

“The Spatial Context of the Battle of the Grand Coteau: Sioux and Métis
Territorial Expansion and the *Mauvaise Terre*”

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Introduction -- The Battle

On July 13 & 14, 1851 a small group of Métis Buffalo Hunters (70 hunters and their families) hunting in the area of the Grand or Missouri Coteau, in what is today North Dakota, encountered a large Sioux encampment/war party of more than 1000 warriors. This small Métis contingent was part of a much larger Métis Hunting expedition of over 350 hunters and families, who had split off from the main party some days previous in the hopes of finding larger buffalo herds away from the main camp. They had agreed to stay in touch in case they encountered hostile Sioux, as they knew there were Sioux plans for some kind of attack, but had grown somewhat over-confident, and miscalculated the problems of staying in touch and locating the enemy once they hit the Missouri Coteau. Unlike the plains where sight lines are long and communication easy, the *Mauvaise Terre* was different ground. The terrain was higher and broken, and sight lines were shorter which increased the risk of surprise and complicated signaling. Small groups -- a cart train of perhaps a hundred carts -- could vanish from sight in this terrain and hunting and travelling here required increased vigilance and planned communication, something the Métis neglected on this occasion.

Seeing a small encampment of Métis Hunters, the Sioux attacked and over the course of the next two days the Métis held off their much larger Sioux attackers (probably Yankton and Yanktonai) in two long and pitched battles (5-6 hours each). They were finally rescued at the end of the second day when the main camp arrived on the scene having been alerted by messengers sent on the first day of the battle. Seeing the larger encampment draw near the Sioux gave up their attacks and retreated from the scene. The Métis had survived by adopting well-rehearsed defensive warfare tactics of encircling their horses, oxen, and women and children in a kind of circular barricade of carts. On the perimeter of this corral or barricade, Métis sharpshooters kept

the Sioux mostly out of range of the women, children, by firing from shell scraps dug into the prairie sod.

