

Jean Baptiste Wilkie¹ (1803-1886)

This is a biography of Jean Baptiste Wilkie, a great Métis warrior, buffalo hunter, and Chief of the Métis at Pembina, North Dakota. He was one of the Métis hunters who fed the Scots Selkirk Settlers during their first six years in the country.² In the mid-1820s he was operating a large horse ranch beside the Red River in what is now St. Vital. Because of HBC prohibitions on Métis free-trade, Wilkie permanently moved his operations south of the border in the 1840s. His family then appears in the 1850 Pembina Census. They appear as Family #94: Baptiste Wilkie, age 47, hunter, born at Pembina; Amable Elise (Azure), age 42, born at Pembina; Augustus, age 21, hunter, born at Pembina; Alexandre, age 19, born at Red River; Catherine, age 16; Magdeleine, age 13; Elizabet, age 11; Agathe, age 9; Cecilia, age 7; Marguritte, age 5; Antoine, age 3; Mary, age 1. His oldest son Jean Baptiste is enumerated separately as Family #123: Baptiste Wilkie, age 24, hunter, born at Pembina, and Marie (Laframboise), age 16.

On the Chippewa side of his family he was a descendant of Mezhekamkijkok. Jean Baptiste and his family were on the Pembina Annuity Roll for Little Shell's Band in 1867 and in 1868 appear on the Annuity Roll for Way-ke-ge-ke-zhick's Band. Under the Red Lake and Pembina Treaty (1872) he was issued Half Breed scrip #172. His family appears in an early Red River Census.

Known as the chief of the Half Breeds in the Pembina/St. Joseph area, Jean Baptiste married Amable Elise (Isabella) Azure (b. 1808). Wilkie's father Alexander was from Scotland and his mother's name was Mezhekamkijkok. Jean-Baptiste's wife, Amable Azure³ (b.1808) was the daughter of Pierre Azure (b. 1788) and Marguerite Assiniboine.⁴ Amable died in 1888 and is buried at Olga, North Dakota.

Two of their sons-in-law, Gabriel Dumont and Patrice Fleury, were leaders of the 1885 Métis Resistance. The Wilkie's had a large family:

- Jean Baptiste Jr. (b.1824) married Marie Laframboise, and then Isabelle Patenaude.
- Judith (Berger) (b. 1825). In 1879, Judith and her husband Pierre Berger, led twenty-five Métis families to central Montana in search of the diminishing buffalo herds.
- Augustine (b. 1829) married Marie Paquin
- Alexander (b. 1831) married Louise Gariepy.
- Marie Catherine (b. 1834 at St. Boniface) married Michel Gladu.

¹ The Plains Cree called Wilkie and the Métis "Nakawiniuk".

² The Selkirk Settlers wintered at Pembina because of its proximity to the buffalo herds.

³ Amable's younger brother Pierre "Labelle" Azure was born in 1818. He was also known as "Pierre Assinbwan." He married Marie Marthe Breland, the daughter of Jean Baptiste Breland and Cecile Bruyere. They were enumerated in the 1850 Pembina census as Family #60.

⁴ Amable's grandparents were Joseph Azure, born 1767 in Quebec and Lizette Ma-na-e-cha (Ojibwe). He died suddenly on January 29, 1832 at St. Boniface. This family appears in the Red River Census between 1832 and 1840. In 1804, Joseph was working as a guide for the NWC; he accompanied François Antoine Larocque on an expedition to the source of the Missouri River.

