

# THE GROS VENTRE/FALL INDIANS IN HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

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## **Abstract / Résumé**

Apparent contradictions in historic accounts regarding the identify of the Gros Ventre/Fall Indians as either Atsina or Hidatsa may be a product of scholarly interpretation. Nomadic Atsina, on the northern plains, were related to a group of Atsina who settled with the Missouri River villagers. David Thompson's observations are internally consistent and supported by others. Historic documents show the two Atsina groups and the Arapaho recognized their kinship throughout the 1800s.

Des contradictions apparentes dans les comptes rendus historiques au sujet de l'identité des Indiens Gros Ventres/Fall (sont-ils des Atsinas ou des Hidatsas?) peuvent être le produit des interprétations savantes. Les Atsinas nomades, qui vivent sur les plaines du nord, étaient liés à un groupe d'Atsinas qui se sont établis avec les villageois de la rivière Missouri. Les observations de David Thompson sont cohérentes et elles sont soutenues par d'autres chercheurs. Les documents historiques indiquent que les deux groupes d'Atsinas et les Arapahos ont reconnu leurs liens de parenté tout au cours du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle.

Information from historic records has been employed to answer precontact North American archaeological problems for more than two hundred years (Trigger 1989: 69). Because of the assumed static nature of North America's Indigenous peoples, initially it was believed the early postcontact record could be used to easily answer most, if not all archaeological questions. Expectations about the usefulness of the accounts of fur traders and travellers for resolving precontact problems have changed.

Archaeologists working on the northern plains and parkland use historic records to identify the location and nature of specific sites mentioned in the documents (Meyer *et al.* 1992). Historic records are used to argue the location and interactions between Native groups in the early contact and precontact period (Brink 1986; Russell 1991). Archaeologists use historic and ethnographic accounts to assign ethnic labels to precontact archaeological materials (Kehoe 1959; Wettlaufer and Mayer-Oakes 1960; Forbis 1961; Byrne 1973; Joyes 1973; Malainey 1991). Trigger (1989) expands Wedel's (1938) original definition by referring to all of the above applications as "the direct historic approach."

When historic accounts are used to interpret archaeological problems, however, the approach is by no means "direct." First, European travellers and traders often received information through an interpreter, who may have filtered out some details. The writers were selective in recording particulars in their journals. The authors may not have participated in the production of the published works. Those who did relied on notes taken decades earlier to produce narratives of their travels. Editors of these works inserted words, phrases and footnotes which reflected their personal interpretation of the work. Finally, scholars, with particular hypotheses, examine published accounts and take historical clips, possibly out of context, which support their own interpretation. As a result, the actual observations of the early travellers may be distorted by biases at several different levels.

Using historic records to identify and locate one Native group, known as the Gros Ventre, Fall Indians, Rapid Indians, Minnetarees of the Prairie, Minnetarees of Fort des Prairies and Big Bellies, in particular, has proven to be difficult. Various scholars have presented conflicting interpretations about the ethnicity and the precontact and early postcontact distribution of this group, sometimes using the same quotes to support divergent points. The intention of this paper is to propose that the confusion centred around the Gros Ventre debate rests with the interpretation of historic accounts by certain editors and scholars. The accounts are, for the most part, internally consistent and corroborate each other.

## **The Identity of the Gros Ventre**

The nature of "Gros Ventre Problem" has been summarized as follows:

The Gros Ventre pose a stumbling block for discussions of eighteenth century Indian groups in the northern grasslands/parkland area. Evidence that they were an Atsina group is contradicted by numerous other information showing them to be Hidatsa. (Russell 1991: 200)

Russell (1991: 200-212) presents an overview of the arguments for both identifications and chronicles the apparent contradictions in the historic records. Early travellers, including David Thompson and Alexander Henry, wrote that nomadic Indians on the Canadian plains were related to Indians in the horticultural villages. Many editors and scholars rejected the validity of these observations on the basis that the nomadic group were known to be Algonkian Atsina and the horticultural group were Siouan Hidatsa. One editor even changed the body of Henry's narrative to "correct" his observations (Russell 1991: 208).

Most historians, ethnographers, linguists and archaeologists who study the problem believe the nomadic Gros Ventre are Atsina (Hale 1885; Scott 1907; Flannery 1953; Kehoe and Kehoe 1974a and 1974b; Pentland 1976; Kroeber 1978). Scholarly discussions of the groups usually include a statement clearly distinguishing the Gros Ventre in the villages from the Gros Ventre on the northern plains. For example, in his introductory remarks about the Hidatsa, W. Raymond Wood (1986: 3-4) states:

Although they are known by many variant names—especially in the older literature—they are perhaps most widely known as the Gros Ventre, or the Gros Ventre of the Missouri. They are, however, unrelated to the Algonquian-speaking Fall Indians, or the Gros Ventre of the Prairies, now known as the Atsina Indians (an offshoot of the Arapaho), who were living near the falls of the south branch of the Saskatchewan River in what is now southwestern Saskatchewan during the late 1700's.

Archaeologists use historic accounts to argue that nomadic Hidatsa groups frequented southern Saskatchewan in the 1700s and 1800s. Wettlaufer and Mayer-Oakes (1960) regard all Fall Indian groups as Hidatsa; whereas, Byrne (1973) concludes that both Hidatsa and Atsina groups were referred to as Fall Indians. Russell (1991: 212) finds the evidence 1) of the identity of the groups, 2) of their occupation of an original homeland in central Saskatchewan and 3) that they were driven out of the area by the Cree and Assiniboin, to be inconclusive.

Passages most often cited by modern scholars to demonstrate the

apparent confusion of the early travellers include remarks that the horticultural Gros Ventre/Fall Indians in the Missouri River villages were related to the nomadic Gros Ventre/Fall Indians on the northern plains. In particular, the observations made by David Thompson during his visit to the villages in the winter of 1797-1798 have been criticized. For this reason, Roy Meyer (1977: 273 n. 273) regards the accounts of Thompson to be reliable only with respect to his direct observations, not when they depended on verbal communication.

Other researchers regard Thompson's account to be accurate, or, at least support his credibility. The observations made by Thompson, Henry and Umfreville are used by Byrne (1973: 552-553) to argue that the Fall Indians were a Hidatsa group who lived in Saskatchewan. Wood (1986: 7) and Russell (1991: 208) caution against the dismissal of Thompson's statements as he visited the Knife River villages with knowledgeable traders and was familiar with Native groups across the northern plains. In this regard, it is necessary to examine the accounts of the European and American travellers, beginning with the account of David Thompson.

Three lengthy passages from Glover's (1962) edition of *David Thompson's Narrative 1784-1812* are presented below. The first two excerpts are from "Chapter XIV Mandanes and Their Customs." The first passage is the story received from Manohah in 1797, a French-Canadian, who resided with the Fall Indians. The second passage is a summary account of the Fall Indians made at the end of this chapter. The third passage is from "Chapter XXII The Plains Indians."

