

# **“A Rather Colourful Caravan”, October 3, 1803.**

By Alexander Henry

In 1802, Alexander Henry was Superintendent of the Lower Red River for the North West Company. His main post was Fort Pembina, located at the forks of the Pembina and Red Rivers. From this location, in the late autumn he would often send work parties to construct and staff, so-called ‘wintering houses’ where wintering trading would occur with the local indigenous population. These wintering posts were usually maintained for one or two seasons only. They were not usually protected by timber palisades as the feared Sioux were not known to send raiding parties north from the Dakotas into what is now southern Manitoba during the winter, so the post occupants were generally safe to winter at these locations.

During the winter of 1801-02, Henry himself visited the “Hair Hills” wintering post, noting that it was two days travel by cariole, a kind of sleigh, from Fort Pembina.<sup>1</sup> In the spring of 1802, his men in charge of the post, “Cadotte and Payet” returned from the outpost with a large and successful winter's trade. Consequently, on October 3rd, 1803, Henry sent Michel Langlois to lead a group to re-establish the Hair Hills sub-post for the coming winter season. Henry, described the departure of this group, which he referred to “a rather colourful caravan of meadow gentry” as it set off to winter in the Hair Hills, (Pembina Hills).

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## **October 3, 1803 - NWC Fort Pembina**

*“Mr. Langlois and others started for the Hair hills. This caravan demands notice, to show the vast difference it makes in a place where horses are introduced. It is true they are useful animals, but if there were not one in all the North West, we should have less trouble and expense. Our men would neither be so burdened with families, nor so indolent and insolent as they are, and the natives in general would be more honest and industrious. Let an impartial eye look into the affair, to discover whence originates the unbounded extravagance of our meadow gentry, both white and native, and horses will be found one of the principal causes.*

*Let us view the bustle and noise which attended the transportation of five pieces of goods to a place where the houses were built in 1801-02. The men were up at break of day and their horses tackled long before sunrise; but they were not ready to move before*

ten o'clock, when I had the curiosity to climb on top of my house to watch their motions and observe their order of march.

*Antoine Payet, guide and second in command, leads the van, with a cart drawn by two horses and loaded with his private baggage, cassettes, bags, kettles, and mashqueminctes [sic] Madame Payet follows the cart with a child a year old on her back, very merry. Charles Bottineau, with two horses and a cart loaded with 1 1/2 packs, his own baggage, and two young children with kettles and other trash hanging on to it. Madame Bottineau with a squalling infant on her back, scolding and tossing it about. Joseph Dubord goes on foot, with his long pipe-stem and calumet in his hand; Madame Dubord follows on foot, carrying his tobacco pouch with a broad bead tail.*

*Antoine Thellier, with a cart and two horses, loaded with 1 1/2 packs of goods and with baggage belonging to Brisebois, Jasmin, and Pouliot, and a kettle hung on each side. Auguste Brisebois follows with only his gun on his shoulder and a fresh-lighted pipe in his mouth. Michel Jasmin goes next, like Brisebois, with gun and pipe puffing out clouds of smoke. Nicholas Pouliot, the greatest smoker in the North West, has nothing but pipe and pouch. Those three fellows, having taken a farewell dram and lighted fresh pipes, go on brisk and merry, playing numerous pranks. Domin Livernois, with a young mare, the property of Mr. Langlois, loaded with weeds for smoking, an old worsted bag (Madame's property), some squashes and potatoes, a small keg of fresh water, and two young whelps howling. Next goes Livernois' young horse, drawing a travaille loaded with his baggage and a large worsted mashguemcate [?] belonging to Madame Langlois.*

*Next appears Madame [John] Cameron's mare, kicking, rearing, and snortling, hauling a travaille loaded with a bag of flour, cabbages, turnips, onions, a small keg of water, and a large kettle of broth. Michel Langlois, who is master of the band, now comes on leading a horse that draws a travaille nicely covered with a new painted tent, under which his daughter and Mrs. Cameron lie at full length, very sick; this covering or canopy has a pretty effect in the caravan, and appears at a great distance in the plains. Madame Langlois brings up the rear of the human beings, following the travaille with a slow step and melancholy air, attending to the wants of her daughter, who, notwithstanding her sickness, can find no other expressions of gratitude to her parents than by calling them dogs, fools, beasts, etc.*

*The rear guard consists of a long train of 20 dogs, some for sleighs, some for game, and others of no use whatever, except to snarl and destroy meat. The total forms a procession nearly a mile long, and appears like a large band of Assiniboines."*

Trading in the area of the Lower Red River in the early 1800s was at times a hazardous business. In his journal narrative Henry mentions the suspicious death of a post master and the disappearance of all his records, and his own strengthening of the stockade at Fort Pembina, ostensibly against the Sioux, but according to him also against an increasingly unruly and hostile local Indian population.

