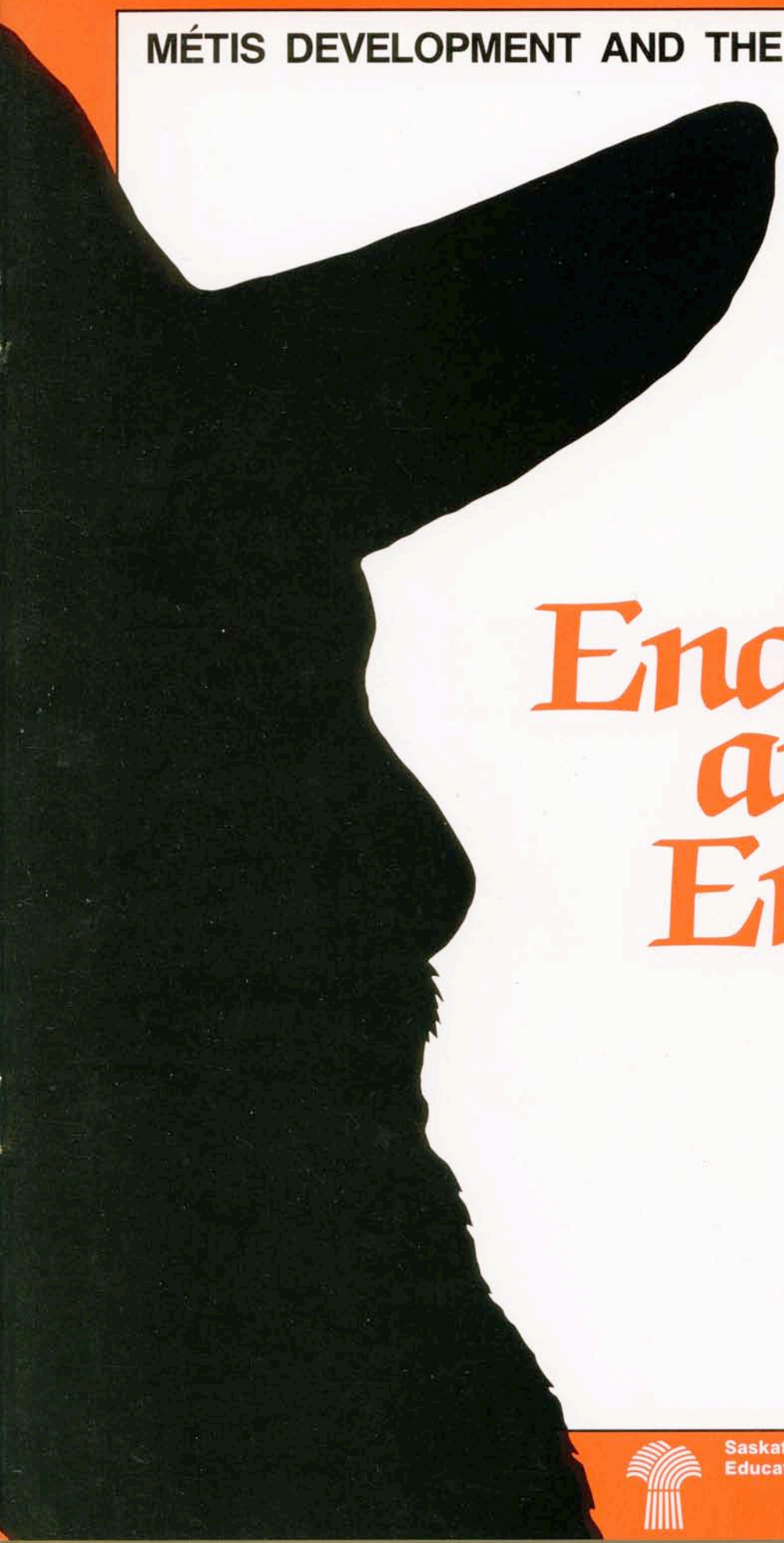
MÉTIS DEVELOPMENT AND THE CANADIAN WEST

# 5

# Ending an Era



Saskatchewan Education

Gabriel Dumont Institute

**Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data**

Racette, Calvin, 1952-

Métis development and the Canadian west

2nd ed.

Cover title.
Text: Calvin Racette.
Co-published by Gabriel Dumont Institute.
Includes bibliographies.

Contents: 1. Contrasting world — 2. Changing times — 3. Petitioning for rights — 4. Conflicting plans — 5. Ending an era.

