

Metis Graveyard

A History of the Pembina, N.D., Metis Cemetery (April 1, 1999)

Father Severe Dumoulin established a Catholic mission at Pembina in 1818; by 1823, when the community was moved north to St. Francois-Xavier, he had recorded 49 burials. The names of these people were burned in a fire at St. Boniface Cathedral in 1860. There is a list that has been prepared by volunteers for Assomption Catholic Church, Pembina, which lists the names of the people buried from 1849 when Father Belcourt was there, to 1892 when the last burial is recorded. There are 165 names on this list; the only one that we know of that was moved was Joe Rolette Sr. He was moved to the new non-denominational cemetery, which is west of the town of Pembina.

There were two villages centered in Pembina in the 1790's. These fur trade posts were established around the forks of the Pembina and the Red rivers. This area was prone to flooding; there were severe floods in 1826, 1851 and 1860. Father Dumoulin established his mission on a ridge north of the Forks about half a mile south of the 49th. parallel. The ridge is located near highway I-29 between a wayside stop and the Red River. The site is marked by a plaque erected by the State Historical Society in 1963 stating that the cemetery is "three hundred feet to the east". This ridge which runs beside a coulee is a high spot in the area and less prone to flooding. Eye-witnesses who lived nearby in the 1920's and 1930's describe the site as a "mound".

In 1893, after the Catholic Church stopped burying people there, the State Legislature of North Dakota passed an appropriation of \$500 "to purchase and maintain the site". Unfortunately, they never set aside the money and the cemetery was virtually abandoned. A farmer named Frank Moris obtained the land from the original landowner, Edward Lemon, and neighbors claimed that Lemon respected the cemetery by farming around it. By the 1920s, the markers, which were probably wooden crosses, had deteriorated and fallen down. Nevertheless, this site of the oldest Christian burial ground in North Dakota was known and respected. At some point in the 1920s or 1930s (accounts differ), the farmer decided to plant crops on the site. He subsequently farmed over the mound or ridge and his relatives continued to farm over it. In the 1930s, the local Catholic priest, Father Belleau, recorded that a local Metis, Mr. Francois-Xavier Gosselin estimated that the mission was five acres and the cemetery was ten acres.