

## Brave Women, Courageous Children<sup>1</sup> The 1885 Resistance

The years leading up to the 1885 Resistance were ones of near-starvation conditions for many of the Metis and First Nations people of Saskatchewan. Little has been written about the women of Batoche to document their courage, dedication and support during the fighting. The local people were aware of the coming battle, some fled the area, and others sent their wives and children away. Those women that chose to stay were loyal to the cause and their husbands knew that their help would be needed. Throughout the battle Metis women endured many hardships and faced danger constantly. They carried food, messages and supplies to the men in battle. Many times they placed themselves in harms way. There are accounts of Madeleine Wilkie and Marguerite Monet tending to the children and the wounded. Cannon fire rained down on their homes and shelters. Snipers fired through their windows, the Gatling gun spewing a wall of bullets.



“Half-Breed ladies,” Captain James Peter’s Album I, p. 36 (Saskatchewan Archives Board, R-B2081).

These women are fleeing Batoche after their homes have been destroyed by cannon fire and their refuge in the church has been fired upon; Middleton’s troops had shot at the church and wounded Father Moulin in the leg just prior to this. Note the white head bands on the women and children, so the soldiers won’t shoot.

Throughout the battle at Batoche, Métis women who chose not to leave their homes faced constant danger from cannon fire and the indiscriminate fire of automatic rounds from the Gatling

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<sup>1</sup> L. J. Barkwell “Brave Women and Courageous Children.” From an earlier version of this essay that was published in Walter Hildebrandt, *The Battle of Batoche: British Small Warfare and the Entrenched Metis, Second Edition*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2012: 96.

gun. Marcien Caron, who grew up on the old Caron homestead, says that so many rounds had been fired at their house that even in the 1940s, the children were still finding Gatling bullets in the fields.<sup>2</sup> During the battle the women nursed the wounded, provided food for the men, and scavenged the battlefield for spent bullets and cannon balls that could be recycled into shot for the Metis shot guns.

Homes were blown apart, burned and destroyed by the action of the soldiers. Women ran from house to house herding the children ahead of them, helping the elderly reach the safety of cover. Those wounded that could walk, the heroines took them with them. Some women had taken shelter in the rectory on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May, but Middleton's men had fired upon that too. Field guns shelled houses, the Gatling gun firing towards the west and then north, hitting homes that were still occupied by frightened women. Most of the women, children and Elders had camped in a secluded flat surrounded by bluffs on the east side of the river. They took shelter in tents and makeshift dugouts covered by robes and blankets. Some had moved to the riverbanks and dug caves.” Caves had been dug—ten, fifteen, twenty feet long—five or six wide, and four or five deep—and these were carefully covered with trees and brush and earth. In these, during the four day's struggle, the families lived and ate, and slept if they could.”<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, despite the cold and damp mid-May nights, most of the women, children and elders who had camped on the east side of the river in tents and makeshift dugouts shivered throughout the night since fires held the danger of giving their positions away. Gabriel Dumont assisted by fashioning rawhide moccasins for the children's bare feet. When the women and children escaped along the Saskatchewan River to the north toward Bellevue they used the ice flows piled up on the river bank as protection from the rifle fire. Living conditions were so bad that many women and children eventually succumbed to illness, among them Marie-Thérèse Tourond, Marguerite Riel and Madeleine Dumont. Whereas twelve men died of battle wounds, there were nine women who died of tuberculosis, influenza and miscarriages brought on by their living conditions.

After the fighting stopped, the Métis women and children were left destitute not just because their men had fled but also because the Canadian troops proceeded to loot and pillage food, clothing and all household articles. Father André stated, “the expedition had mostly for its goal to pillage and steal ... and resemble more vandals than Christian soldiers... the population has been delivered to the horrors of hunger. I think the government would do better to exterminate all these unfortunates rather than leave them to perish by degrees, that cruelty would be more humane than to leave them to suffer by the indifference they show for their misery.” He then goes on to say, “We have all around us a population unarmed, but delivered (handed over) to the horrors of hunger. I see the vengeance that is brewing in these hearts and one day the government will pay dearly for this inhumanity towards these poor people who are willing to submit, but despair will throw them into crime. Your Excellency, use your influence to come to our rescue!”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Personal communication with Marcien Caron, July 17, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Nathalie Kermaal. “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.

<sup>4</sup> Archives Deschâtelets, Ottawa: André-Taché, Prince Albert, June 4, 1885. Translated by Rose-Marie Carey.



Metis women and children in a refugee camp at Fort Pitt after the Metis defeat at Batoche in 1885, from a newspaper front page (Public Archives of Manitoba).

The mortality rates for the Metis children of the South Branch Community reflect the starvation conditions and the results of the deprivations created by war. In 1884, 22 children died, 16 of these were infants. In 1885, 23 children died, 12 of these were infants and in 1886 27 children died twelve of whom were infants.