Henry had reason to be cautious. According to his journal on September 4, 1800 he arranged for a guide named Nanaundeyea to take a man named Lagasse and two other men into the (Pembina) hills to build a wintering house there. Henry's action in setting up a post in the hills seems to have been a response to increased competition in the Lower Red River area especially from the XY Company.

Nanaundeyea pointed out that these hills were within the raiding range of the Sioux, and suggested that it would be wiser to wait until after the beginning of October before entering the area when the danger of attack by a Sioux war-party would be negligible. Henry obviously agreed with this suggestion. Nanaundeyea, Lagasse and another North-West Company employee must have set out for the hills on or about October 1<sup>st</sup>, since on October 13<sup>th</sup> Henry visited them. He found Lagasse and a man named Dubois living at the foot of the hills in a rather tiny log hut.

That Henry was sensible of the Sioux threat in the area is clear from his attempts to dissuade local Indians from visiting the hills on September 18<sup>th</sup> to trap beaver, calling the project a "dangerous undertaking". He had no illusion about the chances of defending a wintering post against attack by the Sioux or anyone else, and to avoid the need for defending these posts they were occupied only during the relatively safe winter months. Nevertheless, Lagasse and Dubois had a close call that winter whether they knew it or not. On January 6<sup>th</sup>, 1801 Henry's associate, Michel Langlois arrived at Fort Pembina.

He informed me that a party of "Crees and Sonnants" had left their camp to go to war, but on reaching our house at the Hair Hills, and hearing the Saulteurs (sic) were ready for them, they gave it up for the present and wished to plunder the house. Fortunately there were two or three old men among them, who prevented the pillage and remained several days after the party had gone off, fearing lest they might come back and accomplish their design. This would have been easy, as there were but two whites at the house.

There is no subsequent mention of the fortunes of Lagasse or Dubois that year, but that fall a post was again built in the Hair Hills. On October 10, 1801 Henry and a certain Mr. Cameron visited Michel Langlois, who despite his hair-raising story of the winter before, had taken on this sub-post. Henry found that Langlois had built his wintering house *"three leagues higher up than our house was last winter, exactly at the foot of the steep sandy banks, where the river (Dead Horse Creek) first issues from the mountain."*

