

Trails, truth and tourism: Manitoba's Red Coat Trail

Lesley Gaudry, University of Winnipeg

Abstract: An enduring problem in heritage tourism is the maintenance of authenticity. Organizations responsible for maintaining standards at historic sites seldom accept replication of historic artifacts as desirable. The resource must be original. This challenge is one that the Manitoba Historic Resources Branch and the private sector dealt with in the early 1980's, when the Red Coat Trail Association attempted to promote a highway route from Winnipeg, Manitoba to Fort MacLeod, Alberta, as the "Red Coat Trail". This "trail" purported to trace the route taken by the North West Mounted Police in 1874 on its trek westwards to Alberta.

Heritage purists challenged this notion of authenticity. The North West Mounted Police's path ran some hundred kilometers from the proposed Red Coat Trail. This paper traces the conflict between tourism promoters and heritage interests. It questions the relevance of the trail concept to automobile tourism and argues that a trail's unique potential cannot be fulfilled without involvement of all the senses. Only the visual is significant in windshield sightseeing.

Key words: *Trails, Tourism, Red Coat Trail, Manitoba, Tourism Developers, Heritage Purists, North West Mounted Police*

Introduction

There has been a substantial increase in the tourism industry in the past decade to make it one of the world's leading industries. The overall increase in tourism has led to more individuals seeking not only "4 S" tourism (sun, sand, sea and sex), but also an experience based upon "intrinsic assets of our past" (Cossons 1989, 192; Howell 1994, 150; and Nuryanti 1996, 249). Heritage attractions, including heritage trails, are rapidly emerging as a large component of the Canadian tourism industry. The increased interest in heritage tourism and outdoor recreation has ultimately influenced the emergence of heritage trails (Ledohowski 1998,

202). Despite this increasing trend, little research has been conducted on the nature of heritage trails (and trails in general) to explore their functions, primary users, and their utility for the tourism market.

The Functions of Trails

What purpose do trails serve and why do they emerge? Trails have been built for various reasons in the past, but one can better understand their potential for tourism if their functions are explored. Trails often serve more than one function, but some general trends can be identified. There are five principal functions that trails may serve: (1) utilitarian use, (2) recreational use, (3) to provide access to the aesthetic beauty of a specific area, (4) to cater to a particular mode of transportation, and lastly (5) for development. The last three trail functions listed perhaps have the strongest ties to tourism.

The *first* function of a trail is related to its utilitarian purpose. The utilitarian trail is developed for a specific, practical purpose. An example of a modern utilitarian trail is a trail used exclusively by cyclists. Cycling paths are now being used, particularly in urban settings, as a means of commuting to and from work. The *second* function of a trail is to provide an opportunity for recreation. The recreational trail's purpose is to meet the recreational needs of local residents in the community rather than to attract tourists. Recreational trails were developed as a response to the industrial revolution, when urban areas lacked space for recreational use (Kulczycki). The historic notion of greenways in urban areas may be paralleled with recreational trails. Examples of recreational trails are walking trails, recreational bike trails or cross-country ski trails. A recreational trail is often promoted as a multi-use trail that caters to various recreational interests. Its use may vary from season to season.

A *third* function of a trail is to provide access to the aesthetic beauty of a specific area, either *natural* or *human made*. The *natural* aesthetic beauty of a surrounding environment may include a trail where there is a unique geographical formation such as at the Giant's Causeway located in Northern Ireland. The *human made* aesthetically beautiful area may include a unique cultural resource. An example of a trail that leads to a scenic *human made* environment is the Inca Trail that leads to Machu Picchu in Peru. This trail gives the public access to the beauty and exquisite architecture of ancient Inca structures situated in the Andean Mountains. Local residents may use this type of trail; however, the trail's main function is frequently to draw tourists.

The *fourth* function of a trail is to serve as an attraction for a particular transport mode in the appropriate ideal setting. The motor trail networks that were completed in the 1920's permitted many individuals to explore the Western Frontier and "trail blaze" in their new automobiles (Ackerman 1993, 10). A more recent example of this type of trail is the snowmobile trail. Snowmobiles, which were originally simply a mode of transportation, have increased significantly as a recreational vehicle. Trails developed for a particular mode of transportation can be graded from easy to difficult thereby making them desirable for different skill levels.