As Manohah was as a Native with them I enquired if they had any traditions of ancient times; he said, he knew of none beyond the days of their great, great Grandfathers, who formerly possessed all the Streams of the Red River, and head of the Mississippe, where the Wild Rice, and the Deer were plenty, but then the Bison and the Horse were not known to them: On all these streams they had Villages and cultivated the ground as now; they lived many years this way how many they do not know, at length the Indians of the Woods armed with guns which killed and frightened them, and iron weapons, frequently attacked them, and against these they had no defence; but were obliged to quit their Villages, and remove from place to place, until they came to the Mississourie River, where our fathers made Villages, and the Indians of the Woods no longer attacked us; but the lands here are not so good, as the land our fathers left, we have no wild rice, except in a few Ponds, not worth attention. Beyond this tradition, such as it is I could learn nothing (Thompson 1962:

174-175).

Fall Indians who also have Villages, are strictly confederate with the Mandanes, they speak a distinct language; and it is thought no other tribe of Natives speak it: very few of the Mandanes learn it; the former learn the language of the latter, which is a dialect of the Pawnee language. The Fall Indians are now removed far from their original country, which was the Rapids of the Saskatchewan River, northward of the Eagle Hill; A feud arose between them, and their then neighbours, the Nahathaways and the Stone Indians confederates, and [they were] too powerful for them, they then lived wholly in tents, and removed across the Plains to the Mississourie; became confederate with the Mandanes, and from them have learned to build houses, form villages and cultivate the ground; ...Another band of these people now dwell in tents near the head of this River in alliance with the Peeagans and their allies; The whole tribe of these people may be estimated at 2200 to 2500 souls (Thompson 1962: 177-178).

The Fall Indians, their former residence was on the Rapids of the Saskatchewan, about 100 miles above Cumberland House; they speak a harsh language, which no other tribe attempts to learn, in number about 70 tents at ten souls to each tent.... Their Chief was of a bad character, and brought them into so many quarrels with their allies, they had to leave their country and wander to the right bank of the Mississourie, to near the Mandane villages. (Thompson 1962: 239-240)

The history of the Fall Indians written by Thompson is internally consistent. From his (1962: 174-175) conversation with Manoah, we learn that the Fall Indians moved from the Eastern Woodlands, probably modern Minnesota, several generations ago. Recently, the Fall Indian residents of Metaharta were driven from their homeland by Indians of the Woods who were armed with guns.

In the second passage, the Indians of the Woods were identified as Cree (Nahathaways) and Assiniboin (Stone). In the recent past, these Natives drove the Fall Indians from central Saskatchewan where they had lived in tents. One group of Fall Indians moved to the Missouri villages and adopted a horticultural way of life. Another nomadic band of these people lived near the headwaters of the Missouri and were affiliated with the Blackfoot.

In third passage, Thompson again reported that the nomadic Fall Indians left their home in central Saskatchewan and moved south to the

Missouri River after conflicts with their neighbours arose. In both the second and third passages, Thompson reported that the Fall language is unique and very difficult to learn. The information in the first passage supports the second; the second supports the third passage without contradiction.

These passages have been used to argue that the Fall Indians were Hidatsa. Russell (1991: 207) quotes both the second and third passages before remarking: "Thompson is explicit: the Fall Indians are the Hidatsa who once lived near the Forks of the Saskatchewan." In one version of Thompson's Narrative, the editor, J.B. Tyrrell, replaces the words "these people" with "[the Hidatsa]" in the sentence in the second passage which begins "Another band of these people now dwell in tents...." Meyer (1977), however, points out inconsistencies that arise when the Fall Indians mentioned in Thompson's accounts are assumed to be Hidatsa. Meyer (1977: 273) charges Thompson with three mistakes: 1) underestimating the length of time that the Hidatsa resided on the Missouri, 2) erring in thinking that the Hidatsa had recently been driven out of the Eastern Woodlands by the Ojibway and 3) confusing the Hidatsa Gros Ventre with the Atsina Gros Ventre.

In assuming the Fall Indians are Hidatsa, these scholars imply that Thompson was unfamiliar with or confused about the identity of this group. As outlined by Glover (1962: lxxii-cii), under his employment with the Hudson Bay Company, Thompson worked in Manchester House (Figure 1), and on the Bow River from 1786-1788. In 1793, Thompson was at South Branch House (Figure 1) and Manchester House and again visited South Branch House in May 1794, just two months before the Fall Indians destroyed it and killed the inhabitants. He was employed at HBC houses in modern Saskatchewan and Alberta for eleven years prior to his visit to the Missouri River villages (Figure 1). After joining the North West Company (NWC) in 1797, Thompson continued to travel throughout Western Canada until 1809 and the northern plains until 1812. In light of his extensive experience, it is necessary to consider that the Fall Indians mentioned by Thompson are, indeed, Atsina Fall Indians. Inconsistencies do not arise when the Fall Indians in Thompson's passages are regarded as Atsina. Rather, the information he offers about the Fall Indian origin traditions and language lends support to an Atsina ethnic designation.

The origin traditions of three Hidatsa subgroups are well documented and corroborated by numerous informants (Bowers 1965; Wood 1980). The Awatixa indicate they came from the sky under the leadership of Charred Body. The group landed and established a settlement on Charred Body Creek, near the modern town of Washburn, North Dakota. Their

claim to be long time inhabitants of the Missouri River Valley is substantiated by archaeological evidence at Flaming Arrow, the earliest known Awatixa site. Its location conforms well to Awatixa tradition and dates to AD 1200 (Ahler and Swenson 1993).

Both the Awaxawi and Hidatsa-proper claim to have lived beneath the earth before emerging from a body of water, possibly Devil's Lake (Bowers 1965; Wood 1980). Initially, the groups together lived as maize horticulturalists in the vicinity of Devil's Lake but they separated after a fire came down from the sky. The Hidatsa-proper travelled north, briefly living in a land with moose and a polar climate. During their northern sojourn they lost the knowledge of how to grow maize. Eventually, the Hidatsa-proper journeyed south to the Heart River, where they met the Mandan villagers. After the Mandan re-introduced maize horticulture to the Hidatsa-proper, the group travelled to the Knife River and established their own villages.

After the separation with the Hidatsa-proper, the Awaxawi remained near Devil's Lake and continued to grow maize. After a period of time, a great flood forced the Awaxawi to flee the Devil's Lake area. When they arrived at the Missouri River, they met the Awatixa. The Awaxawi attempted to settle along the Knife River but the Hidatsa-proper, who had already established settlements there, drove them away. The Awaxawi, however, soon returned and resided along the Knife River. Later, the Awaxawi and Hidatsa-proper traditionally adopted the Awatixa.