ISBN 0-920915-09-4 (bk. 1). - ISBN 0-920915-10-8 (bk. 2). - ISBN 0-920915-11-6 (bk. 3). - ISBN 0-920915-12-4 (bk. 4). - ISBN 0-920915-13-2 (bk. 5).

1. Métis - Prairie Provinces - History.* 2. Northwest, Canadian - History. I. Saskatchewan. Dept. of Education. II. Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research. III. Title.

FC109.R33 1987 971.2'00497 C87-098064-5
E99.M693R33 1987



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# Ending an Era

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# Introduction

## Series Overview

*Métis Development and the Canadian West* is a series of five books which examine the development of the Métis culture and the role of the Métis in western Canada from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries.

- *Book 1: Contrasting Worlds* is an overview of the Canadian West from the 1600's to the early 1870's when many of the Métis moved from the Red River area to Saskatchewan.
- *Book 2: Changing Times* is an examination of the governing bodies and the laws which were in effect in the Canadian West between 1821 and 1875.
- *Book 3: Petitioning for Rights* is a study of the period between 1872 and 1883 which focuses on attempts by the Métis to obtain title to the lands on which they lived.
- *Book 4: Conflicting Plans* is an examination of the conflict between the Métis' attempts to gain legal ownership of their lands and the federal government's national policy and plans for a railway.
- *Book 5: Ending an Era* is an examination of the resistance battles, Riel's trial, the political situation and the immediate aftermath of the resistance.

## Series Objectives

The objectives of this series are:

- to present written, visual and primary materials in a form which is amenable to an inquiry-based approach
- to document Métis contributions to prairie settlement and the development of the West
- to challenge stereotypical images associated with the Métis by presenting information from which accurate perceptions of the historic Métis culture can be drawn
- to present the Métis perspective of the events which occurred between 1870 and 1885.

## Suggested Methods

The material in *Métis Development and the Canadian West* is designed to provide a basis for increasing the students' understanding of the Métis culture through an inquiry approach. Issues are presented and data is provided. The students are expected to resolve the issues themselves in a logical and defensible way. Their opinions should be respected and the emphasis should be on the development of their analytical skills.

A recommended reading list has been included at the back of each book. These can be used as resources for both teachers and students, particularly when researching further material on some of the questions.

## Organization of the Books

Each book contains:

- the objectives of the book
- a brief summary of the content
- a content section which incorporates a number of primary documents
- endnotes which indicate the source of the quotations used
- a vocabulary list which defines selected words from the content section **in this print**
- questions which can be used for discussion, research or assignment purposes
- a recommended reading list.

## Objectives of *Book 5: Ending an Era*

The objectives of this book are:

- to describe, the 1885 Resistance battles and their outcomes
- to examine the trial of Louis Riel and his councillors
- to examine the government's investigation of the Métis land claims after the resistance.

## Summary of *Book 5: Ending an Era*

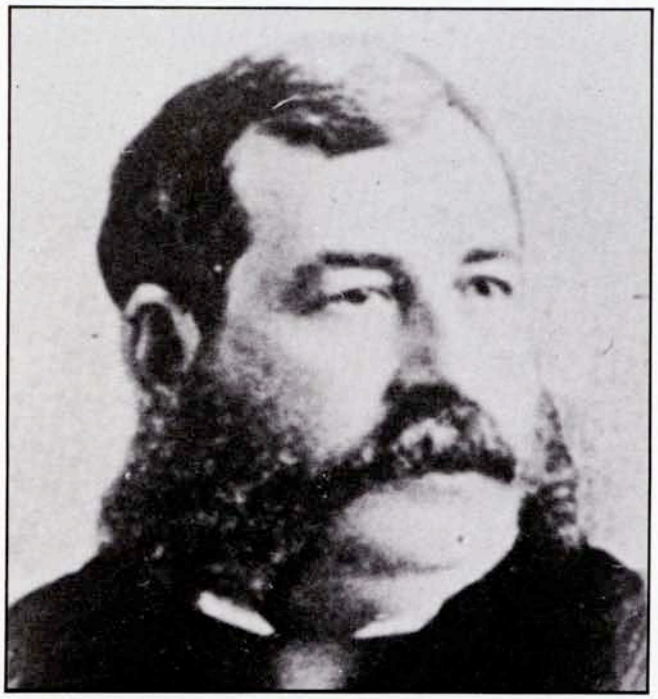
In 1885, armed conflict took place between the Métis of the Prince Albert area and government forces. In the third battle, at Batoche, the Métis were defeated and Riel surrendered. He was tried, convicted and hanged for high treason. The defeat at Batoche ended an era of Métis independence. Although an investigation into the causes of the resistance was launched, the Métis' future promised to be one of economic and political hardship.

