

GABRIEL DUMONT



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Gabriel Dumont is best remembered in Canadian history as Riel's general and commander of the forces in the North West Resistance of 1885. An overview of the life of Dumont shows that, not only was he a natural choice for this role, he had also emerged as leader in his own right of the Metis people prior to the 1885 Resistance. He had an intimate knowledge of the people whom he led into battle and of the battlegrounds where he fought. His lifestyle, more so than Riel's, embodied the lifestyle of the Metis of that era.

THE EARLY YEARS

Gabriel Dumont was born in St. Boniface in 1837 and was the fifth child in a family of eleven. His father, Isidore Dumont was a farmer at the time of Gabriel's birth. However, when Gabriel was two years old, the family moved to the Fort Pitt region which is near the present site of Lloydminster. Here his father traded with the Indians and bought supplies from the Hudson's Bay Company post.

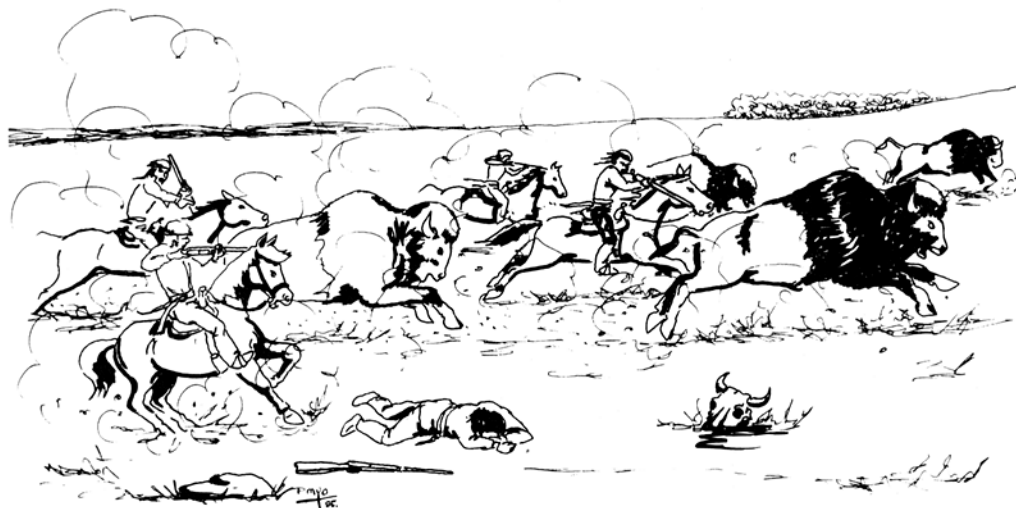
Although Gabriel never received formal schooling, he was well educated in the ways of the land. The historian, George Woodcock writes:

The education of Gabriel Dumont, apart from encouraging his natural linguistic talents, made him a fine hunter and a good trapper. By the age of ten he could not only ride a pony but break one in. Long before he handled a rifle, he learned to shoot with deadly accuracy with the bow used by his grandmother's people, the Sarcee. He was a good fisherman, he could handle a canoe in the turbulent northern waters—and...he became an excellent swimmer. He accompanied his father, and sometimes his Indian kinsmen, on their buffalo hunts, and in the process he learnt the topography of the prairies so well that he became an excellent guide....!

In the summer of 1848 the Dumont family moved once again, this time back to Fort Garry and the Red River region. It was on this trip that Gabriel received his first gun for performing an act of bravery. Gabriel alerted the camp to what he thought was a Blackfoot raiding party and he requested a musket to help fend off the attackers. Isidore, Gabriel's father, soon realized it was only a herd of buffalo approaching. However, for not being afraid, Gabriel was presented with his first gun which he named "le Petit" or "The Little One". This name, which was bestowed on all subsequent rifles that he owned, in time became almost as famous as his own.