- Madeleine (Dumont) (1837-1886) Madeleine married Gabriel Dumont in 1858 at St. Joseph (North Dakota). Soon after, they moved to the St. Laurent area of Saskatchewan. Madeleine gained a reputation for being hospitable and compassionate to those less fortunate than herself. There is evidence that she and her husband had a very close relationship and he greatly respected her. The couple had no children but adopted a daughter, Veronique (born 1863 at Red River) and a boy, Alexandre Fageron (Fayant). As well as coping with everyday duties, Madeleine frequently accompanied Gabriel on long trips by snowshoe, Red River cart, and horseback. Indeed on several occasions she traveled alone from Batoche to Winnipeg to sell the furs that Gabriel had acquired. The ability to speak English gave her an advantage Gabriel did not have, although he spoke French and five Native languages. Madeleine also acted as a teacher for the children of Batoche. During the 1885 Resistance she nursed the wounded and distributed the meager rations and supplies. Gabriel saw to Madeleine's safety before crossing the border into the United States after the Battle of Batoche. She soon joined him because she could not tolerate the resultant situation in the Batoche area. Her health suffered severely in Montana. Madeleine died in October 1885 at Lewistown, Montana, from consumption and complications arising from a fall from a buggy.
- Elizabeth (b. 1839) married Antoine 'Henry' Fleury.
- Cecilia (b. 1843) married Joseph Gariepy.
- Agathe (b. 1844) married Patrice Joseph Fleury. Her husband was born in 1848 at Pembina, the son of Louison Fleury and Josephite, a Gros Ventre woman. Patrice was involved in the 1885 Resistance at Duck Lake and Batoche with Dumont. At Batoche, he was one of Dumont's captains on the west side of the Saskatchewan River.
- Marie Marguerite (b. 1845) married Henry Bousquet.
- Antoine (b. 1848) married Esther Gladue.
- Mary (b. 1849)
- David (1853-1854)



JEAN BAPTISTE WILKIE

Wilkie and the Chippewa reportedly had a palisaded fort on the Souris River near Towner N.D. called “Buffalo Lodge” which was attacked and burnt down by the Dakota in 1825.

The Red River Volunteers of 1835

Jean Baptiste Wilkie was a prominent member of the Red River Volunteers. This group represented the first militia corps recruited in the Prairies. On February 12, 1835, the Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company, Sir George Simpson, ordered the raising of a corps of 60 men, called the Red River Volunteers. The task of this group was to defend and police the colony. Each member agreed to “well and truly serve the same double office of Private in the Volunteer Corps and Peace Officer.”⁵ The commander received £20 per year, each sergeant £10 and each volunteer £6. They were to be ready to serve at all times, in exchange for which they were paid a modest annual sum. The commander of the unit, Alexander Ross, was also sheriff of the district.

Wilkie Leads Buffalo Hunt of 1840

Alexander Ross describes a buffalo hunt out of Red River led by 37 year-old Jean Baptiste Wilkie:

⁵ Manitoba Archives, MG2, B7-1, Red River Volunteers attestations, Fort Garry, February and March 1835.

On the 15th of June, 1840, carts were seen to emerge from every nook and corner of the settlement bound for the plains ... From Fort Garry the cavalcade and camp-followers went crowding on to the public road, and thence, stretching from point to point, till the third day in the evening, when they reached Pembina, the great rendezvous on such occasions ... Here the roll was called, and general muster taken, when they numbered, on this occasion, 1,630 souls; and here the rules and regulations for the journey were finally settled. The officials for the trip were named and installed into office; and all without the aid of writing materials.

The camp occupied as much ground as a modern city, and was formed in a circle; all the carts were placed side by side, the trains out-ward. These are trifles, yet they are important to our subject. Within this line of circumvallation, the tents were placed in double, treble rows, at one end; the animals at the other in front of the tents. This is in order in all dangerous places; but where no danger is apprehended, the animals are kept on the outside. Thus the carts formed a strong barrier, not only for securing the people and their animals within, but as a place of shelter against an attack of the enemy without.

The first step was to hold a council for the nomination of chiefs or officers, for conducting the expedition. Ten captains were named, the senior on this occasion being Jean Baptiste Wilkie, an English half-breed, brought up among the French; a man of good sound sense and long experience, and withal a fine bold-looking and discreet fellow; a second Nimrod in his way. Besides being captain, in common with the others, he was styled the great war chief or head of the camp; and on all public occasions he occupied the place of president. All articles of property found, without an owner, were carried to him, and he disposed of them by crier, who went around the camp every evening, were it only an awl. Each captain had ten soldiers under his orders; in much the same way that policemen are subject to the magistrate.⁶

Battle of O'Brien's Coulée, 1848

In the mid-summer of 1848 a large Chippewa-Métis and Dakota battle took place at O'Brien's Coulée⁷ near present day Olga, North Dakota. The Chippewa-Métis hunting camp was made up of 800 Métis men and 200 Chippewa Indian men. They had their families, horses and over 1,000 Red River carts. The Chippewa were led by Old Red Bear and Little Shell II. The Métis were led by Jean Baptiste Wilkie whose mother was a full-blood Chippewa. François Corvin Gosselin who along with William Gaddy who would later be a sub-leader of the 49th Rangers attached to the British Boundary Commission were also at this battle.⁸

⁶ Alexander Ross, *The Red River Settlement*. Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1972: 245-247.

