

Heroines of the 1885 Resistance: Isabelle Branconnier Vandal. (1856-1936).
Spouse, Roger Vandal, (b. c. 1849).

Isabelle was born on August 20, 1856, the daughter of Amable Branconnier and Elizabeth Stevenson. She was first married to Roger Vandal at St. Agathe in 1873. During the battle for Batoche “she could see and hear the shells going overhead.” Stray rifle fire “cut off a piece of one woman’s hair, and two innocent little babies were so closely grazed by bullets that a scratch was left on their skin.”¹

Her husband, Roger, was quite ill in 1885 and did not participate in Resistance fighting. They eventually returned to Manitoba in 1888 and rejoined their relatives at St. Jean-Baptiste. Roger died in St. Boniface on October 30, 1888.

Isabelle later married Etienne Desmarais on September 7, 1890 at St. Jean Baptiste. In 1933, Isabelle gave the following dictation to Mrs. E. Robinson [Georgina née Hopcraft] of Morris MB. This was preserved by Father David Roy who added footnote information from parish registers. This was passed on to the author by Lionel Bernier, a Vandal descendant.

In later years after I was married, we moved to Fish Creek, Saskatchewan. My husband myself and four children.

Now, in 1885 the trouble started again at Batoche.² I happened to be there again, so it seemed that trouble was following me. The first battle was at Duck Lake, the second at Fish Creek, and the third at Batoche. So there we were—at Batoche—for protection, and in the middle of trouble.

The leader of the Rebellion ordered all families into Batoche for safety. For ourselves, my husband did not take part in the rebellion with the others as my husband was sick.

The battle went on for three days, starting at 7:00 AM and leaving off at six PM. The soldiers got orders to fight and take Batoche as the rebels were getting out of ammunition. When the soldiers entered we were all hidden alongside the river bank (the village being on top of the hill). All the families and children were camped there. We could hear the leaders commanding the soldiers, and bullets were going over our heads into the river just like hail. Some of the tents were shot through. Once we went for water for the children and I saw something strange in the mud. All I could see was something like a handle. So my sister and I pulled it out and found it was a cannonball, as they shot across the river at the houses on the other side, and this one had not got across.

The soldiers took Batoche and all the families had to run away for safety. We all started along the river; there were with us about two hundred children, maybe more, with their parents. The river had risen and gone down again, and had left a bank of ice which was a protection for us against the bullets. While we were walking, a little dog was killed right in front of us by a bullet. It could have been one of us as well.

When the government boat came up, we were hidden in a little slope watching it pass. We saw it when it got caught by the cable. It was twisting around as if there was nothing to guide it.

¹ Cited in Nathalie Kermaol. “Les roles et les souffrances des femmes métisses lors de la Résistance de 1870 et de la Rébellion de 1885.” *Prairie Forum*, Vol. 19, No. 2, Fall 1993: 160.

² « Started again » is a reference back to the 1869-70 Resistance she talks about earlier in the dictation.

But my real worst experience, to me at least, was when I nearly lost my little girl. There was an Indian family that we used to feed before the rebellion. I was really frightened of them, but when we were getting away with our children, I had one in my arms and had one by the hand, the others being big enough to follow me. The same Indian woman happened to pass me, and she saw that I was in difficulty handling the children, so she grabbed one of my little girls and made signs she was going to help me. Putting the child on her back she started off. I hadn't looked, and when I did, she was almost a quarter mile ahead of me. I left the other children with my sister and started to run after her. When I got to her, I grabbed my little girl and told her: "You are running away with my girl." The [Indian woman] said "Yes", and she took out some bannock and gave it to the little girl. I never saw the [woman] again.

From there we went on to a small mountain where we stayed three days. We had very little to eat and our clothes were badly torn. While we were there, Riel came to us. All his moccasins were torn, and my sister, Mrs. Joseph Vandal [Julienne Branconnier] gave him a pair of moccasins. Then he took two men, Mr. Modeste Vandal and Mr. Modeste Boyer, and wrote out his surrendrance papers, and the three went to meet the soldiers to give themselves up. He said he took those two men to prove he was surrendering himself, and [so] that no one would get the reward for his capture.

After all was over all the men had to give up their arms to the government at Batoche, so all the families could go back home, that is, the ones that had homes left. Many homes were burnt. Ours was not burnt, but all our clothes and stock were gone.

My husband had been a volunteer in the Province of Manitoba³, but had his discharge when leaving for the west. A captain of the government army came to our house and questioned us. My husband showed him his discharge and told him he hadn't taken part in the rebellion, but he was there and couldn't help himself. Of course they couldn't force him as he was sick. The captain said all right, stay here, and he would come for us the next day.

The next day he arrived with two soldiers in an express, and took us to Clark's Crossing where all the army troops were. When we got there they had camp ready for us, some good soldiers came and covered my children with woollen blankets, as they saw we had nothing.

I was quite nervous to be alone with strangers with my children and sick husband. But, I soon found out they were good friends to us. We were there three weeks; I was the cook. They gave us supplies for a year and we went back home to Fish Creek. We stayed there until 1888. During that time I worked all I could and earned a team of ponies and an express wagon. I was working for the soldiers. The one I especially remember who helped me to get work was Captain Bebière.



Compiled by Lawrence Barkwell

³ Lionel Bernier says that this was likely the St. Jean Baptiste Infantry Company.

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