There is some archaeological evidence in support of the Awaxawi and Hidatsa-proper traditions. Archaeologists consider Knife River ware to be the pottery manufactured by the Awaxawi and Hidatsa-proper. The earliest occurrences of Knife River ware are in eastern North Dakota, their traditional homeland (Wood 1980; Ahler and Swenson 1993). In the 1700s, Knife River ware suddenly came to dominate pottery in Middle Missouri River assemblages. This is regarded as archaeological evidence of the strength of the Hidatsa presence after the Awaxawi and Hidatsa-proper established settlements in the region (Ahler and Swenson 1993).

The origin tradition related by Manoah differs from those regularly associated with three Hidatsa sub-groups and lacks archaeological support. On the basis of Manoah's account, Ahler and Swenson (1993) attempted to identify antecedents of Knife River ware in the archaeological record of Minnesota, where the headwaters of the Red and Mississippi Rivers are located. While several pottery types are known from this area, none resembled the pottery of the Awaxawi and Hidatsa-proper. Strong similarities did, however, exist between Knife River ware and two Wisconsin types, Point Sauble Collared and Aztalan Collared. This finding prompted the researchers to suggest the large body of water men-

tioned in the better known Awaxawi and Hidatsa-proper origin traditions may be Lake Michigan, rather than Devil's Lake (Ahler and Swenson 1993).

The Fall Indians known to Manoah claim they formerly lived along the headwaters of the Red and Mississippi River; this tradition bears strong similarities to that of the Arapaho and Atsina (Scott 1907; Ewers 1958; Hodge 1975). "According to the tradition of the Arapaho they were once a sedentary, agricultural people living far to the N.E. of their more recent habitat, apparently about the Red River Valley of N. Minn" (Hodge 1975 I:72). Shortly after their departure from this region, the Atsina split from the Arapaho and moved to the northern plains where they became affiliated with the Blackfoot (*ibid*). There is some archaeological evidence in support of this series of events. The late precontact pottery from northern Minnesota is similar to that found on the northern plains (Walde 1994), in precisely the area said to have been occupied by the Atsina in the late 1700s (Mackenzie 1927; Figure 2). The archaeological record of Minnesota appears to provide more support for hypothesis that Manoah related an Atsina, not a Hidatsa, tradition to Thompson.

Thompson's description of the Fall Indian language also supports an Atsina ethnic designation. The language spoke by the Arapaho and Atsina was known, historically and ethnographically, as being particularly difficult to speak (Flannery 1953:ix). Traders could not find interpreters for the Atsina language so it was necessary to conduct business in Blackfoot, which was mutually intelligible (Umfreville 1954:102). Scott (1907) noted that it was necessary for the Arapaho to follow a similar procedure. Both Maximilian (1838) and Hayden (1862) commented that these allies of the Blackfoot had a language which was most difficult to speak. Hale (1885:697) reported that the Atsina spoke a dialect similar to the Arapaho, "It is a peculiarly harsh and difficult language, and is said to be spoken only by these two tribes."

Descriptions of the Hidatsa language bear no mention of unusual harshness or other difficulties. The Hidatsa language was not considered unique; the three Hidatsa subgroups shared the same language, each with a separate dialect. Matthews (1969) reported that the Mandan and Hidatsa languages were distinct but because they were long-time neighbours their languages were somewhat alike and probably had a distant common origin.

The next detailed ethnohistorical description of the Missouri villages is provided by members of the Lewis and Clark expedition, who explored the Louisiana Purchase lands from 1804 to 1806. They visited the village of Metaharta, which was also referred to as the "middle village" or the "lesser village of the Mandans" (Wood 1977: 337; Wood 1986: 47).



Wood (1977: 337) indicates this was the village of Manoah, the remains of which are known today as the Sakakawea site, 32ME10. The account Lewis and Clark received regarding the origin of the Minnetarees in the Metaharta village is similar to that recorded by Thompson. William Clark told Nicholas Biddle there were three groups in the villages, the Mandans, the Minnetaree Proper and the Minnetaree who lived in Metaharta. The Minnetarees Proper clearly distinguished themselves from the Minnetarees Metaharta, who were immigrants from Saskatchewan. Clark gave an account of how the Fall Indians came to be called 'Minnetarees':

Above the Ahharways on Knife Creek about a mile above Ahharways vill. live Minnitarees Mataharta on South Side of Knife. The acct. given of them by Minnetarees proper is that they came many years ago come from the plains & settled near them about 150 warriors.

...These Minnitarees (who are what McKenzie calls Fall Indians) say that they have relations on the Saskashawan whom they did not know of till they met them in their war parties & in fighting them were astonished at discovering that they spoke their own language. These probably the Minnitarees of Fort de Prairie whom McKenzie calls Fall Indians. The roving Indians on the Saskashawan were first known by English who called them Fall Indians & when they found those of the Missouri speaking same language called them also Fall Indians. Afterwards when it was known that the Missouri Fall Indians were called Minitarees those who spoke the same language on the Saskashawan were called Minitarees on Fort de Prairie residing near the Establishment in the Prairie on that river. The Minitarees are called by the French gros ventres - by the English big bellies - names applied also to all the Fall Indians. (Biddle 1962: 524-525)

In his narrative, Thompson apparently lumped the Hidatsa Minnetarees proper together with the Mandan, a common practise among traders based in the northern plains and parkland at this time (see Harmon 1957: 85; Henry 1988: 211). Later, others lumped the Atsina Minnetarees in the Metaharta village and the Atsina Fall Indians on the plains with the Hidatsa Minnetarees proper.

David Thompson's reports are internally consistent and independently corroborated by William Clark. Consequently, the argument that Thompson was confused is weakened; his observations should not be dismissed. Both Thompson and Clark (from Biddle's notes) reported that former residents of Saskatchewan, unrelated to the Minnetarees proper, settled with the villagers and were living in Metaharta. These Metaharta

Indians spoke the same language as their nomadic Fall Indian relatives, who were affiliated with the Blackfoot Confederacy. When read without an assumption of Hidatsa homogeneity among the Minnetarees, many of the apparent inconsistencies vanish.

The possibility that Thompson's observations are correct does not necessarily imply that the Hidatsa were former residents of central Saskatchewan. The account of the Minnetarees proper provided by Clark shows a clear distinction between the Hidatsa residents and the recent immigrants from Saskatchewan. The Atsina Fall Indians appear to have left central Saskatchewan and split into two groups some time after the Cree and Assiniboin acquired guns but before Thompson's visit in 1797. One Fall Indian group became affiliated with the Blackfoot Confederacy and lived on the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains at the headwaters of the Missouri River. The other group of Fall Indians adopted a sedentary, horticultural lifestyle in the Missouri villages.

