

Lost in the Red Ochre Hills

By Joan Soggie

Part 2

In March, 1866, a well-armed party of Blackfeet attacked a Cree encampment along the South Saskatchewan River. A running battle ensued, in which hundreds of warriors were slain. Numerous references to this battle (or massacre) in historical writings state these facts; but the exact location of the battle is in doubt. In part 1, we learned that Gull Lake, Elbow, Red Ochre Creek south of Saskatoon, and another location south of Riverhurst can probably be ruled out as the site of the battle.

But there is more. At least three more references have surfaced. The first of these dates from the mid-1940s, when *The Saskatchewan Commonwealth* (a weekly newspaper of the CCF) published a series of "True Stories of the Old West". One was "The Battle of the Red Ochre Hills". It is a good rousing story, and includes a few details not mentioned elsewhere. Although no sources are given, it seems to have been loosely based upon Isaac Cowie's account, and thus provides no new information.

The second reference is in a letter to the Provincial Archivist dated November 30, 1966. Eldon Johnson of Kindersley, a respected amateur archaeological-sleuth-turned-professional, wrote on behalf of a friend, Chris Ewanin, who was attempting to find the location of a Cree-Blackfoot battle in the Ochre Hills which had involved his ancestors. Central Butte resident Andrew Graham identified the Ochre Hills for them as the Vermilion Hills south of Riverhurst, which takes us back to square one.

A little more digging into the Provincial Archives yields a third reference: an account given by Abel Watetch about 1960. Who on earth is Abel Watetch? A phone call confirms that his descendants still live in Regina, and in nearby Piapot First Nation. His grandson, Art Watetch, recalls Abel Watetch as a man who valued his cultural history and was a spokesman for his people. As a young man, Abel had served with the Canadian Armed Forces in World War I, was gassed and injured for his country, and received medals in recognition of his service.¹ Then he returned home to the cruel reality of life on the reserve. Even a decorated veteran of the Great War had to get permission from the Indian Agent to go into the city for a day. He became a spokesman for his people, protesting the pass system and other inequities in the treatment of aboriginal people.

But how did he come to write an account of the Massacre in the Red Ochre Hills?

As a boy at residential school, Abel had hungered for stories of his people's past, a history that could help make sense of the present. Later in life, he wrote down some of those stories, preserving them for future generations. His book, *Payepot and his People*, was published by the Saskatchewan History and Folklore Society. And his account of the battle of Red Ochre Hills was preserved in the Saskatchewan Provincial Archives.

Although born a decade after the time of Blackfoot-Cree warfare,² Abel Watetch had memorized stories told by the survivors. He tells about having returned home to the reserve after years in residential school. "Most of the old people were alive at that time, and they used to gather together and tell of this and that and I was always listening. My dad would talk about that massacre every now and again and I would interrupt him to repeat some part of the story so I could memorize it."³ His father would have been a young man at the time of the battle.

Abel Watetch's record of his father's story carries on the long aboriginal tradition of keeping oral history, now recognized by many historians as being as accurate as written records. "The Ochre Hills Massacre of 1866", written by Abel Watetch, relates the story as remembered by the Cree victors long after the battle. It was a story that must have seemed almost mythical to listening youngsters like young Abel, but would have been a vivid memory to the elderly story-

tellers. In the days of their youth, war with the Blackfoot earned them glory. Events like this were too important to forget or falsify. They may have embellished a bit, but probably this version is as close to being factual as any story ever is.

Mr. Watetch began his account by stating that in the old days, his people chose their camping site with an eye to the three necessities of plains life: fuel, water, and game. He himself was not familiar with the Red Ochre Hills that the old people referred to in the story, but he knew it had been considered a good refuge in the often hungry months of late winter and early spring.

The account that follows is in my own words but is based entirely upon the Abel Watetch version of the battle.

As bald hilltops reappeared through the snow cover that March 1866, a group of Plains Cree and Saulteaux set up camp in a coulee leading from the Red Ochre Hills into the present South Saskatchewan River. When a party of Assiniboines joined them, the Cree welcomed these friends, but there was no space left for them in the main camp. Consequently, the Assiniboines set up their tipis on the flats lower in the valley, near the river. To the north of their camp were bushes where the women gathered fire-wood.

On the opposite side of the river stood a steep-sided treeless knoll. It was from this hill that scouts for a Blackfoot war-party spied the small Assiniboine camp across the frozen river. The tipis of the Cree and Saulteaux were hidden by the curving, brush-covered slopes further up the coulee. To the Blackfoot, it seemed a camp with no defences. They concealed their horses on the far side of the knoll. Then the Blackfoot and Blood warriors crossed the frozen river and crept through the snow-filled brush towards the half dozen tipis. A few women gathering wood saw them and ran for help. One woman, an Assiniboine later known as Tatiopa or "many stabs", was knocked down, stabbed and left for dead. KayKaytoway, a Cree woman and a swift runner, managed to elude the enemy, and raced to warn the main camp.

The Blackfoot rushed at the Assiniboine camp, but found the tipis empty. They took what they wanted as trophies from the tents, then slashed and destroyed the rest.

