

Dumont, Gabriel. (1837-1906)

(Contributed by Darren R. Préfontaine, Gabriel Dumont Institute, Saskatoon)

Gabriel Dumont—the name conjures up a host of images: the diminutive but courageous “*chef métis*” who led his people in armed struggle against the Dominion of Canada; a nineteenth-century Che Guevara passionately concerned with his people’s self-governance; the quintessential *l’homme de prairie* who lived freely as a bison hunter and entrepreneur, and a humanitarian who shared his bounty with the less fortunate. Gabriel Dumont was a man of action, whose many admirable qualities, including his selflessness, courage, sense of duty, and love of his people, have inspired generations of Métis. At age twenty-five, Gabriel became the leader of the Métis wintering along the South Saskatchewan River as well as the Métis bands in the Touchwood Hills.

Gabriel Dumont went to Duck Lake to capture the 42 Snider rifles that had been previously used by the volunteer cavalry at Duck Lake. According to W.B. Cameron, two companies of cavalry were formed there under the designation “the North West Mounted Rifles.” They had several officers from Prince Albert and interestingly they were under the command of Lieutenant Gabriel Dumont. This militia was disarmed and disbanded shortly before the outbreak of the Resistance in 1885.¹

Captain Owen E. Hughes, who commanded one of the companies alongside Dumont, and a resident of Prince Albert, related the following story of the militia to W.B. Cameron, who retells it here. When General Middleton first engaged the Metis under Dumont at Fish Creek, Hughes who was with the Canadian column on his way back from Winnipeg remarked the rebels were “his men,” and when the General inquired whom he was referring to he told him “Why, my men down there... Gabriel Dumont, my second lieutenant with eighty of my Half-Breeds, driving back the whole Canadian army... fifteen hundred men. Why if I was down there leading them I’d have you all on the run by now, and you’d never stop until you reached the Atlantic.”²

Dr. Charles Mulvaney attests to Dumont’s abilities as a leader and guerrilla fighter in writing about the fighting at Tourond’s Coulée:

Dumont was not seen during the fight, but one of our scouts saw him riding off after all was over. His directing hand was plainly seen, however, as nobody else on Riel’s side could have arranged the rebel plans or picked the ground so well. The rebel movements appeared to be directed by long, low whistles. General Middleton said it was like the piping of a boatswain. Occasionally they could be heard shouting to each other to “Keep back,” “Go on,” “This way,” “Fire lower,” “Fire higher,” etc., but during the serious part of the day they fought in grim silence. The rapidity with which some of them loaded their shotguns with the old-fashioned powder horns and paper wadding was truly marvelous. A few of them who had Winchesters ran from one part of the ravine to the other, strengthening their line as circumstances directed.

¹ Gordon Light, *Footprints in the Dust*. North Battleford: Turner Warwick Publications Inc., 1987: 129.

² Paget James Code, 2008: 80-81, citing W.B. Cameron “The North West Mounted Rifles,” unpublished manuscript, Saskatoon: Morton Special Collections, University of Saskatchewan Libraries, 1927: 4.

General Middleton says they are finer skirmishers and bush-fighters than he ever imagined them to be.

A correspondent writing the night of the fight says: “The buckshot made very ugly and painful wounds. Old-style leaden balls were also fired with considerable effect. Had the rebels been armed with Sniders they would have wiped us out in short order from the shelter which they occupied.”³

Despite being so lionized, little is known of Gabriel Dumont prior to the 1870s. He was born in December 1837, in St. Boniface, Red River Settlement, the third child of Isidore Dumont and Louise Laframboise. He was named for his uncle, a hard drinking buffalo hunter and Native leader. From an early age, his family was involved in the bison hunt. Alongside other Métis from St. François-Xavier, Red River, Dumont participated in the hunt in present-day North Dakota for the first time in 1851. In time, the boy who embraced the hunt with so much gusto would become a buffalo hunter par excellence. Another event happened in 1851 that would profoundly impact upon young Dumont’s psyche—on July 13 and 14, he and 300 other Métis decisively defeated, through disciplined marksmanship and the use of barricaded rifle pits, a much larger party of Yankton Dakota at the Battle of Grand Coteau. The ease of the Métis victory—only one fatality—made a huge impression upon Dumont. However, when he used the same defensive rifle pit system in 1885, he would be less successful.