⁷ So called because O'Brien lived at this location some 35 years after the event. It is a short distance west of Olga, N.D. Olga is between one branch of the Pembina River to the north and the Tongue River to the south.

⁸ Libby Papers, A85, Box 36, Notebook #14. August 4, 1910 interview with Little Duck, Dominion City, MB, interpreter Roger St. Pierre. This paper was given to me by Louis Garcia, historian for the Mni Wakan Oyate.

Wilkie established himself at St. Joseph, North Dakota about 1847. His house was the stopping place for Indians passing through the town. A fatal encounter occurred at his home in 1861 between several Sioux and Chippewa. Several Indians were killed, among them the brother of Chippewa chief, Red Bear.

United States, Pembina and Red Lake Chippewa and Métis Treaty of 1851⁹

Jean Baptiste Wilkie was signatory to a treaty made and concluded at Pembina, in the Territory of Minnesota, on the twentieth day of September, eighteen hundred and fifty-one (1851,) between the United States of America, by Alexander Ramsey, governor and ex officio Superintendent of Indian affairs in said Territory, commissioner duly appointed for that purpose, and the Chippeways of Pembina and Red Lake, owning the country on the Red River of the North. Unfortunately this treaty was not ratified by Congress.

Signed by:

Jean Battiste Wilkie

President of the Council of Half Breeds

Council and Principal Men of the Half Breeds

Joseph Nolen

Francois Reinville

Charles Hool

Robert Montour

Antoine Azure

Baptiste Vallee

Joseph Reichardt

Pierre Bottineau

Baptiste La Roche

James Tanner

Interpreter

(Name spellings are as in the original)

Buffalo Hunt of 1853

During the Pacific Railroad Survey of 1853, Isaac Stevens encountered a camp of Red River hunters on the plateau between the Sheyenne and James Rivers in the Dakota Territory, south of Lake Miniwakan, what is now called Devil's Lake. The first group of 1,300 people was lead by Jean Baptiste Wilkie. Six days later he met a group led by Governor Delorme. He gives the following account:

⁹ 32d Cong, 1st sess. Confidential Ex. Doc 10 1-3.

Vine Deloria Jr. et al, *Documents of American Indian Diplomacy: Treaties, agreements and conventions, 1775-1979. Vol 2.* Norman, Okla: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999: 798-800.

July 16 — ... About 2 p.m. the whole Red River train came in sight, and, as they approached, fired a succession of volleys of firearms as a salute, which we returned with three rounds from the howitzer. The train consisted of 824 carts, about 1,200 animals, and 1,300 persons, men, women, and children, the whole presenting a very fine appearance.

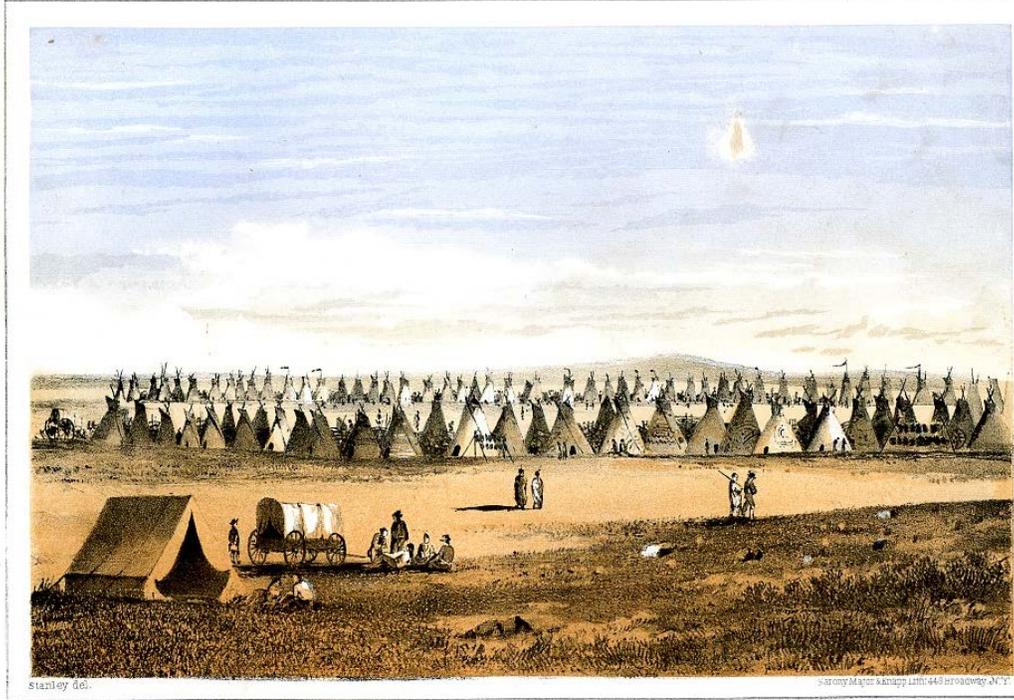
They encamped near by, and the close yard which they formed presented quite a contrast to the open camp adopted by us. They make a circular or square yard of the carts, placed side by side with the hubs adjoining, presenting a barrier impassable either to man or beast. The tents or lodges were arranged within, at a distance of about twenty feet from the carts, and were of a conical shape, built of poles covered with skins, with an opening at the top for the passage of smoke and for ventilation. They were 104 in number, being occupied generally by two families, averaging about ten persons to the lodge. Skins were spread over the tops of the carts, and underneath many of the train found comfortable lodging places.