Before he was fourteen years old Gabriel fought in his first battle against the Metis' traditional rival, the Sioux. This occurred during the great buffalo hunt of 1851 which culminated in the Battle of the Grand Coteau. During this hunt the Metis buffalo hunters came across a large Sioux war party who were determined to expel the Metis from what they considered to be their traditional hunting grounds. It is said, "Gabriel emerged unscathed and elated from his first battle; while still less than fourteen, he had gone through one of the testing experiences that in his world led to the recognition of manhood."²

For the next few years Gabriel lived the life of the buffalo hunter and, at the age of 25, he was elected leader of the buffalo hunt which originated from the Saskatchewan area.

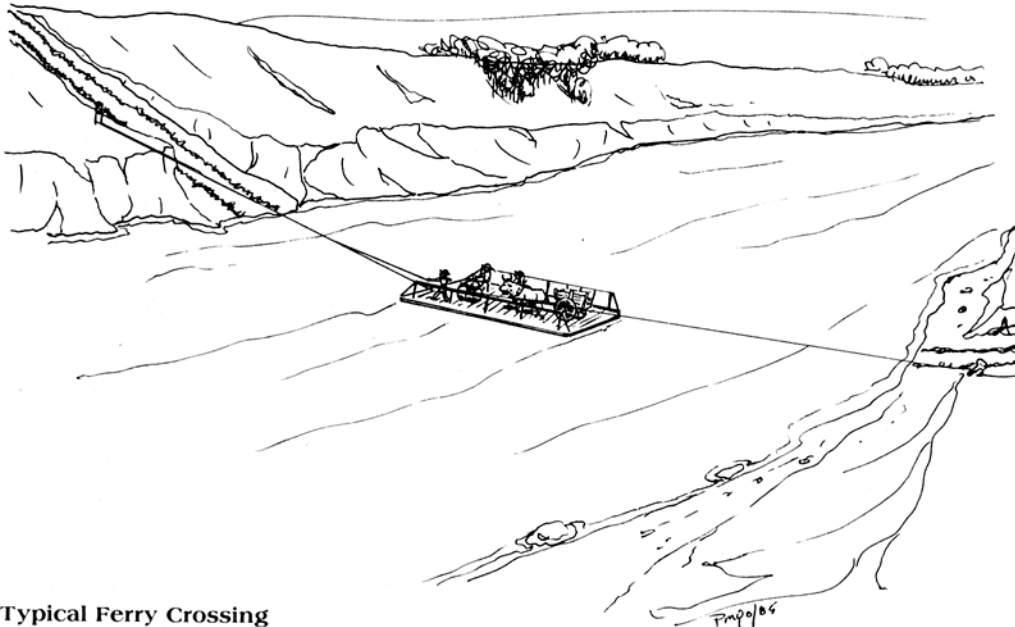


Metis "Running the Buffalo"

It was during this period, in 1858, that Gabriel married a Scottish Metis woman named Madeleine Wilkie. By all accounts it was a close relationship. Gabriel is said to have remarked, "We are always together, and what is done to her is as if it were done to me."³ Although they had no children together, they did adopt a girl named Annie and a second cousin of Gabriel's named Alexis Dumont.

For five years, from 1869 to 1874, Gabriel's chief sources of income were from trading with the Hudson's Bay Company, trapping, fishing and occasionally working as a guide for the missionaries. He soon realized that, with the influx of newcomers to the land, the days when a man could hunt and fish to supply adequate food and shelter for his family were limited. Gabriel Dumont then became a farmer on a site about ten miles south of Batoche, where the trail from Humboldt and Fort Carlton crossed the Saskatchewan River.

Gabriel also ran a ferry service across the Saskatchewan River for people travelling along the Carlton Trail. It soon became known as Gabriel's Crossing. To complement the ferry service, he set up and operated a small trading store. The store became famous as it housed the only billiard table in that part of the country.



