area (Figures 15 and 16).

Legal subdivision of the Souris River basin occurred shortly after 1880, and a number of Métis families established claims in the forested wetlands between the Maple Lakes and the Souris River (Figure 14). A flood of French and English speaking immigrant homesteaders moved into the area shortly thereafter. We expect that after the 1888 establishment of Grande Clairiere, many Métis families were attracted to the Catholic Church and the commercial services offered by this hamlet, and were gradually absorbed into the French-speaking community that developed there. Interestingly, the land registry records indicate that no one gained homestead patent on the quarter sections containing the Vera and Twin Fawn sites until 1896 (Frank and Philomene Vodon). This family sold their land shortly thereafter, and moved closer to Grande Clairiere. We reiterate that the farmstead used by both the Frank and Archie Vodon families is well removed from the archaeological deposits of interest here.

We expect that tensions between the Métis and Anglo Saxon Protestant settlers after the 1885 Riel Rebellion also figured in the decline of the Métis as a discrete social entity in the Lauder Sandhills region. One anonymous reviewer of this paper commented that we should also not rule out racial tensions between the Métis and Francophone immigrants. In any case, it is noteworthy that several Métis families

were among the first to gain title to their homestead claims in the Lauder Sandhills. These same individuals also appear in the land registry records as holding homesteads along the Assiniboine River immediately south of the Oak Lake Indian Reserve (i.e. Antoine Lafontaine, Antoine Gladu, Alexander Davis, and James Whiteford) (Figure 15). It is not clear whether these families established several farmsteads, and then sold those which seemed to be the least viable, or whether they sold homesteads and moved on to reestablish themselves in new areas in the face of sectarian tensions.

The mobility of many Métis at this time made for very dynamic residence patterns. For example Mrs. Philomene Jannot Lafontaine was born at St. François Xavier in about 1845, but is reported to have been raised in the Lauder Sandhills area. She and her husband (Antoine Lafontaine) are listed as resident at St. François Xavier in the 1870 Red River census (Sprague and Frye 1983). However, the Land Registry records indicate that Antoine Lafontaine held land on Section

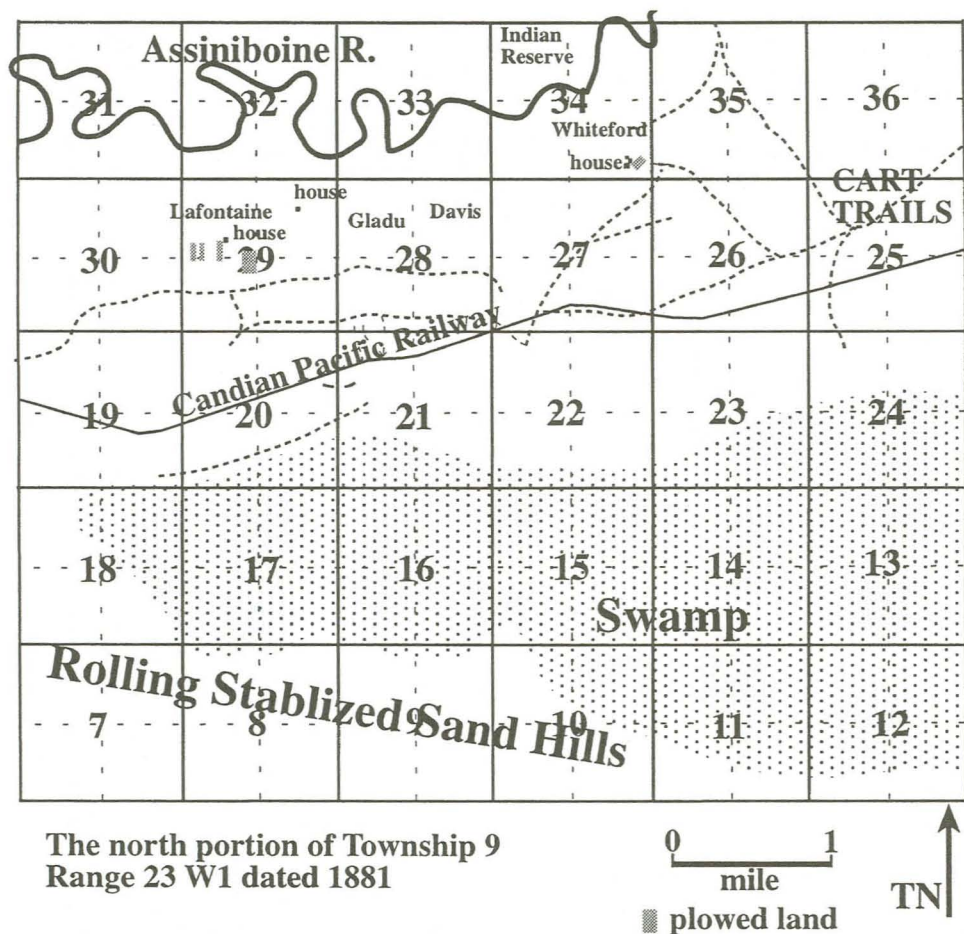


Figure 15. Métis farmsteads established along the Assiniboine River before the 1881 DLS survey.