The *final* function that a trail may serve is development. Trails used for development may function as catalysts for economic growth, urban redevelopment, beautification, and/or heritage preservation. These types of trails are often designed as multi-use trails so that they may attract a larger number of visitors and generate economic wealth. They may exist in the form of rail trails or heritage trails. Heritage trails are pathways designed to increase the understanding of the natural or cultural heritage of a community. They often present only a selective geography of a city or community and its heritage resources. They range from routes that exist only on paper and can be traced out with the aid of guidebooks to physical entities with pavement treatments, interpretive signs and community and public art (Alexander and McKenzie 1999, 23).

Exploring the various functions of trails allows one to understand their diverse nature and the roles they play in tourism. Local residents and tourists use many trails, despite their function. Trails used for recreational purposes are more homogenous in nature and are commonly found in various locations. Trails used more for tourism development possess a unique characteristic or attraction that cannot be found elsewhere. This "uniqueness" is the key for attracting tourists from further afield.

Trail User's Attachment to the Land

The trail user's attachment to the land is a significant factor to explore when attempting to understand the nature of trails for tourism. A user's attachment to the land refers to one's personal relationship with the landscape through which the trail passes. A tourist's relationship with the landscape may range from connected and fulfilling to distant and abstract. One can gain a better understanding of the user's motivations when the user's attachment to the land is explored. The mode of transportation may also influence the trail user's attachment to the land, which may be listed at three intensities; low intensity, moderate intensity and high intensity (Figure 1).

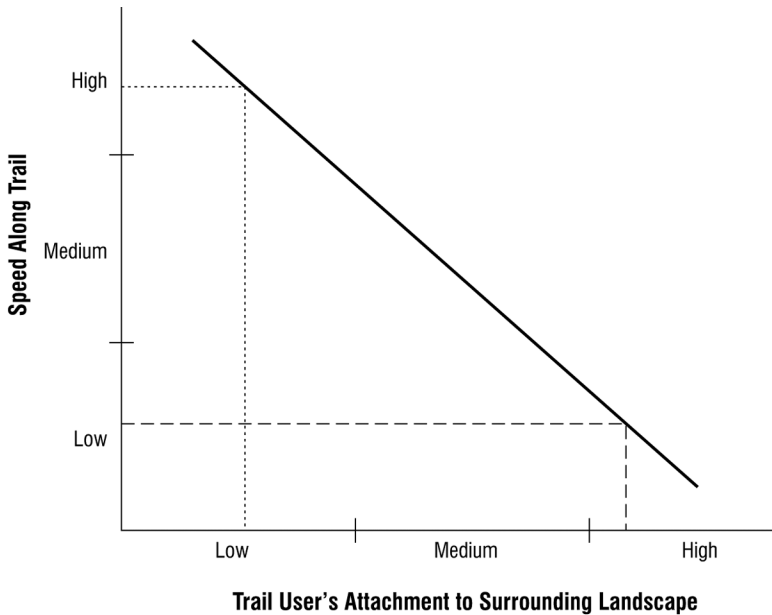


Figure 1: Trail user's attachment to the landscape.

The first level, the low attachment level, is characterized by trails where the mode of transportation is motorized and fast such as a motor road network or a snowmobile trail. It is not of primary importance for the users of these types of trails to experience the natural beauty of the surrounding landscape. They are primarily using trails to participate in a recreational activity such as “trail blazing” or snowmobiling where there is a high rate of speed. Users with a low level of attachment may also be classified as individuals who are seeking the quickest route to a particular destination.

The second level of user attachment to the land is moderate. This level may be characterized by an integration of two different types of trails, those that serve a function for a particular mode of transportation combined with an aesthetic function. The user is more connected to the landscape than in the low level. Bicycle trails and horseback riding trails may be characterized as medium level trails. Horseback riders maintain a moderate level of attachment to the land as the horse reacts directly to the environment and the rider reacts to the horse, using the natural instincts of the horse to “read” the land. The riders are somewhat physically and emotionally removed from the land as “the horse provides a barrier between the land and the human participant” (Beeton 1999, 212).

The final level of attachment to the land is high. The high attachment level may be characterized by trails such as hiking or cross country ski trails. Users of these types of trails are extremely attached to the land, as the rate of speed is slower than the two previous levels. Users that participate in trails of high attachment are seeking a full aesthetic and sensual experience as they use the trail. They are able to physically feel, see, hear and smell their environment to an extent greater than the two lower levels. Hiking is a popular tourist (and recreational) activity, in the high level of attachment, not only because it gives people a rich sensory experience of their surroundings but also because it is affordable.

