# The Rocky Mountain Rangers, The Riel Rebellion and Their Distinct Connection to Medicine Hat

## By William J. Anhorn K.C. ICD.D

"About the Author"



William J. Anhorn was born and raised in Medicine Hat, Alberta and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree (Political Science) from the University of Calgary and a Bachelor of Laws degree from the University of Alberta. He returned to his hometown of Medicine Hat in 1976 and practiced law for over 35 years as a senior partner with the Law firm of Pritchard and Company. He retired in 2012 and he and his wife Joan Elaine Anhorn (Medlicott), a retired teacher, continue to reside there. Always having a keen interest in writing and more recently genealogy, he has researched and written a series of articles on his own family and his extended family (Medlicott/McIvor) and their history and has assisted others in search of their family origins.He also has an ardent interest in history including the history of Medicine Hat and has researched and written several articles in relation to the history of his hometown. He currently is a member of the Medicine Hat Genealogical Society and Past Chairman of the Historical and Heritage Resource Management Committee of the Medicine Hat Exhibition and Stampede Company. He can be reached at wjanhorn@gmail.com

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## Introduction:

Growing up in the 50's and 60's in Medicine Hat and attending elementary school was a memorable experience but looking back at my classes in "social studies", I have only a faint recollection about anything taught about Western Canadian history. But then, maybe I wasn't paying attention.

Certainly most of us will recall reference to the "Riel Rebellion" and its leaders Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont but in relation to the history of Medicine Hat, there would appear to have been little, if any, connection.

I have always had a keen interest in history and more recently, the history of Medicine Hat.

My interest in the history of Medicine Hat and the surrounding area resulted in my first article on local history entitled, "**Demons of the Soul**", the story of the Bliss Family from Medicine Hat and the Infamous Bill Bliss. As a result of this research, I discovered that his father William, who had grown up in as a member of a distinguished family from Nova Scotia, had joined the NWMP and that he had been involved in the march west in 1873 and the establishment of Fort Walsh in the Cypress Hills, all of which was designed to bring law and order to the Prairies.

Apart from being a familiar image on the horizon looking south from Medicine Hat, the Cypress Hills has been an important part of the history of Western Canada and in typical fashion, following the story of Bill Bliss, I went down another "rabbit hole", which gave rise to another article entitled, "**North of the Medicine Line**", the story of the Cypress Hills and the Origins and History of Some Prominent Metis Families from Medicine Hat.

In an earlier article regarding Medicine Hat, I told the story of a well-known local personality by the name of Phoebe Munroe. Anyone growing up in Medicine Hat in the 60's and 70's would be well familiar with this interesting character. It is entitled, **"Lost in the Shadows".**

As an amateur historian and genealogist, going down a proverbial "rabbit hole" is a common affliction or ailment.

As an example, in another narrative entitled, **"Through the Looking Glass",**[1] I completed some research and described events, which led me to go down another "rabbit hole" in pursuit of an additional story, completely unrelated to local history. In this story, I made specific reference to one of Lewis Carroll's earliest works[2] and it may not come as a complete surprise, that the term "*going or falling down a rabbit hole*" was introduced in the 1865 popular novel, "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland". In that classic story, Alice literally falls down the hole of the White Rabbit, taking her to Wonderland, which was a bizarre and absurd universe, with a multitude of strange and unusual characters. Although the phrase may have been used from time to time in common parlance over the next 100 years or so, it did not rise in popularity until the advent of the Internet.

As pointed out by several authors and columnists, it took the Internet to develop the "phrase" as an online metaphor, which means being caught in a virtual time warp, where typically, one of two things invariably happen.

First,[3] we may become interested in a particular topic and a quick 'Google' search leads us to one article on the subject, which leads to another link, which leads to another article and before we know it, we have spent hours reading all we can about the subject, all the while

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[1] This was a genealogical research project where I assisted the husband of Phoebe Munroe's daughter establish a long lost ancestral connection and the origin of a family heirloom.

[2] Note that any reference to "Alice in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There," are in the public domain. The works were Published before January 1, 1923, and are in the public domain worldwide as Carroll died in 1898, more than 100 years ago.

[3] See, Kathryn Schultz, "The Rabbit Hole –Rabbit Hole" The New Yorker Magazine June 2015 and Elaine Zelby, History of the Idiom "Down the Rabbit Hole" Medium.com January 28th, 2019

wondering when we look up, where the time went.

Alternatively, we will look up a certain fact or subject and in doing so, become distracted by another completely unrelated topic which piques our interest and as Alice in Wonderland would say, we become "*curiosier and curiosier*" to borrow a phrase from the book and down another "rabbit hole" we go.

When we finally look at the clock, we wonder how much time we wasted!

However, to coin a phrase, "*Time you enjoy wasting is not wasted time*!"

This treatise is a fine example of "unwasted time" as by sheer coincidence, I came across a reference to the militia unit, the "Rocky Mountain Rangers". There was a short obscure reference to this militia unit being a precursor to the South Alberta Light Horse from Medicine Hat.

The name "Rocky Mountain Rangers" had a rather idyllic quality, like something out of a Western movie and the vague reference to Medicine Hat, naturally caught my attention. As I went down that "tunnel", I discovered that the Rocky Mountain Rangers have a distinct and genuine nexus to Medicine Hat and quite surprisingly, there is also an indisputable connection to the Riel Rebellion, or more often referred to as the North West Rebellion.

This rather strange link piqued my interest and as you can well imagine, I went "down another rabbit hole", and the end result, as you will see, adds another interesting chapter in the history of Medicine Hat.

**The "Real" Riel Rebellion**

Louis David Riel met his death on a scaffold in the North West Mounted Police Compound in Regina, North West Territories on November 16, 1885. The crime for which he was convicted and for which he was "hanged" was treason.

With the opening of the trap door of the gallows on that fateful day, another door was opened as scholars, historians and academics began to raise questions as to his innocence or guilt, whether or not he had a fair trial and perhaps most importantly, whether he was a traitor or a rather a "real" hero, who was championing a "just" cause on behalf of the Metis and Indigenous populations during those turbulent times in Western Canada.