Typical Ferry Crossing

THE METIS NATION

In 1873 a local Metis government was set up in the village of St. Laurent near Batoche. On December 10, the Metis assembled in the village and democratically elected their own governing body. Gabriel Dumont was chosen, by acclamation, to be president for a period of one year. Eight councillors were also elected. Together they were to govern the Metis according to rules patterned largely after the old buffalo hunt laws.

The council passed laws setting out the duties of the council, regulating contracts (e.g. agreements made on Sunday were null and void) and authorizing the raising of money by taxing households. They also passed laws related to penalties for crimes such as horse stealing, dishonouring girls and lighting fires on the prairie in midsummer. On January 27, 1875 the council passed laws regulating the buffalo hunt. Old laws which specifically forbade anyone from proceeding ahead of the designated departure date for the hunt were enacted, and new laws prohibiting anyone from leaving behind unused buffalo carcasses were also passed. The latter signified a genuine concern on the part of the Metis for their future, which was still heavily dependent upon the rapidly diminishing buffalo.

The passing of the laws relating to the buffalo hunt was the last official act of the council of St. Laurent. Later that year Dumont had his first confrontation with the Canadian government, an event which marked the demise of the council of St. Laurent. A group of supposedly "free" buffalo hunters, most of whom were hired and outfitted by the Hudson's Bay Company, set out from the Batoche area ahead of the date set for the beginning of the hunt. For this violation, Gabriel and his men entered their camp and confiscated goods equivalent to a fine imposed for the infraction. Eventually the North West Mounted Police were called in to settle the disagreement. However, Inspector Crozier reported that the "free" buffalo hunters had, in fact, infringed upon the customs of the land and that, furthermore, the local Metis self-government was well suited to the area and operated very efficiently.

Little more was made of the matter. Nevertheless the local Metis government lost virtually all of its power with the arrival of the NWMP.

THE STRUGGLE

The Metis of the Saskatchewan region submitted a number of petitions to the Federal Government requesting title to the lands they held. The first of these petitions was sent in 1873. They continued to be sent for the next 11 years, with no results.

On May 6, 1884 a meeting was held among representatives of the Metis, the English half-breeds and the white settlers. At it the following resolution was passed:

We, the French and English natives of the Northwest, knowing that Louis Riel made a bargain with the Government of Canada in 1870, which said bargain is contained mostly in what is known as the "Manitoba Act", have thought it advisable that a delegation be sent to said Louis Riel, and have his assistance to bring all the matters referred to in the above resolutions in a proper shape and form before the Government of Canada, so that our just demands be granted.⁴

As one of the four delegates, Dumont set out for St. Peter's Mission, Montana to bring Riel back to Canada to act as spokesman for the rights of the Metis. As a natural leader of the Metis, Dumont played a major role in the Resistance of 1885 as Riel's General. He commanded the troops in the battles which took place at Duck Lake, Fish Creek and Batoche.

Riel had several meetings in the Saskatchewan area that summer and, in the fall, he sent one last petition to Ottawa citing the people's concerns. When again no answer was forthcoming, the idea of a provisional government was proposed in Batoche on March 6, 1885. Between the time when the idea of the provisional government was proposed and when it was actually set up on March 19, 1885, the Metis received news which greatly alarmed them. Lawrence Clarke, a Hudson's Bay Company factor, arrived with a response from Ottawa to the Metis' last petition. He told the people that the government was going to give their answer to the Metis' petition with bullets. So, fearing an attack, the Metis began to ready themselves.

Within a week of the creation of the provisional government, Gabriel Dumont and his men had captured supplies and defeated a force of the North West Mounted Police at Duck Lake. An oral account of the North West Resistance was dictated by Dumont to Benjamin De Montigny, the recorder of Montreal, in December, 1888. Extracts from a translation of the account relating to the Battle of Duck Lake are as follows:

On March 25, 1885,...the mounted police appeared on the other side of the river, I asked Riel to give me 30 men so that we could go to Duck Lake and ransack our opponent's storehouses....

