

## Lost in the Red Ochre Hills, Part I

By Joan Soggie

*Tribal warfare and golf: although separated by more than 140 years, did they share a common location?*

Golfers at the Harbor Golf Course at the village of Elbow, Saskatchewan, might notice a stone cairn standing near the ninth green overlooking Lake Diefenbaker. Placed there by the Department of Natural Resources in 1967, the marker stands as an enigmatic reminder of our shadowy past. The inscription reads:

**“In March, 1866, a large Blackfoot war party, traveling down the South Saskatchewan River Valley in this vicinity, killed two Cree women and prepared to attack a small camp on a neighbouring hill. Their shots alerted a well-armed party of Cree warriors who trapped them in the Valley. An estimated 400 Blackfoot were killed in the running battle which extended over a mile between Tufts Bay and Elbow Harbor Coulee.”**<sup>1</sup>

That sounds like a fine historic tale, doesn't it? But maybe more “tale” than “history.” This official version has challengers.

The village of Riverhurst, about 30 km (19 miles) as the crow flies from the village of Elbow, but at least 75 km (47 miles) for anyone traveling on land, claims an identical battle for the Vermilion Hills near Riverhurst on the same date. An item entitled “Indians in the Area” published in a 1990s *Lake Diefenbaker Circle News* quoted Riverhurst's local history book:<sup>2</sup> “Tradition has it that the battle between the Crees and Blackfeet which took place at ‘Red Ochre Hills on the South Saskatchewan’ in March of 1866, was fought on the northern edge of the Hills known as the Missouri Coteau, **a few miles south of Riverhurst**. There was a battle fought in a draw called Roe's Coulee or Death Coulee, and many Indians were killed, and the coulee had hundreds of skulls and other bones within the memory of people now living, but no direct evidence of the 1866 battle exists.”

The article goes on to cite a description of the battleground by Isaac Cowie, Hudson Bay factor at Fort Qu'Appelle, who reported seeing it in 1871.

The writer honestly acknowledges that, from the description given by Mr. Cowie, the location could not be matched with any place in the Riverhurst area. “The mystery continues!”

And thickens. For, according to respected historian Mary Weekes, the battle took place at neither Elbow nor Riverhurst, nor even along the South Saskatchewan River. Her version asserts that “the great slaughter of the Blackfoot Indians, when six hundred were trapped in a ravine and killed by prairie Crees, took place at **Red Ochre Hills, some twenty miles south of Gull Lake**, Saskatchewan, March, 1866.”<sup>3</sup> Same time (March, 1866), and identical participants (Cree, Blackfoot)... but an entirely different location!

Gull Lake is a town some 230 km (144 miles) from our original location of the battle at Elbow, and nearly that far from the second location at Riverhurst. And another 20 miles south of *that* places us near a small creek, but a long, long way from the South Saskatchewan River.

Just to further muddy the already murky depths of historical research, archaeologist Ian Brace sent me another account. This one is from “Recollections of an Assiniboine Chief”, and describes a battle at a site called “Wa-say-Oyuze-Wakpa”, or Red Ochre Creek ... 160 km (100 miles) to the north of Elbow, between present day Saskatoon and Whitecap Dakota First Nation.<sup>4</sup> It sounds like the same battle, same time, involving the same tribes and individuals, but this time placing it at a **creek** called Red Ochre instead of **hills** by that name!

Obviously, there were lots of battles. After all, the war between the Cree and the Blackfoot had started almost as soon as were thrown against each other by the pressures of white

encroachment and trade. In the 1860s they had been at each other's throats for two generations.

And there is a lot of confusion over place names. Often traditional geographical designations were translated or exchanged for another name. In areas where there was no continuous aboriginal presence, many original names have disappeared in the past 150 years. Anyone living near the South Saskatchewan River in the 1860s probably could have pointed me in the direction of the Red Ochre Hills, but I could not find the name on maps of the 1880s. As the old nomadic bison-hunting way of life disappeared, so did the old names and tribal knowledge of the land. In this first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the Red Ochre Hills is not even a memory. Those few who happen to come across the name in old texts readily assume that "Red Ochre Hills" is synonymous with the "Vermilion Hills" south of Riverhurst.

But let's look at Isaac Cowie's account referred to in the Riverhurst local history. As a Hudson's Bay factor, Cowie traveled this area for five years immediately after the battle, and reported visiting the site. Presumably, he has left us a few clues to the location.