Louis Riel and his Metis Associates -1884

The debate rages on to this day but the preponderance of evidence from intense academic study would strongly suggest that, at least in the eyes of these minority groups and open-minded citizens of this country, that he was unjustly convicted and that the sentence that was imposed was completely disproportionate to his involvement in the uprising.

The pleas of mercy expressed by the jurors that found him guilty, fell on deaf ears and were ignored.

To many he is a hero and an inspiration to others who have taken up the cause for equality and justice and for the liberation for the Metis from their past and concurrent difficulties.

Beyond that, I will let you be the judge!



Louis Riel-1885

One cannot, however, be completely oblivious to the circumstances of the times that led to that eventful day and the “fear” that engulfed Western Canada as a result of the Riel Rebellion, which no doubt in some considerable degree contributed to his fate.

It is with this backdrop and as a prelude to that fateful chapter in Canadian history, that the Rocky Mountain Rangers were formed and surprisingly as I found out, their unique connection to Medicine Hat.

Let me explain.

**The Enemy Within**

Newspapers throughout Canada carried frequent accounts of Indian and Metis unrest during the early months of 1885. However, it was the story of the Metis victory at Duck Lake on March 26, 1885 that electrified the nation. The North West Mounted Police had been defeated and the Canadian government responded immediately by dispatching a sizable militia force westward by the recently completed Canadian Pacific Railway. While the Canadian force was divided into three main columns, most of the public interest was focused on the activities of Major-General Middleton and his 800-member contingent, as it was their objective to attack Batoche, the headquarters of Riel's provisional government and defeat the "enemy within".

Many newspaper accounts from the east had previously described the western Canadian front as a lawless and dangerous frontier and despite the presence of the NWMP that the vast majority of the land was largely under protected.

In the book, "**Inspector F.J. Dickens of the North-West Mounted Police"** by David J Carter, the author provides a rare glimpse into the thoughts and feelings of the times by reproducing and documenting "Christmas letters" from Inspector Dickens to his family in England.

These letters provide a fascinating account, literally from the "frontlines" of the conflict. Carter reports that as early as 1876 that it was "tumultuous'' times and that there was a great deal of tension in the west.

*"The Great Plains of North America were in a state of tension in the wake of Chief Sitting Bull's massacre of George Custer and his cavalry in June at the battle of Little BigHorn in Montana Territory. It was not until the following year 1877 that Sitting Bull and Sioux followers would seek refuge in Canada, to the east of Fort Walsh at the Wood Mountain Post, where they would remain until 1882. "* (Dickens, p.11)

Only can only imagine the angst among the early inhabitants, white settlers and Metis alike in the area, not to mention the relatively small contingent of members of the NWMP, with the presence of the legendary Indian warrior and his 300 followers. Camped near the Cypress Hills, following the historic battle with the U.S. Army, considerable fear was evident as nobody was certain as to their intentions.

Dickens in his 1884 Christmas letter to his family reported that, "*throughout the land there has been thievery, threats of violence and even murder. It is a good thing that the Mounted Police are here but our resources are stretched far too thinly*"

Much of the apprehension was no doubt fuelled by the earlier events south of the border. But much had to do with the internal political, cultural, economic and social strife that both the Metis and the native Indian population was experiencing with the "settlement" of Western Canada.

It was hardly settling!

The disappearance of the plains buffalo combined with increasing population of "white" settlers led to a serious decline of their nomadic lifestyle that they enjoyed for centuries. Although the various Indian tribes had fought and squabbled for decades, the slow economic and social decline of their lifestyle led to increased tension among them as they contended for position and superiority in relation to the remaining most prized area-the Cypress Hills. This area long considered "special" place provided ample resources of game and wildlife and much needed protection during the harsh winter months. But it ability to accommodate the growing population of Indians migrating towards this unique "hunting ground" led to extreme discontent and social discord.

A much greater political upheaval further east from the Cypress Hills was brewing, as the Metis population as well became upset with the decline in their own nomadic lifestyle and the purported broken promises given to the by the Federal Government relating to self-government, financial assistance and related issues, which no longer seemed to be a priority down east.

This discontent led ultimately to the Riel Rebellion.

The Riel Rebellion had a significant effect on the entire country from B.C. to Nova Scotia and the conflict, although relatively short lived, nonetheless was considered by many to be Canada's own "civil war". It laid bare the deep divisions that existed between the "natives" and the predominantly white settlers, the French and English from east to west, including the sizable Metis population, which in the face of mounting frustration with the Federal Government and the perceived "broken" promises, "promises" that had been given to them as a by-product of the earlier Red River uprising of 1869.

There have been literally hundreds of books written regarding the details of the Rebellion, with many offering different and at times contradictory analysis of the circumstance giving rise to the conflict. Military experts have scrutinized the various battles between the Metis and the Indians and the Government Forces including the NWMP in painstaking detail. It is well beyond the scope of this dissertation to venture down this path but those interested or inclined to know more, should "read" a good book on the subject.

Essentially,[4] there were five significant battles or confrontations during the suppression of the insurrection in the West, which was led by Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont. The North West Field Force, which was composed primarily of members of the NWMP, was involved in four of them: Fish Creek, Cut Knife Hill, Batoche and Frenchman's Butte.

At Duck Lake, the skirmish was between the Metis and the North West Mounted Police, under Superintendent Crozier. One other major event occurred during the campaign-the Frog Lake Massacre, where whites and Metis in the community were killed and the remainder taken hostage by a renegade Cree band of insurgents led by their leader, Big Bear. Only the Battle of Batoche gave the Government Forces under the command of Colonel Middleton a decisive victory, which ended the insurrection.

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[4] The Battle of Batoche, Walter Hildebrandt Parks Canada, Winnipeg **http://iportal.usask.ca/docs/Prairie%20Forum/Battle%20of%20Batoche%20(v10no1**

The sole clear victory for the Metis came at Duck Lake. The other three conflicts, Fish Creek, Cut Knife Hill and Frenchman's Butte were all stand-offs in one form or another. At Fish Creek, the Metis retreated after an indecisive battle; at Cut Knife Hill, the Commander of the Government forces, withdrew pursuant to the resistance of another band of Crees led by Chief Poundmaker; and at Frenchman's Butte, Big Bear's Cree retreated from the barrage of fire into their defensive alignment, from the combined NWMP and militia forces.