# Ending an Era

## A Desperate Situation

The people of Saskatchewan experienced great turmoil during the early 1880's. Most of the people of the Indian nations were confined to reserves where they lived in a state of semi-starvation. Their requests for adequate food and clothing, as agreed to in the treaty negotiations, were ignored. The shift of the Canadian Pacific Railway line to the south from the route originally proposed, caused bankruptcy among many of the land speculators and merchants in the Prince Albert area. The settlers and the Métis were anxiously awaiting responses to their petitions for land title. Early frost in l883, then drought and grasshopper infestation in 1884 ruined the crops, heaping further misfortune on those living in the territory.

The settlers and the Métis requested Louis Riel's assistance in obtaining title to their lands and establishing responsible government in the North West Territories. Riel and the leaders of the Settlers' Union prepared a petition which they sent to Ottawa. At a general meeting, a Bill of Rights based on the petition was formally adopted. Lawrence Clarke travelled to Ottawa to plead their case with the federal government. When Clarke returned with the message that the petition would be answered with bullets, the Métis prepared to defend themselves. Riel formed a provisional government and made preparations for an armed resistance.

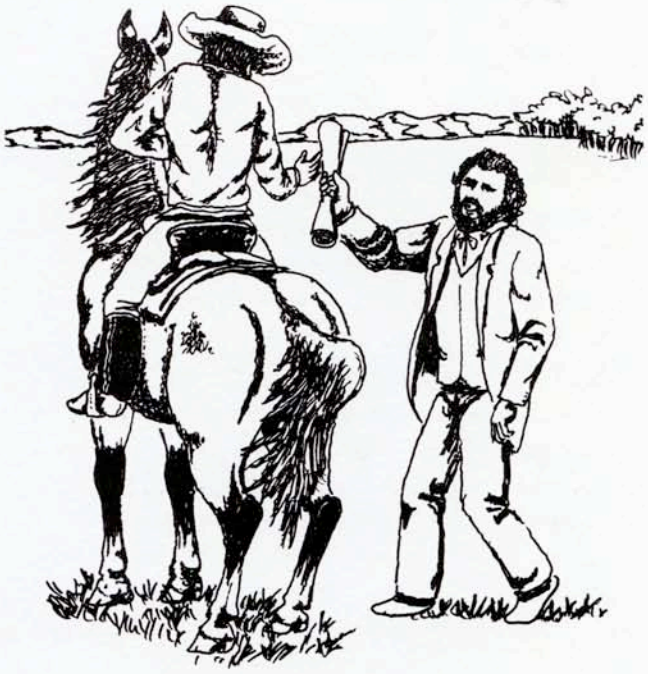


***Lawrence Clarke, elected official for the District of Lorne who travelled to Ottawa to represent the Métis, 1885.***

Meanwhile, in the east, the Canadian Pacific Railway was dangerously near bankruptcy and had applied to the federal government for a loan. Knowing that parliament was unlikely to approve yet another loan for the railway, Prime Minister Macdonald introduced the Franchise Bill as a delaying tactic. The uproar created by the Franchise Bill gave Macdonald the time he needed to delay introduction of the C.P.R. loan application until it was more likely to be approved.

## The Métis Prepare

In sending their petitions and drafting their Bill of Rights, the Métis were relying on a constitutional process for settlement of their claims. Clarke's message underlined the need for the Métis to have a stronger bargaining position if they were to have any hope of their demands being met. To achieve this end, Riel and the provisional government attempted to force the federal government to come to terms. They seized the church at Batoche and established their headquarters there. Riel also planned to seize Fort Carlton and to force the North West Mounted Police to surrender. He felt that once this was accomplished, the federal government would be ready to negotiate a solution to the demands stated within the Bill of Rights. Hillyard Mitchell, a trader at Duck Lake, was told by Riel, "If we take Fort Carlton we will be able to bring the Government to terms and get our rights."[1]



***Louis Riel sending a letter, 1885.***

On March 21, 1885, Riel sent the following letter to Superintendent Crozier demanding the surrender of the police:

> Major: — The Councillors of the Provisional Government of the Saskatchewan have the honor to communicate to you the following conditions of surrender:—You will be required to give up completely the situation which the Canadian Government have placed you in, at Carlton and Battleford, together with all Government properties.
>
> In case of acceptance, you and your men will be set free, on your parole of honor to keep the peace. And those who will choose to leave the country will be furnished with teams and provisions to reach Qu'Appelle.
>
> In case of non-acceptance, we intend to attack you, when to-morrow, the Lord's Day, is over; and to commence without delay a war of extermination upon all those who have shown themselves hostile to our rights. Messrs. Charles Nolin and Maxime Lepine are the gentlemen with whom you will have to treat.
>
> Major, we respect you. Let the cause of humanity be a consolation to you for the reverses which the governmental misconduct has brought upon you.

