

Louis Schmidt, M.L.A. (1844-1935)

Schmidt was born on December 4, 1844 at Old Fort Chipewyan. His father, Alfred “Rabasca” Smith, was a HBC fisherman and freighter and his mother, Marguerite Lespérance, was the daughter of a Red River Metis guide. Schmidt indicated that his paternal grandfather was Nicholas Andrews a HBC employee at Athabasca who was married to Marie-Anne Généreux, a Metis from Great Slave Lake. Andrews deserted Marie-Anne and she then married Pierre Laferté and then married Schmidt. Louis said that he went by the name Laferté until Bishop Taché changed it in 1858, believing Schmidt to be his true name.

In 1854, Schmidt joined his mother at Red River where she had traveled for medical attention. He enrolled in the Brothers of Christian School and was one of four Metis boys (along with Louis Riel) selected by Taché to do advanced studies in Quebec colleges. He attended Collège St. Hyacinthe until 1861. He went to live with his mother and grandfather, Alexis Lespérance. He obtained work with the Oblates preparing Cree grammars and dictionaries then in 1863 went to Pembina to work for Joseph Lemay a customs collector. Due to problems with Lemay’s wife (namely, his drinking), he was forced to move to St. Joseph where Father Alexis André took him in. In December of 1863, he accompanied Father André as the American government’s peace envoy to the Sioux Indians. Schmidt then returned to Red River in the summer 1864. Bishop Taché then placed him in charge of the churches cart trains going to St. Paul, Minnesota for supplies. He was also employed as a teacher at Collège St. Boniface. In the spring of 1866, he was assigned to accompany Father Ritchot to the mission at Qu’Appelle. When his uncle, Louis Lespérance fell ill at Fort Ellice, Schmidt went there to take him back to Red River. Later that year he took charge of his grandfather’s carting business and went on the fall buffalo hunt down to the Grand Coteau.

The following year Schmidt worked for a mail contractor on the Abercrombie, Devil’s Lake, Helena, Montana mail route. He was badly frozen during this venture and lost some toes so he returned home with very little money. However, he received his compensation from the United States government for the Sioux negotiations completed four years earlier and used this money to outfit himself as a freighter on the route to Saulk Rapids, Minnesota. In 1869, he apparently promised bishop Taché that he would stop drinking. It was at this time that he went to live with Louis Riel.

Louis Schmidt was a boyhood friend and schoolmate of Riel and became extensively involved during both Resistances. Schmidt was a delegate from St. Boniface to the Convention of Forty and was appointed Assistant Secretary of State. He was elected to the Manitoba legislature from



the riding of St. Boniface West in 1870. He was married to Justine Laviolette in 1872. After the annexation of his riding to that of St. Charles he ran in St. Charles in 1874 and was defeated. In 1878 he ran and was elected in St. François Xavier. He was also very active in the St. Jean Baptiste Society and l'Union St. Alexandre, the Metis Association.

In June of 1880, in response to his ongoing drinking problem, Schmidt left St. Boniface and went to Duck Lake where he met with Father André. The priest suggested that he establish himself on the South Saskatchewan River at the site of present day St. Louis. While there, he soon became involved in the Metis grievances against the federal land surveys. In the winter of 1881 he drafted a petition to the Minister of the Interior for the residents of St. Louis and in the fall of 1882 sent a similar petition on behalf of the residents at Batoche. In the summer of 1883, Schmidt acted as secretary for the first of the large public meetings at St. Laurent regarding the resident's grievances with the federal government. In the meantime, he had gained employment in the office of a Prince Albert barrister. On May 6, 1884 Schmidt was at a meeting of English mixed-bloods and settlers in Prince Albert (again he was secretary) and he suggested that they send a delegation to Riel in Montana to obtain his assistance. Schmidt was to accompany them but on May 12th he received his long sought appointment to the Land Office and Father André persuaded him to stay behind. Nevertheless, he continued to assist the Metis by publishing their grievances in *Le Manitoba*. When Riel arrived, Schmidt went to St. Laurent to volunteer his services but Riel declined, believing he could be most useful to them in the Land Office. Over the next few months, Schmidt became concerned over Riel's behaviour, he communicated this to Bishop Taché and implored him to make the Metis grievances better known and thus head off violence and what he viewed as Riel's heretical preaching. By becoming vocal with these criticisms many Metis became convinced that Schmidt had not only abandoned the Metis cause but had betrayed the cause. Nonetheless, when conflict broke out in March of 1885, the government arrested Schmidt.

Louis Schmidt, *dit* Laferté, is remembered in the Fransaskois community for defending francophone language rights in Saskatchewan. The Fransaskois historian Raymond Huel, for instance, has written three articles about Louis Schmidt "Living in the Shadow of Greatness: Louis Schmidt, Riel's Secretary," *Native Studies Review*, Vol. 1, 1984, pp. 16-27; "Louis Schmidt: Patriarch of St. Louis," *Saskatchewan History*, Vol. 40, No. 1, 1987, pp. 1-21 and "Louis Schmidt: A Forgotten Métis," in A.S. Lussier, Editor, *Riel and the Métis: Riel Mini-Conference Papers*. Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications; 1979; 1983, pp. 93-107).



Compiled by Lawrence Barkwell
Coordinator of Metis Heritage & History Research
Louis Riel Institute