**Fear of the Unknown**

"*The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown*"
**— H.P. Lovecraft**

Perhaps more significant than the battles which were fought, were those which were not. Although the newspapers of the time indicate that many "whites" feared reprisals from Indians during the Rebellion, very few took place. At Battleford, some five hundred men, Poundmaker's Cree allegedly besieged women and children in the North West Mounted Police fort, but the fort was not directly attacked, although the stores of the town, momentarily abandoned by a frightened population, were looted.

In Prince Albert, residents protected by the North West Mounted Police were not threatened by Indians or the Metis. Trouble was anticipated from the large number of Indians comprising the Blackfoot Confederacy, nearer Calgary, who were increasingly dissatisfied with the "reserve system" that had been implemented by the Government and their own litany of "broken promises".

Crowfoot, their war chief, had received an invitation from Riel to join the resistance, but he did not respond. The presence of the North West Mounted Police and the trust the Indians had was certainly partially responsible for their reluctance to participate alongside Riel. But it was

a “tinderbox” and it was generally considered that it would not take much to light the fuse.

In the months leading up to these battles, an armed uprising and a general attack by combined Indigenous and Metis forces was considered imminent and feared by many white settlers in the West, including inhabitants of Fort Macleod, Calgary and Medicine Hat.

As pointed out by one author, the conflict was not in a far off land or overseas across an ocean and nor was it a threat by some foreign power but a threat from within our borders and only “a few hundred miles down the river” from Medicine Hat.[5]

Innuendo and rumour together with a shortage of reliable information fuelled the panic that was in the air and when Riel had pressed his demands by the petition he had submitted to the Government under Prime Minister John A. MacDonald, the prospect of an armed revolt was not only anticipated but was also almost assured.

As we all know, by June 1883, the CPR had reached a point where a bridge was built across the South Saskatchewan and a large settlement that grew up around the construction site had continued to grow. In the spring of 1885 with clouds on the horizon, there were approximately 3,500 white[6] and Metis settlers in the district of Assiniboia while the Indigenous population was numbered at three or four times that amount. Medicine Hat itself had a population of men, women and children of approximately 750.

Of grave concern was the safety of the recently completed railway bridge across the South Saskatchewan River at Medicine Hat, which was considered a likely or probable target of the insurrection. The construction of the continental railway itself and this strategic crossing

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[5] “Rocky Mountain Rangers- Southern Alberta’s Cowboy Cavalry and the North West Rebellion-1885” by Gordon E. Tolton, Lethbridge Historical Society, Occasional Paper No. 28 (1994) p. 25

[6] “Century of Service, The History of the South Alberta Light Horse by Donald E. Graves p.28

in Southern Alberta was considered by at least some of the "dissidents" among the Indian and Metis population, as being the "root" cause of their declining lifestyle and the clear demonstrable evidence driving the momentum of the white settlers to "their" land.

"*The tensions that ultimately led to the outbreak of the rebellion had been simmering for more than a decade but were accelerated with the construction of the CPR.*" (Tolton, et al)

Lack of communication and misguided or exaggerated fears led to general unrest. (See, Appendix I, II and III)

The NWMP in March 1985 in anticipation of an armed conflict moved a considerable force of its members from the detachments in southern Alberta including Fort MacLeod, to the east into the area over which Riel claimed autonomy. This stretched the remaining contingent to its limit and the ability to maintain law and order was considered greatly compromised and the ability to resist an insurrection by the Force to the Blackfoot Confederacy or any other native or Metis marauders was considered a substantial risk.

**The Cowboy Calvary**[7]

Into the breech at least figuratively speaking "rode" Captain John O. Stewart, who proposed the establishment of a volunteer mounted militia unit, comprised of civilians, who were not unfamiliar with "guns" and "horses", to establish an armed presence and bring calm to the general population and to offer a valuable tactical resource in the event the conflict escalated.

John Stewart, a 31 year-old from Ottawa, Ontario had come out West in 1881 to found the Stewart Ranching Company near Pincher Creek. While in Ottawa and before coming out west, he had been an officer in

[7] This subtitle is graciously borrowed with permission from another later book by Gordon E Tolten entitled,"The Cowboy Cavalry"-The Story of the Rocky Mountain Rangers-2011.

an Ontario militia cavalry unit where he had established a solid reputation and political contacts at the highest level. While in Ottawa and while the insurrection was in its early stages and with a premonition of the imminent danger, he proposed to the Minister of the Militia the idea of establishing a mounted unit of 150 men from the ranch employees in Southern Alberta.[8] It was quickly approved by Ottawa!



Troop of Rocky Mountain Rangers, Medicine Hat (1885), L-R Captain John Stewart, Captain Gilpin Brown, unknown, Lord Boyle, his brother and Kootenai Brown. There are three unidentified men standing behind the RMR who were camped beside the Halifax Regiment on the 6 Ave Hill (now 4 Ave SE) above Medicine Hat

1885

Stewart returned to Pincher Creek and within 20 days, he was able to recruit from among the ranch hands and cowboys in the Pincher creek and Fort Macleod area, three troops of this "cowboy cavalry". As a precursor to his recruitment plan, he had insisted that "any nationality be accepted" knowing full well that many of the "cowboys" and ranch hands in the area were American, with even some being former members of the U.S. Army Cavalry.[9] Many of the new "recruits" were former members of the NWMP who had come out west and following

[8] Graves, p. 32

[9] It is reported that one member of the RMR had been a survivor of the massacre at Little BigHorn

their service stayed in the area and worked as “cowboys” or having received a 320-acre land script as a form of pension became ranchers in their own right.

By the last week of April 1885, the militia unit had raised a sufficient number of volunteers and they were ready for service. Given the close proximity to the nearby Rocky Mountains, it did not take long for them to quickly be known as the “Rocky Mountain Rangers”. (RMR)

A total of 13 Mounties became Rangers and 5 others who had been earlier Scouts for the NWMP. One of the scouts was the infamous to Kootenai Brown (John George Brown), who became a legendary figure in Western Canadian folklore.

