

Riel in Montana¹

In August in 1879, Riel left the Pembina/ Turtle Mountain Metis community of St. Joseph, ND and traveled to Montana. In October, he wrote his mother a letter posted from Ft. Belnap (*The Collected Writings of Louis Riel*, Vol 2, p. 208): « Je me trouve parmi des metis: notre came se compose d'une trentaine de Loges. Il est sur la riviere au Castor, non loin du Missouri" (I am among Metis: our camp is composed of about 30 lodges. It is on Beaver Creek, not far from the Missouri (east of present day Zortman).")

In the same letter (*ibid*, p. 208), Riel writes that there are many buffalo nearby their camp but also many people there to hunt them, including "sauvages" ("wild indians") and Metis from Canada: "Il faut que le Bon Dieu envoie joliment de Buffalo de ce cote-ci Missouri: autrement, il pourrait bien y avoir de la misere encore cette annee" ("God must send a good deal of buffalo to this side of the Missouri: otherwise, there could easily be starvation again this winter.") The early 1800s would see the last few years of the great buffalo hunts, a fact which was having as much impact on the Metis as it was on the other Northern Plains Indian peoples.

He wrote in December of 1879 (*ibid*, p. 210) "Nous sommes au grand detour de la Riviere au lait. Il y a la environ 150 familles metisses. On m'a fait l'honneur de m'elire chef de camp. J'ai accepte mais a regret. Car je t'assure qu'il y a eu de l'ouvrage a faire. Il a fallu courir d'un Fort a l'autre pour tacher d'avoir la permission pour nos gens d'hiverner la ou ils sont actuellement. Enfin le general Terry de St Paul vient d'envoyer une epeche permettant aux metis. au cris, aux sauteurs, aux pieds noirs aux gens de sang de passer l'hiver le long de la Riviere au lait sur le reserve des gros ventres, des Assiniboines et des Yanktons." ("We are at the Big Bend of the Milk River (10-20 miles northeast of Malta's present day location). There are about 150 Metis families here. They did me the honor of electing me camp chief. I accepted but reluctantly. Because I can assure you there was some work involved. I had to run from one Fort to the other trying to get permission for our people to winter over at their current location.

Finally General Terry from St Paul sent a dispatch allowing the Metis, Cree, Chippewa, Blackfeet, and Bloods to spend the winter along the Milk River on the Gros Ventres, Assiniboine, and Yankton reservation"). The presence of the "Saulteux" of Chippewas, almost certainly refers to fullblood Turtle Mountain Chippewas of Little Shell's band. This site is close by the Wolf Point area where Little Shell was living in the summer of 1891, when requested that Bottineau petition the government for a Montana reservation for his people, Metis and fullblood, in that region (Morris and Van Gunten 1985:47).

The following May, Riel declared his intention to become a U.S. citizen at Ft. Benton (*ibid.*, Martel. "Introduction" p. x1). That summer, Riel together with 101 signatories petitioned Gen. Miles for "a reservation in this territory for the halfbreeds" (*ibid.*, pp. 223-226; Flanagan, pp. 183-187). Using 1850, 1860, and 1870 US Census records for

¹ From SUPPLEMENTAL REPORT ON THE LITTLE SHELL CHIPPEWA TRIBE'S FEDERAL ACKNOWLEDGMENT: SUPPLEMENTAL CHRONOLOGY OF DOCUMENTS, 1870-1994.

Pembina and St Joseph's parish records to determine Pembina affiliation and D.N. Sprague and R.P. Frye's *Genealogy of the First Metis Nation* (Winnipeg: Pemmican Press, 1983) to determine Red River affiliation, historian Thomas Flanagan has determined that 43 of the 101 were identifiable as Pembina Metis and 39 as Red River Metis. Some 33 of Flanagan's Pembina names and 14 of his Red River and unidentified names can, in fact, be found on the 1890 Turtle Mountain Roll and/or on the 1892 lists of "American Metis" that Bottineau submitted as part of Chief Little Shell's protest of the McCumber agreement (NA RG 75, Irregular Shaped Papers #14, Turtle Mountain Chippewas Protest to Amendment of 1892 Agreement). Every name cited by Clemence Berger and Ben Kline as members of Pierre Berger's 1879 group of 25 families may be found as signatories to this petition, as well as many of the other names they associate with the founding of Lewistown.

Among the signatories Flanagan identified as Pembina are found: two of the four historic Doney brothers, Joe (RC#191) and Jean Marie (John M. RC#179); the elder Moise Latray, father of William Latray (RC#16) and Pierre Berger, the grandfather of Lewistown representative, Elizabeth Swan, and the leader of the first group of Metis who founded Lewistown. All of the later names are included in Bottineau's 1892 "Protest" lists of American Metis, persons claimed to have rights as the Turtle Mountain Tribe. This demonstrates a continued affiliation with the Turtle Mountain and Little Shell and Bottineau's government on the part of the Montana Turtle Mountain Metis settlers even as they were in the process of creating an independent social and political community in Montana.

Crow Agency head A.R. Keller recommended that this petition be denied on the grounds that the signers would be a bad influence in the Indians and also were "British Subjects". The latter statement is incorrect in the case of, at least, the 43 Pembina men, as Flanagan himself points out (pp. 185ff.). Subsequent to the denial of their petition, Riel and this Metis camp wintered in 1880 and 1881 and Flat Willow Cree, in the Judith Basin near Lewistown, where many of the Pembina Metis settled permanently. (*The Collected Writings of Louis Riel* . Vol 2 Pg 229, fn 1).

At St Peter's, Riel taught many of the Metis children at the mission, including Marie Beauchamp, Marie Christine, William, Sara and Simeon Swain, the children of James Swain and Elise Nomme (Nomee); Marie and Adophe Beauchemin (Bushman, father of current Choteau Little Shell member, Myrtle Reardon); Helene de Montigny; Marie Azur, the child of Gabriel "Gabe" Azure and Cecile LaFromboise; Flora LaRance, the child of Basile and Marguerite LaRance, all three buried in the Teton Canyon Metis cemetery today; and James and Joseph Gray (ibid, p. 378: see also Flanagan. "Biographical Index." *The Collected Writings of Louis Riel*. Vol 5, in which Flanagan provided genealogical data in individuals mentioned in Riel's writings, identified those who were Metis, and specifies those who were from Pembina).

Riel also attended a political meeting of the Metis there, at which Gabriel Azure was elected "Chairman of the Assembly" and then spoke to the group (p. 377). Finally, many of the Metis at St. Peter's gave Riel their power of attorney to sell their Canadian "scrip" rights while on a trip to Winnipeg, including : James Swan Sr. and his wife,

Marie Arcand; Louis Malaterre and his wife, Euphrosine Lapierre; F.X. Lapierre and his wife, Marie Rose Swan; James Swan Jr. and his wife, Elise Nomme; Louise Morin and her husband, Alexandre Azure; Euphrosine Malaterre and her husband, John Pambrun; Cecile Courchene and her husband, J. B. Falcon; Charles Malaterre; Genevieve Arcand; and Antoine Azure (ibid, pp. 277-283). Here in the two lists of names above are many of the individuals and families that were later associated with Augusta and Choteau, and even in the later years with Great Falls. Riel's correspondence makes it clear that they were a social and political community in the early 1880s.



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