It may be difficult or even impossible to irrefutably establish the Atsina presence in the Missouri villages. Due to the harsh nature of the Atsina/Arapaho language, it is possible the Atsina Fall Indians adopted a Siouan language when they settled with the Missouri River villagers. Wood (1986: 33) indicates the Awatixa Hidatsa lived in Metaharta. If the Fall Indians learned the Awatixa language they would have spoken a language very similar to Hidatsa proper as well as and their own Arapaho dialect. That the Atsina would learn the language of the Awatixa is not beyond the realm of possibility. As shown previously, the Atsina learned and employed the Blackfoot language when communicating with traders because no one else could speak their language. If the Atsina adopted the Hidatsa language and lifeways, the assimilated group may have become practically invisible to later ethnographers. This suggestion is not without precedence. Flannery (1953) noted the nomadic Atsina (Gros Ventre of Montana) were often identified as Blackfoot because many of the men spoke the language.

There is little hope of detecting the migrant group in the archaeological record of the Missouri villages. Following the 1780-1781 small pox epidemic, the material culture of the Missouri River Villagers became essentially homogeneous under the strength of the Hidatsa presence. Even the once-dominant Mandan peoples seem to have been reduced to the status of refugees and subsumed into the Hidatsa cultural pattern (Ahler and Swenson 1993:131). As a result, the material culture of the Mandan can not be distinguished from that of the Hidatsa after 1781. Under the powerful Hidatsa influence, it is unlikely that a small group of Atsina Fall Indian migrants would maintain a detectable material culture identity either.

Even if they shared a language and material culture, it is not likely that the Hidatsa would have quickly assimilated the Atsina or that a "fused ethnicity" (Sharrock 1974) would have developed. Both Thompson, in 1797, and Clark, in 1804, observed that the Hidatsa clearly distinguished themselves from the Saskatchewan migrants, indicating no kinship existed between them. According to Bowers (1965:6), inter-village marriage and marriage with the Mandan or other tribes was virtually nonexistent among the Hidatsa prior to 1845, when they moved from the Missouri River villages. If the Fall Indians in the villages were related to an Atsina group, more evidence of this should exist in the accounts of other European and American travellers and fur traders. In particular, one expects evidence that:

- 1) The Fall Indians lived in Saskatchewan prior to David Thompson's 1797 account.
- 2) The Fall Indians left Saskatchewan after being attacked by their forest-dwelling neighbours, who were armed with guns.
- 3) Fall Indians were a non-Mandan, non-Hidatsa group, originally from Saskatchewan, who lived in the villages.
- 4) Fall Indians in the village were related to the Fall Indians who travelled in the northern plains.
- 5) Fall Indians were Atsina, an Arapaho splinter group.
- 6) Different names, Fall, Rapid, Gros Ventre, Minnetarees of Fort des Prairies and Big Bellies, were applied to the same group of people.

### The Accounts of Other Traders and Travellers

After working for the Hudson Bay Company in the late 1780s, Umfreville published this 1790 account of the Fall Indians:

This nation is thus named by us, and by the Nehethawa Indians, from their inhabiting a country on the Southern branch of the [Saskatchewan] river, where the rapids are frequent. As they are not very numerous, and have a harsh, guttural language peculiar to themselves, I am induced to think they are a tribe that has detached itself from some distant nation, with which we are not as yet acquainted.

...the Canadian-French...call them *gros ventres*, or big-bellies; and that without any reason....

They seem not yet to be initiated into the manner of hunting beavers...for they bring nothing to us but wolves....

Though we have interpreters for all the other Indian languages, none as yet have been able to attain a competency of this to make themselves understood; and the general method of conversing, is by speaking the Black-foot tongue,

which is agreeable, and soon acquired. (Umfreville 1954: 102) According to Russell (1991: 204), Umfreville made these observations while at his post in modern west-central Saskatchewan (Figure 1). The vocabulary collected by Umfreville has been identified by linguists as Atsina (Kehoe and Kehoe 1974a and 1974b; Pentland 1976). Kehoe and Kehoe (1974a) have attacked Byrne's (1973) use of this account to argue the Hidatsa formerly lived in Saskatchewan.

The location of the Fall Indians provided by Mackenzie (1927) is a result of his 1793 and 1798 travels. He places them in central and south-eastern Saskatchewan, from the confluence of the North and South Saskatchewan Rivers southeastward to northwestern North Dakota (Figure 2). The Fall Indians consisted of two related groups, one occupying modern central Saskatchewan and another to the southeast:

From [the Blood and Picaneaux] downwards extend the Black Feet Indians, of the same nation as the two last tribes: their number may be eight hundred men. Next to them, and who extend to the confluence of the south and north branch, are the Fall, or Big-bellied Indians, who may amount to about six hundred warriors. (Mackenzie 1927: 75-76)

The Fall or Big-bellies Indians, are from the south-eastward also, and of a people who inhabit the plains from the north bend of the last mentioned river [the Missouri], latitude 47.32 N, longitude 101.25 west, to the south bend of the Assiniboin River to the number of seven hundred men. (Mackenzie 1927: 76)

Mackenzie mentions these Fall Indians exchanged buffalo robes and bad wolf skins for articles of no great value.

In the late 1700s, there was an imbalance in the distribution of fire-arms among Native groups in Western Canada. As the North West Company trader, Duncan M'Gillivray (1929: 31) explained, the Plains tribes were unable to purchase as many of these items as the parkland- and forest-dwelling Cree and Assiniboin, who traded beaver pelts, "the *Gens du large* consisting of Blackfeet, Gros Ventres, Blood Indians, and Piedgans &c., are treated with less liberality, their commodities being chiefly Horses, Wolves, Fat & Pounded meat which are not sought after with such eagerness as the Beaver." MacGregor (1966: 51) suggests that eventually, "the east and north edge of the prairies became ringed with tribes bearing fire arms while the Plains tribes, principally the Gros Ventres or Fall Indians and Blackfoot were without them."

The Cree and Gros Ventre/Fall Indians had been involved in violent conflicts for many years but usually only a few people were ever killed. One night in the summer of 1793, however, a party of Cree encountered

a band of Gros Ventre consisting of 16 lodges near South Branch and "resolved to revenge all their former injuries" (M'Gillivray 1929:62). When the Gros Ventre camp retired "[the Cree] fell upon them like hungry Wolves and with remorseless fury butchered them all in cold blood except a few children whom they preserved for Slaves" (*ibid*: 62). M'Gillivray explained the Gros Ventre did not retaliate because they were terrified of the Cree, who used the cover of trees to their advantage in battles. Instead, the Gros Ventre targeted European traders who furnished their enemies with the weapons. They violently attacked NWC and Hudson Bay Company (HBC) trading posts in Saskatchewan. The first attack was against Pine Island Fort and Manchester House in 1793; the second was against the HBC South Branch House on 24 July 1794. The South Branch House attack was so vicious that the story was told repeatedly in the fur trade journals for decades. Because of their reputation, the movements of the Fall Indians, Rapid Indians, Gros Ventre, or Minnetarees of the Plains can be traced, even though they were given different names.