We went back to Duck Lake, and we had scarcely let our horses out to eat, when we heard someone shout again, 'Here come the police'. We immediately jumped on horseback, and without delay I had my men occupy the hillock which commanded the plain, and from where the enemy would have been able to level their guns on us....

Crozier, accompanied by an English half-breed, approached one of our Indians who was unarmed and, it seems, gave him his hand. The Indian then tried to grab the gun out of the hands of the English Metis who was, I believe, John Dougall Mackay. This English Metis fired, and I think was this rifle shot which killed my brother Isidore and made him fall from his horse, stone dead....

As soon as the shooting started, we fired as much as we could. I myself fired a dozen shots with my Winchester carbine, and I was reloading it to begin again, when the English alarmed by the number of their dead, began to withdraw. It was time they did, for their cannon which until then had kept my infantry men from descending the slope, was silenced because the gunner, in loading it, put in the shot before the powder. My infantry men then began to surround them....

In their flight they had to go through a clearing, so I lay in wait for them saying to my men, 'Courage, I'm going to make the red coats jump in their carts with some rifle shots'. And then I laughed, not because I took any pleasure in killing, but to give courage to my men....

Since I was eager to knock off some of the red coats, I never thought to keep under cover, and a shot came and gashed the top of my head, where a deep scar can still be seen....

After the enemy had fled, my companions tied me on my horse, and we went to Duck Lake, where my wound, which was a deep one, was dressed.⁵

Thus, from Dumont's own account we can see that the first bullets of the resistance were not fired by the Metis, but rather by the interpreter accompanying General Crozier. John MacKay later admitted firing the first shot, in a newspaper account of the resistance. It is also worthwhile to note that the Metis numbered 30 men while the North West Mounted Police numbered about 100, yet the Metis were able to drive the opposing forces back.

On April 24, 1885 the Metis, under the leadership of Dumont, fought with government troops, led by General Middleton, at Fish Creek. Although the Metis had fewer than 100 fighters and the government forces numbered approximately 400, the Metis were able to defend Fish Creek and once again force the government troops into temporary retreat.

The final battle between the Metis people and the government was fought at Batoche from May 9 to May 12, 1885. The Metis numbered less than 300 men while the government had approximately 800 soldiers. The government forces were well equipped with supplies and ammunition and, as well, had a Gatling gun which could fire up to 1200 bullets a minute. What ammunition the Metis had was rapidly depleted and near the end of the battle the Metis were forced to load their rifles with rocks and whatever other pieces of metal they could find.

Outnumbered as they were, the Metis were able to hold off the troops and extend the resistance for three months, from March to May. This, in itself, testifies to Dumont's military leadership abilities.

