

Near Fort Walsh is Farwell's Trading Post where whiskey, guns, and furs were the staple commodities.



PARKS CANADA

THE MILD, MILD WEST

TOM FORD visits Saskatchewan's southwest corner, where the Mounties established law and order – in a peaceable way.

A lot of places can say they represent Canada's beautiful face. Only a few can claim to be a site of the nation's soul. One of them is southwestern Saskatchewan.

The region was Canada's Old West – badlands, bad men, cops, cowboys, and aboriginals. The United States had a Wild West; Canada had a mild west, not because the people involved were bland, but because they

had the courage to try peaceful rather than violent solutions.

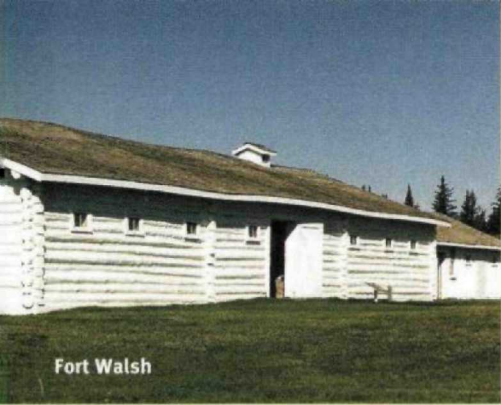
A good spot to begin your tour is where the North West Mounted Police started in what is now Saskatchewan: Fort Walsh, a National Historic Site with costumed interpreters just south of Maple Creek, 350 kilometres west of Regina. The whitewashed log fort nestled in the brown, undulating Cypress Hills is a replica of one built in 1875 by a flamboyant NWMP superintendent, James Morrow Walsh, and thirty men, about a year after the Mounties trekked west to assert Canadian sovereignty by enforcing our laws.

Walsh and Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer of the U.S. Seventh Cavalry exemplify the differences in the Canadian and U.S. West: Custer and 264 of his men were annihilated after they foolishly attacked Sitting Bull and the Lakota in 1876 in Montana,

but Walsh became Sitting Bull's friend when he and more than four thousand Lakota fled to Canada seeking refuge after the battle of the Little Big Horn.

Just inside the fort's main gate, in a building representing Walsh's office, you get a sense of what it was like when Sitting Bull angrily refused American offers to take him back, and you can imagine Walsh's favourite riding habit – a slouch hat with the front brim turned up, a buckskin jacket with fringes and cavalry boots – stuffed into a corner.

Because of Sitting Bull, Fort Walsh became NWMP headquarters from 1878 to 1882. Near a fort bastion is a replica of the office of the commissioner, the force's highest ranking officer. Sitting Bull and the last of the Lakota left Canada in 1881 after Prime Minister John A. Macdonald had Walsh removed to another post because he thought the Mountie was too



Fort Walsh

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chummy with the old chief.

Fort Walsh was dismantled in 1882, but in its heyday it was the largest permanent centre between Winnipeg and Vancouver, with a population of nearly five thousand during special events. Traces of the community and two graveyards remain.

Near the fort are reproductions of two booze forts that made huge profits exchanging cheap rotgut (spiced with ink, tobacco, and a touch of strychnine to give you a really great hangover) for buffalo hides used to make expensive machinery belts. A few steps away is the field where a gang of wolfers killed thirty-six Assiniboines in 1873 in a drunken fight over stolen horses – a massacre that helped push Sir John A into creating the NWMP.

A two-and-a-half hour drive east of Fort Walsh are the remains of the old NWMP Wood Mountain Post: a few reconstructed buildings and some indentations in the ground. The site doesn't look like much, but nearby Walsh had his first meeting with Sitting Bull, an event burned into the minds of many Canadian school children.

Walsh, resplendent in his pillbox hat and red

jacket, rode with six men into the camp of the Lakotas, North America's best light cavalry. He called a meeting, lectured the aboriginals on Canadian law, and seized some stolen ponies his scout happened to notice. The school stories often don't mention it, but Walsh got away with this because the Lakota also wanted peace. Sitting Bull liked to say he was a "British Indian" and loved displaying a George III medal he said had been given to an ancestor.

You can see what the country was like in the days of Walsh and Sitting Bull at Grasslands National Park, near Val Marie, one of North America's largest tracts of mixed grass prairie. If you want to go back even farther in time, visit Eastend (the east end of an old Mountie patrol) and its classy, new T. rex Discovery Centre, named after Scotty, a *Tyrannosaurus rex* fossil discovered in 1991 and one of the world's most complete.

One of the baddest of the southwest's badlands is the Big Muddy, near Coronach, 162 kilometres east of Val Marie. In the

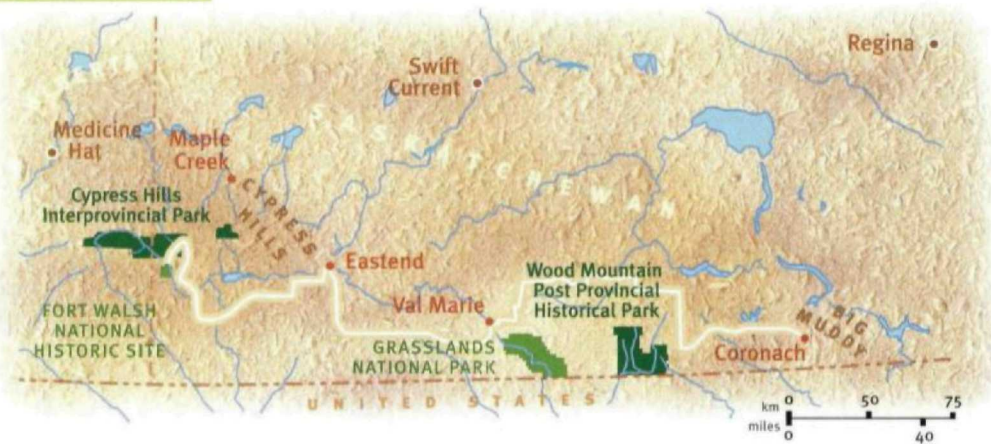
late 1800s, it was station one in an outlaw escape route, supposedly set up by Butch Cassidy, that ran all the way to Mexico. Sam Kelly, a Canadian rustler and train robber, dug caves into the Big Muddy's sides for himself and his horses. On a guided tour you can see Kelly's caves, preserved thanks to some wooden supports local entrepreneurs put in to hold them up.

The southwest's most striking feature, however, is its geography. As Eastend's Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Wallace Stegner wrote: "The world is flat, empty, nearly abstract, and in its flatness you are a challenging upright thing ... It is a country to breed mystical people, egocentric people, perhaps poetic people. But not humble ones."

Just the kind of people who could help develop a nation's soul.

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IF YOU GO ...



DANN HUCK

For information on places to see, accommodations, and special events contact:

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Big Muddy guided tours
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