

Fort Desjarlais

Location: Souris River, North of Lauder
RM of Cameron
1836 – 1858

FORT DESJARLAIS IS REMEMBERED TODAY AS the most prominent and successful of the Souris River trading posts. Built by the independent Joseph Desjarlais in 1836 it was located almost directly north of present-day Lauder, near Hartney.

One unexplained mystery regarding the fort's existence was its immense size in comparison to other Souris River posts. Facing the river, the fort was 200 feet long and 150 feet deep (60 by 45 metres). One long log building and several other smaller ones were surrounded by a stockade of oak posts. At all times the fort employed an unusually large force of 50 to 80 men and kept a large number of horses. Other livestock was also housed there, and several small plots of grain were grown. The fort included a horse corral, and an excavation of the site in 1967 revealed manure two feet (over half a metre) deep.

The main question is: how did Desjarlais support so many men and horses? Supplying food for such numbers would have been a monumental task in and of itself, never mind providing wages. Yet Fort Desjarlais operated quite successfully in opposition to the Hudson's Bay Company and other independents for nearly 20 years. Most posts along the river operated for no more than a few years. How and why was this fort able to stay in business for so long? Some hypotheses have been put forward to answer this questions.

Proclaimed "Warden of the Plains" by the HBC, Cuthbert Grant had his fort only five miles (eight kms) downstream from Desjarlais'. It was Grant's express duty to keep independents and especially American traders from establishing themselves on the Souris. Desjarlais may have felt the need for a large force of men for protective purposes. Some also suggest that he was engaged in illegally smuggling American liquor into Canada and Canadian furs into the United States. He may have wished to safeguard these interests with a sizable force of men. It would also have taken many men and horses to carry on such traffic to and from the border.

The hypothesis that Desjarlais required protection from First Nations seems unlikely. The fact that his

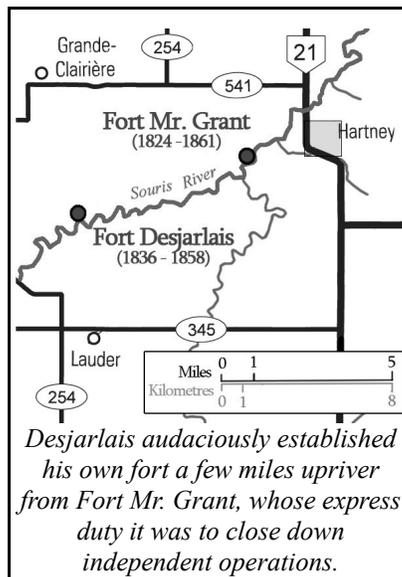
fort operated for so long in such dangerous territory suggests that Desjarlais was friendly with the neighbouring tribes. According to Dakota living at Turtle Mountain at that time, Joseph Desjarlais was known as *Mitche Cote*, or "Hairy Legs." There may have been a less admirable reason for Desjarlais getting along so well with his neighbours – on several occasions he faced charges from Fort Garry authorities for trading firewater (adulterated liquor) to First Nations on the Souris.

The size of Fort Desjarlais is probably due to the dual occupations of the men: buffalo hunters and fur traders. This supplementary economic activity would have given the fort three sources of income: buffalo robes in the winter, pemmican sold to the HBC, and trade with trappers and First Nations. Add the possibility of illegal trade with the Americans and the income generated by the fort could quite conceivably have been enough to support year-round employment for a large number of men.

Fort Desjarlais' operation came to an end in 1858 due to a fire that destroyed the fort. It's possible the fort was burned down by rival traders, but much more likely that it lay in the path of a prairie fire. Joseph Desjarlais immediately moved south of the border and built another post.

In the 1960s several cellar holes and chimney mounds were still distinctly visible at the site of Fort Desjarlais. Since 1969, though, three floods of the Souris River have all but completely eroded evidence of the fort. Most of what did remain has crumbled into the Souris River. It was

estimated by an old timer living in the area that Fort Desjarlais eroded into the river at an average rate of two feet per year. At that rate the fort would have taken 120 years to disappear.



References:

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McMorran, G. A. *Souris River Posts*. Souris: Souris Plaindealer Ltd., 1948.
Map: Fort Locations from McMorran, G. A.