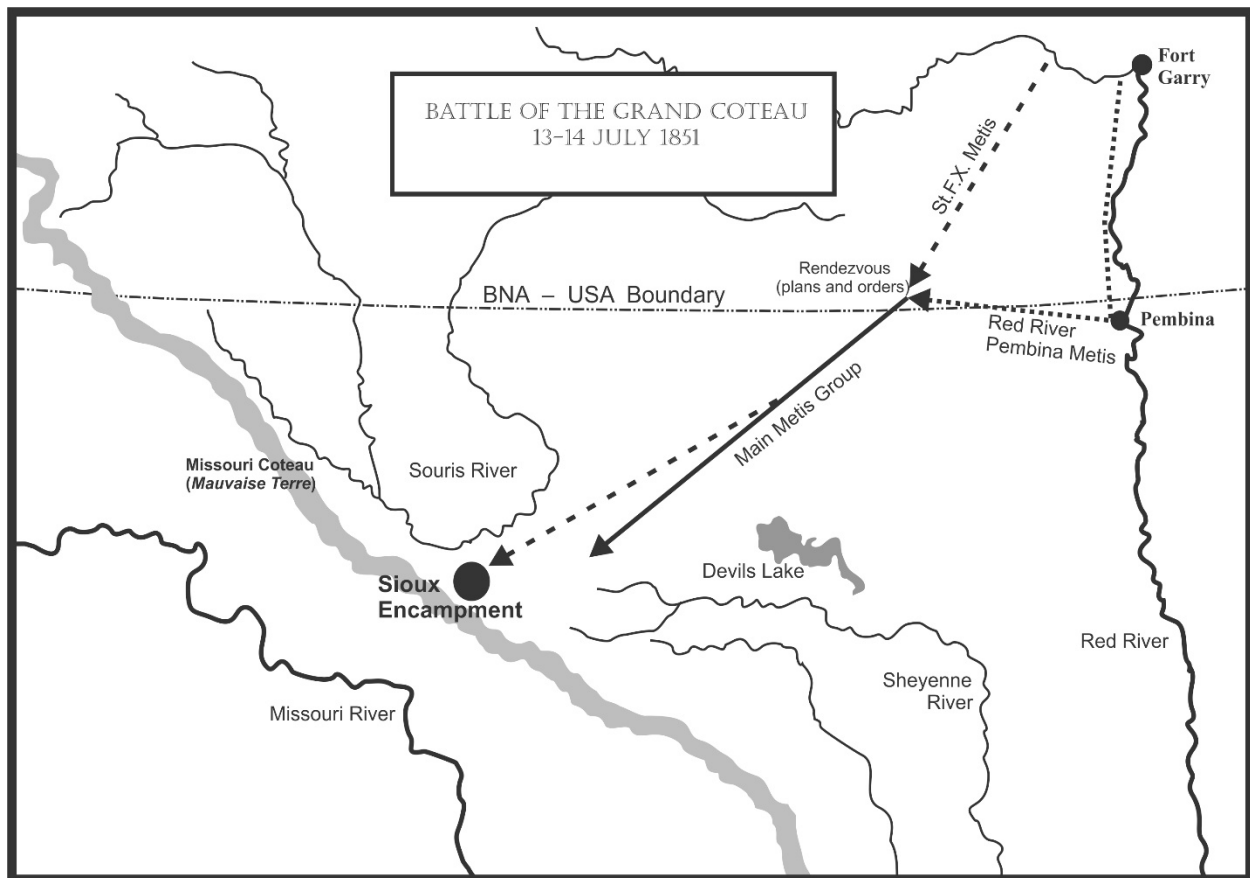


Figure 1 Location & Routes to the Battle of the Grand Coteau

Credit: Map by author

In this two-day battle only 1 Métis was killed along with 12 horses and 4 oxen. The Sioux, according to some estimates, lost 80 men.¹ According to W.L Morton, the most pre-eminent

¹ This is the number given by W.L Morton, but is probably wildly overstated. See his "The Battle of the Grand Coteau, July 13-14, 1851," Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba, *Transactions*, Series 3, No. 16 (1959-60). The other primary sources for this battle are more conservative. The letter of Father Lacombe written in January 1852, and published in *Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, Vol. XVI, No. 5 1 Mars 1917, pp. 73-78 notes that 8 Sioux were killed; Father Laflèche gives the number of Sioux killed as 15, but in a note says that he later heard that 50 had been killed. Lettre de M. Richer Laflèche, Missionnaire à un ses amis. Saint-François de la Prairie du Cheval-Blanc, le 4 septembre 1851. *Rapport les Missions du Diocèse de Québec*. Mars, 1853, No. 10, pp. 44-70. The number of 15 is probably closest to the truth as the Indian Agent at St. Peters in the Dakotas put the number at 10 or 11 based on Sioux Reports. "Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Department of the Interior, Office Indian Affairs, November 27, 1851." Senate

historian that has studied this conflict, the Battle of the Grand Coteau represented the greatest military achievement of the Métis, and the proudest memory of the Métis Nation. According to Morton, the battle ended the long warfare of the Métis and Sioux, and thereafter the Métis were *Masters of the Plains* where ever they chose to march.²

For the most part, my paper will not deal with the details of these events: Morton's reconstruction of the Battle is mostly beyond dispute, and the researches of R.H. Caldwell³ and Allen Ronaghan⁴ have pretty accurately established the where and how of the battle. Rather, what my paper does is take up the issue of the meaning of this battle and place it into the larger context of territorial expansion of both the Sioux and the Métis peoples in the period of the 1840s and 1850s. In particular, I will argue that while the Métis were the clear winners of this particular battle, Sioux objectives were also met, albeit with a significant loss of life. Finally, I also argue, contra Morton, that Sioux Métis hostilities did not end after 1851, nor were the Métis the masters of the plains where ever they chose to march.

