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Petite Ville Site Survey, Saskatchewan

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In the autumn of 1870 a group of Métis from the Red River settlement established a winter camp on the west bank of the South Saskatchewan River at a site located approximately 10 miles south of present-day St. Laurent (Giraud 1954). The encampment was called "Petite Ville" with the ensuing occupation spanning at least three winters (LeChevallier 1930; Fortier 1979). Métis from Petite Ville as well as other settlements on the South Saskatchewan attended a meeting in 1871, at which a decision was made to establish a permanent settlement in the region. With this in mind, land was obtained on the east bank of the South Saskatchewan River 10 miles above Petite Ville in an area later to be called St. Laurent. The settlement was not officially established until the summer of 1873. Whether the Petite Ville site was occupied after 1873 by the Métis is not known. As a means of assessing Petite Ville's potential interpretability in regard to the Batoche National Historic Site themes and objectives, a survey of the site was conducted in the summer of 1979.

History

Diminishing buffalo herds and dissatisfaction with the Red River settlement resulted in an increase in the number of Métis migrating to and settling on the Western Plains between 1860 and 1880 (Giraud 1954; McKee 1973). Gabriel Dumont was the leader of a group of Métis who wintered in the Fish Creek/Batoche region in the late 1860s (Dawson 1979). It has been suggested that this group camped at the site of Petite Ville prior to the arrival in 1870 of Métis from the Red River settlement (Dawson 1979). Among the 40 or 50 families within this wintering party were Dumonts and Boyers, family names later to be important in the developments at Batoche (Dawson 1979; LeChevallier 1930).



Although the Petite Ville population probably included entrepreneurs, it is best characterized as Hivernant (Giraud 1954). Hivernant Métis, also known as winter rovers, were highly transient individuals who subsisted primarily on the natural resources of the prairies and forests. This group more often than not was involved in the great Métis buffalo hunts of the spring and fall.

Correspondence associated with the priests assigned to Petite Ville intimates that living conditions were comparable to other hivernant sites. Father Petitot gives the following description of a Petite Ville residence.

Just fancy a long hut without gables, like a gigantic coffin, having by way of a door a piece of bison parchment, stretched on frame, with windows of the selfsame parchment, and a roof consisting of poles laid flat, and covered over with hay and earth, which the growing season has transformed into a picturesque garden of wormwood and willowherbs, in the midst of which a fine willow has the boldness to simulate a steeple; a faint image of the hanging gardens of Babylon. Such was the wretched hovel which served as a dwelling (LeChevallier 1930:24).

However "wretched" it may have been, Moodie suggests hivernant dwellings were typically constructed in this fashion:

log walls crudely put together...Poles placed in rows and covered with earth and hay provided the roof. Holes were cut in the walls for doors and windows. When required, the latter were closed off with the skins of animals (Moodie 1965:111).

The style of Métis residence described in these passages was probably not intended for extensive habitation and may have housed more than a single nuclear family.

Site Location

According to LeChevallier (1930:19) the site of Petite Ville was located "on a wedge formed by a horse-shoe conformation of the river", ten miles south of present day St. Laurent. This description places the site of Petite Ville on a terraced oxbow of the South Saskatchewan River in the Rural Municipality of Rosthern, Saskatchewan on land owned by Mr. Harold Tadei of Prince Albert. A survey of the oxbow located the site on the northern third of the main oxbow terrace just north of a recent trail. The remains of Petite Ville, a complex series of depressions, occur approximately 100 metres southwest of the flood plain and an additional 40 metres from the river bank.

Methodology

The primary objective of the survey was to record and map all features associated with the Petite Ville site. This was accomplished through a pace and compass survey of the area. Measurements and compass directions were taken from prominent and, hopefully, timeworthy features including fence lines, a well used road that traverses the land, and the South Saskatchewan River. As the property was privately owned no attempt was made to collect artifacts.

In surveying Petite Ville, dense vegetation posed problems (Figure 1). Often the investigators would lose sight of the reference features and of each other making the pacing of straight lines impossible in many places. Brush clearing was undertaken in some areas to facilitate recording. As a result, the accompanying map must be regarded as a rough and possibly incomplete sketch of the site (Figure 3).

Petite Ville

The area of the Petite Ville site comprises approximately 100 x 300 m on the northeast third of the bottom river terrace (Figure 2, 3). At present, 28 depressions have been mapped. Five other depressions are known to exist but the density of the overgrowth precluded their recording. It is presumed that many more depressions are present within the dense bush lying to the north and east of the designated site. One depression is known to exist on the crest of a terrace overlooking the flood plain.