Apart from the ability to ride and shoot, their first hand knowledge and the “lay” of the land of these members were vital and their ability and experience in dealing with the native population was invaluable. For these “recruits” their ability for tact and composure and being able to de-escalate tensions using common sense and diplomacy would prove to be critical.



One of the seasoned veterans of the NWMP, who after retirement had settled in the Pincher Creek area and who joined the Rangers was John Henry Gresham Bray, who later became a distinguished citizen of Medicine Hat.

Sergeant Major John Henry Gresham Bray[10], who had taken a voluntary discharge from the NWMP in 1883, took a land grant near Pincher Creek as in effect, a form "pension" from the Government.

His extensive military background combined with his experience as a member of the NWMP, was called upon to lead Troop # 3 of the Rocky Mountain Rangers

Although lacking in discipline and in other than basic military training and without any established common military uniform, they presented themselves, at least in appearance as a "motley" crew, but nonetheless was considered a formidable force- "a force to be reckoned with".

The combined troop ostensibly would have the task of guarding the 200-mile frontier between the Rocky Mountains to the west and Medicine Hat and the Cypress Hills to the east, parallel to the international boundary line and as far north as High River. The role was to protect the cattle herds from thieves and rustlers, both white and non-white intruders and from American Indians sneaking across the border, having regard to the now depleted ranks of the NWMP.[11]
While troops #3 and #4, were sent north to Calgary, troops #1 and #2 under the command of Major Stewart were sent east to Medicine Hat.

A newspaper account from May 1st 1885 offered the following description, as the continent of the Rocky Mountain Rangers rode out of Fort Macleod destined for Medicine Hat.

"*Composed of a particularly fine body of men, as they marched past armed to the teeth with Winchesters, and waist and cross belts jammed full of cartridges, there was but one opinion expressed regarding them, and that was that they would make it extremely unhealthy for several times their number of rebel half breeds or Indians should the occasion require"*[12]

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[10] In my article, "North of the Medicine Line" a considerable portion of the piece is devoted to the exploits of John Henry Gresham Bray
[11] The Cowboy Calvary by Gordon E Tolton 2011 p. 88
[12] Fort MacLeod Gazette May 2nd 1885

Another eastern newspaper account described their departure, in somewhat of a whimsical manner in this way-

*"Their tanned faces almost hidden beneath the brims of huge Mexican sombreros, strapped on for "grim death. Around many of their necks were silk handkerchiefs, which besides an embellishment prevented irritation by their coarse brown duck or "Montana" broadcloth coats.*
*Over pants of the same material were drawn a pair of "chaps"(leather overalls). Cross belts pregnant with cartridges, a "six shooter', sheath knife, a Winchester sling across the pommel of their saddle and a coiled lariat completed the belligerent outfit. Mounted on "broncos" good for 60 to 100 miles a day, they soon disappeared in the distance; a loud clanking of bits and jingling of their Mexican spurs now gave place to the rattling of transportation wagons."*



The Rocky Mountain Rangers arrival in Medicine Hat-May 3rd, 1885

Two days later, the Rocky Mountain Rangers with a full complement of 60 men and 10 officers rode into Medicine Hat, to the relief of the citizenry who had been digging rifle pits or trenches around the perimeter of the town in anticipation of the armed revolt and who had created their own haphazard form of militia or Home Guard, which

consisted of men, women and any children, who were capable of bearing arms.

The Home Guard was under the direction of Sgt. Robert McCutcheon[13], (1853-1943). He had joined the NWMP in 1875 at Cornwall, Ontario and came west with them to Fort Macleod and was later stationed at Fort Walsh and at Medicine Hat. He was one of the small group of NWMP that served with Superintendent James Walsh, who gallantly rode into the camp of Sitting Bull and his legion of warriors who crossed the border into Canada following the defeat of General George Custer at Little BigHorn, having been pursued by the U.S. Army Cavalry. Some reports indicate that Sgt. McCutcheon rode slightly ahead of the main NWMP contingent and that he was the first Mountie to dismount and greet Sitting Bull as he came out of his tepee. [14]

In addition to the coveted CPR Bridge across the South Saskatchewan River at the Hat, a 104-mile long narrow gauge railway was under construction between Medicine Hat and Coalbanks (now Lethbridge) to ultimately bring car loads of coal from that point to the nearest connection to the CPR line at Dunmore. In addition, a telegraph line was being constructed to link Medicine Hat with Fort Macleod in order to bring much needed communication to the area ranches. The railway crew and construction workers building both the telegraph line and railway had reached Bow Island going west and the apprehension and fear of being attacked brought another dimension of responsibility to the Rocky Mountain Rangers in addition to keeping a vigil over the Cypress Hills and the American border and looking for any malcontents 'itching' to get into the fighting [15].

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[13] Robert McCutcheon became a prominent businessman and local Medicine Hat politician and had a street named after him in Medicine Hat-McCutcheon Drive in Crescent Heights

[14] A Medicine Hat Newspaper article 01/12/2019 by Malcolm Sissons suggests that the earliest "resident" of Medicine Hat even before the arrival of the CPR was Robert McCutcheon who along with 22 others petitioned the Federal government to claim "title" to land they occupied in an area described as Medicine Hat Coulee which is believed by the writer to be present day Riverside. See, https://www.medicinehat.ca/home/showdocument?id=16035

[15] Tolten, "The Cowboy Cavalry" p.119

With available access to a telegraph at Medicine Hat, Stewart on his arrival sent a telegraph to his "boss'' the Minister of Defense and the Militia (Caron) in Ottawa, who he had prevailed upon earlier for the creation of the Rangers.

The message was curt and to the point.

"*Will render all possible protection to railwaymen and Medicine Hat. Indian quiet at MacLeod...left one hundred efficient Rangers as Home guards*."

Many in the Macleod/Pincher Creek area, quite understandably, had expressed the view that sending the RMR to Medicine Hat was a mistake and that it left the Pincher Creek/Fort MacLeod area particularly vulnerable to attack by the larger Indian population in their area and to the north towards Calgary.

In the first few weeks, unconfirmed reports of Indians moving north and west from the Cypress Hills put everyone on edge and many of the Rangers were spoiling for a fight with the Metis and Indians and were discontent with simply "guarding" railway construction workers and telegraph lines.