What is missing from most accounts of the battle are Sioux perspectives and Sioux objectives. Richard White's fine article on the expansion of the Western Sioux in the 18th and 19th centuries⁵ is very useful in this regard, but he barely touches on the northern reaches of Sioux territory, and never deals with Sioux-Métis hostilities. David McCrady's examination of the Sioux on the Canada/US borderlands does treat Sioux-Métis relations, but mostly in the period after the

Ex. Doc. No. 1 32nd Congress, First Session. (Washington: A. Boyd Hamilton, 1851), 432. Georges Dugas, who wrote a chapter length study of the battle based on first hand Metis reports notes that the Metis never learned how many Sioux died in the battle. George Dugas, *Histoire de L'Ouest Canadien de 1822 à 1869: époque des troubles* (Montreal: Librairie Beauchemin. 1906), 119-130.

² W.L. Morton, "The Battle of the Grand Coteau, July 13-14, 1851."

³ R.H. Caldwell, "The Battle of the Grand Coteau 13-14 July 1851: Grappling with the Transnational History of Non-Literate Peoples," Paper presented to the University of Waterloo History Conference, 5-7 May 2011.

⁴ For Allen Ronaghan's considerable research on the location of this battle see "Dakota-Metis Battle on the Grand Coteau: 1851," at <http://www.metismuseum.ca/resource.php/14325>.

⁵ Richard White, "The Winning of the West: The expansion of the Western Sioux in the 18th and 19th Centuries," *Journal of American History*, Vol. LXV, No. 2 (September 1978), 319-343.

1860s. On the Battle of the Grand Coteau, McCrady does note that Morton's conclusions are mostly the stuff of myth, but he does not explain the battle or its spatial and territorial repercussions in any detail.⁶

The Expansion of the Sioux and the Métis

According to the reports of the Indian agents among the Sioux, about 1829 the buffalo had begun to withdraw further west from the traditional lands of the Sioux, with the result that those bands of the Teton, Hunkpapa, Yanktonai, and Yankton who had enough horses began moving further west and north to follow the buffalo herds. By 1842 the Agent at the St. Peter's Agency reported that the roving bands of the Yankton and Yanktonai subsisted almost entirely on Buffalo, and in the winter could be found on the Missouri and its tributaries, and during the rest of the year roamed over the plains between the headwaters of the St. Peter's River (Minnesota River at Big Stone Lake) to Devils Lake and westward following the movements of the Buffalo.⁷ These migrations (north and west) brought them into direct conflict with the Saulteaux (Ojibwa) and resulted in endemic warfare on the edges of the territories they claimed. These war zones became, in effect, a “no-man’s land” and a “game sink” where the buffalo were especially numerous, given it was too dangerous for small bands to stay longer than it took to hunt.

At the same time that the Yankton and Yanktonai were expanding their hunting territories to the north and to the west, the Red River Métis, who were closely associated inter-married with the Saulteaux, were also expanding their buffalo hunts to the south and west into the same war zone. By the 1830s Buffalo could no longer be found in large numbers around the RRS and

⁶ David G. McCrady, *Living with Strangers: The Nineteenth-Century Sioux and the Canadian-American Borderlands* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006).

⁷ Report of Amos J. Bruce, Indian Agent, St. Peter's Agency, Iowa Territory, September 15, 1842, in “Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for the year 1842,” (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1843), 419-22.

