

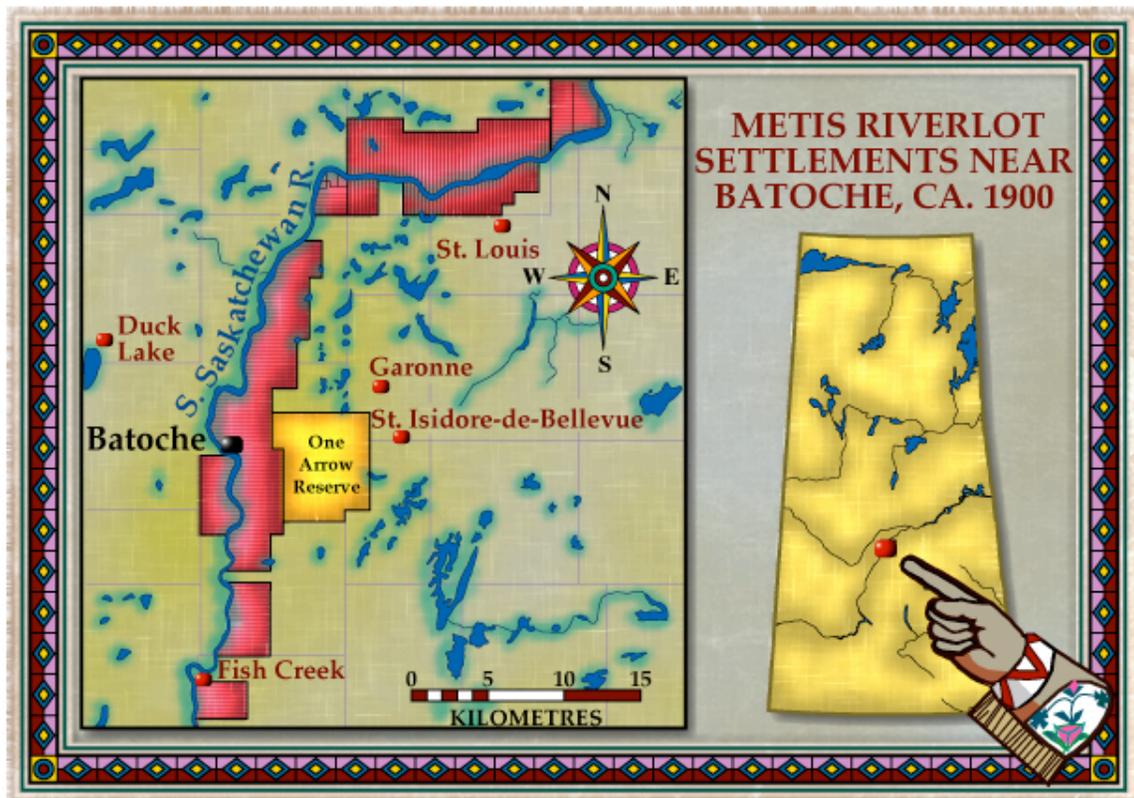
Batoche – Darren R. Préfontaine

Module Objective: The students will learn about the historical significance of Batoche and why the Métis feel that this community is “sacred ground”. The students will also learn that Batoche represents the spirit of resistance to the Métis.

Batoche symbolizes Métis’ freedom, resistance and martyrdom. From their First Nations foremothers the Métis learned of the spirit of Aboriginal resistance to European colonial policies. From their French-Canadian forefathers, the Métis inherited the concept of “*survivance*” – the visceral desire to preserve their language, faith and culture at all costs. The Batoche Métis called themselves “*Otipemisiwak*”, “*gens du libre*” or “Free People”. For the Métis at Batoche, the merging of resistance and *survivance* would be a potent mix. During a few brief weeks in 1885, less than one hundred Métis resisted the might of the British Empire and the fledgling Dominion of Canada. The end came at the Battle of Batoche between May 8-12 1885. During this battle, the Métis valiantly fought against an enemy army many times their size. Inevitably, however, they succumbed, with many dying.

After 1885, Batoche become “sacred ground” to the Métis. Stories of the resisters’ heroism, of old men sacrificing their lives to save young men, of Madeleine Dumont comforting the women and children, and of homes being burned and pillaged remained within the Métis community. In 1884, the Métis of Batoche, St. Laurent, and St. Louis, Saskatchewan, appointed St. Joseph’s Day - July 24 - as a Métis “national day”. The day started with a Mass followed by a country fair with dancing and music. Men competed in shooting competitions, horse races, and arm wrestling. Women displayed their embroidery, quilts, hooked rugs, sashes, and crochet work. After 1885, people gathered at Batoche to remember the battle and those Métis who died fighting to preserve their way