A postscript added:

> To Messrs. Charles Nolin and Maxime Lepine.
>
> Gentlemen:—If Major Crozier accedes to the conditions of surrender, let him use the following formula, and no other: "Because I love my neighbour as myself, for the sake of God, and to prevent bloodshed, and principally the war of extermination which threatens the country, I agree to the above conditions of surrender." If the Major uses this formula and signs it, inform him that we will receive him and his men, Monday.
>
> Yours,
> LOUIS "DAVID" RIEL,
> Exovede.[2]

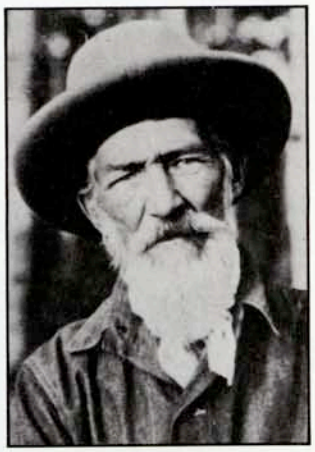
***Members of Riel's provisional government, 1885.***

***Maxime Lepine.***

***Charles Nolin.***

## The Duck Lake Encounter

The attack threatened in Riel's letter did not occur. On March 26, 1885, Crozier sent a small detachment of police to Duck Lake to obtain supplies and ammunition. After being halted and turned back by a party of Métis led by Gabriel Dumont, they returned to Fort Carlton and reported to Crozier. A force of ninety-five police and volunteers under Crozier then set out to confront the Métis. They were met by the Métis and a small party of Indians near Duck Lake.



***Above left: Superintendant Crozier, North West Mounted Police, 1875-1885.***
***Above right: Joe McKay, scout and interpreter for North West Mounted Police at Battle of Duck Lake, 1885.***

Gabriel Dumont sent his brother, Isidore and a Cree named Assywin to talk with Major Crozier. Carrying a white flag, they rode into the clearing. Crozier and Joe McKay, an interpreter for the police, rode out to **parley** with them. A scuffle ensued, in which Assywin and Isidore Dumont were both killed. The Métis had the advantage of cover and, after a brief battle, the police were forced to retreat, leaving behind ten dead men. Four years later, Gabriel Dumont gave the following account of the encounter at Duck Lake:

*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 a hillock which commanded the plain, and from where the enemy would have been able to level their guns on us.*

*We were only a few men on horseback and a few men on foot, waiting for the police who had been reinforced by eighty men commanded by Crozier, who had rejoined Mackay's forty runaways. They had a cannon with them.*

*I sent in pursuit of their scouts several men to whom I gave orders not to shoot, because Riel had asked us not to be the first to fire.*

*I gave orders to my horsemen, who numbered 25, to go down into a hollow, where we were under shelter from the cannon.*

*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 Métis who was, I believe, John Dougall Mackay. This English Métis fired, and I think it was this rifle shot which killed my brother Isidore and made him fall from his horse, stone dead....*

*As soon as the shot was fired, the police and the volunteers commanded by Crozier, fired a round, and the Indian who was with my brother, was killed....*

*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.*

*This first encounter had lasted half an hour.*

*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; I fell down on the ground, and my horse, which was also wounded, went right over me as it tried to get away. We were then 60 yards from the enemy. I wanted to get up, but the blow had been so violent, I couldn't. When Joseph Delorme saw me fall again, he cried out that I was killed. I said to him, "Courage, as long as you haven't lost your head you're not dead."*

*While we were fighting, Riel was on horseback, exposed to the gunfire, and with no weapon but the crucifix which he held in his hand....*