Trails play a significant role in the tourism field, because they are so varied and potentially versatile. However, they are not without challenges, as there are often conflicts between the users and the landowners. Trail operators may also experience management challenges that increase according to the number of stakeholders involved in the planning and management process. The Red Coat Trail in Manitoba has experienced management difficulties due to heritage purists and tourism developers competing for the designation of the Red Coat Trail on different highway networks.

A Heritage Trail in Manitoba: The Red Coat Highway Trail

Heritage trails, as tools for development, are not limited to urban settings or walking paths. They may emerge in rural landscapes on highway routes such as the Red Coat Trail that runs from Winnipeg, Manitoba to Fort MacLeod, Alberta. The Red Coat Trail follows provincial highway networks that link the three “Prairie Provinces”, thus commemorating the history of the North West Mounted Police and the epic March West that they took in the summer of 1874.¹

The Red Coat Trail, along Manitoba’s Provincial Highway Number Two (P.T.H. #2), was designated with the intent of stimulating economic activity and tourism south of the Trans Canada Highway (Figure 2).

The effort to commemorate and designate this heritage trail for tourism development caused tension between various parties, particularly within the province of Manitoba. The development process was characterized by conflict for eleven years before an outcome was reached. Many groups in favour of the designation (the Red Coat Trail Highway Association and local tourism developers), as well as those who opposed it (The Boundary Commission/North West Mounted Police Trail Association, the Manitoba Historical Society, the Manitoba Historic Resources Branch and local heritage purists), lobbied the Manitoba government with letters, articles, meetings, and public rallies through changes in government and ministers.

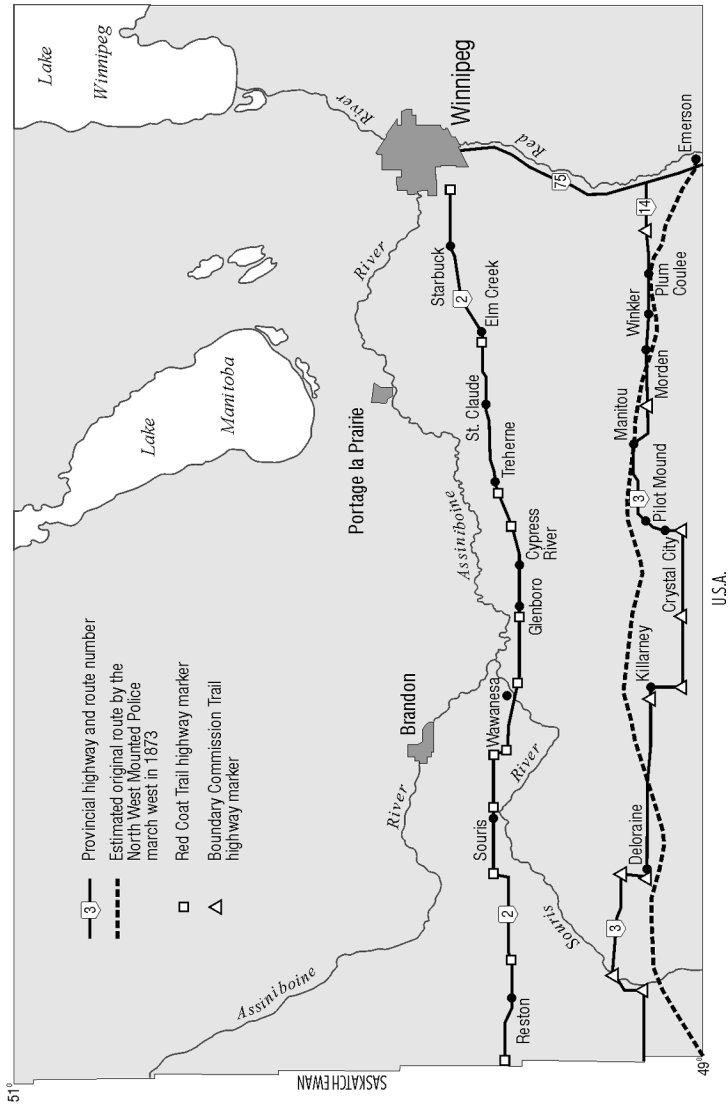


Figure 2: The Red Coat and Boundary Commission Trails, Manitoba

On 25 June 1993, after a decade long struggle, P.T.H. #2 was officially designated the Red Coat Trail (Manitoba Government News Release 2 November 1993).