Varying between 0.5 and 1.5 m in depth below surface, three types of depressions were recorded. The predominant form is circular; 17 depressions range from approximately 1.5 to 6 m in diameter (Figure 3). Seven square depressions constitute the second type. These range from 2 to 4 m square. The final type includes four depressions which were rectangular in shape and measured 5 x 3 m, 1.5 x 1 m, 4 x 0.5 m and 4 x 8 m. No distinct area of occurrence for any particular depression style seems to exist across the site.

Approximately six more or less distinct groupings of depressions exist. The largest appears south and east of the escarpment tree line east (23 m) of the main trail. This cluster contains ten depressions but it is probable that a number of others were obscured by the heavy brush cover. A second cluster, of six depressions, occurs east (25 m) of this major concentration and approximately 40 m west of the flood plain. Between two of the depressions is a stone feature which may be the remains of a chimney. A third cluster of two depressions exists approximately 85 m south of this second group with a lone depression between them, just northeast of the main road as it bends away to the southwest across the bottom terrace and along the base of the upper terrace (Figure 3).

A large flat stone located approximately 0.5 m to the north-east of the larger depression may have been a foundation stone. A fourth cluster of two depressions occurs approximately 155 m southeast from this last group. This fourth cluster is unique in its distance away from the other five groupings and appears to contain the only depressions on the central area of the terrace. Two other clusters occur along the main road as it leaves the woods to the north and east. The fifth grouping occurs approximately 35 m to the west of the major concentration, approximately 14 m down the road out of the trees and to the east of the road. Indeed the road fronts two of five depressions in this cluster. The sixth cluster of three depressions occurs 14 m up (north) along the road and 25 m into the woods.

A 3 x 1.5 m mound is located between the depressions. Mr. Tadei, the owner of the land, originally found this mound and described it as having a line of five or six large flat stones arranged down the centre of the mound's north-south axis. These stones have since been removed by Mr. Tadei and are presently to the southwest of the mound. Believing the mound to be a burial, Mr. Tadei has undertaken his own testing operation, digging a small 3 x 0.5 m trench in which he found a few animal bones along the western edge of the mound. Although the identification of this mound as a grave may at present be tenuous, it should not altogether be ruled out. In addition to the associated mound, the sixth cluster is located at the edge of a wooded area. No other depressions were found among the trees. However, the trees may be a recent phenomenon.

A tentative interpretation of the Petite Ville site depressions would suggest them to be features associated with a cluster of structures representing the Métis settlement. Presumably they would have been used for storage. The only type of structure presently known to have existed in Petite Ville is residential. One of these residences, as noted previously, was used for religious functions (LeChevallier 1930). Generally speaking, a number of different types and sizes of storage depressions were associated with Métis dwellings, examples of which are cellar, cache or refuse pits. The location of the depressions varied such that a few could have been placed inside the dwelling (cellar pits) and a number outside (refuse or cache pits) (Bonnichsen, Horan, Doll and Baldwin 1973; Doll and Kidd 1976; Elliott 1971). The six clusters at Petite Ville may represent six or more cabins and their associated features.

In terms of the spatial distribution of site depressions, the following two occurrences were noted. Few depressions occur in the grassy or wooded areas of the terrace. For the most part, depressions were located in willow, saskatoon and raspberry bushes. Moreover, in close proximity to many of the large depressions, there are other, smaller depressions.

In at least two instances pairs of depressions are joined together by a shallow trench. The significance of the preceding patterns is not known. Similar arrangements of one large and one small depression were found in the West Village of Batoche (Donahue et al. 1977) and at the Buffalo Lake Site, Alberta (Doll and Kidd 1976). A photograph of the structure associated with the Batoche pits illustrates a rather elongated gabled building (Figure 4). However, the structure was divided into three segments, two of which have an interior depression, presumably a cellar pit. Possibly, the large/small depression arrangement is a storage feature of an elongated and/or segmented structure.

There can be little doubt that more than six structures were present at Petite Ville. Without having visited the site Father LeChevallier estimated that 30 "huts" had been constructed on site (1930:19). Given that 40 Métis families were at the site and assuming an estimate of one to three families per cabin, we must expect there to have been between 14 and 40 cabins. In which case Father LeChevallier's estimate would seem quite appropriate. Why the remains of a much larger complex were not located is a somewhat perplexing problem. At present, it seems probable that the unlocated portion of the settlement falls in the northern section of the oxbow either among the previous identified depressions or to the north and east of them. This area, as previously mentioned, was poorly surveyed due to dense foliage. Should this prove to be the case, then the northern section of the oxbow would have had a relatively dense population of perhaps 80 to 200 individuals (40 families with 2 to 5 members) paralleling Father LeChevallier's (1930:19) characterization of Petite Ville as but a "shapeless agglomeration of huts." It would also be similar to that described by Robinson for another Métis site on the North Saskatchewan River. He states:

Some 30 or 40 huts crowded together and built of logs, branches of pine trees, raw-hides, tanned and smoked skins... (1879:254).