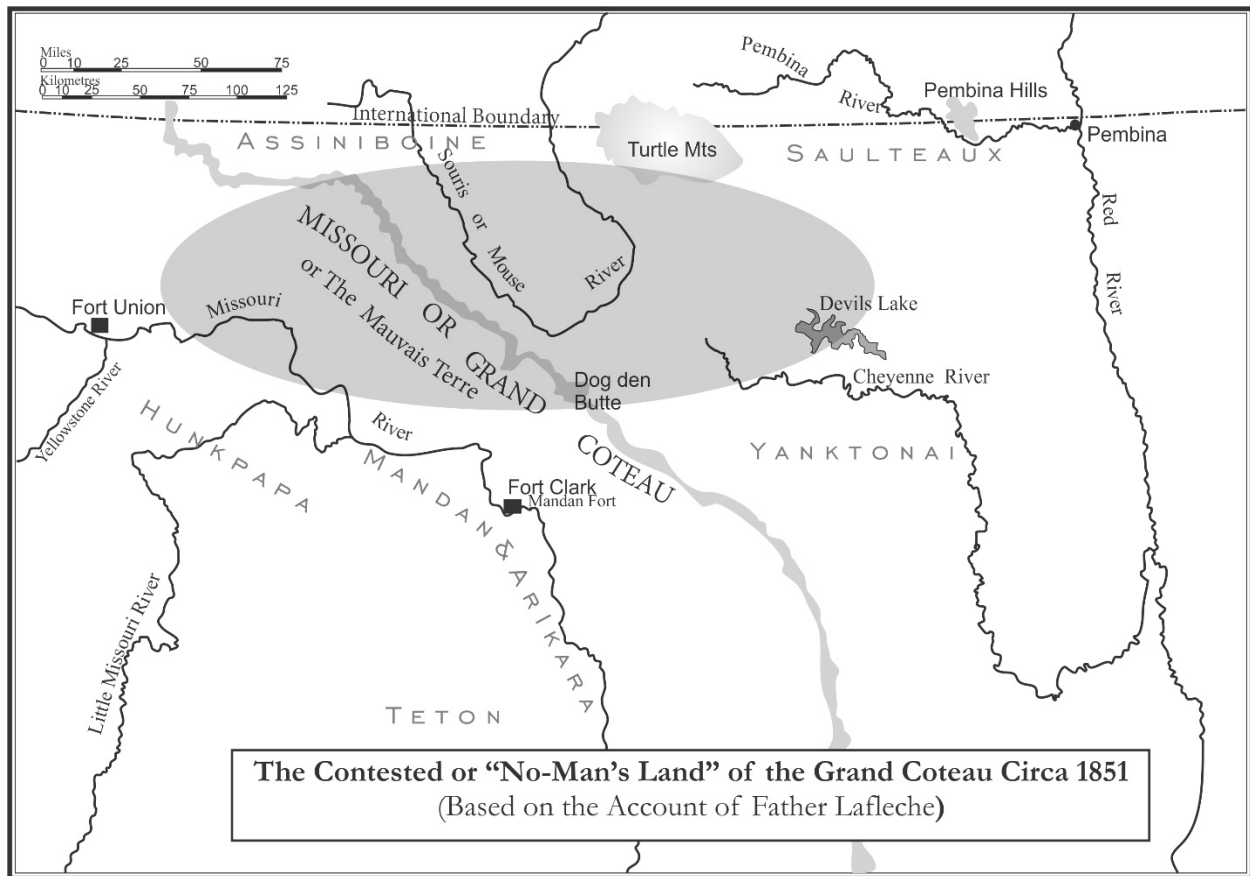


Figure 2 The Borderlands of the Sioux and Métis

Credit: Map by author

Pembina, and consequently the Métis had adapted their communal buffalo hunt into a moving butchering and military machine. By the 1840s this could include up to 1200 Red River Carts, over 600 hunters accompanied by 600 women and 300 children who did the butchering and drying of the meat. This hunting caravan also included 400 buffalo-running horses, 600 cart horses and 500 oxen.⁸ This armed caravan would then travel hundreds of miles in a southwestward direction towards Devils Lake and the Missouri Coteau where abundant buffalo herds could be found in

⁸ These numbers are for the 1840 buffalo hunt and come from Alexander Ross, *The Red River Settlement: Its Rise, Progress and Present State with Some Account of the Native Races, and its General History to the Present Day* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1856), 244. A detailed description of the 1845 hunt can be found in "Lettre de M. Belcourt, St. Paul, 25 novembre 1845, in *Rapport les Missions du Diocèse de Québec*, Juillet 1847, No. 7, 35-49.

late summer. In doing so, the Métis moved directly into the territory also claimed by the Sioux. Protected by the size of their caravan and their defensive military tactics already noted, the Métis were able to harvest large numbers of buffalo in their two-month hunts. The Métis view of this territory, and its geopolitics, is instructive and has been articulated by the Father Lafleche, the Oblate priest who accompanied their 1850 and 1851 hunts.