Some of the men left and returned home while others felt compelled to go to the "front lines" to the east, although it is uncertain if anyone made it there. One of the scouts named "Rattlesnake" Jack Robson was enlisted to find new recruits among the "cowboys" and ranch hands in the ranches near and around the Cypress Hills.

Some of those recruited from the area included:
Brothers Joseph and James Simmonds, William D Armstrong, Henry Haymes, Henry Hall, George Holt, John W. Little, Albert Martin, Alexander Gordon, Frederick Elliot, George Welch, Frederick Young, Joseph Purviance and James A Grant.[16]

[16] Tolten, "The Cowboy Calvary" p 126

One of the “Hat” Rangers was William McCord who had been an Indian agent on the Blood Reserve and who had become well acquainted with some of their leaders including Chief Red Crow.

Another, Frederick A.R. Mountain had been previously a member of the NWMP and later the British Columbia Provincial Police but for various reasons had come to Medicine Hat in 1882. With his experience, he was quickly promoted to Sergeant of the RMR.

The ranks of the Rocky Mountain Rangers in Medicine Hat swelled with new recruits, but their destiny with the future remained uncertain.



Rocky Mountain Ranger-Edward Barker

**We Were Here First….**

The Rocky Mountain Rangers under Major John Stewart continued the protection of the town and railway bridge and the construction crews to the west and continued regular patrols to the Cypress Hills, with scouts well familiar with the area. Some of these scouts were Metis, who like many of their compatriots further east, were followers of Riel and they too were depressed and disillusioned with their own plight. Recognizing the potential for them joining the fight and with some ingenuity, several of their leaders were put on the "payroll" as scouts for the Rangers and the NWMP in the area and with this alliance, the Rangers and the NWMP had 'their ears and eyes' well trained on the Cypress Hills, effectively thwarting any attempts to bring arms and ammunition or men from Montana north towards Riel's encampment.[17]

Reports filtered back to Medicine Hat of the fighting between the Government Forces and the men led by Riel and Dumont and the successes the Metis enjoyed and the setbacks to the military, which was a significant blow to the Canadian government. The fear was that if the Metis under Dumont and the rogue Chiefs of Poundmaker and Big Bear were to establish an alliance and draw in new allies, that this could pose a "real and present danger".

Newspaper accounts suggested that the Cypress Hills could end up being a rallying point where once established, they could hold out against all the troops Canada could muster and from that strategic vantage point, "swoop down on the settlements nearby and the cattle country and put the whole country on defence"[18]

Stewart, thinking ahead, was of the view that the likelihood or probability was a Metis defeat and that the insurrectionists like Dumont and Riel would likely try to escape through the Cypress Hills and unite with the Metis settlements in Montana, where they could easily blend in and be lost. Stewart, from his command post in Medicine Hat, offered a $1000 dollar reward for the capture of Riel, should he try to escape to the United States.

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[17] Tolten, The Cowboy Calvary p. 129

[18] Tolten, "The Cowboy Cavalry" as reported in the Macleod Gazette p.137

From the RMR headquarters in Medicine Hat, the long monotonous patrols now armed with a fresh monetary incentive, continued into the Cypress Hills and beyond, into the stark vast prairie to the west, and south to the Milk River ridge and beyond to the 49th parallel. These patrols seemed now to take on greater importance. With a greater sense of security, regular wagon trains of supplies from Fort Benton in Montana made their way up to Medicine Hat and then by rail on to Calgary.

Rangers regularly patrolled the streets of Medicine Hat, while not on reconnoitres beyond the town.

In the meantime, Stewart purposefully moved his Rangers upstream and across the river from the town site in order to maintain better discipline but some suggest that the move was more to keep the restless 'cowboys' from the bars and saloons that had sprung up in the Hat and other potential vagaries'.

Following the arrival of a regular army unit in the form of the Halifax Provisional Battalion, the battalion of 200 infantrymen from Nova Scotia were assigned to guard the railway, and members were deployed at Winnipeg Moose Jaw and Maple Creek to that end but the main body of the battalion was stationed at Medicine Hat.

One can only imagine the clash between east and west, with the Rangers in their makeshift, dusty and drab clothing and sombreros meeting these eastern military units in their pristine and colourful military uniforms.

It would, as one might expect, be a recipe for disaster.

With the arrival of the Halifax battalion, and the presence of the Rocky Mountain Rangers and the assembled Home Guards under the command of Captain Thomas Tweed and the watchful eye of Drill Sergeant McCutcheon and local businessman, William Cousins and Thomas Ireland[19], the town felt relatively secure, but nonetheless, it was reported that there was a CPR engine and several passenger cars always "stoked"[20] at the railway station, prepared and ready to evacuate the women and children away to safety on a moment's notice.




In addition, as word of the uprising progressed and fears of Indians being on the "warpath" continued, a local building called "Immigration Hall" in Medicine Hat was stocked with provisions and barricaded and the women and children were notified that they would all assemble at this location in the event any Indian attacks were imminent.[21]

[19] Thomas W Ireland, who established the Saskatchewan Brewery in Medicine Hat (1884) is observed (above) with two "Indian" patrons.

[20]Isabel Cousins Interview (1950), Historical Society of Medicine Hat and District, Esplanade Archives, Accession No. 2008.2.017

[21]Anna Buchanan Gillespie (wife of Manley Lorne Miller) Oral Interview,(1950) Historical Society of Medicine Hat and District, Esplanade Archives, Accession No. 2008 2.009

Another assembly point was the Saskatchewan Brewery, which was established in 1884 by Thomas W. Ireland but it is doubtful that much serious military strategy took place at this location.

Indians of all shapes and sizes were commonplace walking the streets of Medicine Hat, but seldom did they pose any threat or demonstrate aggression towards the townspeople.[22]




To assist in the effort to defeat the rebel forces of Louis Riel, ammunition and stores were loaded onto stern-wheelers docked on the south side of the CPR Bridge at Medicine Hat and then they steamed down the South Saskatchewan River to Batoche and Battleford to provide vital supplies to the Government forces.