Dumont’s life as a young adult was typical of other Métis: He married early and hunted bison, although he was already earmarked for leadership. In 1858, he married Madeleine—daughter of Jean-Baptiste Wilkie, a Métis bison hunt leader and trader—at St. Joseph (Walhalla), in present-day North Dakota. They had a warm, loving relationship, although they had no children of their own. The couple adopted a daughter, Veronique⁴ called “Annie” (born 1864 at Big Lake, Alberta) and a boy, Alexandre Fagnant (b. 1869).

The couple’s early years were spent on the hunt, constantly moving between the North Saskatchewan River and the rich bison-hunting grounds of the Dakotas. By the 1860s, the great herds of bison, which provided many Métis with their livelihood, rapidly dwindled. Seeking new economic opportunities, Dumont operated a ferry service at “Gabriel’s Crossing” and even owned a general store. Dumont had become the leader of several hundred Métis living in and around St Laurent de Grandin, in what is now central Saskatchewan. The Métis community, which was steadily being augmented by émigrés from Manitoba, elected him Chief of the Hunt in the 1860s and President of the St. Laurent Council in 1873. Dumont presided over the Council until 1878, when the North West Mounted Police (NWMP) disbanded it after it attempted to levy a fine against those Métis who contravened the conservation measures of the *Law of the Hunt*.

Gabriel Dumont’s role as the Metis’ military leader during the 1885 Resistance is where he is best remembered. Under Dumont’s leadership, throughout the 1870s and

³ Charles Pelham Mulvaney, *The History of the North-West Rebellion of 1885*, Toronto: A.H.Hovey & Co., 1885: 133-134.

⁴ Veronique was the daughter of Jacques Dumont (b. 1838, the son of Gabriel Dumont Sr.) and Marianne Bruneau (b. 1839 at Lac la Biche). Marianne died on November 24, 1865. Jacques and his second wife Marianne Breland died in the smallpox epidemic in the fall of 1870. When Veronique was released from the Grey Nun’s orphanage at age 14, Gabriel and Madeleine Dumont adopted her as one of their own. Gabriel always called Veronique “Annie” because she looked like her mother Marianne “Annie” Dumont. At age 18 the multi-lingual Annie Dumont was hired by Richard Hardisty, HBC Factor at Edmonton and put in charge of all trading goods at the store. This information was provided by Lloyd Hamilton of Calgary, Alberta, a grandson of Veronique, Veronique married William Hamilton on December 11, 1888.

1880s, the Batoche area Metis were desperate for redress from the federal government, particularly regarding their land tenure. However, being unlettered and uncomfortable with Euro-Canadian politics, Dumont knew his limitations. Therefore, he, Michel Dumas and James Isbister brought Louis Riel back to Canada from Montana in order to negotiate with the federal government. Riel then became the undisputed political leader and Dumont, the military commander.

However, once the resistance broke out, Dumont knew that his force of 100-300 could not defeat the Dominion's larger, better-equipped army, backed ultimately by the might of the British Empire. Thus, despite successfully employing guerilla tactics and superior marksmanship at Duck Lake, against the NWMP, on March 25 and on April 24, at Tourond's Coulee, against General Middleton's forces, the Métis' resistance was doomed. On May 9-12, the Métis fought an entrenched battle at Batoche against a larger, well-armed force. Tired and out of ammunition, the Métis valiantly succumbed to a hasty charge by Canadian volunteers. Thus ending Gabriel Dumont's role as military leader.⁵

After 1885, Dumont lived a varied existence: a political exile in the United States; a widower—Madeleine died of tuberculosis in October, 1885; a Wild-West Show performer; a brief and failed tenure as a political speaker in French-Canadian nationalist circles; a raconteur of the events of 1885, which he dictated in January 1889; a farmer—he received land-scrip in 1893; and a hunter and trapper. On May 19, 1906, he died suddenly at Bellevue, Saskatchewan, likely of a heart attack. He is buried at St. Antoine de Padoue Cemetery, Batoche.

Bibliography:

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The Dakota Metis Treaty of 1861

Gabriel Dumont was present as a councilor to his father-in-law Jean Baptiste Wilkie at this treaty negotiation.