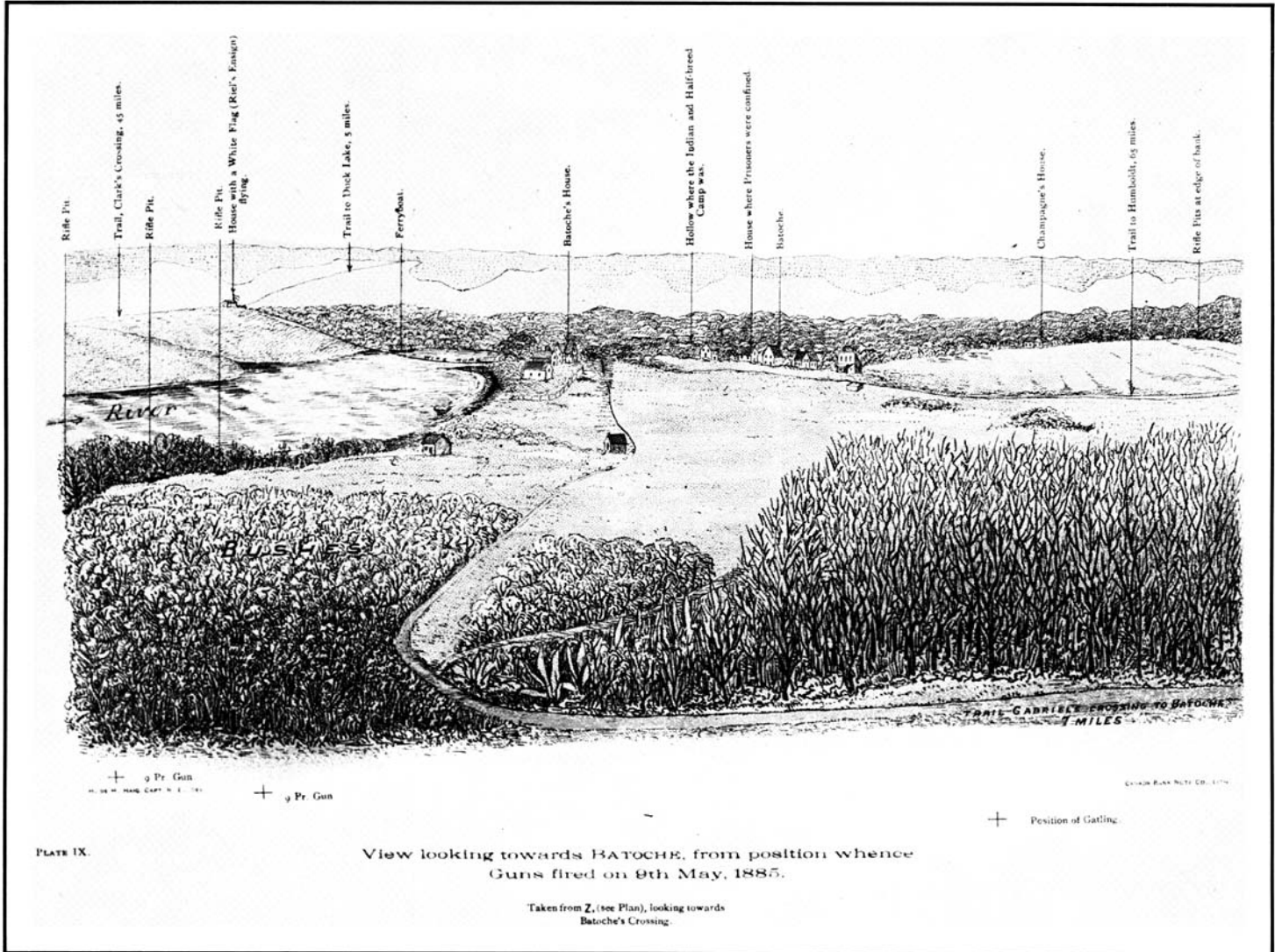


Photo courtesy of RCMP Museum, Regina

1885 Resistance



Troops crossing bridge at Fort Qu'Appelle



Officers of the Mountain Rangers at Medicine Hat, Alberta

Photo courtesy of Saskatchewan Archives Board

Photo courtesy of Public Archives of Canada

1885 Resistance



General Middleton, leader of Canadian troops, and his wounded aides.



Fort Qu'Appelle — General Middleton's Headquarters

Photo courtesy of Public Archives of Canada

Photo courtesy of Saskatchewan Archives Board

1885 Resistance



Body of Metis Donald Ross



Metis Scouts captured before Fish Creek

Photo courtesy of Public Archives of Canada

Photo courtesy of Public Archives of Canada

THE AFTERMATH

Following the battle, most leaders of the Metis were either captured or they surrendered. However, Gabriel Dumont refused to give himself up. When asked to surrender by his brother-in-law, Moise Ouellette, he said, "You can say to Middleton that I am in the woods and I still have 90 bullets to use on his soldiers."⁶

Gabriel Dumont and Michael Dumas escaped and, after eleven days of riding, they crossed the border into the United States. There they were arrested by the United States cavalry on May 27 and held at Fort Assiniboine for two days. They were released on May 29 and travelled to Spring Creek, a Metis settlement in Montana. Here Gabriel heard the news that Louis Riel had been captured.