M'Gillivray's journal contains a significant amount of information about the Gros Ventre because he travelled through central Saskatchewan just after the attack of South Branch House (S.B.). On 29 August 1794 while at Cumberland House (Figure 1), M'Gillivray (1929: 13) learned of the attack on South Branch House the previous month. The word of the brutal assault spread along with fear and apprehension about the Gros Ventre. The next month M'Gillivray and his party travelled to Fort George (Figure 1), through the country frequented by the Gros Ventre. The trip was extremely stressful; on 21 September 1794, M'Gillivray remarked that the some people were so afraid of another attack that buffalo, deer, wolves and even their own shadows were mistaken for Gros Ventre (*ibid*.: 25-26).

M'Gillivray recorded details of the movements of Gros Ventre gleaned from other Native groups and European travellers. On 25 September 1794, his group was relieved to learn that the Gros Ventres "were supposed to have retired to the Rocky Mountains," making future precautions against them during the trip unnecessary (*ibid*.: 27). Just over a month later, M'Gillivray (1929: 39) wrote:

the Gros Ventre hitherto stationed at the Rocky Mountains have separated in Two Bands, one of them supposed to be that which attacked S.B. has formed an alliance with the Snake Indians, formerly their mortal enemies, with intention to abandon this quarter for ever, and the other band Steer their course in this direction to obtain peace of us and the nations that surround us.

From M'Gillivray we learn that the two bands of the Gros Ventre, per-

haps only informally divided as Mackenzie noted, decided to split permanently. The band which attacked South Branch House did not intend to return to Saskatchewan; the other band wanted to make peace with traders and other Native groups. From later accounts of traders, it is clear that at least some of those who attacked South Branch House returned as well.

According to M'Gillivray's entry dated 22 February 1795, the Gros Ventre were once again in Western Canada. Before leaving Fort George with furs collected over the winter, M'Gillivray referred to the Gros Ventre on two other occasions. On 9 April 1795, some Blood and Blackfoot Indians arrived at the fort with word of the Gros Ventre; they confirmed the rumours that the Gros Ventre separated into two bands; one band consisting of 90 lodges were returning to "this quarter" (*ibid.*: 69). The other band formed an alliance with the Snake Indians, a group who did not trade. M'Gillivray wrote with certainty that his previous information about the division of the Gros Ventre was correct. He provided little information about the Snake Indians; however, Wood and Thiessen (1985: 170) identify the Snake as Shoshoni. On 15 April 1795, M'Gillivray (1929: 73) mentioned that, although they would like to, the Gros Ventre probably would not trade that spring because they feared a bad reception.

The account provided by M'Gillivray are important for several reasons. First, it corroborates Manoah and Thompson's record of attacks on the Gros Ventre/Fall Indians by the Cree, who were better armed. Secondly, it gives reliable evidence that the Gros Ventre formally split into two bands and that one division left Saskatchewan permanently, travelling south of the border. Thirdly, it gives the time and circumstances of the departure. Finally, it provides evidence that the other Gros Ventre group returned to the northern plains of Western Canada. The activities of this group are well documented by traders in Western Canada and will be discussed later. The fate of the group which remained south of the border is known from Thompson and Clark, who reported that Gros Ventre/Fall Indians left Saskatchewan and settled in the Missouri villages. These people adopted a sedentary, horticultural lifestyle and lived in the Minnetaree village of Metaharta.

The Gros Ventre/Fall Indians which returned to Canada waited two years before visiting a HBC trading house. In mid-December 1796, George Sutherland (1967: 75) noted that 400 Fall Indians arrived at Edmonton House (Figure 1), "these being the nation who plundered Manchester House in 1793 and attacked and burnt the South Branch and killed three of your honours servants there in the summer 1794 and have not visited any of your honours' settlements since that time till now." The trader gave them a severe reprimand and made them promise not to treat Eu-

ropeans poorly in the future. The Indians presented him with horses and wolf skins then left.

The chiefs of the Fall Indians wished to maintain goodwill with the European traders in 1800. In May 1800, near Carlton House in central Saskatchewan, James Bird (1967: 245-246) noted of an incident involving the kidnapping of "a party of the new company's people" by some Fall Indians. When the Fall Indians brought their captors to the main camp in the prairie the chiefs interceded, returned the Canadian prisoners and were apologetic. This account shows that the Fall Indians continued to travel in the Saskatchewan plains and had not restricted their movements to the Rocky Mountains.

Peter Fidler provides several accounts of Fall Indians during his winter at Chesterfield House, located at the confluence of the Red Deer and the South Saskatchewan Rivers (Figure 1). On 15 August 1800, Fidler (1967: 253) identified the Fall Indians visiting Chesterfield House as the ones who attacked South Branch House in 1794. The word list compiled by Fidler for these Fall Indians is definitely in the Atsina language (Pentland 1995).

Upon returning to Chesterfield House the following year, Blood Indians told Fidler a group of Southern and Stone Indians recently killed 14 Fall Indian men and sixty women and children (*ibid.*: 293). Traders feared the Fall Indians would resort to violence as a result of the stress they were experiencing. In early October, Fidler (1967: 294) received news from nine Fall Indian chiefs, "The Fall Indians have had the smallpox amongst them this summer and carried off upwards of 100 all young people, they received it from a few Tatood Indians who comes far to the south.... The Fall Indians, on account of the war and disease this summer cutting off such numbers of them, appears desperate, and is nearly ready to fall on anyone they can." The editor of Fidler's journal, A.M. Johnson (1967: 294), identified the Tatood Indians as Arapaho, citing Elliot Coues. Later, Fidler (1967: 298) provided more information about the Tatood Indians:

Three Tatood Indian chiefs came with their families consisting of four young men, five women and seven children: this is a part of a nation that never saw Europeans before. They inhabit on the eastern borders of the mountain far to the south of this, they have been forty-four days in coming, they speak nearly the same language as the Fall Indians and are at peace with them, who have escorted them here.... Their manners are different from the Fall Indians, but are nearly of the same size and features.

In addition to Johnson's identification, the fact that the Tatood Indians

had not seen Whites suggests they were not Hidatsa, as Europeans and Americans had been visiting the Missouri River villages for over sixty years.

As a result of many hardships relating to attacks in the summer of 1801, disease, and severe weather in the winter of 1801-1802, Fidler (1967: 309) learned that the Fall Indians were suffering badly and he feared they would soon become aggressive. His apprehension was justified. In early February 1802, the Fall Indians killed two Iroquois (Irroques) who were making gestures of friendship. In early March 1802, they killed another 10 Iroquois and two Canadians, even though their safe passage had been promised. After the traders were threatened, the NWC traders set fire to their post and moved into Chesterfield House with Fidler.

On 8 March 1802, the chiefs told Fidler (1967: 315) they had been unaware of the young warriors intentions to kill the Iroquois and the Canadians. The chiefs were upset that the traders did not trust them and had requested that the Blackfoot nations protect them during their spring departure. Fidler (1967: 316) wrote:

The Fall Indians make us very fair promises and plenty of them, that we have not the least to dread from them, but we cannot sincerely trust them. This is the same people that plundered Manchester House in 1793 of every article, and who attacked the South Branch House in the spring following, and murdered every man, woman and child at it, took everything of goods, which was considerable, and burnt the house to ashes.