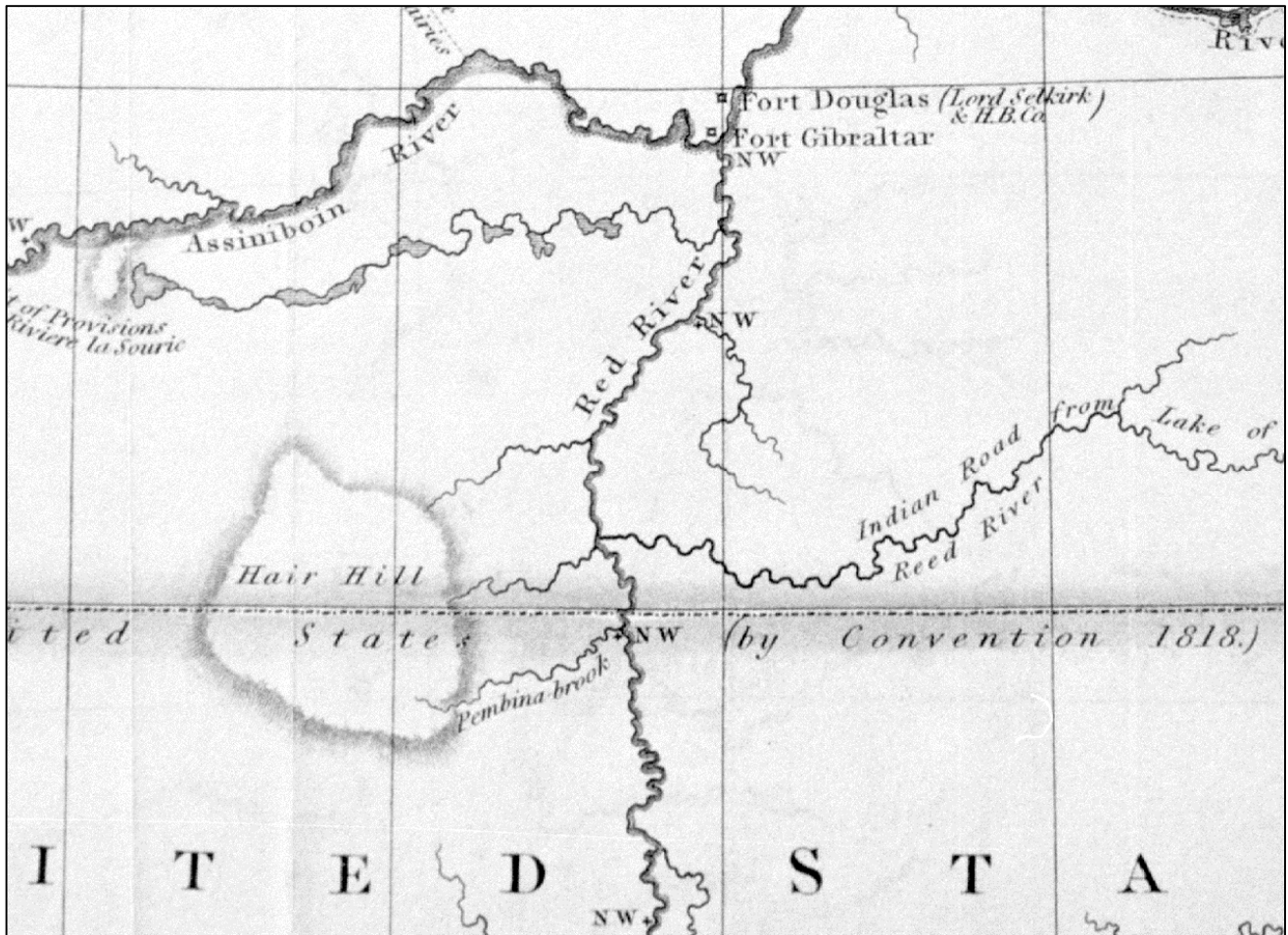
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**RETURNS OF LOWER RED RIVER DEPARTMENT, 1801-02.**

	JOHN CAMERON, X. Y. OPPOSITION, GRANDES FOURCHES.	M. LANGLOIS, HAIR HILLS.	J. B. DESMARAIS, OLD MOUCHE, RIVIÈRE AUX GRATIAS.	A. HENRY, JOHN CRÉBASSA, PAMBIAN RIVER.	TOTALS, IN FOUR CANOES.
Beavers, weighing 1,805 lbs.....	410	200	130	629	1,369
Black bears.....	22	24	..	18	64
Brown bears.....	2	5	..	4	11
Wolves.....	30	160	8	58	256
Foxes.....	20	39	2	16	77
Raccoons.....	29	14	3	39	85
Fishers.....	23	57	38	67	185
Otters.....	29	5	2	24	60
Martens.....	..	13	5	6	24
Minks.....	6	..	5	26	40
Wolverenes.....	..	3	1	..	1
Loup-cerviers.....	..	8	8	51	67
Dressed moose and biches.....	..	20	..	..	20
Shaved and parchment biches.....	..	220	12	38	270
Muskrats.....	..	5	..	8	13
Buffalo robes.....	..	1	7	2	10
Packs of 90 lbs. each.....	9	24	3½	25½	62
Bags of pemmican, of 90 lbs. each.....	..	50	7	33	90
Kegs of beef.....	..	..	..	16	16
Kegs of grease.....	3	..	..	..	3
Kegs of sugar.....	3	..	..	..	3

**Gain, Halifax currency, £1,171 15s. 7d.**

Above: Winter of 1801-02 returns from Lower Red River region NWC posts: "Pambian River"; "Grandes Fourches" (Grand Forks); "Rivière aux Gratias" (Morris River); and "Hair Hills", (second column). Note that the Hair Hills sub-post, took in twenty-four, 90-pound packs worth of furs and pelts, only slightly less than the 25 ½ packs taken in at the main regional post, at Pambian River.



Above: North West Company Fort Pembina, "Pembina Brook", and the "Hair Hill" as shown in this detail of an 1816 map entitled: "Map of Part of the Indian Territories in North America Exhibiting the Route of the Indian Fur Traders from Fort William to the Red River and to the other Trading Stations of the North West Company", Dated: 19 June 1816 (A of M - H3 614.2 gmd.)

...from: "Fort Pinancewaywining", by Michael Payne, Research Assistant, Historic Resources Branch, Province of Manitoba. November 1980

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