Gabriel immediately began making plans to rescue Louis Riel and bring him back to Montana where he would be safe. However, due to the elaborate protection by the NWMP, the rescue attempt never took place.

It was during this period that Gabriel's wife, Madeleine, passed away. With his wife and most of his kinfolk gone and the rebellion a lost cause for the Metis, Dumont had no reason to stay in the Montana area. He decided to accept Buffalo Bill Cody's offer and join his Wild West Show. Gabriel toured with the show for about three months, from June to September 1886. His duties were relatively light at first, consisting mainly of riding in parades and posing with his famous rifle, "le Petit", remembering all the time to look fierce. He was billed as "Gabriel Dumont...The Hero of the Half Breed Rebellion".⁷ Later in the tour he had a chance to show off his riding and shooting skills in the main arena. While touring with the show, Dumont was visited by two of his old adversaries, Major Crozier formerly of the NWMP, and Lieutenant Howard. Lieutenant Howard claimed "...that he had always been careful at Batoche to aim his Gatling gun above Gabriel's head".⁸

Dumont at Fort Assiniboine, 1885



Photo courtesy of RCMP Museum, Regina

Gabriel Dumont

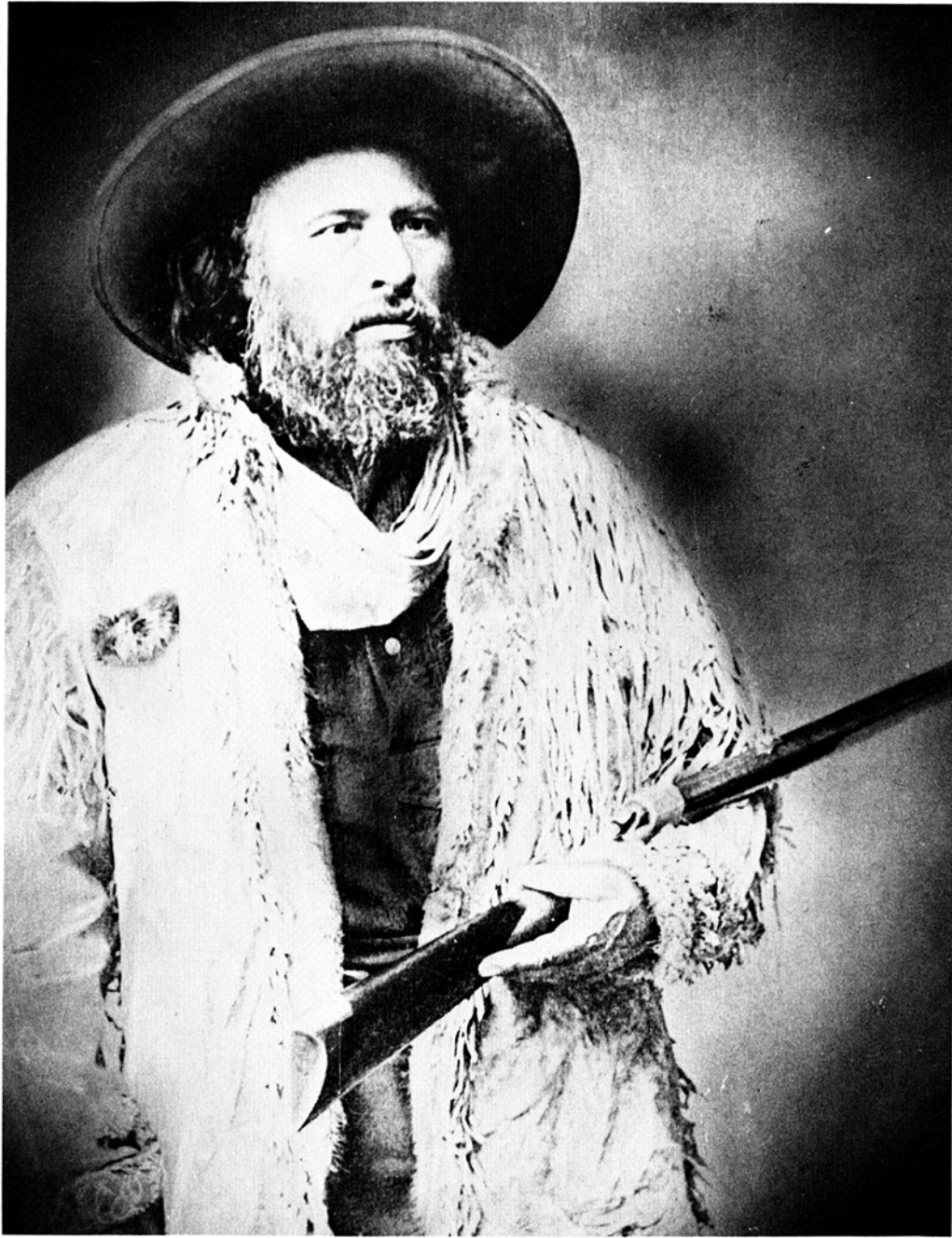


Photo courtesy of Saskatchewan Archives Board

Dumont in New York, 1887



Photo courtesy of Saskatchewan Archives Board

Although Gabriel received news of the general amnesty in July, 1886 for those who had taken part in the 1885 Rebellion, he did not return to Saskatchewan until 1890. He did not entirely trust the Canadian government to live up to its promise of general amnesty and, besides, there were no personal reasons to go back immediately. During this time Gabriel travelled in the eastern United States, speaking to Americans of French background who were sympathetic to the Metis cause. He also visited Quebec and spoke with sympathizers there.

