

This fort is my pride and joy! I'm Joseph Desjarlais. If I have to say so myself, Fort Desjarlais was the most prominent and successful of the Souris River trading posts! My men and I built it in 1836 almost directly north of present-day Lauder, near Hartney.

The fort was 200 feet long and 150 feet deep with one long log building and several smaller ones, surrounded by a stockade of oak posts – immense in comparison to other Souris River posts!

At all times I employed between 50 and 80 men, and kept a large number of horses, a handful of farm animals, as well as some plots of grain; most unusual for trading posts in the 1800's!



A sketch made by Hartney historian Larry Clarke and the site today.

Being an independent fur trader, many wondered how I stayed in business for over 20 years when neighboring forts lasted only a few years. And, I operated in direct opposition to the Hudson's Bay Company – which is no small feat! Believe me!

Some think I employed so many so as to protect the fort. Poppy cock. We didn't need protection from the Dakota. We got along well with our neighbours. That's why we were so successful. In fact (laugh) they called me *Mitche Cote*. Hairy Legs!

Some thought I needed the space to carry on some shady business, smuggling American liquor into Canada, and, Canadian furs into the States. Officially? I needed all that space because many of the men in my employ were

both buffalo hunters and fur traders. Three sources of income came from the men: securing buffalo robes for winter, selling pemmican to the Hudson's Bay Company, and trade with trappers and First Nations. (*Sheepishly*) Shady trading with the Americans? Well, (*chuckles*) I'd better not say yay or nay to that!

But, as glorious as it was for 22 years, my operation came to a tragic end in 1858 when a fire tore through the fort. Some think it was as simple as a prairie fire that got out of hand. Some blame rival traders, thinking I was too big for my britches. Whatever. I moved south of the border and built another post to start all over! The fur trade business in these parts is profitable enough if you keep your friends close. Certainly worth trying again!



A Google Earth view

I hear say that in 1967 Fort Desjarlais was excavated and several cellar holes and chimney mounds were still distinctly visible at the site. Since then though, three floods of the Souris River completely eroded evidence of my great fort, most of it crumbling into the Souris River. It's estimated, Fort Desjarlais slipped into the Souris at an average rate of two feet per year. So the fort would have taken 120 years to disappear. That's how grand it was. Achem! Humbly speaking of course.

Betty Sawatzky and David Neufeld adapted 'Fort Desjarlais' from a story written for Vantage Points 1.