[22]Margaret Ireland, daughter of Thomas W. Ireland Oral Interview (1951) Historical Society of Medicine Hat and District, Esplanade Archives, Accession No. 2008 2.012



A local “gathering” at the Saskatchewan Brewery in Medicine Hat. Circa 1885[23]

With the arrival of the Halifax Battalion, a conflict of a different sort arose between the Rangers and the “rank and file” of the men in uniform. With the arrival of the Nova Scotia military unit, the Commander of the “Easterners”, Colonel James Bremner noticed a battery of military tents across the river and enquired as to the nature of the ‘Cavalry troop’ and who was their commanding officer.

The local postmaster and businessman Thomas Tweed advised that the unit was a newly formed militia unit under the Command of Major John Stewart.

[23] An interesting and diverse group Rocky Mountain Rangers and Mounties that were in Medicine Hat many in anticipation of hostilities in relation to the Riel Rebellion. Kootenai Brown (John George Brown), a Rocky Mountain Ranger, is the man at centre (sitting) and Thomas W. Ireland is observed pouring some beer into a glass.

Colonel Bremner, being of a superior military rank, felt that it was incumbent on Major Stewart to report to him.

Stewart, on the other hand, not being apprised in advance of the arrival of the Halifax battalion and not being fully informed of their respective roles was taken aback by the challenge to his authority and rather than submitting to his authority, simply ignored the Colonel's enquiry, taking the position that "we were here first'! [24]




Halifax Battalion-Medicine Hat

For a number of weeks, there was a "Mexican stand-off" between the two military men but a tragic accident occurred which brought them together and led to a mutual understanding of their respective roles and a commitment for cooperation.

The circumstance that brought them together occurred when two Nova Scotia soldiers, while bathing in the South Saskatchewan River near the railway bridge in early May were caught in an undertow and drowned. The incident brought the two rivals together in a regretful and

[24] Tolten, p. 138

unfortunate circumstance as the two young men were buried in the town, with full military honours.




A collection of Medicine Hat NWMP and Rocky Mountain Rangers and Members of the Halifax Battalion (left side) and some local citizens.




The Rocky Mountain Rangers in their typical “sombreros” and members of the Halifax Battalion in “happier” times. Circa 1885



Major John O. Stewart, Commander of the Rocky Mountain Rangers

## The Battle at Batoche

In the meantime, following the defeat at Frog Lake, the combined forces of the NWMP and other militia units and the regular army under the command of General Middleton began to mass a force near Batoche and began mapping a strategy, gathering supplies and ammunition. Dumont, on the other hand, began fortifying the town, boarding windows and digging camouflaged rifle pits in anticipation of the offensive. Middleton assembled a number of artillery pieces and introduced new weaponry from the American allies-a Gatling gun.

Severely unnumbered and noticeably outgunned, Riel through his messengers appealed for aid and assistance. A dispute arose between Riel and Dumont as to the manner or way in which they should continue their campaign. Riel was advocating a peaceful resolution and a negotiated settlement. Dumont proposed an all out military attack using "pre-emptive guerrilla–style strikes" as opposed to a traditional military attack. Riel, as a compromise, begged Dumont to wage a "civilized" war.[25] Dumont relented, knowing full well that absent support from Poundmaker and Big Bear and their rogue warriors that the outcome was predictable.

As the artillery moved into place and as the Gatling guns began firing, Dumont in a last ditch effort set prairie fires to disorient and hide his men from the onslaught of military might. For three days, the 200 Metis kept the superior Canadian forces at bay with each side holding its ground.

On the fourth day, an overzealous Commander of one of the Canadian battalions seemingly ignoring Middleton's conservative battle strategy launched a full frontal assault and the sheer number of men overwhelmed the rifle pits and the infantry quickly breached the Metis defences and entered the town of Batoche. Within hours the battle was over and as nightfall fell, the remaining fighters were rounded up.

In the melee, both Gabriel Dumont and Louis Riel had escaped.

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[25] Tolten, p.139

Within a few days, Riel alone, hungry and disorientated and on foot, wandered into two scouts from a militia unit and he was taken into custody.

He was surreptitiously brought through the military lines and presented personally to General Middleton where he offered his hand in surrender.



Gabriel Dumont

The rest as they say, is history as Riel was tried and convicted of treason and hanged.

Gabriel Dumont along with a fellow Metis named Michael Dumas, having no intention of surrendering or being captured, took off towards the Cypress Hills en route to the U.S. border and across into the sanctity of the United States, where a far better fate awaited them. Dumas as an experienced Metis hunter was well familiar with the Cypress Hills and was knowledgeable of the available escape routes and being well known and respected in the Metis “brethren” along the way received comfort, aid and assistance.

Back in Medicine Hat, Major Stewart received word of Riels capture and surrender and the escape of his Adjutant General Dumont and he sent a "dispatch" that the Rocky Mountain Rangers were on patrol and covering every possible trail to the south through the Cypress Hills and that they were on the lookout. He expressed concern and was fearful that Poundmaker and Big Bear and their Indian allies may be intent upon going south to the region and that "*speedy arrangements of troops with scouts & artillery is immediately necessary to prevent lodgement in the Cypress Hills*". Notwithstanding a valiant effort by the RMR, both Dumas and Dumont slipped through their "dragnet" and went across the border.

Both surrendered themselves to the U.S. Army at Fort Assiniboia and were granted asylum by the United States Government. After much diplomatic turmoil, both were released under an order from President of the United States, Grover Clevland. Following a general amnesty to the participants in the Rebellion issued by the Federal Government several years later, Gabriel Dumont returned to Canada and for a while went on a "speaking tour" being completely unapologetic for his role in the uprising that was clearly one of the darkest chapters in Canadian history.




He later farmed a small plot of land in Saskatchewan and continued to hunt and fish.

Unlike the fate of his "comrade in arms", Gabriel Dumont died peacefully in his sleep from heart failure at the age of 68 years on May 19th, 1906 at Batoche.

Ironically, this was the site of the final battle of the Riel Rebellion.