From a tourism developer's perspective, the designation of the Red Coat Trail was a victory, but the heritage purists believed that it lent no credibility to the Manitoba government, and was not a "sane" decision (Crawford 1993). Local heritage groups, the Boundary Commission/North West Mounted Police Trail Association and various historians stressed that designating P. T. H. #2 as the commemorative trail of the North West Mounted Police, was inaccurate and a distortion of history. The North West Mounted Police's authentic path ran some hundred kilometers from P.T.H. #2.

Developing heritage trails for tourism is a dynamic and integrative process. There are numerous challenges associated with commemorating past events and increasing commercial activity. There are many factors to consider in "building" a tourist trail that will be effective, informative and entertaining. The Red Coat Trail development process did accomplish one task- an increased awareness of the North West Mounted Police's role in the development of the West. However, the Red Coat Trail tourism initiative was less successful as a tourism corridor because of the difficulties surrounding its designation and the highway trail's limited use. After analyzing the Red Coat Trail Case Study, there are three key issues that would need to be addressed for the Red Coat Trail (and a heritage trail in general) to be a successful and effective tourism initiative: 1) full cooperation and participation from all the parties that have a vested interest in the heritage trail, 2) an integrative trail network, and lastly 3) the promotion of a comprehensive, authentic and sincere heritage experience. Without these, a heritage trail such as the Red Coat Trail will remain a valuable but under-recognized heritage resource.

Cooperation and Participation

For a successful heritage trail tourism initiative, it is crucial to have the cooperation and participation of all parties involved. A heritage trail may cover a significant distance in the landscape and have multiple functions. Indeed, the longer the trail and the more functions it has, the greater is its potential to draw interested parties into controversy. If the Red Coat Trail were re-marketed it would be profitable for the tourism developers and the heritage purists to work together in a collaborative manner in commemorating the history of the Canadian Prairies. If the

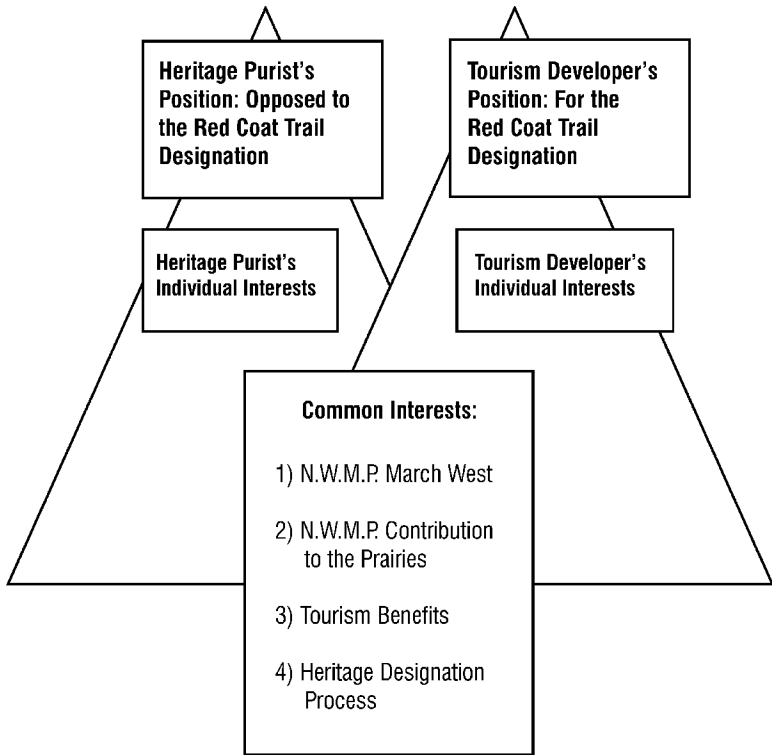


Figure 3: The space for cooperation and participation.

competing interest groups focused on their common interests rather than their competing positions, it would create a potential space where all parties could cooperate and participate in promoting an authentic, effective and entertaining heritage trail (Figure 3).

These interests could include the retelling of the North West Mounted Police trek westward and their contributions in developing the North West Territories. Discussing the potential for tourism in commemorative events as well as the difficulties associated with heritage designation could also be of benefit.