Consider the location and extent of the grasslands where the Métis go every summer in caravans for their provisions. Take a North American map, and notice the space between the Assiniboine River to the north, the Red River to the east; the Cheyenne River and the Grand Coteau to the south; and to the west draw a line from the source to the mouth of the Souris or Mouse River; and you will see the country where the buffalo roam in the thousands throughout the year. In this immense country, there are only a few clumps of wood along the rivers. Without visiting the country, it is difficult to obtain an accurate idea of the appearance presented by this plain without borders. It is dotted with a few small salt lakes, which seem placed only to irritate the thirst of the parched hunter in the dry seasons. The ground, which in all probability will never suffer the heartbreak of the plow, has a continual succession of elevations and depressions; the soil is generally sandy and even if the land were habitable would only produce meager harvests. . . . In the north and Northwest of this territory are the homelands of the Assiniboine and Saulteaux; to the southeast are the homelands of the Sioux, who are more numerous if taken together, and the mortal enemies of the Assiniboine and Saulteaux. . . . To overcome their smaller numbers the Assiniboine have made a pact with the Saulteaux. Plains Indians are usually the worst kind; However, Saulteaux/Ojibwa and Assiniboine respect the lives of the whites and steal whenever they can do so without incurring too much danger. The Assiniboine especially are the most cunning thieves. But the Sioux are unquestionably the most wicked of these peoples; though they steal less, murder is the object of their most ardent desires, and the goal of all their actions; to achieve this, they fear neither fatigue nor fasting. They kill indiscriminately white or Indian and only their cowardice stops them. . . . Some Métis have been occasionally massacred by the Sioux, but peace is not openly broken with them. Until this year, the Métis have always traveled in this territory which they regard as their homeland, because many of them were born there and spent much of their youth there. Before the Metis became attached to the Red River, no Indian nation had dared occupy the desert, which separated the warring tribes. Here the countless herds buffalo grazed in peace, and were the only owners. They were disturbed only by the passage of war parties looking for scalps. That explains why there were so many buffalo when Métis arrived.⁹

⁹ Lettre de M. Richer Lafleche, Missionnaire à un ses amis. Saint-François de la Prairie du Cheval-Blanc, le 4 septembre 1851. *Rapport les Missions du Diocèse de Québec*. Mars, 1853, No. 10, 45-47. Translation by the author.

Sioux-Métis Hostilities and the American Government

By the 1840s these Métis incursions were much resented by the Sioux, who, the Indian Agent in the St. Peters Agency noted, would oppose the Métis by force if the US government did nothing to stop the Métis from hunting on Sioux lands. This required the attention of the US army, the Agent noted, as the Métis were killing great numbers of buffalo.¹⁰ By 1844 little had been done despite the complaints of the Sioux to the U.S. Government. The Indian Agent again warned the Indian Commissioner that large numbers of Red River Métis were making incursions into American territory killing annually upwards of 30,000 buffalo. Conflict with the Sioux was occurring every year and killings, and reprisal killings, were already taking place where the Sioux could isolate small groups of Métis hunters.

The consequence of such a state of things is, that quarrels are constantly occurring between the half breeds and the Sioux Indians, attended, sometimes, with fatal effects. I have advice of a fight which took place a few days since, between these people, at least 150 miles within our boundary. It appears that a half-breed Chippewa of Red river was killed by a party of Yanktons, of the Missouri, which was retaliated by a large party of half breeds upon another band of Sioux, (belonging to Lake Traverse,) who had no cognizance of the affair, and who were attacked by the half breeds without any warning, and eight Sioux were killed and two taken prisoners. These Sioux are highly exasperated, and will doubtless commit outrages upon any whites they may meet, by way of revenge.¹¹

In response the U.S. army sent a detachment of cavalry to visit the Métis (1845) telling them they would no longer be allowed to hunt on U.S. soil. The Métis response was to petition the U.S. government arguing that the territory belonged to them through their Saukteaux/Ojibwa ancestry, and that many of them had been born in the territory. The upshot was that the Métis

¹⁰ Report of Amos J. Bruce, Indian Agent, St. Peter's Agency, Iowa Territory, September 15, 1842, in "Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for the year 1842," (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1843), 422-23.