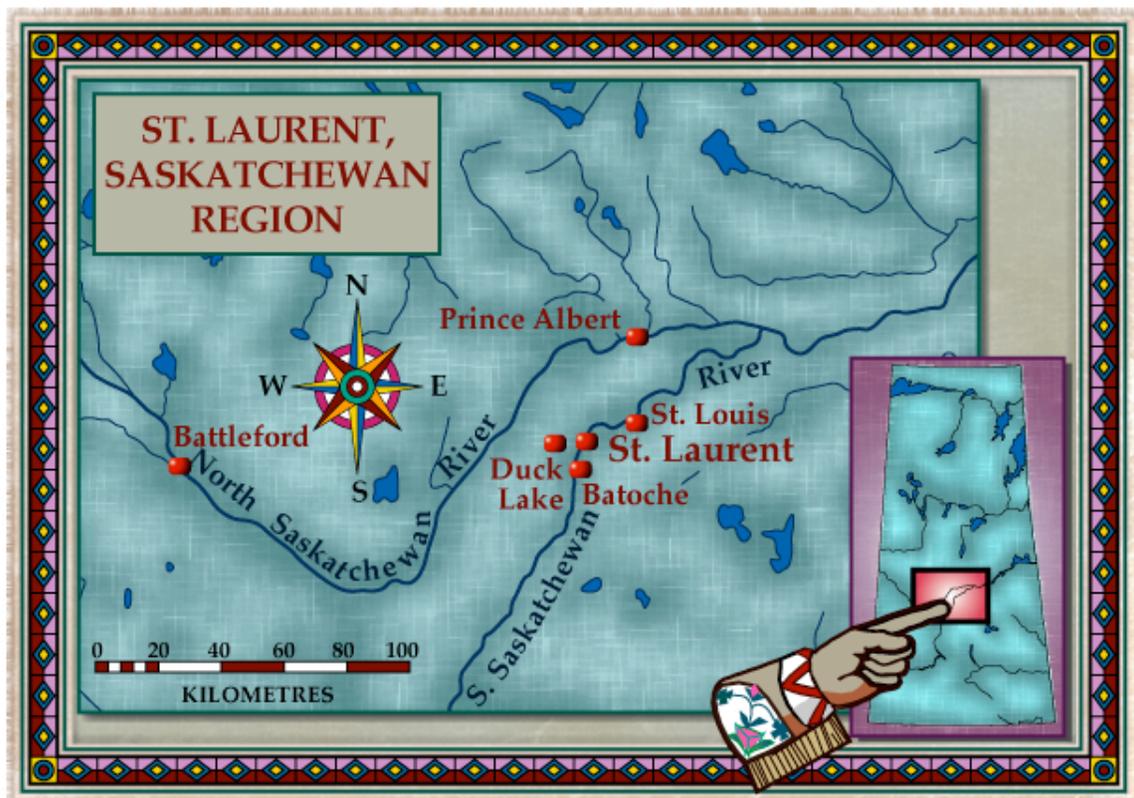
of life. Since 1970, the modern celebration at Batoche, during the last week in July, has drawn thousands of Métis from across the Métis Homeland. While Métis culture is always on display, the highlight for many is the religious procession and prayers held for the fallen heroes at rest in the Batoche cemetery.



Batoche no longer exists as a community. It is ghost village haunted by the traumatic events of long ago. It remains a poignant reminder to the time when the Métis made a stand against the unresponsive, neglectful, and eventually oppressive policies of the Canadian state. After Batoché's fall, the community precariously lived on. However, by the 1920s and 1930s, the sense of community began to dissipate and eventually unraveled. After 1885, incoming French-Canadian, French and Walloon (French Belgians) settlers ensured that many

Batoche Métis would be assimilated. After the 1885 Resistance, some Batoche Métis managed to disperse to more northern and remote locales in Alberta, British Columbia and to Saskatchewan in order to remain “Free People”.

Dispersed Red River Métis initially built Batoche. As Gabriel Dumont indicated in his dictated memoirs in 1903: “We left Manitoba because we were not free, and we came here to what was still a wild country in order to be free. And still they (read “*les anglais*” or English Canadians) will not leave us alone.” Founded in 1871, as the “St. Laurent Settlement”, Batoche and its environs consisted of 322 persons in that year and by 1877, 500. In the early 1880s, more Métis came from Manitoba and this migration led to the creation of Batoche, St. Laurent, St. Antoine, Duck Lake and St. Louis Parish as settled communities with a population in 1883 of approximately 800-1500. From 1885-1920, the community at Batoche consistently had a population of 450.



The Métis at Batoche and area were made up from several extended families including the Nolin's, Lépine's, Gariepy's Boucher's, Letendre's, Venne's, Champagne's, Fisher's, Fidler's, Pilon's, Caron's and Montour's. Endogamy or marriage within the community was extensively practiced. As a result, almost everybody in the settlement was related. The community was also free of a variety of social pathologies that would later plague many Aboriginal communities. This ensured cultural and community solidarity. Michif- French and Michif-Cree were most commonly spoken in Batoche, in addition to Cree, Saulteaux and Dakota. The residents of Batoche were devout Roman Catholics, who often practiced a syncretic Catholicism mixed with Aboriginal spirituality.