Rifle Pits

On two converging grassy knolls at the edge of a wooded area on a terrace above that of Petite Ville is located a series of alternating depressions overlooking a plain through which a trail winds (Figure 5, 6). This position provides a commanding vantage over the surrounding prairies. The pits are likely Métis in origin and therefore have a relationship with the Petite Ville site.

The depressions were identified as rifle pits dating from the Rebellion period by the owner of the land. Their location, orientation, size and shape, which are similar to rifle pit clusters in the West Village of Batoche (Donahue et al. 1977), substantiate his claim. Moreover, there would

appear to be no other large structural remains in the vicinity with which the pits could be associated.

Most of the depressions occur on the westernmost portion of the two knolls. There are possibly as many as eight pits. However, the shallowness of two of them make their use as rifle pits questionable. The six identifiable pits are between 6 and 12 square metres in size. They are generally rectangular in shape. Two of the pits have smaller depressions attached to them, a reason for which cannot be identified.

The rifle pits appear to have been strategically located by the Métis. The trail could be easily protected from the knolls, while a ridge behind the rifle pit cluster facilitated retreat.

Old Trail

The remnants of a trail were located during the 1979 survey running along the tree line to the first oxbow terrace, then angling east approximately 72 metres from the rifle pit knoll just described (Figure 7). The trail terminates in the southern half of the terrace on which Petite Ville was located. Given both its termination point and the adjacent position of the rifle pits, it seems probable that the trail was used during the Métis occupation at Petite Ville.

Conclusion

Petite Ville was a winter camping site which was used for at least three seasons and which resembles other such Métis encampments. Evidence of structures in Petite Ville consists of storage depressions of various sorts, a possible foundation stone, and chimney stones. The historic record suggests that buildings were temporary, rectangular, log cabins with buffalo skin windows and doors. The location of the depressions indicates that most of the cabins were built close together between the woods and floodplain in the northern third of the oxbow. Access to the site was probably via a narrow trail up the side of the embankment located in the southern half of the oxbow.

Petite Ville cannot be viewed as the progenitor of St. Laurent or of Batoche. According to Payment (1978) a number of Métis settlements in the area participated in the establishment of St. Laurent. It would not be surprising, however, if individuals from the various settlements bought river lots near to each other. Hence, the area of Batoche may have been settled primarily by members of Petite Ville or close relatives. For example, Jean Baptiste Boyer, a Batoche entrepreneur, is known to have been at Petite Ville (LeChevallier 1930). He was related consanguinally to both Letendre and Fisher, other storekeepers at Batoche (Payment 1979: pers. comm.).

To conclude, the Métis site of Petite Ville, with storage depressions, grave (?), access trail, as well as Rebellion period rifle pits, was located on an oxbow of the South Saskatchewan River across from the Fish Creek Church. The significance of this site lies in information which could be derived concerning Métis adaptations to the plains/parkland environment and to the frontier situation in the 19th century. More specifically, insight may be gained into hibernant activities and the developmental relationship between Petite Ville and Batoche/St. Laurent. In turn, this relationship may help to explain the events leading up to the rebellion of 1885.

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Figure 1. Dense vegetation made surveying difficult.
 Depressions associated with Petite Ville are located to
 the left of the trail in the picture.