¹¹ Report of Amos J. Bruce, Indian Agent, St. Peter's Agency, Iowa Territory, September 1, 1844, in "Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for the year 1844," (Washington: C. Alexander Printer, 1844), 121.

did not stop their hunts and the United States did nothing.¹² Between 1845 and 1850 conflict was constant. As the Indian Agent for the St. Peter's Agency noted in 1846:

It again becomes my duty to call your attention, and the attention of government, to the inroads of the half-breeds and freemen of Red river into the Sioux country.

It is reported to this office that a larger number of them than usual went last spring into the Sioux country in pursuit of the buffalo. It is almost incredible, the quantity of those animals that are annually destroyed by them. The products of these hunts are usually taken to supply the Hudson's Bay Company trading posts.¹³

The Battle and its Significance

This then was the context of the 1851 Battle of Grand Coteau. By 1850 there was endemic warfare along the British/United States boundary between the Sioux and the Saulteaux with whom the Métis were allied. Both sides claimed this as their buffalo-hunting territory and collisions were inevitable.¹⁴ Father Lafleche, who accompanied the Métis on their hunts into American territory in both 1850 and 1851, noted that the Métis later heard that the Sioux had asked their American agent to help drive away the Métis, to which he had replied, "If the lands on which the Metis hunt belong to you, defend them." As a consequence, the Sioux resolved to attack in 1851. To this purpose, they had sent tobacco to all the various Sioux bands during the winter to raise a large war party. As Lafleche further noted, "What was even more unfortunate, was that we did not receive this news and knew nothing of the preparations that threatened us.

¹² Report of Amos J. Bruce, Indian Agent, St. Peter's Agency, Iowa Territory, September 1, 1845, in "Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for the year 1845," 489-90

¹³ Report of Amos J. Bruce, Indian Agent, St. Peter's Agency, Iowa Territory, September 1, 1846, in "Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1846," (Washington: Ritchie and Heiss Printers, 1846), 34.

¹⁴ Report of Nathaniel McLean, Indian Agent St. Peter's Agency, September 1, 1851, in "Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Department of the Interior, Office Indian Affairs, November 27, 1851," Senate Ex. Doc. No. 1, 32nd Congress, First Session (Washington: A. Boyd Hamilton, 1851) 432-33.

At the usual time, that is to say June 15, we left for the buffalo hunt on the plains. We went with the simplicity of the dove, not the wisdom of the serpent.”¹⁵

Thus, on July 13, 1851, when the large Sioux Hunting/War party, spotted the smaller St. Francois Xavier branch of the larger Red River Caravan, they decided that this was an opportune time to defend its territory and punish the Métis interlopers. While the Sioux were unsuccessful in destroying the smaller Métis party, and indeed took more casualties than did the Métis, it is probable that the Sioux regarded this attack successful at one level. They had demonstrated that anything less than a united and large Métis hunt was at risk in this "no-man's land", and that, in an era when the large Métis buffalo hunts out of Red River were decreasing in size due to the shift to smaller Métis wintering camps on the plains (buffalo already too far from Red River) it was both safer and more cost effective to establish these wintering camps further westward and in the territories of allies instead of their enemies. In other words, despite winning the battle, the Métis seem to have abandoned their forays deep into American territory. This conjecture is supported by two sources of evidence. First, U.S. Indian Agency complaints of Métis hunting in Sioux territory ends after 1851; and second, none of the known sites of Métis wintering camps after 1851 were located in this contested area. Rather, they were located in the area along the border between Turtle Mountain and the Milk River on lands controlled by the Saulteaux, Assiniboiné, and Cree -- bands closely allied to the Métis. As well, personal accounts of the Métis from the 1850s through the 1860s note that any small group of Métis found in Sioux territory were in mortal danger.¹⁶

¹⁵ Lettre de M. Richer Laflèche, Missionnaire à un ses amis. Saint-François de la Prairie du Cheval-Blanc, le 4 septembre 1851. *Rapport les Missions du Diocèse de Québec*. Mars, 1853, No. 10, 54. Translation of the author.

¹⁶ William Davis Papers, Note Books. Archives of the State Historical Society of North Dakota.