29, Township 9, Range 29 (along the Assiniboine River immediately south of the Oak Lake Indian Reserve) in 1880 (Figure 15), and on the northwest quarter of Section 18, Township 6, Range 24 (1 mile south of Grande Clairiere) in 1888 (Figure 14). Mrs. Lafontaine's conversations with G.A. McMorran in 1934 (McMorran 1950) indicate that the family moved from Oak Lake to the Lauder Sandhills in about 1886, where they remained. Father Gaire reports a Métis community already resident in the Lauder Sandhills in 1888. Several of the surnames he mentions are the same as those listed in Figure 15. Given the favourable locations of the farmsteads along the south bank of the Assiniboine River and adjacent to the Canadian Pacific Railroad main line, we find it interesting that the Breland, Whiteford and Lafontaine chose to sell these claims and move to the sandy lands of the Lauder Sandhills where no railroad has even been established. This would

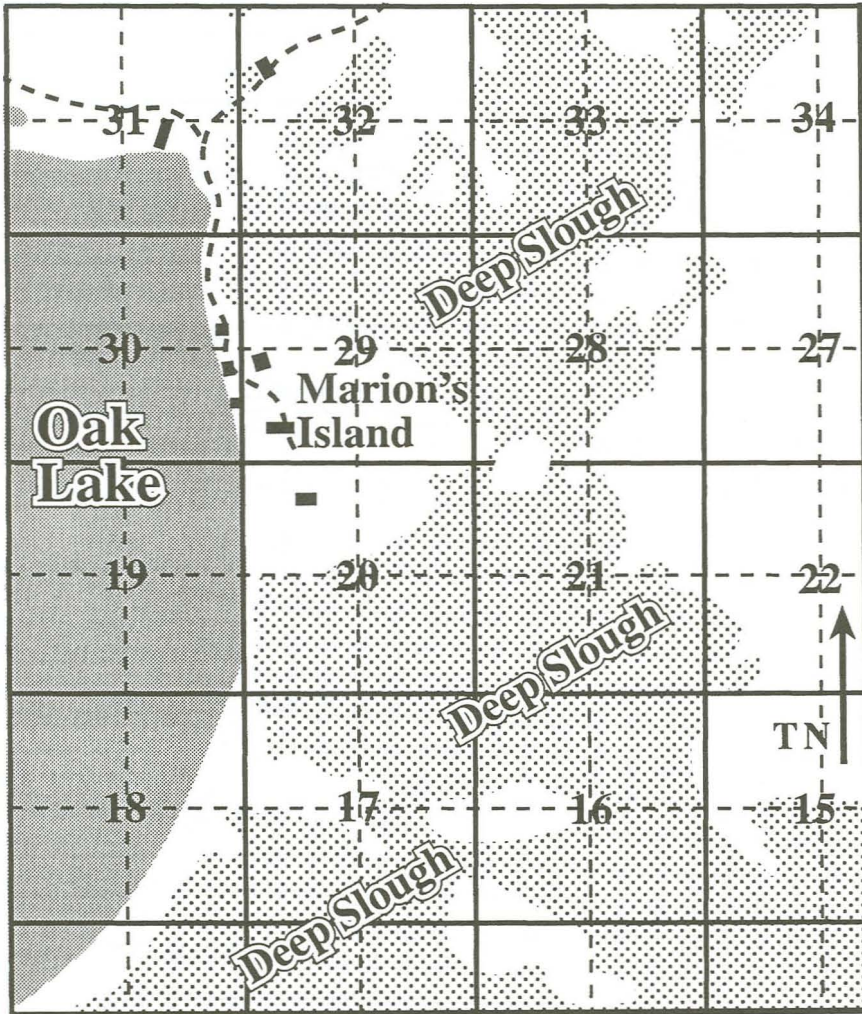


Figure 16. Plowed land along the northeastern shore of Oak Lake on the 1882 plan of Township 8, Range 21, W1.

indicate that social and political pressures were more important than economic ones in the decision to move into the Lauder Sandhills.

Philomene Lafontaine would have been about 18 years old at the time that her family moved to the Lauder Sandhills. Apparently she found employment at Filteau's store, met her future husband (François Vodon) after his family arrived at Grande Clairiere in 1890 (Anonymous 1988: 9), and was married in 1894. Not unlike the Lafontaine family, many other Métis appear to have quietly lived in the Sandhills quite literally and figuratively on the fringes of the developing rail line communities.