In his book *The Company of Adventurers*, Isaac Cowie wrote: "In the fall of 1871 I camped for some time, when on a trading trip, alongside this ravine. It was still full of the grim skeletons of those who fell in March, 1866; and I followed, from the mouth of that death trap of the Blackfeet, for miles up the flat bottom lands of the South Saskatchewan valley a trail of bleached bones of the Blackfeet who had fallen in panic-stricken retreat, to the fury of the pursuing Crees. The ravine was a perfect Golgotha, and the trail of dead bones could be plainly seen, from a height, stretching for miles along the burnt surface of the bottom lands of the valley."<sup>5</sup>

It is clear that the battle took place in a ravine leading into the South Saskatchewan River Valley, and continued along the river. The "height of land" from which Cowie viewed the scene indicates high hills or very steep river-breaks overlooking the Saskatchewan River valley. This description could have applied to most of the land adjacent to the South Saskatchewan River from Saskatchewan Landing to the Elbow ... all of which is now submerged under Lake Diefenbaker. It does not fit with the location in "Recollections of an Assiniboine Chief", nor with the Gull Lake location referred to by Mary Weekes.

But this does nothing to resolve our dilemma. Cowie's description does not exclude Elbow or Riverhurst, but neither does it confirm either of them. Prior to completion of Gardiner and Qu'Appelle Dams in the 1960s, steep river breaks - long coulees slashed into the prairie - lined both sides of the river valley for many miles. The valley bottom was flattened by the river floodplain; for much of the year, the river was reduced to a central channel, bordered by sandbars and willow-grown flats. Cowie could have been standing at any of dozens of locations along that 145 km (90 mile) stretch of river-that-has-since-become-a-lake.

Does Mr. Cowie give us other clues to the location, since his seems to be our only contemporaneous description? Yes, he does!

Further on in Isaac Cowie's reminiscences he tells us that, in October of 1873, he left Fort Qu'Appelle, and headed out with two other Hudson's Bay company men for their winter camp on the plains. They "found that the first party had decided to stop at Sandy Hills near the Elbow of the South Saskatchewan, about 225 km (140 miles) from Fort Qu'Appelle, instead of going further west. The reason given for wintering so near in was that whiskey was flowing so freely at the posts the Americans had projected into the Cypress (sic) Hills country that it would be dangerous to go to Red Ochre Hills."<sup>6</sup>

Well, that eliminates Elbow from the running as a contestant for the honour of hosting the massacre of the Red Ochre Hills. "The Sandy Hills at Elbow" bordered the whole east side of the river at the Elbow. They were obviously, in Cowie's opinion, a good, safe distance from the Red Ochre Hills of battle fame.

But what does it do for Riverhurst's claim? Riverhurst is within a day's ride of the Sandy Hills of Elbow. The Hills, known as the Vermilion Hills, which have been assumed in recent times to be "the Red Ochre Hills", are just south of the present-day village of Riverhurst. If they are indeed the same hills, it makes nonsense of Cowie's decision to winter at Elbow instead of the Red Ochre Hills; the Vermilion Hills by *Riverhurst* are just too close to the Elbow sandhills.

So we are left with a relatively well-documented battle, and no site. But it probably was **not** the Harbor Golf Course at Elbow.

*(In the second installment we will explore other references to the battle. If only a survivor had left us a first person account! Or... did he?)*

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<sup>1</sup> Plaque still present on Elbow Harbor Golf Course, Elbow, Saskatchewan, Canada, in September 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Riverhurst Community History, compiled by E. L. Shooter, G.M. Krislock, George Deener. Riverhurst, Saskatchewan, 196?.

<sup>3</sup> Weekes, Mary. Great Chiefs and Mighty Hunters of the Western Plains. Regina and Toronto: School Aids and Text Book Publishing Co. Ltd., 19\_\_, (pp. 82-85).

<sup>4</sup> Kennedy, Dan . Recollections of an Assiniboine Chief. Toronto and Montreal: McLelland and Stewart, 1972 (pp. 112 -113).

<sup>5</sup> Cowie, Isaac. The Company of Adventurers. Toronto: William Briggs, 1913 (p. 315).

<sup>6</sup> Ditto, page 462.