A Fall Indian who worked for the NWC told a trader that A Kas Kin, the chief of the nation, disliked the traders because they had killed his brother in 1794 while he was attempting to set fire to the NWC South Branch House (Fidler 1967: 316). Small pox, attacks by the Assiniboin and Cree Indians and severe weather was said to have "sharpened and soured their former vindictive disposition and have been the reason of their killing the Irroques..." (*ibid.*: 316). On 15 April 1802, the Blackfoot informed Fidler (1967: 321), "that every Fall Indian with their families are pitched away for the Mis sis su rie River, and there to meet the Crow Mountain and Tatood Indians and make a very formidable party, and that they will then come to fall upon us and proceed down the country to find the Crees and Stone Indians and kill what they can of them in revenge of the last summer."

The violent reputation of the Fall Indians (Rapid Indians, Gros Ventre, Big Bellies or Minnetarees of Fort des Prairies) was known across the northern plains. In the spring of 1801, Archibald N. McLeod was stationed at NWC Fort Alexandria on the upper waters of the Assiniboine



River in east-central Saskatchewan (Figure 1; Lamb 1957: xii and 30). At that time, Rapid Indians were looking for Cree and Stone Indians to attack so Cree groups were encouraged to trade at McLeod's post instead of Fort des Prairies (McLeod 1933: 172-173). Mr. King, a European trader, had "great apprehension of his being pillaged & perhaps murdered by the Fall Indians" (McLeod 1933: 172).

Daniel Harmon (1957: 48), stationed at Fort Alexandria that summer, noted the presence of several women and children who were waiting for their husbands to return from fighting the Rapid Indians on the plains and the upper part of the Missouri River. In September, the Cree and Assiniboin returned having "made great slaughter among their enemies (the Rapid Indians)" (*ibid.*: 51). This information is consistent with that received by Fidler from the Blackfoot and Fall Indians in the fall of 1801.

Almost two years later, in July 1803, the Rapid Indians were still feared. Harmon (1957: 68-69) was relieved that they had not encountered the Rapid Indians, who were searching for Cree and Assiniboin, "it was fortunate for us that we did not see them...as they look upon us as their enemies also, for furnishing the Crees & Assiniboins with fire arms, while they have few or none, having as yet had but little intercourse with the White people." In 1804, Harmon (1957:77) noted the Cree and Assiniboin rarely travelled on the plains south of the Qu'Appelle River in modern southeast Saskatchewan, "for this part of the Country belongs to the Rapid Indians." In September 1805, Harmon (1957: 96) passed by the former location of South Branch House and recorded a detailed story of the attack and destruction of the post by the Rapid Indians. There is no doubt that the group referred to as Rapid Indians and the Fall Indians are one in the same.

Evidence that the Fall Indians who resided in the Middle Missouri villages were related to the Atsina Fall Indians who travelled on the northern plains is also provided in later historic records. In the account of his 1858 expedition, Henry Hind (1969: 158) writes:

The Gros Ventre occupy the country bordering upon the Milk River from its mouth to the territory of the Piegiens. The Bloods, Piegiens, and Blackfeet speak the same language, the Gros Ventre the Arapahoe language; they were adopted by the Blackfeet about thirty years since, having seceded from their own nation. On the Upper Missouri, near the great bend, the Gros Ventres have a large village of mudhouses."

The records of a government agent contain indirect evidence that at least some Atsina Fall Indians once resided in the Missouri villages. At the end of the nineteenth century, Native Americans were required to obtain permission from their agents before travelling. Roy Meyer (1977:

294 n. 58) writes:

The need for Indians to obtain permission from their agent before going on such visits sometimes revealed interesting misconceptions on the part of certain agents. In 1893, for example, John Foster, agent at the Wind River Shoshone-Arapaho reservation in Wyoming, wrote to the Fort Berthold agent, asking permission for four Arapahoes to visit their Gros Ventre kinsmen at Fort Berthold. He had evidently confused the Hidatsa tribe (called Gros Ventre by government agencies) with the Gros Ventre of the Prairie, close relatives of the Arapahoes.

Meyer implies this reflects a misconception on the part of the agent, John Foster, who complied with the Arapaho request. The Arapahoes who made the request obviously believed their relatives resided at Fort Berthold. John Foster regarded their request as valid, suggesting that he knew some Atsina lived there. Indians from the Knife River section of the Middle Missouri villages (where Metaharta was located) were moved to Fort Berthold in 1845 (Strong 1940: 358). This example serves as evidence that the Wind River Arapaho recognized former residents of the Missouri villages, now lived in Fort Berthold, as their Atsina kinsmen. At least one government agent acknowledged this relationship by facilitating the Arapaho visit to their relatives.

Traces of the Atsina presence among the Siouan villagers appear to have persisted into the twentieth-century. When Bowers (1965) conducted his ethnographic fieldwork in the 1930s and 1940s, he received Hidatsa origin traditions similar to those recorded previously. The Awatixa claimed they descended from the sky and established their first village near modern Washburn, North Dakota; while the Awaxawi and Hidatsa formerly lived beneath the surface of the earth (Bowers 1965). Some of Bowers' (1965:11) informants, however, still related "contradictory accounts" of being agriculturalists along the headwaters of the Red River. As suggested previously, this tradition is consistent with that of the Atsina and Arapaho.

The hypothesis of Atsina Fall Indians in the Missouri River villages cannot, however, reconcile all contradictions in the ethnohistoric record. Inconsistencies with regards to the identity of the Fall Indians remain in the writing of Alexander Henry the Younger. During the 1790s, Henry worked for the North West Company in modern Manitoba (Gough 1988: xxviii). In 1799, he wintered at Fort Dauphin, then spent much of the next eight years on the upper part of the Red River, along the North Dakota-Minnesota border. There is no indication that Henry was familiar with the Fall Indians/Gros Ventre when he travelled to the Missouri River vil-

lages in 1806. In the course of his visit, Alexander Henry passed through but did not stop and visit the Willow Indians at Little Big Bellies Village (Henry 1988: 234-235). Henry reported a sudden change in the manner of people; his party was harassed by children and dogs which entertained the men who looked on. His editor, Gough (1988: 216 n. 216) identified this village as "Meteharta."

During his brief stay, Henry did not receive the same information regarding village composition as previous visitors. He (1988: 277) regarded all of the villagers as Siouan, noting that the Crow language was nearly the same as the Big Bellies and that the Crow, Mandans, Big Bellies, Souliers, and the Sioux were formerly the same people.