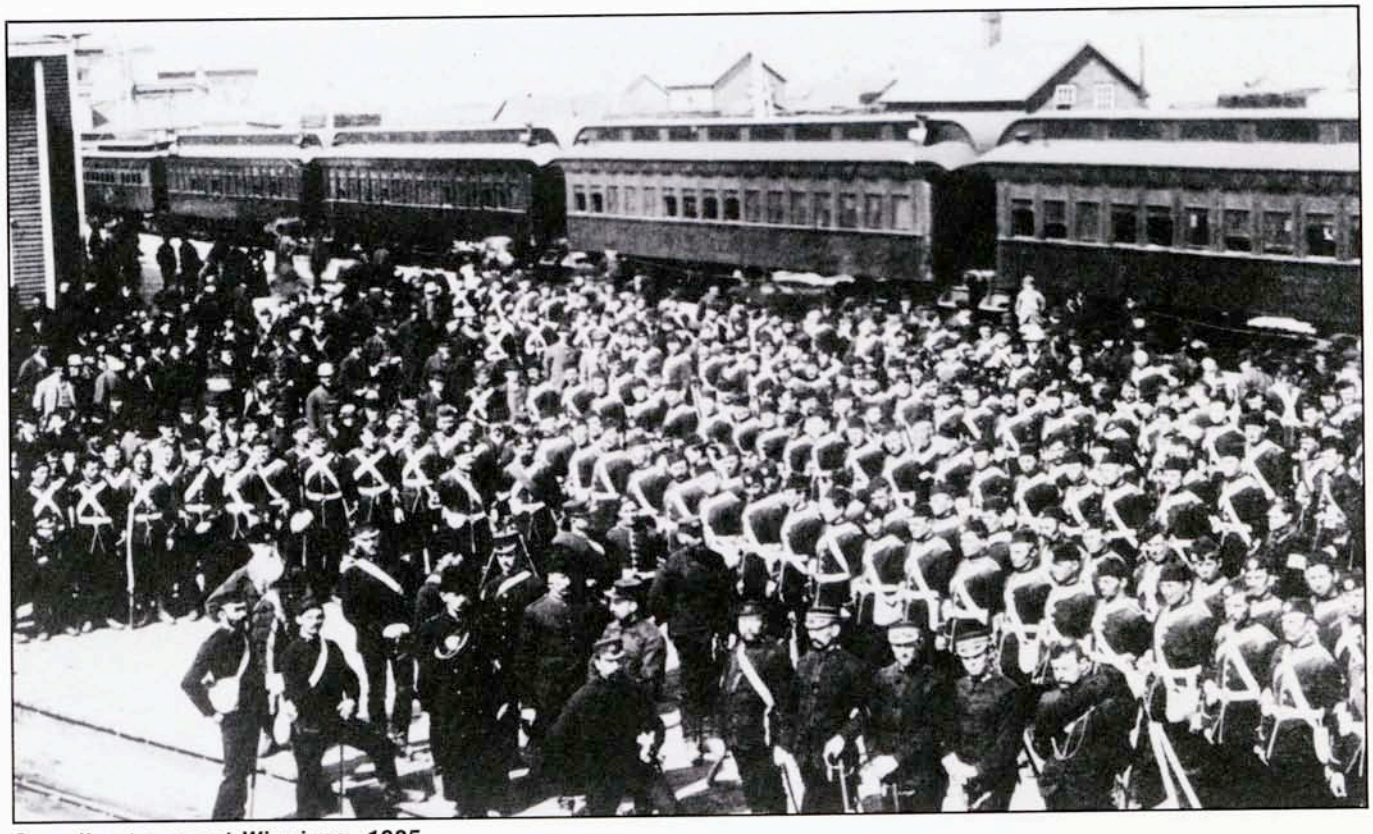
*The enemy was then beginning to retire, and my brother, who had taken command after my fall, shouted to our men to follow and destroy them. Riel then asked, in the name of God, not to kill any more, saying that there had already been too much bloodshed....*

*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....*[3]

## Salvation Of The C.P.R.

When news of the fighting reached Ottawa, it provided Prime Minister Macdonald with a solution to the financial dilemma of the C.P.R. A rebellion in the North West could not be allowed to go unquelled. Troops would have to be sent to the Saskatchewan District, and how better to transport them than by rail? The incident at Duck Lake happened at an opportune time:"[Macdonald] could use the railway to defend the west. He could use the west to justify the railway...."[4] Prime Minister Macdonald immediately set to work to implement his plan:

> *From here on it was a question of tactics. The Franchise bill would be used to block awkward questions on the North-west rebellion; the North-west rebellion would be used to aid the C.P.R. and the C.P.R. relief would benefit from the Opposition's preoccupation with the first two.* [5]