The animals were allowed to run loose during the day to feed, but were driven into the corral at dark. Thirty-six of the men are posted as sentinels, remaining on guard all night. We have but twelve guards, three reliefs, not more than four men being on guard at one time.

As our camps were only about two hundred yards apart, there was much visiting between them. I was struck with the good conduct and hospitable kindness of these people. A small band of Prairie Chippewa Indians, who accompanied this party, visited our camp during the evening, and entertained us with one of their national dances.

I was much pleased with Governor Wilkie, who is the head of the expedition. He is a man of about sixty years of age, of fine appearance and pleasant manners. This party are residents of Pembina and its vicinity. When at home they are engaged in agriculture, raising wheat, corn, potatoes, and barley. The land yields about twenty-five bushels of wheat to the acre, their farms averaging about fifteen acres each. They are industrious and frugal in their habits, are mostly of the Romish persuasion, leading a virtuous and pious life. They are generally accompanied by their priests, and attend strictly to their devotions, having exercises every Sabbath, on which day they neither march nor hunt. Their municipal government is of a parochial character, being divided into five parishes, each one being presided over by an officer called the captain of the parish. These captains of the parish retain their authority while in the settlement. On departing for the hunt they select a man from the whole number, who is styled governor of the hunt, who takes charge of the party, regulates its movement, acts as referee in all cases where any differences arise between the members in regard to game or other matters, and takes command in case of difficulty with the Indians. In the early part of the year, till the middle of June, these people work at agriculture, when they set out on their first hunt, leaving some thirty at the settlements in

charge of their farms, houses, stock, etc. They start out to the southward in search after buffalo, taking with them their families, carts, animals, etc. These carts, when loaded, contain about 800 pounds, and are used in common.



CAMP RED RIVER HUNTERS.

Above is a photograph of a hand coloured lithograph of Jean Baptiste Wilkie's Camp near Lake Miniwakan (Devil's Lake), done for the US Pacific Railroad Expeditionary Survey by John Mix Stanley in 1853.

There were 336 men in the present train, of whom over 300 were hunters. Each hunt, of which there are two every year, continues about two months, the first starting in June, the second about the middle of October. Their carts were already half full, and they expected to return to their homes in the latter part of August. On their first trip the buffalo are hunted for the purpose of procuring pemmican, dried meat, tongues, etc.; the skins, being useless for robes, are dressed for lodge skins, moccasins, etc. In October the meat is still better and fatter, and they procure a like quantity of dried meat, reserving sufficient for a year's provision, which is about one-half of the whole amount procured; they dispose of the rest at the trading posts of the Hudson Bay Company. The meat which they carry home finds its way, through the Red River traders of the [American] Fur Company, to Fort Snelling, where it is exchanged for goods, sugar, coffee, etc., at the rate of fifteen cents a pound. The trade of this company is all in dry goods, sugar, tea, ammunition, etc. Notes are also issued by the Hudson Bay Company, which are currency among them. Several of these, of the denomination of five shillings, payable at York Factory, and bearing the signature of Sir George Simpson, were offered in change to various members of the expedition on purchasing various articles. The skins collected in the summer hunt are usually retained by the