Over the years the hunting parties of the Dakota and the Metis continued to fight over the same hunting grounds. The Dakota (the people of the "Ten Nations", some 400 lodges) would typically gather at what was called "Sioux Coulee" near present day Langdon, North Dakota. The gathering place for the Chippewa and Metis was between Cando and Devil's Lake. Tired of this stand-off, Chief Wilkie as leader of the Metis and Chippewa hunting parties decided to bring some resolution to the situation in the early 1860s. Gregoire Monette⁶ of Langdon, North Dakota tells the following story in 1917:

In order to put an end to the suspense, fear and worry of watching the enemy, the Half-Breed hunters and Chippewa Indians under Chief Wilkie decided to send a commission to Washington to interview the president and find out how to obtain peace between these

⁵ Dumont's accounts are not given here because they are available in many other sources.

⁶ Gregoire was married to Philomene Wilkie (b. 1863) the grand-daughter of Chief Wilkie.

tribes. Chief Wilkie and Peter Grant were the men chosen. So well did they impress the authorities at Washington that President Lincoln told them they could have all the ammunition they needed for their protection. He asked them at the same time not to induce trouble but to go to them as brothers taking with them the bravest and best to make parley for peace. This was done and Chief Wilkie, Peter Grant, Gabriel Dumont, Joseph LaFramboise, Antoine Fleury, and seven others were chosen. They went direct to the village of the Dakota's or Nadouissieux and direct to the lodge of the chief. This they found surrounded by soldiers. They reported to the chief, and he asked for them to be brought in. The rabble had gathered about the lodge and threatened to kill them, but the soldiers would not allow them to do so saying that their chief was a brave man who would dare to come alone to a hostile camp. The crowd was so envious and angry that with their knives they slashed the tent cloth in the lodges. Although they were admitted to his presence the chief was very austere. They told him their mission, and being very tired and thirsty, Gabriel asked for a drink of water. This was refused which was known to be an indication of trouble. Chief Wilkie became alarmed and sadly dropped his fine bearing. Gabriel, his son-in-law asked him "What is wrong with you?" When the old gentleman told him his fears, he became very angry. He began at once to load his gun, saying "I won't die before I kill my full share," and again demanded water which was brought immediately and due respect was shown their high commission from that time forth.

When asked to fully explain their mission, as spokesman, Chief Wilkie said, "We are enemies wasting the good gift that has been bestowed upon us through nature. We are preventing each other from trapping and killing the animals. There is plenty of room and much provisions. Let us help each other as brothers, let us have peace together." When the council was concluded, the pipe of peace was ordered to be brought. This was a very long pipe, ornamented with human hair so long as to reach the floor, bear claws and porcupine quills were also part of its decoration. The tobacco was cut by his first lieutenant; this was mixed with several herbs, and kinnikinnick. This mixing of the tobacco was to indicate the fusion of their interest and harmony of the whole people. The pipe was then handed to the Sioux chief, who took three draws and passed it to chief Wilkie. In this way it went around the lodge. Three times the pipe was filled and solemnly smoked and peace thereby established.

Chief Wilkie then distributed to them gifts of tobacco, tea and sugar. They were then given a great feast at which they told how sad they were and afraid when they thought they were going to regret their friendship, and asked how they should get safely home. The chief said with great dignity, "I will give you safe conduct; I will send my soldiers with you to your lodge and nothing will harm you. You have seen here some of my bad children and you may meet them on the way, but if they attempt to harm you, kill them and I will protect you." The above took place on Grand Coteau, forty miles west of Devil's Lake. Before leaving, Chief Wilkie invited the Sioux to send a delegation to visit his people, setting the day and hour for their arrival. When the time came near, chief Wilkie, bearing in front of him a white flag, went a mile out to meet them. About one hundred came, the chief and his staff were quartered in Chief Wilkie's lodge, the common people were scattered so as to get better acquainted. When the time came for

them to go, they, as a sign of their friendship and brotherly feeling traded all their horses taking back none they had brought with them. Much good was accomplished, although there were still bad children (perhaps on both sides). (Cited in *St. Ann's Centennial*, 1985: 231-232.)

Gabriel Dumont's saddle blanket and saddle

Montana Historical Society:
X64.16.01 Pad Saddle
X82.18.12 Blanket





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