*Canadian troops at Winnipeg, 1885.*

## Plans To Quell The Resistance

Fearing a general uprising in the North West, Prime Minister Macdonald began taking steps to control the situation. On March 23, 1885, just prior to the Duck Lake incident, Macdonald had sent a telegram to Dewdney, in which he stated, "The land claims of the halfbreeds are to be adjusted without delay."[6] In a letter to General Middleton on March 29, l885, Macdonald wrote that the plan "is to localize the insurrection."[7] A commission was established to assess the land claims of the Métis. Macdonald also feared that the Indian nations would join the Métis uprising. To encourage their neutrality, "General orders were given to distribute additional provisions to the Indians; and the investigation of the Métis claims was now set in motion by the appointment of the necessary commissioners."[8]

*General Middleton, Commander of Canadian troops during the Resistance, 1885.*

*Colonel Otter, Commander of the troops stationed at Swift Current, 1885.*

*Major General Strange, Commander of the troops stationed at Calgary, 1885.*

***Militia at Fort Qu'Appelle, 1885.***

## Military Forces Move Toward Batoche

Troops from the east were mobilized and sent west by rail. In all, three military forces were placed in the west: one at Qu'Appelle under General Middleton, one at Swift Current under Lieutenant Colonel Otter and the third at Calgary under Major General Strange.

Since the population of the Qu'Appelle area was mostly Métis, Middleton placed the area under martial law to prevent the inhabitants from joining Dumont and Riel at Batoche. On April 4, 1885, Middleton and 800 soldiers began the march to Batoche. Middleton had at his disposal:

> *...5,456 junior officers and men. Supplies would include 586 horses, 8, 9-pounder cannon, 2 Gatling guns, 6,000 Snider-Enfield .50 caliber rifles, 1,000 Winchester repeating rifles. For the Gatling guns there were 70,000 rounds of ammunition; for the Snider-Enfield rifles, 1,500,050 cartridges; for the 9-pounder cannon, 2,000 shells. Also food for the men, fodder for the horses, clothing, two field hospitals and medical supplies. Middleton's officers alone outnumbered the entire Métis fighting force.*[9]

Although about 700 Métis families lived in the area, Riel did not have the support of all. It is stated in Black's *History of Saskatchewan:*

> *Well-informed loyalists, such as J.E. Sinclair, of Prince Albert; the well-known legislator, scout and interpreter, Honorable Thomas MacKay: the Honorable Hilliard Mitchell, and Mr. Louis Marion, a loyal French Halfbreed, who was for some time detained by Riel a prisoner at Batoche, affirm that neither at this time nor later did Riel have more than sixty or seventy Halfbreed supporters really intent upon rebellion.... Others were in arms simply in an instinctive though hopeless effort to defend their homes.*[10]

At no time did the fighting force of the Métis ever exceed three hundred and fifty men.

## The Frog Lake Incident

Meanwhile, the news of Riel's victory at Duck Lake had also reached the Cree Chief, Big Bear. Wandering Spirit, a war chief, and a number of the younger men planned and executed a raid on the settlement at Frog Lake. On April 2, they seized prisoners to barter for food and supplies.