hunters for their own use, while the robes collected in the fall hunt are a staple of trade with the Fur Company, and also with the Hudson Bay Company, which latter company do a large business in this portion of the country, supplying the settlers with most of their clothes, groceries, etc. The Red river settlements are made up of a population of Halfbreeds, traders of the Hudson Bay and Fur Companies, discharged employees of these companies, and Indians, representatives of every nation of Europe, Scotch, Irish, English, Canadians, and speaking a jargon made up of these dialects, intermingled with, Chippewa and Sioux, patois French being the prevailing tongue.

The Dakota, Chippewa, Métis Treaty of 1859

This treaty was negotiated by Jean Baptiste Wilkie on behalf of the Métis and Chippewa. William Davis (born RR 1845) was present at this meeting as a 14 year-old. He tells the following story: There had been a conference at St. Joseph in 1858 where it was agreed that a meeting should take place the next year at Les Isles aux Mort, near Leeds N.D. (north-west of Devil's Lake) to set the boundary lines for the hunting grounds of the Sioux, Métis, and Chippewa. There was water everywhere in the vicinity of the treaty site. This created islands, leading to the name of the site.

On the first day of the conference the bands rode out and met halfway between the camps. They were on horseback and fully armed, ready for battle, if necessary. They rode in parallel lines until they were about 100 feet apart. They then turned to face each other. After a few moments of silence a Sioux Chief slowly dismounted, accepted a huge peace pipe of catlinite (pipestone) from a warrior, stepped into the lane between the lines and invited the Métis leader to join him.

The pipe was first presented to Chief John Baptiste Wilkie, leader of the mixed-bloods and after him the sub chiefs and headmen of the Sioux and the captains of the Métis puffed the pipe. When the serious matters were finished the two groups mingled freely to indulge in sports and trade, the latter consisting chiefly of barter for guns and buffalo robes and horse trading.

The next day the conference began. It was agreed that the unpleasant relations between the Chippewa (the relatives), the Métis, and the Sioux were unnecessary and dangerous. The Sioux were accused of raiding the Chippewa country, stealing horses and sometimes scalping Chippewa people. The Métis were most concerned because the Sioux "made fun" with the "meat" (other portions of the body).

The Sioux charged that the Métis encouraged the coming of whites and the killing of too many buffaloes. But the line was fixed. It was to follow the Goose River from the mouth to the timber of the Goose where the river has three branches. From the source of the branches the boundary followed the stream to its mouth and continued to Dog Den Buttes, from there it ran south to the Missouri River opposite the mouth of the Knife River.

Grey Owl, Wanata or Wanaatan II (The Charger)¹⁰, Tete la Brule (Makaideya, or Burnt Earth) and Mato Wakan (Medicine Bear) were the Sioux leaders. Grey Owl was described as a fine appearing man and very eloquent by Mr. Davis. "He had fine limbs, thick and strong and was straight and tall/ He spoke well and was not afraid."¹¹

The Dakota Métis Treaty of 1861

In subsequent years, the hunting parties of the Dakota and the Métis 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 Métis was between Cando and Devil's Lake. Tired of this stand-off, Chief Wilkie as leader of the Métis and Chippewa hunting parties decided to bring some resolution to the situation in the early 1860s. Gregoire Monette¹² 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 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.

¹⁰ This was the son of the Yanktonai chief of that name who died in 1840, He was wintering along the Missouri River by 1828 and had frequent conflicts with the Minnesota/Pembina/Turtle Mountain Chippewa and Michifs.

¹¹ Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation. *St. Ann's Centennial: 100 Years of Faith*. Belcourt, N.D.: 1985, pp. 314-315.

¹² Gregoire was married to Philomene Wilkie (b. 1863) the grand-daughter of Chief Wilkie.

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.)

Note: The picture of Jean Baptiste Wilkie is from Manton Marble, “Red River and Beyond (Third Paper)”, *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, February 1861, Vol. 22, Issue 129: 306.



LOUIS RIEL INSTITUTE
Knowledge • Culture • Heritage

Compiled by Lawrence Barkwell
Coordinator of Métis Heritage and History Research
Louis Riel Institute