Louis Riel Trial, Regina, Saskatchewan Back row, L-R: Louis Napoleon Blache; Reverend Father Louis Cochin; Superintendent R. Burton Deane; Reverend Father Alexis Andre; Beverly Robertson (interpreter). Front row, L-R: Horse Child (youngest son of Big Bear); Big Bear; Alex D. Stewart (chief of police, Hamilton); Poundmaker. Aboriginals holding pipes issued as inducement to pose. Library and Archives Canada number C1872.

**Old Soldiers Never Die….**

"Old soldiers never die; they just fade away." **—Douglas Macarthur**

With the quelling of the insurrection and later, the capture of Big Bear and Poundmaker, the threat to Medicine Hat and southern Alberta and the attendant "fear" quickly evaporated. The dramatic events around Batoche and the defeat of the small Indian uprising were quickly communicated to the Blackfoot Confederacy and the Blackfoot, Blood and Peigan bands to "foreclose out" any thoughts of their own armed insurgency.

Throughout the months of June 1885, the Rocky Mountain Rangers continued their general patrols and carried out policing duties in the absence of a full NWMP complement of men.

With Riel, Poundmaker and Big Bear in prison and Dumont in exile in the U.S., the so-called "North-West Rebellion" was declared at an end on July 2nd 1885.

In the interim, Major Stewart felt a compulsion to endeavor to retain the Rocky Mountain Rangers as a permanent active military unit and petitioned the Militia and Defense Minister in Ottawa accordingly. He boarded a train to Winnipeg, where he sought out a meeting with General Middleton to advance this cause.

With the absence of any credible threat, the Rocky Mountain Rangers were ordered to leave Medicine Hat and return to Fort Macleod on July 2nd, 1885, where the troop would, absent a miracle, be disbanded. The full contingent of the Rocky Mountain Rangers, absent their leader, arrived in Fort MacLeod on July 8th to a "hero's welcome" including an artillery salute.

Major Stewart returned to Fort MacLeod, a few days later and despite intense lobbying, he had failed in his mission to create a permanent military force, much of the decision based upon financial considerations.

It was the only battle as commander of the Rocky Mountain Rangers that Major John O. Stewart had lost.

On July 17th, 1885 the Minister of Defence and the Militia, (A. Caron) directed the discharge and release from service of all the special units organized for the North-West rebellion including the Rocky Mountain Rangers.

As Southern Alberta returned to normal, the Rangers slowly returned themselves to the lives they had previously enjoyed, taking with them the honour of having served their country in the noblest of causes, the defence of the country and the preservation and security of the Dominion of Canada.

**William J Anhorn K.C ICD.D**

## Epilogue

John Stewart was born in Ottawa, Ontario in 1854 and was a member of a prominent Ottawa family and at a young age distinguished himself as an able and ambitious military man. He organized and was the commanding officer of the Princess Louise[26] Dragoon Guards and became well known to the Governor General of Canada, and the Prime Minister in the early 1870's. He came out West in 1881 and established the Stewart Ranch near Pincher Creek along with John Herron. Herron himself was a member of the RMR commanding the 2nd troop that went north to Calgary. In addition to the ranch, Stewart built a fine residence, (a now historic residence) in Calgary, which was completed in 1885 and in anticipation of the railway going through Calgary acquired a sizable land holding east of the Elbow River. He became a celebrated citizen of Calgary and community leader and prominent businessman. He was instrumental in establishing a coal miner at Castle Mountain near Banff/Canmore. But of course, he is best known as the founder of the Rocky Mountain Rangers in response to the North-West Rebellion. He married Isabel Skead, who was the daughter of a successful lumber merchant and prominent politician James Skead in Ottawa in 1887.

[26] **Lake Louise** is named after the Princess **Louise** Caroline Alberta (1848–1939), the fourth daughter of Queen Victoria and the wife of the Marquis of Lorne, who was the Governor General of Canada from 1878 to 1883.

Following their marriage they both returned to Calgary, where they resided in the gothic style home on the Bow River, which still stands today.[27] He died suddenly in Calgary in 1893 and following a short service there, his body was shipped back east by train to Ottawa and he was buried in the Beechwood Cemetery in Ottawa, Ontario. He was 39 years of age.

As a final tribute, Major Stewart was instrumental in again "lobbying" the Government on behalf of the Rangers and convincing them to offer a Rebellion script to each member of the Rocky Mountain Rangers. In recognition for their service, each Ranger was eligible to receive either an $80 bonus or 320 acres of homestead land. Most took the land offer and many stayed in Southern Alberta and became farmers and small ranchers.

As a further legacy, all those who participated in the North-West Rebellion received a specialty minted medal-"the North-West Medal". It became a prized symbol of "honor", which was worn with pride and it was quite unique as, unlike many other military medals, each name of the recipient was inscribed on the medal-as a lasting tribute to their service.

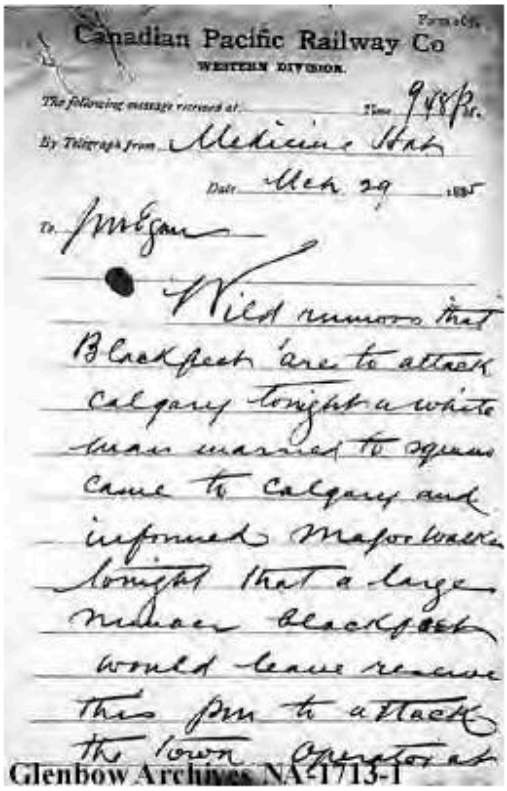


North West Canada Medal

[27] Tolten, "The Rocky Mountain Rangers" p 83

## APPENDIX I

Riel Rebellion telegram from C. Shields in Medicine Hat, Alberta to J. M. Egan.