Henry probably first encountered nomadic Fall Indians in 1808 or 1809 when he wintered at Fort Vermilion in modern west-central Alberta (Figure 1). In 1809, Henry provided this description of them (*ibid.*: 381):

The Big Bellies or Rapid are now stationed to the South of the Slave Indians between the South Branch and the Missouri. Formerly they inhabited the point of land between the North and South Branch of the Saskatchewan over to the junction of those two streams, and from which circumstance it is supposed they derived their name Rapid Indians. They are of the same nation as the Big Bellies of the Missouri, which I have already mentioned. Their Dress, Customs and Manners appear to me to be the same. Formerly they were very numerous, and much dreaded by the neighbouring nations. But since the Smallpox their numbers have diminished very much through the effects of that baneful disease and other depredations committed upon them by other tribes with whom they were at variance.... They are a most audacious and turbulent race, and have repeatedly attempted to destroy and massacre us all.

Later, he (1988: 381-382) connected the Fall Indians with the attacks on the Saskatchewan North West Company and Hudson Bay Company forts in 1793 and 1794.

Henry (1988: 543-544) repeated the identification in 1810-11 at Rocky Mountain House except that he says the Fall Indians are related to both the Big Bellies of Missouri and the Crow Mountain Indians. He (1988: 544) wrote:

The notorious character of the Fall Indians is well known throughout this Country for their vicious disposition and blood thirsty proceedings towards those whom they may be inclined to treat as their foes. They are the only nation of Slave Indians that have actually made a formal attack upon

our Establishment on the Saskatchewan both in which they were successful in plundering the Hudson Bay Company Forts and murdering their Servants, but were severely repulsed by the persons in charge of the North West Company Forts who obliged them to retire, with the loss of some of their principal Chiefs, since which period they have thrown off the mask of deception, and commit depredations, pillage and murder wherever an opportunity offers.

Henry (1988: 544) noted they had also killed a party of Iroquois and French-Canadians on the Bow River a few years before. Henry said they were sly, deceitful and treacherous but the easiest people to trade with. He (1988: 544) attributed this "extraordinary docility" to the hostile acts they have committed against the White people because they realize they deserve no lenity.

Like Mackenzie, Umfreville and Thompson, Henry indicates the Fall Indians were former inhabitants of Saskatchewan. His descriptions of their character and recent activities are basically identical to that provided by Fidler for the Atsina Fall Indians. While Henry's account of the Fall Indians are generally similar to that of other traders, there are inconsistencies in his 1810-11 account. Henry equated the Fall Indians with Crow Mountain Indians and Big Bellies of the Missouri but identified them as a nation of Slave Indians. The association between nomadic Fall Indians on the Plains and "Big Bellies" in the villages is explained in the accounts of Thompson, Clark and M'Gillivray but the stated affiliation between the Fall Indians and the Crow Indians is not supportable. As indicated by Russell (1991: 209), the Crow Indians travelling with Francois-Antoine Laroque in Montana in 1805 did not speak the same language as the Fort des Prairie Big Bellies they encountered.

Henry's equation of the Fall Indians with the Crow Mountain Indians likely reflects his assumption that the ethnic composition of the Minnetaree villages was homogeneous. As a result, Henry equated the Fall Indians with the Hidatsa Big Bellies of the Missouri, whom he knew were related to the Crow, not with the recent Fall Indian immigrants who resided with them. In other respects, his account is internally consistent and similar to those of other HBC and NWC traders.

There is no question that Henry was acquainted with Atsina Fall Indians. When the Fall Indians tried to set fire to his stockade in April 1811, Henry (1988: 559) indicated the attacking group included L Homme, the warrior who directed the attacks at Pine Fort in 1793 and South Branch House in 1794. He (1988: 559) further indicated that L Homme's brother was killed in the South Branch House attack. L Homme was also known as Day Light, the Horns and Iron Shirt; he was probably the same

man Thompson referred to as the Fall Indian chief with the bad disposition in 1797 and who Fidler referred to as A Kas Kin in 1802.

## Conclusions

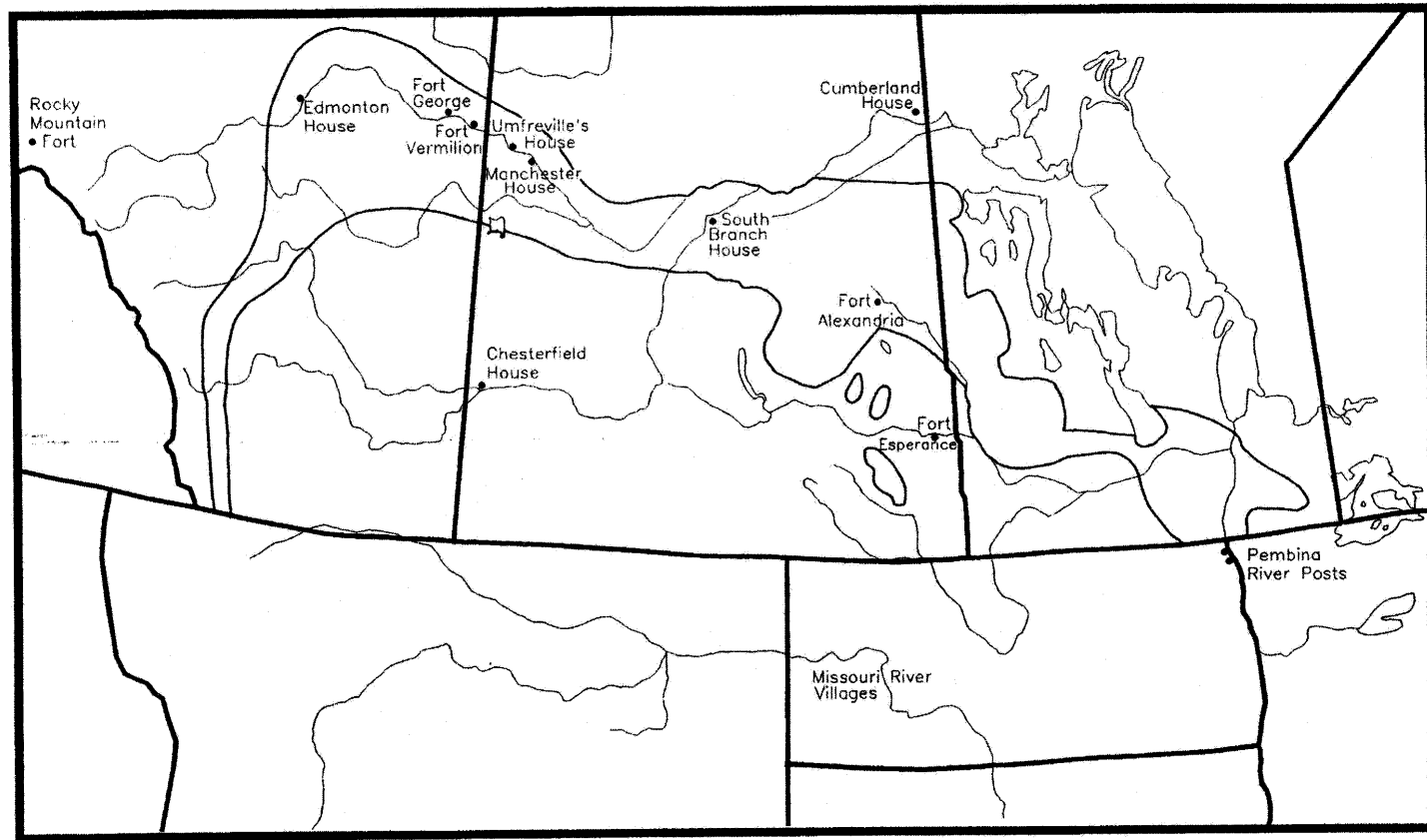
The indirectness of the direct historical approach makes it is necessary to test the consistency of the record, the validity of scholarly interpretations and the assumptions on which they are based. Apparent inconsistencies in the historic record with regards to the Gros Ventre could be the creations of certain editors and scholars who assumed that the Fall Indians which Thompson met in the Metaharta village in 1797 were Siouan Hidatsa. Thompson may have met Atsina Fall Indians, who abandoned Saskatchewan after the 1794 attack on South Branch House, in the Missouri villages. The term "Mandanes," which Thompson employed in his narrative appears to refer to both Mandan and Hidatsa peoples.