Throughout the 1870s-80s, the community developed normally. In 1874, Roman Catholic missionaries arrived. A business class or *petit bourgeoisie* emerged around Xavier Batoche dit Letendre, who, in 1871, opened a general store. An economic base was built around narrow river-lot farms along the banks of the North Saskatchewan, which was supplemented by bison hunting, gathering, provisioning, fishing, hunting and trapping. A mission church, school and residence was soon built and Père André, a priest from Brittany, provided the sacraments to the community. Political leadership was provided by such Manitoba *émigrés* or newcomers as Charles Nolin and Louis Schmidt, and by the community's founder Gabriel Dumont.

From 1873-75, the Métis also practiced self-government through the governing Council of St. Laurent. Gabriel Dumont was elected president. The Council of St. Laurent drafted a set of twenty-eight laws to deter transgressions against persons, property and group survival. For instance, laws were in place for those who "dishonoured" girls, stole horses and for hunting independently of the

community bison hunting party. The enforcement of the last law, led to a threat of force by the Northwest Mounted Police and the eventual demise of the Council in 1875. Political activism took on other forms between 1875-1885. The Batoche Métis began to write petitions to Ottawa in order to have their land rights protected, delegates were sent to meet with government officials at the territorial capitals in Battleford and Regina and in Ottawa. In 1884, when no responses were forthcoming, it was decided, by consensus within the Métis and settler community, to bring Louis Riel to Batoche in order to negotiate with the federal government. The 1885 Resistance soon erupted.

After 1885, the Batoche Métis attempted to have their voices heard in both Regina and Ottawa. From 1885-1890, numerous petitions requesting compensation for the looting by Canadian soldiers of Métis homes during the resistance were sent from the community to the federal government. Others petitioned to receive title to the land or to receive scrip certificates. In 1890, there was a brief discussion about the creation of a Métis reserve in the area; but that scheme fizzled. The Métis voted Liberal in the hopes of defeating the Conservative government in Ottawa. However, by the time the Liberals took power in 1896, they were no longer interested in the Métis. Demographically, the Francophone Métis and French Canadians represented half of the population of the Northwest Territories in 1875. After that, this figure dropped, as did the Métis' political power. Economically, the Batoche Métis were being pushed off the land by immigrant farmers and by incursions on Métis land by First Nations bands. Coupled with political and economic marginalization, was racism. French Canadians, First Nations, English Canadians and immigrants discriminated against the Batoche Métis. Many began leaving Batoche in the 1890s for better opportunities elsewhere. Nevertheless, in 1924, there were still 74 families listed

in the Batoche Parish Register. They were, however, no longer "Free People" in the same sense as their ancestors were.

Questions and Activities:

- 1) Why do you think Batoche means so much to the Métis?
- 2) Visit the Parks Canada website on Batoche (http://www.parksCanada.gc.ca/APPS/DCl/source/3d_e.asp?sitename=batoche). Tour the virtual exhibits of the village Batoche. From what you have learned from other resources are these buildings typical of a Métis community? Why or why not.
- 3) If you have an opportunity either on your own, with your family or with a school group visit the Batoche National Historical Site. Go to the cemetery, the church and the battlefield. You will notice the reverence with which the site holds. Write an essay or a story about your experience at this site. How is this site different or similar to other national historical sites that you may have toured? (In Canada only the Plains of Abraham and Queenston's Heights carry similar reverence and solemnity.)
- 4) How does the Back to Batoche event contribute to modern Métis group identity?
- 5) If you have the opportunity visit both the Batoche National Historical Site and attend the Back to Batoche celebration. How are the events of 1885 interpreted at each locale? Are they similar or different? If so, what do these differences have to see about the dominant society? The Métis?
- 6) Consult Diane Payment's book *The Free People*. Did the Métis try to preserve their way of life after 1885, why or why not?

Sources:

Dumont, Gabriel. "Mémoires dictés par Gabriel Dumont" Batoche, 1903, Provincial Archives of Manitoba, MG10, F1.

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Woodcock, George. *Gabriel Dumont: The Métis Chief and his Lost World*. Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1976. (pp. 93-102)

Websites taken from the World Wide Web, December 16, 2002:

<http://www.metisnation-sask.com/batoche/> (Metis Nation – Saskatchewan)

http://www.parksCanada.gc.ca/APPS/DCl/source/3d_e.asp?sitename=batoche (Batoche National Historical Site)

http://www.mpcbc.bc.ca/photos/batoche_sl_show2002.htm (Batoche Slide Show 2002)

<http://metis.tripod.com/backtobatoche3.html> (Back to Batoche: 1970's through the 1990's)