Canadian Pacific Railway Co
WESTERN DIVISION.

The following message received at ... Time 9.48 P.M.

By Telegraph from Medicine Hat

Date Mch 29 1885

To J M Egan

Wild rumours that Blackfeet are to attack Calgary tonight a white man married to Squaw came to Calgary and informed Major Walker tonight that a large number Blackfeet would leave reserve this pm to attack the town Operator at

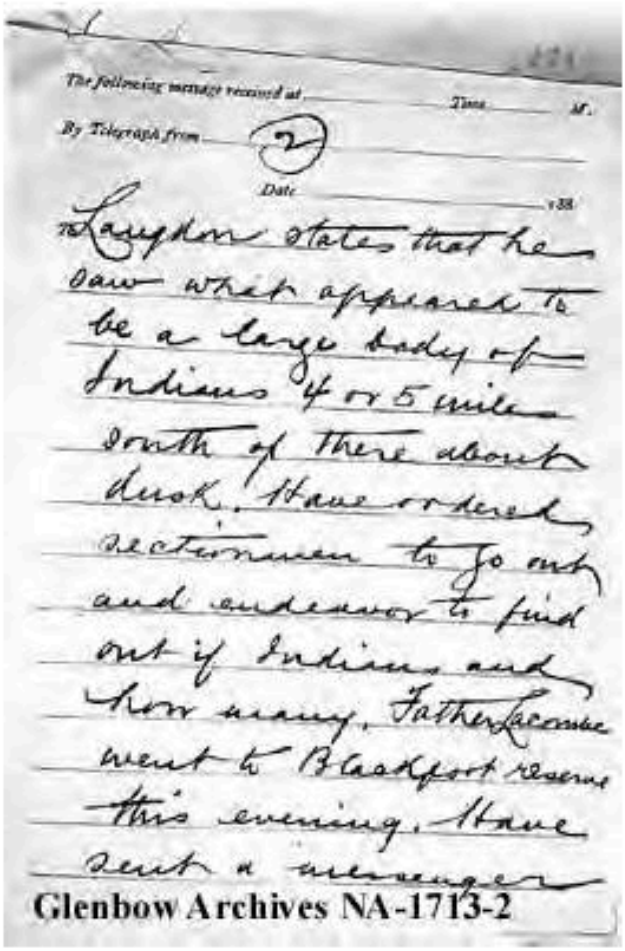
Glenbow Archives NA-1713-1

**29/03/1885**

**"Wild rumours that Blackfeet are to attack Calgary tonight…a large number of Blackfoot would leave reservation this pm to attack town…. "**

## APPENDIX II

**Riel Rebellion telegram, written from Medicine Hat.**



The following message received at _____ Time _____ M.

By Telegraph from 2

Date _____ 188

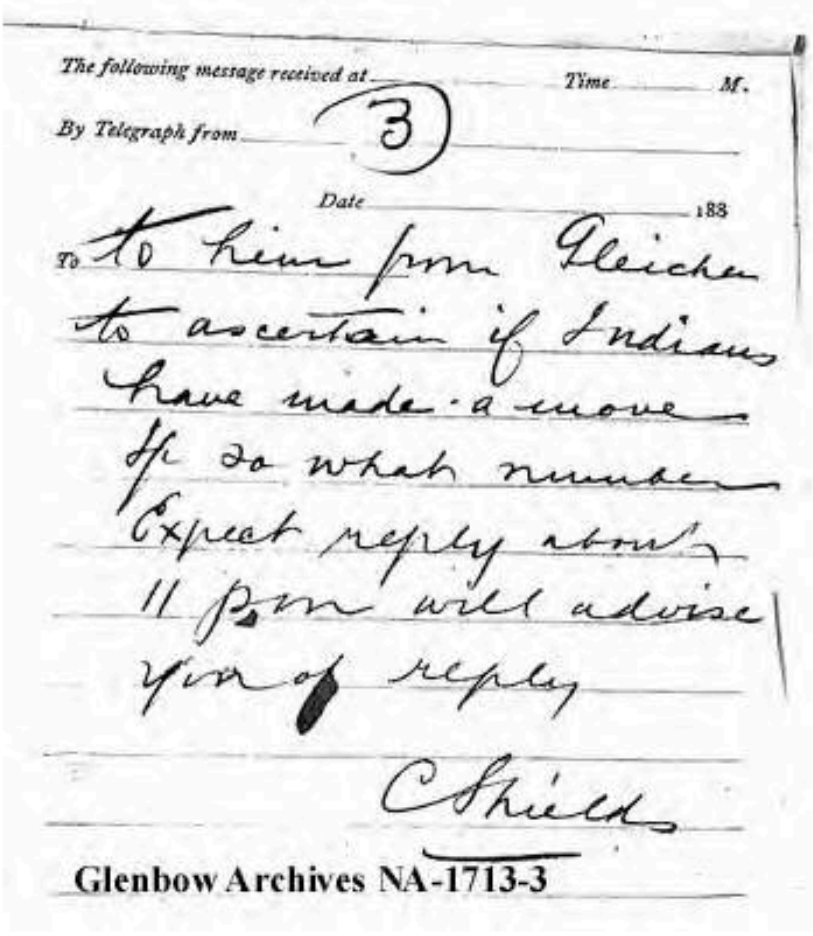
Langdon states that he saw what appeared to be a large body of Indians 4 or 5 miles south of there about dusk. Have ordered Dectionnaen to go out and endeavor to find out if Indians and how many. Father Lacombe went to Blackfoot reserve this evening. Have sent a messenger

Glenbow Archives NA-1713-2

**"The operator at Langdon states that they saw …a large number of Indians 4 or 5 miles south…Have sent a messenger…."**

## APPENDIX III

### Riel Rebellion telegram, written from Medicine Hat.



The following message received at _____ Time _____ M.

By Telegraph from 3

Date _____ 188

To to him from Gleichen to ascertain if Indians have made a move If so what numbers Expect reply about 11 pm will advise you of reply

C Shields

Glenbow Archives NA-1713-3

**…. to him from Gleichen to ascertain if Indians have made a move. If so, what numbers….”**