The social dynamism of the era is readily evident with the life of Philomene Lafontaine Vodon. Upon her 1894 marriage to François Vodon she assumed a new identity as wife, mother and community midwife within the community of Grande Clairiere. Her younger unmarried brother and sister unobtrusively lived out their lives on a small farmstead south of Grande Clairiere, but remain identified as Métis in the genealogical records. They, with two other siblings (resident at Oak Lake and Fort Qu' Appelle), are described as among the "dispersed and relocated Red River Métis" in "The Genealogy of the First Métis Nation" (Sprague and Frye 1983). Their sister Philomene, who lived in the same community as two of her siblings, is not listed. Upon marriage, she seems to have lost her Métis identity, and assumed the French-Belgian Catholic identity of her husband. Again, this is reminiscent of generalizations offered by Foster (1995). In his view, "dispersal" of the Métis as a social and economic corporate group began shortly after the 1870 Manitoba Act, and persisted up until the 1940s:

Dispersal, frequently to the fringes of the dominant society, marked the fate of many if not most Métis in the half-century following the [1885] Rebellion. Some in the area of Winnipeg chose to emphasize things "French" and "Catholic" in their heritage as a means of retaining a distinct identity and defining a corporate role for themselves in the settlers' West. Others sought to strengthen ties with kinsmen on the Indian reserves... (Foster 1995: 435).

Conclusion

While our investigations are as yet preliminary, it is clear that a small resident population of Métis remained in the Lauder Sandhills, and adjusted to the realities of the post-bison hunting era. If our interpretations are correct, they appear to have established themselves in areas that were favorable for subsistence farming, hunting, trapping and foraging. Interestingly, these locations were the forested wetland and sand dune micro-habitats that attracted Plains Woodland foragers several centuries earlier. Such microhabitats offered water, shelter and firewood, good grazing and haylands, protection from prairie fires, and also access to a diverse range of plants and small game. It is no coincidence that the early homestead claims of some Métis families are located in and among the wetlands associated with the Oak Lake Aquifer (Figures 2, 13, 14, 15 and 16). We believe that the post-contact features observed at the Vera and Twin Fawns Sites represent an element of this phenomenon.

Our preliminary analysis indicates that the earliest French, Belgian and Anglo-

Saxon immigrant families homesteaded along the Souris River, or along the margins of wetlands not unlike the Métis settlement strategy. Settlers who arrived slightly later (in the 1890s) are much more widespread in their distribution, and chose land in proximity to the railroad towns or out on the open prairie.

The initial success of these "dryland" homestead farmers derives from several interrelated factors. Like the Métis before them, the newcomers took advantage of the homestead legislation to establish legally defensible land ownership. However, their real advantage lay with the development of suitable wheat strains, the construction of an extensive railroad infrastructure, and the superior capitalization of their agricultural ventures. With the suppression of prairie fires, larger breaking plows and draft animals (and eventually steam tractors), the early 20th century farmers were able to effectively farm on the more drought-resistant soils that surround the sandy wetlands of the Oak Lake Aquifer. As the water table within the aquifer began to decline in the early 20th century, the small sandhill farmsteads became increasingly untenable for agricultural production. Coupled with the historic record of sectarian tension and racism, the "disappearance" of many Métis landholding families seems to have been under way by the late 19th century. The enigmatic semi-subterranean features may offer insight into how the Métis coped with their post-bison hunt economic reality, and also what social and economic pressures caused them to disappear as a corporate group within the region by the 1890s.

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Notes

1. Upon calibration, two of our radiocarbon samples (one each from the Vera and Twin Fawns Sites) have yielded 18th and 19th century calibration intercepts, particularly at 2 sigma. These bison bone collagen samples are associated with late pre-contact lithics and ceramics. When calibrated, they exhibit multiple intercepts that even include low probability intercepts into the 20th century. Clearly, the interpretative value of these dates is minimal given the significant fluctuations in the radiocarbon dating curve at the time in question.
2. Several other small trade posts have been identified along the Souris River between Fort Mr. Grant and Fort Desjarlais. For more information see McMorran 1950; Clarke 1976; Hems n.d.; and Nieuwhof 1990.
3. See Foster (1995: 426-430) for a description of the organization of the Métis bison hunt.
4. Roseanna Jeannotte Vodon was from Belcourt, North Dakota, a community within the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation located just south of the international border (Anonymous 1988: 222). Local informants described her as Métis. It appears that the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation was established by a mix of Ojibwa (Chippewa) and Pembina, St. François Xavier and Wood Mountain Métis (Giraud 1986: 518). Given the variations in spelling of this surname (Jeannotte and Jannot or Jeannot), it is possible that she is a relative of Philomene Jannot Lafontaine, one of the primary informants regarding the Métis history of the Lauder Sandhills. This would certainly help explain how a Métis woman from North Dakota might become married to a Belgian immigrant farmer in western Manitoba.

5. Mrs. J. Vodon is the daughter-in-law of Frank and Philomene Vodon, while Mrs. J. Vinck's family were neighbors of Archie Vodon.

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