*Big Bear, 1885.*

*Poundmaker, 1885.*

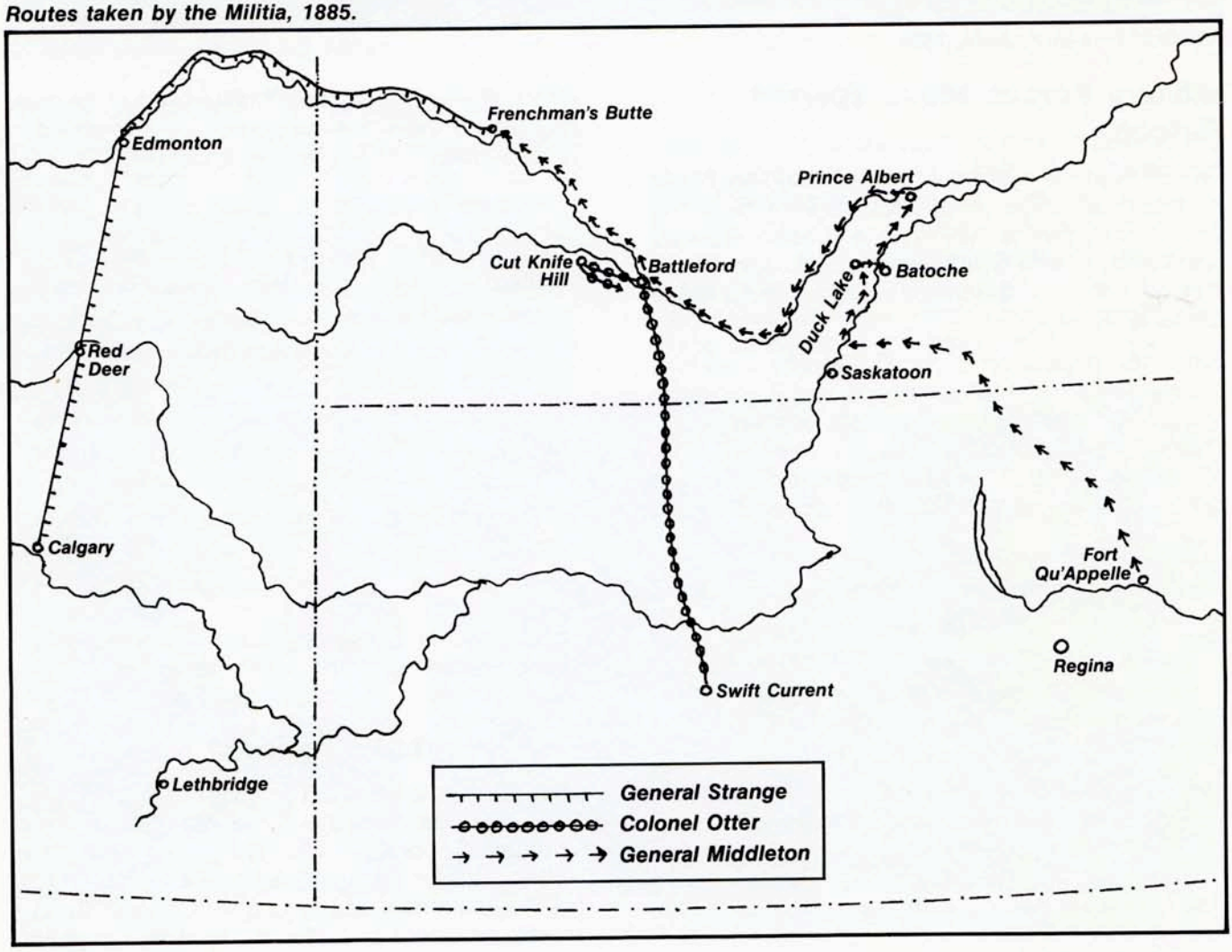
However, the situation grew beyond bartering for provisions when eleven people, including two priests and the Indian agent, were killed. Two weeks later Wandering Spirit, accompanied by Big Bear, seized Fort Pitt.

To prevent Big Bear, Poundmaker and Riel from uniting, more troops were dispatched to northern Saskatchewan. On April 20, Major General Strange and his troops began the march from Calgary to Edmonton, enroute to Saskatchewan. Strange's force was strengthened by a troop of scouts and police led by Colonel Sam Steele. Lieutenant Colonel Otter and a force of 300 set out from Battleford and, on May 2, attacked Poundmaker's camp at Cut Knife Creek. After a day of fighting, the police retreated and Poundmaker and his band began the journey to Batoche to join Riel.

## Tourond's Coulee (Fish Creek)

The column under Middleton arrived at Clarke's Crossing on April 17. By April 24 they had reached Tourond's Coulee, where they encountered 130 Métis under Gabriel Dumont. The Métis had placed themselves along the embankments of the coulee, a position which gave them a strategic advantage over Middleton's force, which was at the bottom of the ravine. The battle lasted the entire day, with both sides withdrawing under a heavy downpour of rain and sleet. Although the battle resulted in victory for neither side, the Métis had temporarily halted

***Routes taken by the Militia, 1885.***



Middleton's march to Batoche.

In his 1889 account of the resistance, Dumont described the Battle at Tourond's Coulee as follows:

*It was daybreak before we were in sight of Middleton, who was encamped at the McIntosh Farm.*

*I thought it wise to retire and go and wait for the enemy at Fish Creek Coulee, known among us as Little Beaver River, which flows from the west to the east, into the right of the Saskatchewan River. The Tourond family lived on the right bank of this stream....*

*Around seven o'clock, a scout, Gilbert Berland, warned us that a column of about 80 men was advancing upon us. I therefore placed 130 of my men, in a hollow, on the left bank of Fish Creek, opposite the Touronds' house, and I had the horses hidden in the woods. I left with 20 horsemen to take cover further ahead along the path to be followed by the troops, with the idea of not charging them until they should be thrust back by the others, and I gave orders to my principal force not to attack them until they were all in the coulee. I wanted to treat them as we would the buffalo....*