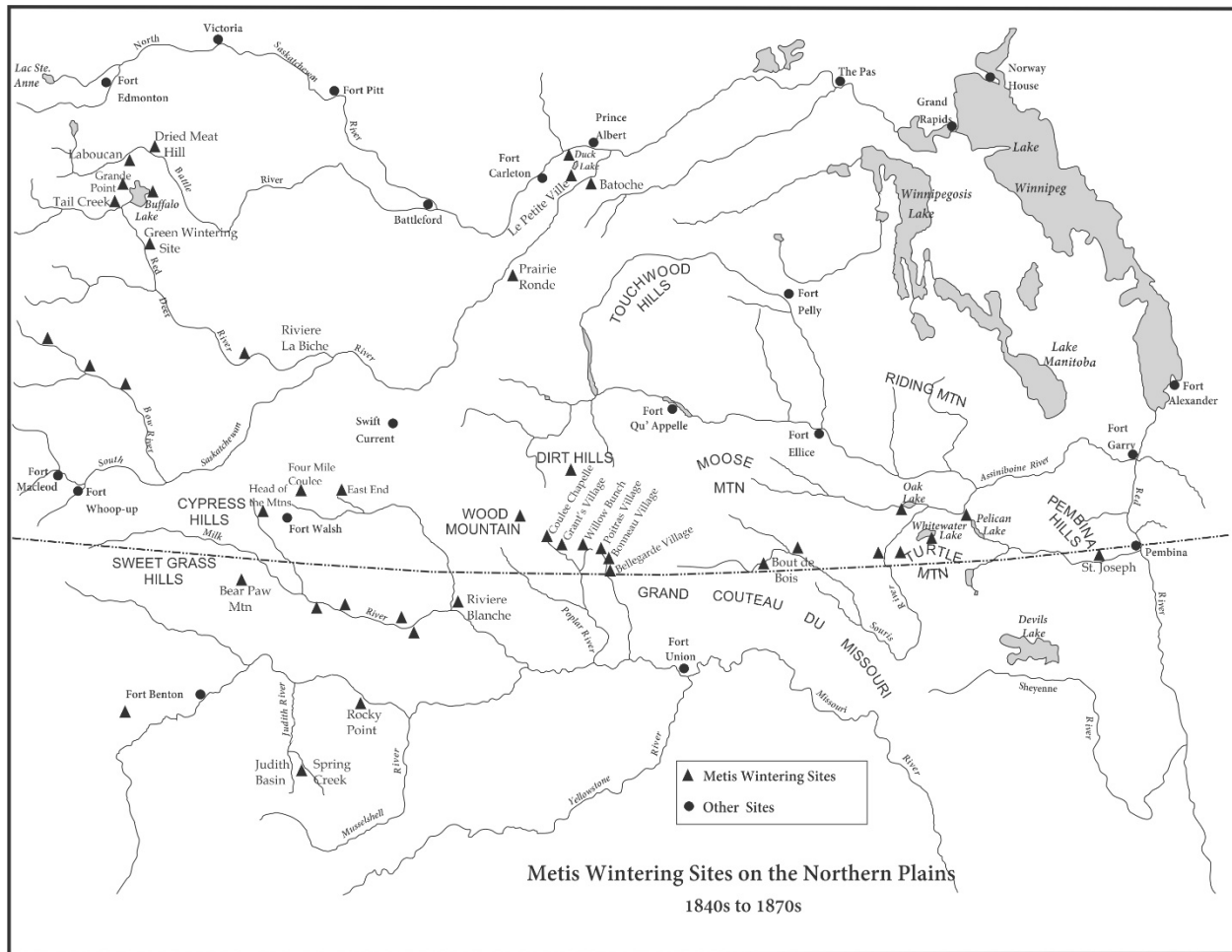


Figure 3 Métis Wintering Sites on the Northern Plains

Credit: Map by author

The Métis won the battle of the Grand Coteau, but this did not mean they were the masters of the plains. They did expand westward, but they did so on the lands controlled by their allies, the Saulteaux, the Cree, and the Assiniboiné. Rapprochement with the Sioux would eventually come in the period of the late 1860s and 1870s, when both groups shifted their hostilities from other native groups to the American and Canadian governments who were now seen as the larger threat.