As of October 2001, the Red Coat Trail was still no more than a designated highway route with the occasional restaurant dedicated to the theme. The Red Coat Trail Highway Association is lacking organization and no physical work has been done to the trail by the association or government. There has been a loss of interest in the Red Coat Trail designation issue and its promotion. The popularity of the Red Coat Trail,

particularly in sections of western Saskatchewan and eastern Alberta, has dwindled due to deteriorating road conditions. Unless one has a half-ton truck or four wheel drive, some sections of the Red Coat Trail should be avoided. It is unfortunate that a decade of effort to establish an inter-provincial tourism corridor has not been more productive.

An Integrative Trail Network

In order to expand the possibilities of the Red Coat Trail, an integrative trail network would be extremely beneficial. A three-tiered trail network would make this heritage trail more flexible to accommodate a wider range of users and could integrate community heritage initiatives, natural features and attractions, and tourism-related commercial services into a “single easily identifiable package” (Ledohowski 1988, 222). If the Boundary Commission Heritage Region expanded to include all the different types of highway routes and the efforts of interested parties, the tourist could enjoy a variety of alternatives in one “identifiable package”. An example of such a project located in the Appalachian Mountains, is the Cherokee Heritage Trails. These include highways, gravel roads through national forests, walking trails, and “original” trails with wagon ruts used in the Trail of Tears to remove Cherokee people from the Southeast United States to Indian Territory (which is now Oklahoma) (Duncan 2002).

The three-tiered trail network, for the Red Coat Trail, could include promoting a heritage highway on a primary route such as P.T.H. #2 or #3. This would allow passing tourists with limited time to sample the Red Coat Trail region without going off the beaten track. The secondary regional route could traverse individual localities connecting with particular communities and municipalities located off the primary route (Ledohowski 1988, 223). These could employ dirt roads or gravel roads that are situated closer to the Boundary Commission/North West Mounted Police trail. Lastly, a tertiary route would be a local heritage route that would proceed from the regional trail system. The tertiary route would encompass the actual B.C./N.W.M.P. trail, be promoted as the *authentic* N.W.M.P. route, and offer tourists an opportunity to get closer to the prairie landscape.

The three-tiered trail network may be added to the trail user’s graph, as it directly corresponds to issues of mode of transportation and user attachment to the land (Figure 4).

The three-tiered trail network offers a more integrative approach for trail use as one may follow the primary route with high speed of transport and a low attachment to the land. Alternatively, users may choose to follow

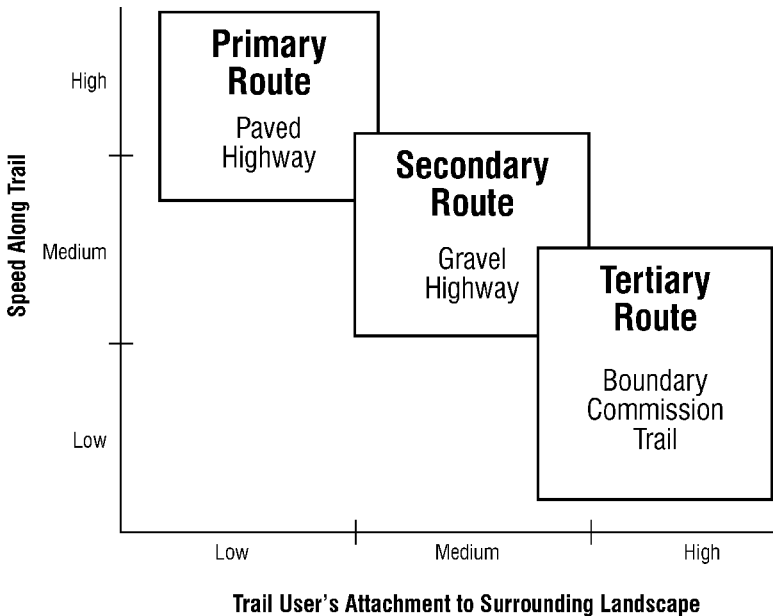


Figure 4: Trail user framework.

a secondary route with a moderate speed of transport, and medium attachment to the land. Or, an individual tourist may choose to follow the tertiary route, the B.C./N.W.M.P. trail with slow speed transport and high attachment to the land. Unique aspects of this integrative trail network are its flexibility and the presence of a tertiary route. The tertiary route is extremely significant because it encourages the tourist to have a high attachment to the land and follow the authentic trail.