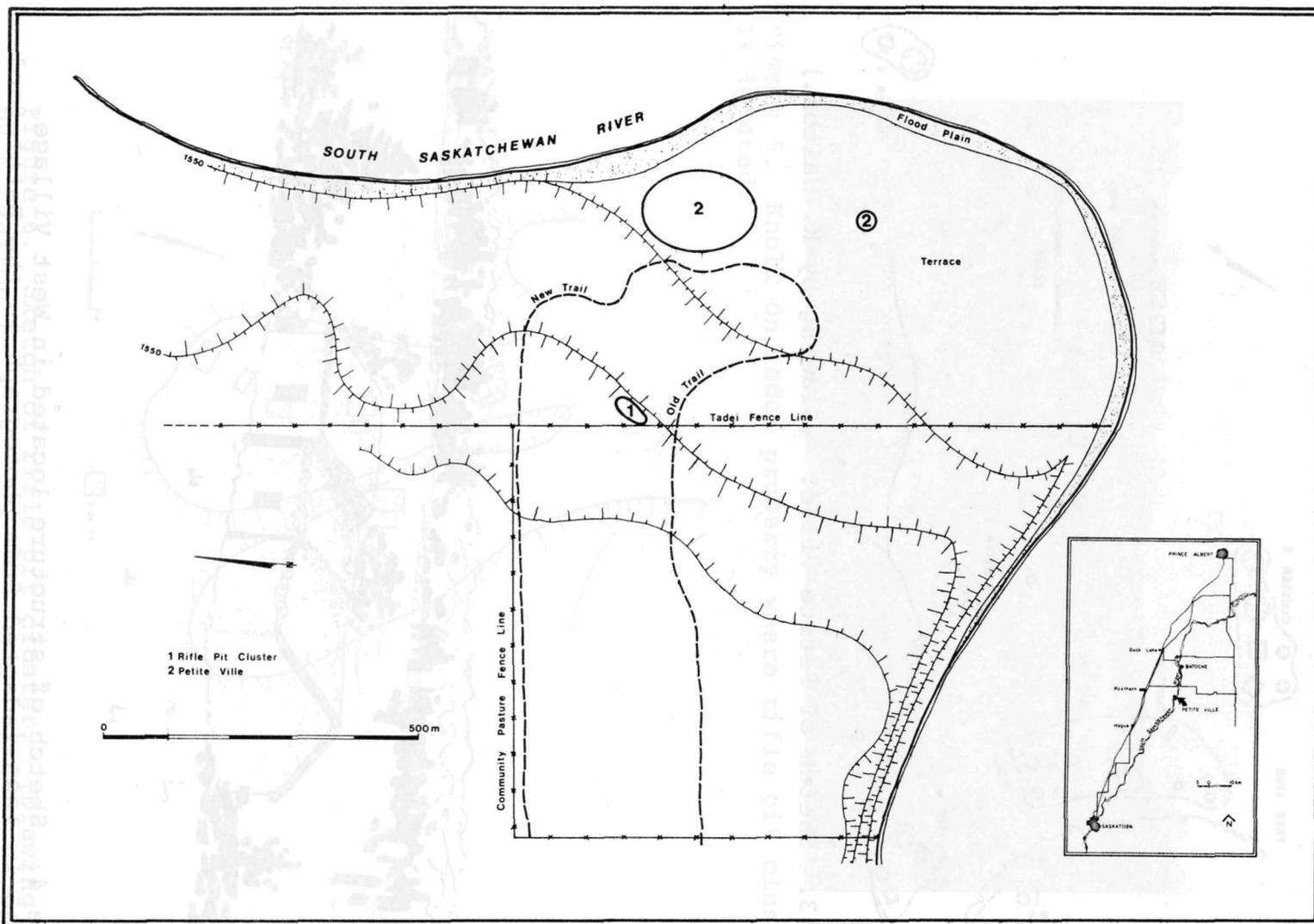


Figure 2. Map of historic sites located on Tadei property. (Drawing by K. Walton.)