Gabriel returned to the Batoche area in 1890 for the first time since the resistance. However, the land to which he returned had changed. For part of the next two years he spent time in buffalo hunting camps in Montana where, at one point, he was attacked with a knife by an unknown assassin. He also journeyed once again to Quebec to try to raise funds for the impoverished Metis survivors of the resistance. In 1893, he returned permanently to Saskatchewan and applied for patent to the lands he had originally occupied near Gabriel's Crossing in 1872. Almost 10 years later, on January 2, 1902, he finally received title to these lands. Rather than being an isolated case, this was typical of the way the Canadian government dealt with the Metis land claims.

Gabriel eventually built himself a small cabin on his land which was farmed by Alexis Dumont. He lived the life he had led as a young man, hunting, fishing, trapping and trading.

THE FINAL DAYS

Dumont enjoyed good health and was active until his death. On Saturday, May 19, 1906 he went for his usual walk along the roads and trails near Batoche. When he returned, he went to his bed and died. He was buried in the cemetery at Batoche, near the homeland he had so gallantly defended in 1885. Gabriel is remembered as a skillful leader of the Metis people in their struggles for responsible government and recognition of land claims.

—Later Years—



Gabriel Dumont

Photo courtesy of RCMP Museum, Regina

FOOTNOTES

1. George Woodcock, *Gabriel Dumont, The Metis Chief and His Lost World* (Edmonton, Alberta: Hurtig Publishers, 1976), p. 47.
2. Ibid, p. 62.
3. Ibid, p. 71.
4. Ibid, p. 137
5. George F. Stanley, "Gabriel Dumont's Account of the North West Rebellion, 1885", *Canadian Historical Review*, V. 30, 1949, pp. 249-68.
6. Peter Charlebois, *The Life of Louis Riel* (Toronto, Ontario: New Canada Publications, 1978), p. 202.
7. Sandra Lynn McKee, *Gabriel Dumont Indian Fighter* (Calgary, Alberta: Frontier Publishing Ltd., 1977), p. 45.
8. Woodcock, p. 236.

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