Since the tourist's attachment to the land is extremely low when traveling in a vehicle, it is questionable whether promoting auto-tourism is an effective technique. Can commemorating a highway authentically and effectively develop a heritage trail's unique potential? Central to North American tourism is the car, the highway, and the view through the windshield and the commercial strip (Urry 1990, 6). The background noise from the radio, air conditioning, and combustion engine in American cars insulate the passenger from almost all aspects of the trail environment except for the view through the windshield. The automobile acts as a barrier that separates the traveler from the environment. Tourists who travel a primary route in a vehicle are frequently only sightseeing. They do not hear, touch, taste or smell most of the outside environment, reducing their experience of the world to a one-dimensional experience. Relying solely

on a one-dimensional experience to promote heritage trails would be unfortunate, because environments such as the prairies cannot be fully experienced from within a cocoon. An actual experience of the prairies is composed of whole complexes of visual, auditory, and olfactory sensations, present circumstances and purposes, past experiences and associations (Relph 1976, 29).

Speed has become a convenience that most North Americans cannot live without, but high speed detracts from a tourist's ability to develop a relationship with the landscape. Low speed and high user attachment, can equate to a "romantic gaze" in which the emphasis is upon solitude, privacy and a personal, semi-spiritual relationship with the land (Urry 1990, 45). The spirit of a place lies in its landscape (Relph 1976, 31); thus the more time spent in the landscape, the greater the potential to become attached to it- or detached from it, if one dislikes it.

A Comprehensive, Authentic and Sincere Heritage Experience

The final key to having a successful heritage trail is the promotion of a comprehensive, authentic and sincere heritage experience. It is possible for tourism developers to distort local heritage and events to suit standardized mass tourism. This standardization encourages a homogenization of local communities, and is frequently illustrated in landscapes of tourism (Relph 1976, 93). If every community along a heritage trail develops the same characteristics, the tourism landscape would lose its "distinctiveness", that is, the ambiguities and complexities that initially made the place interesting (Relph 1976, 93).

To counter this homogenization, heritage trail developers should market heritage experiences involving conflict, misery, and social differences, as they are saleable items that attract tourists. Various communities along the B.C./N.W.M.P Route and the Red Coat Trail could market different experiences such as the whiskey trade, lawlessness in the West, prostitution, and the socio-cultural relations with the native peoples. This is not to say that these characteristics should be the main focus of the Red Coat Trail experience; however, they should be present in the commodified package. It would also be beneficial to include more of the indigenous people's perspective of the development of the West and the impact of the North West Mounted Police on aboriginal families and communities.

Conclusion

The Red Coat Trail proved to be a creative initiative to stimulate tourism and commercial activity in the southern region of Manitoba. However, ten years of debate between various parties, its inaccurate designation, the use of a highway corridor, and a limited interpretation of history ultimately compromised this heritage trail's potential. Despite the complex nature of heritage trails, they are popular tools for development as they are extremely versatile. Because of the flexibility in their function, the trails may serve as catalysts for urban or rural revitalization, commemoration, preservation, education, and economic stimulation. If heritage trails are developed with sensitivity, creativity and authenticity, rather than controversy and distorted history, their potential expands greatly.

In a time when individuals are becoming increasingly "divorced" from their origins due to urbanization and migration, tourists may substitute the nostalgic heritage trail experience as a journey to self-discovery (Lowenthal 1985, 24-26). If this is the case, it is imperative that heritage purists and tourism developers alike, do what they can to ensure that heritage trails are as comprehensive, authentic and sincere as possible. Otherwise, future generations may know their heritage only through distorted stories and myths. In essence, what we do and how we choose to preserve our past and our landscape will significantly affect the minds and hearts of generations that follow.

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Endnotes

- ¹ In the early 1870's large scale settlement was about to begin with the Canadian government's intentions to settle the west. Government officials were concerned about potential hostility that settlers from the east would experience if they crossed paths with tribal natives. Faced with reports of lawlessness and an illegal whiskey trade that sprang up along the Canadian-United States border, Sir John A. Macdonald passed a bill, on May 20th 1873, respecting the administration of justice and establishment of a police force for the North West Territories (Denny 1939, 3). The six original divisions of the North West Mounted Police were recruited in the fall of 1873 and spring of 1874. On July

8th 1874, the North West Mounted Police commenced their march West with 275 people. The goal of the trek was to head west across the Prairies towards Fort Whoop-Up, the most lawless fort in the region (which was located over 800 miles away) and bring land and order to the region.