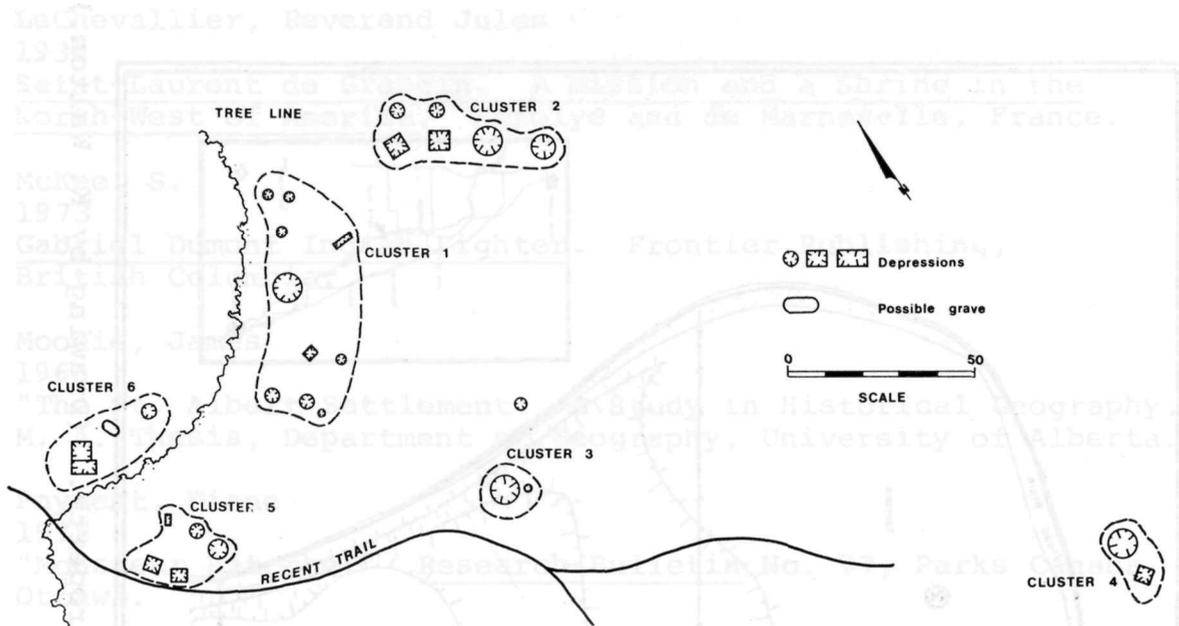


Figure 3. Sketch of Petite Ville. (Drawing by K. Walton.)

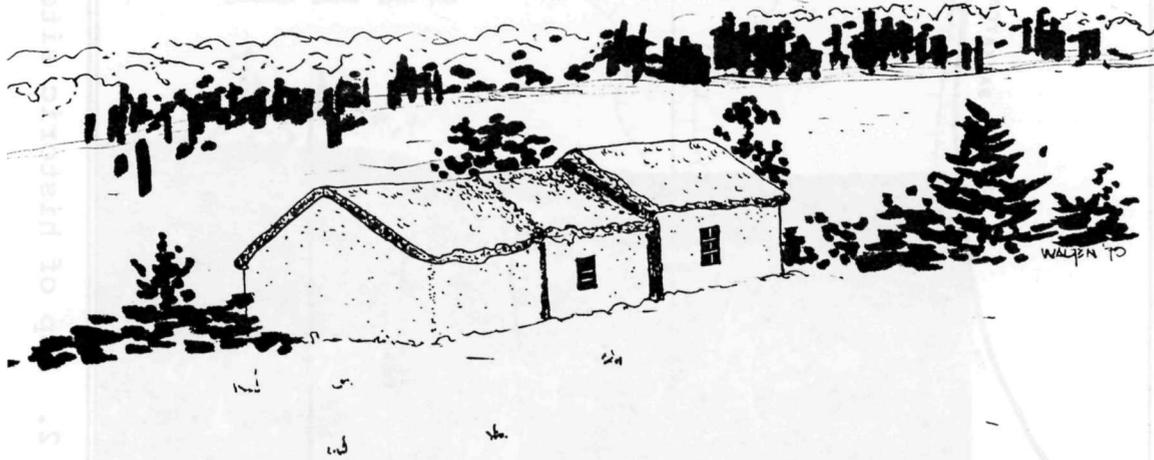


Figure 4. Sketch of structure located in West Village, Batoche in 1885 (adapted from photograph in the Battleford National Historic Park collection). (Drawing by K. Walton.)



Figure 5. Knoll on Tadei property where rifle pit cluster is located.

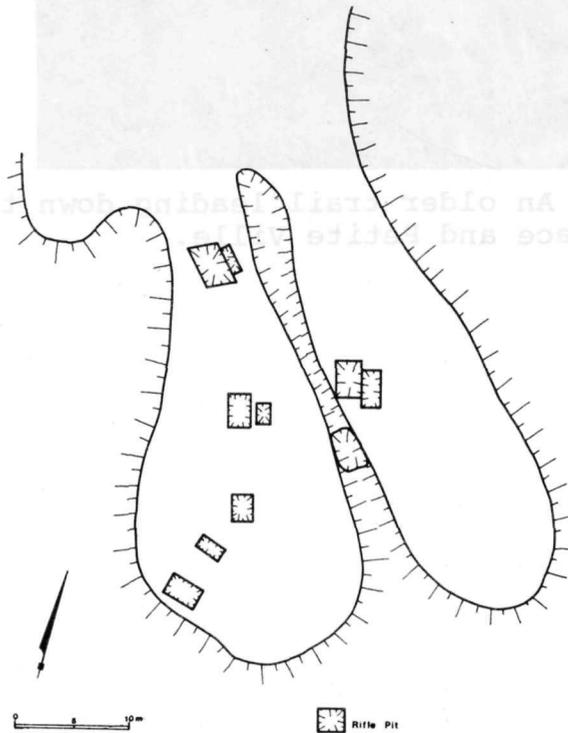


Figure 6. Sketch of rifle pit cluster. (Drawing by K. Walton.)



Figure 7. An older trail leading down to river terrace and Petite Ville.

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