Meanwhile, the Cree, alerted by the woman who had escaped the Blackfoot, leaped to arm themselves. Grabbing guns and bows and arrows, they ran down the coulee from the main camp to where the Blackfoot were looting the Assiniboine camp. The Cree caught them by surprise. The Blackfoot tried to retreat through the bushes, but in their hurry, broke through the snow banks and plunged into deep, wet snow. Once their muskets got wet, the guns were useless except as clubs. Outnumbered, the Blackfoot floundered through the snow at the mercy of the Cree. The Cree came after them with every weapon they had. Pursued by a hail of gunfire and arrows, some of the Blackfoot managed to get back across the river. But another group of Cree had already crossed the frozen river and reached the knoll where the Blackfeet had left their horses. The demoralized Blackfoot war-party arrived at the foot of the knoll to be greeted by a hail of arrows. It was said among the Cree that even young boys used their bows and arrows like warriors that day.

Abel Watetch mentions that "The hero of this massacre was a Cree Indian named 'Little Fish'. After this battle he went down like the rest among the Blackfeet and counted his arrows. They (*there*) were twenty six of his arrows pierced through the bodies."⁴

Mr. Watetch noted also that the fast runner who had given warning to the Cree camp was later known as Mrs. Dubois of Pasqua Reserve. Even the stabbed woman, Tatiopa, survived the battle to live on into treaty days and life on the reserve ... unlike the Saskatchewan Commonwealth account previously mentioned, which has her murdered by the Blackfeet. Perhaps the actual facts were not quite gory enough for readers of the 1940s.

Abel Watetch added that, according to the version of the event known to his cousin Chief Goes Out, the victory was made more amazing in light of the fact that most of the experienced Cree warriors were absent at the time, having gone "down the Swift Current river two days distance, to hunt some stray buffalo that were seen there."⁵

Here is another clue to the location, in addition to the excellent description of the area

already given!

It might be possible to make the journey from the Vermilion Hills south of Riverhurst to the mouth of Swift Current Creek, where it empties into the South Saskatchewan, in two days. From the various accounts, we know that they would have been traveling through windswept prairie and snow-filled gullies, on horses weakened by a long, hard winter. If the passage is read as meaning “two days journey down the Swift Current Creek”, it only makes sense if they started from a point further west on the South Saskatchewan River, somewhere between Riverhurst and what is now known as the Saskatchewan Landing.

This puts us close to the mouth of the Snakebite Coulee on the north side, where the Coteau Hills reach down to the river. This would have been a logical route for the Blackfoot war party to follow. The battle might have been fought right there, at the western border of the hills now called Vermilion, *southwest* (not south) of Riverhurst, north of Gouldtown, at the southern edge of the Coteau Hills.

From Cowie, we know the riverbed must be wide and flat. From both his account and Watetch’s, the south side of the river must be cut with deep and wooded coulees, while the opposite side from whence the Blackfoot war party came was more barren and marked with a high knoll within a range of hills. This area matches that description.

Most of the coulees and all of the old river valley from Saskatchewan Landing to Gardiner Dam are now beneath Lake Diefenbaker, but some hills still rise above it. Many still remember the wooded coulees and wide river valley of the days before the river was dammed in the mid-1960s. Local residents such as Brian and Ole Johnson have found locations within this region that match both Cowie’s and Watetch’s description of the site. Archaeologist Ian Brace, Aboriginal History Unit, Royal Saskatchewan Museum, believes that the site must have been in the area along the South Saskatchewan River north of the village of Gouldtown.⁶

One last piece might just clinch the puzzle. A map printed in Rudy Wiebe’s book *The Temptation of Big Bear* actually shows not only Vermilion Hills, nor the Elbow Sandy Hills, but the Red Ochre Hills. They, of course, are not at Gull Lake, not at Elbow, not even at Riverhurst. That map places the Red Ochre Hills squarely within the semi-circular arms of the elbow of the South Saskatchewan River, where Snakebite Coulee winds past the Beechy-Lucky Lake area of today. Right across the river is the area now called Vermilion Hills.

This we can know with certainty: the Battle of the Red Ochre Hills took place along the South Saskatchewan River; the Blackfoot war-party approached from the west through the Red Ochre Hills (probably the Coteau Hills of today), and from a hilltop, espied Assiniboine tipis across the river; the large Cree and Saulteaux camp further from the river was hidden by the brush-grown walls of the coulee leading down from what we now call the Vermilion Hills. The battle began in the coulee where the Blackfeet attacked the women, then was carried by the Cree defense back down the snow-filled river valley. The Cree pursued the Blackfeet across the river, cutting off their escape and continuing the slaughter to the steep hill from which the Blackfeet had first made their reconnaissance. That hill will be the only extant landmark. All evidence of the battle will have been long-buried beneath the eroded mud-banks and sandy bottom of Lake Diefenbaker.

The exact location of that memorable battle will forever be lost ... along with place names like the “Red Ochre Hills.”

¹ Personal communication with Art Watetch, September 2005.

² # According to the 1906 census for Qu’Appelle District, Abel Watetch was 28 years old, living with his wife Mary (22) and son Joseph (1) and father Jim (65). Jim Watetch would have been 25

years old in 1866, the year of the battle. Abel Watetch would have been born in 1878.

³ "The Ochre Hills Massacre, 1866" as told by Abel Watetch ca. 1960; Saskatchewan Archives Board, Regina, R-834 file 1.f.

⁴ "The Ochre Hills Massacre, 1866" as told by Abel Watetch ca. 1960; Saskatchewan Archives Board, Regina, R-834 file 1.f.

⁵ "The Ochre Hills Massacre, 1866" as told by Abel Watetch ca. 1960; Saskatchewan Archives Board, Regina, R-834 file 1.f.

⁶ Personal communication, October 2004.