There is some evidence that the Atsina Fall Indian villagers were actually related to the nomadic Atsina Fall Indians. Thompson and Clark both indicated that Metaharta villagers were related to the nomadic Fall Indians, not to the Minnetarees proper. Henry also recognized the relationship between those he knew as the Big Bellies or Rapid Indians and residents of the Missouri villages. Several decades later, Henry Hind wrote of the kinship between the Arapaho-speaking nomadic Gros Ventre and Missouri River villagers. Arapaho from the Wind River Shoshone-Arapaho Reservation and their government agent, John Foster, also recognized kinship links with former residents of the Knife River villages as late as 1893. The word list compiled by Peter Fidler for the nomadic Fall Indians positively identifies this group as Atsina.

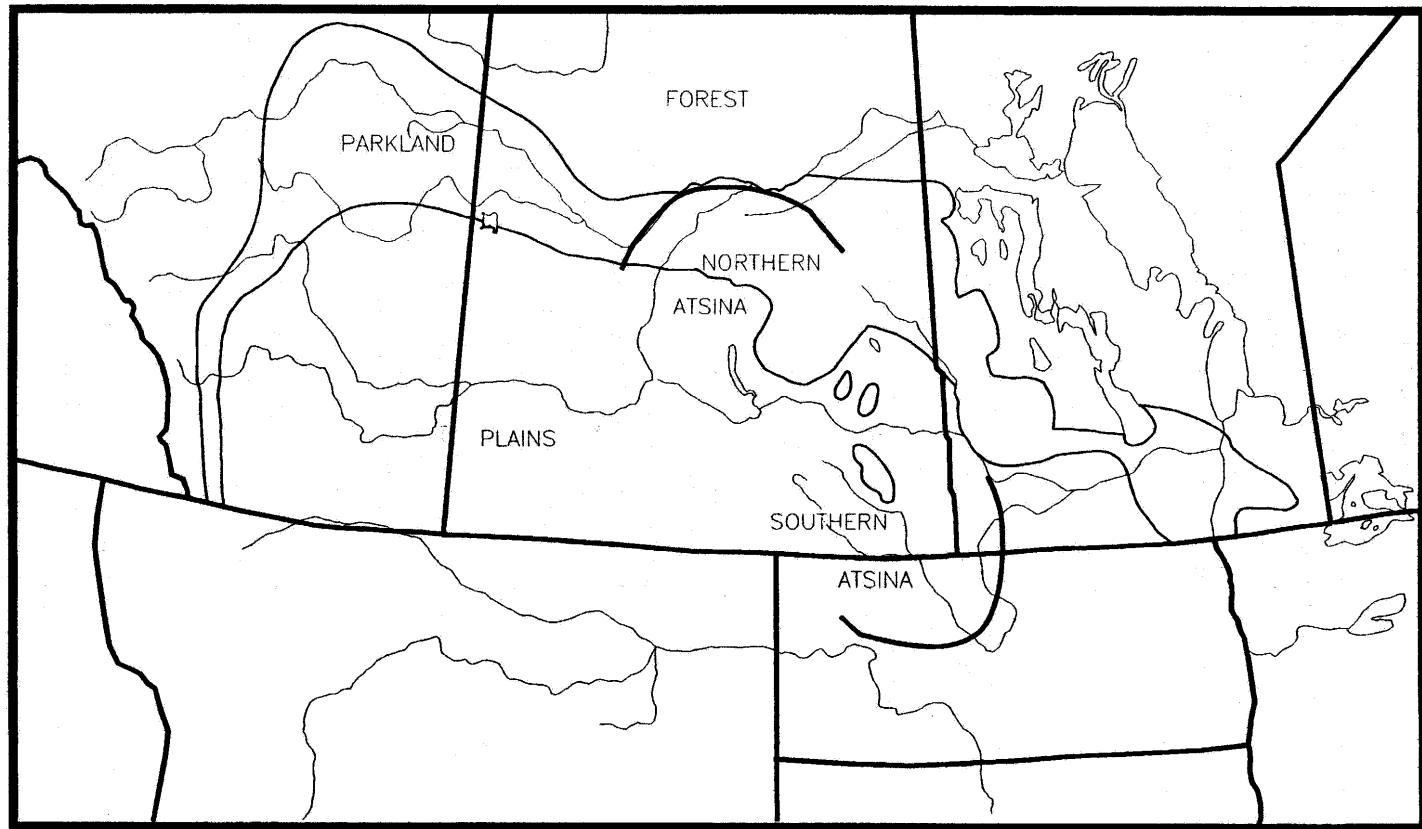
Although they were called by many names, the historic records show that Gros Ventre, Fall Indians, Rapid Indians, Big Bellies, Minnetarees of Fort des Prairie were names referring to the same group. According to Mackenzie, M'Gillivray and Umfreville, they were the principle inhabitants of Saskatchewan plains until the 1790s. This group attacked NWC and HBC posts in 1793 and 1794; shortly afterwards they split permanently into two groups. One group appears to have settled with the horticultural Hidatsa in the village known as Metaharta; the other part of the group returned and were affiliated with the Blackfoot confederacy. This latter group was greatly feared in the 1790s and early 1800s because of their aggressive behaviour towards Europeans, Americans and others.

Many of the contradictions in the historic records about the Gros Ventre appear to be products of editorial assumptions and scholarly interpretations. Several of the inconsistencies in the accounts of traders and travellers vanish under the argument advanced in this paper.

**Figure 1**  
**The Location of Forts Referred to in the Text**



**Figure 2**  
**Mackenzie's Placement of the Fall Indian Groups Prior to 1794.**



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### Notes

1. Fidler spent a winter at South Branch House in 1789 and would have known the Fall Indians (MacGregor 1966:20).
2. Harmon noted that the post was abandoned fifteen years before but actually the 1794 attack was eleven years before.

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