

For 7 years, I had the job of a lifetime. If, that is, you like traveling over the prairie in a noisy cart looking for buffalo. No, I wasn't a hunter of the majestic buffalo. I was sent by the Catholic Church to be a traveling Priest, to the Metis Buffalo Hunters. As labour intensive and as exhilarating as it was, the job nearly cost me my life. Let me explain.

I'm Father Lafleche. Originally from Quebec. I was 21 years old and freshly ordained, when sent to Fort Garry. My grandmother taught me to appreciate her Indigenous traditions. And, I knew of the Metis by reputation. But I was out of my depth when it came to living on the open prairie. There's much to learn and so much to respect. They're a hard working people, the Metis, with an inclination to dance exuberantly to a fiddle when they get together. They follow both their European and Indigenous traditions; making for a most unique culture.



### *Battle site*

At the beginning of summer 1851 we assembled a hunting expedition with wagons, soldiers, women, children, oxen and horses. We traveled west and south from the Emerson-Pembina crossing into North Dakota, to a place called the Grand Coteau, near the southernmost bend of the Souris River. This was Sioux, Dakota, country. With danger in mind, our scouts traveled to the north, south and west of us, remaining alert for buffalo, and for Dakota lodges. The Metis and Dakota have become bitter enemies, competing as they do for dwindling buffalo harvests. If a warning was sent, we were to circle our wagons. On July 13

a warning did come, that thousands of battle-ready Dakota were advancing. A clash over dominance on the prairie was inevitable.

Immediately, we drove the oxen into a circle with the tongues of the wagon facing inward. Adjoining wheels touching. So enemy horsemen couldn't penetrate. Women, children, cattle and horses were huddled inside the circle, while men quickly dug pits outside the circle, so they could lie under the back of the wagon with rifles facing out; a strategy the Metis have fashioned, for this very purpose. This would be a test.

The Dakota fought by sending fiercely painted warriors in successive waves, firing guns and arrows from under the necks of fast, nimble horses. Odds were against us. We were outnumbered 100 to 1! But there wasn't time for fear. I went from soldier to soldier, from family to family, offering encouragement and blessings. It was an eternity, and yet, it was timeless. After two days of onslaught, our wagon circle prevailed. Our men and boys, and some women I should add, are well skilled with rifles. The battle strategy proved effective. The Dakota, it seems, had bargained on us surrendering. But they suffered many casualties. And we, only a few. Halleluia!

The following day, as we were celebrating, the Dakota sent an emissary, stating they would never again attack a Metis hunting party. Called us The Masters of the Plains. For now, at least, the Battle of the Grand Coteau, established the Metis as a fully formed Nation. Capable of determining its own destiny; fighting its own battles.

*Battle at Grand Coteau was adapted from a letter Fr. Lefleche wrote to his superiors.*

*Vantage Points Flashbacks were written by David Neufeld with help from Betty Sawatzky. They were originally aired on CJRB Radio out of Boissevain, Manitoba in the early 2020s*