*We kept them in check all day, because I kept firing hard, and so that I could do so more quickly, the young fellows about me kept supplying me with cartridges which were rapidly becoming exhausted. When I saw there were only seven cartridges left, I decided to set fire to the prairie grass to make the enemy, who found themselves facing the wind withdraw. I figured on going, under cover of the smoke, to pick up ammunition and arms which they would abandon in their flight. I instructed my men to shout and sing during this operation....*

*I was hoping for help from Batoche. But Riel did not want to let the men go; he reassured the people, telling them no great harm would come to us.*

*However my brother Edouard, hearing the cannon, had begged Riel to let him go. Finally he said, "When my own flesh and blood are in danger I cannot stay here", and he hastened to us with 80 horsemen.*

*I had already succeeded in working around the enemy lines, and the police had fallen back although the volunteers continued the battle.*

*They dived into clumps of trees behind them and hearing our shouts, they fled, leaving a lot of baggage....*

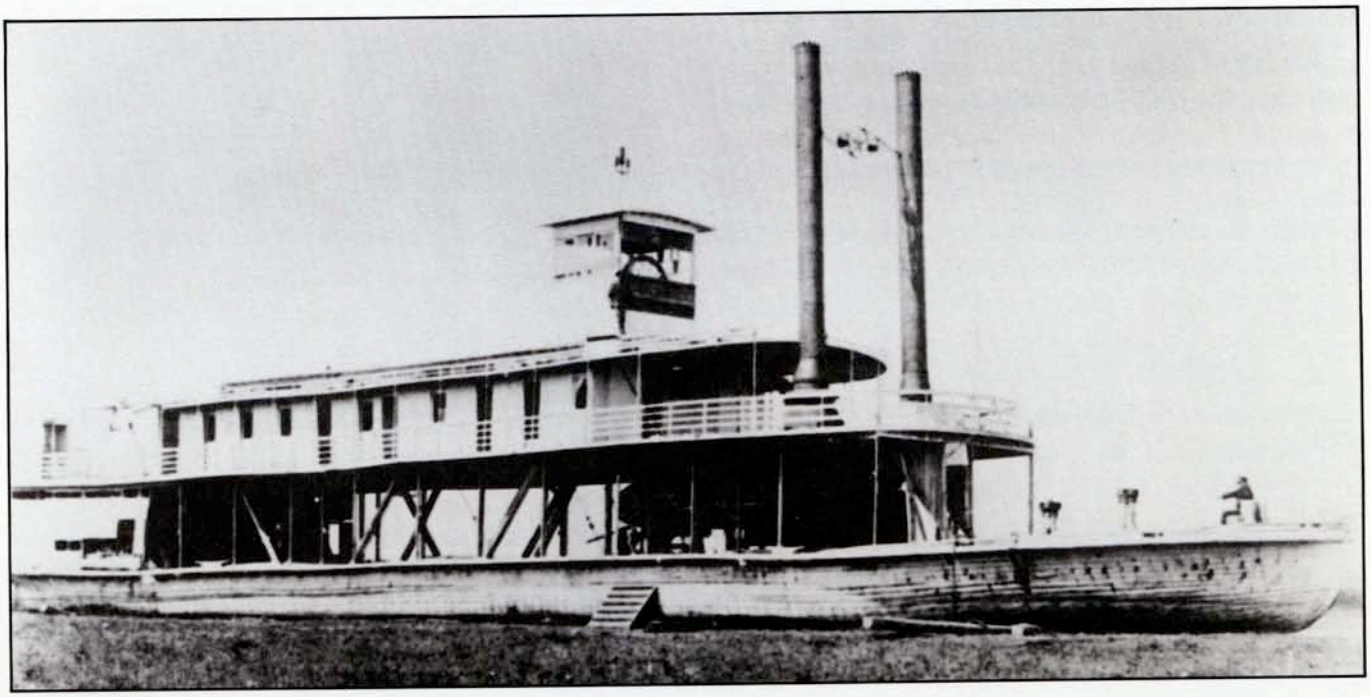
*Thanks to Providence, in the whole day of continuous and desperate fighting, we lost only 4 men....*

*It is useless for Middleton to estimate our forces at 300 men, of the 150 we were when we met the enemy we remained 47 and 7, and we were only 54 in number, when at the end of the day, Edouard Dumont's 80 horsemen came to our assistance....*[11]

***Tourond's house at Fish Creek where Métis were shelled, 1885.***

## The Wait For Reinforcements

Middleton's troops retired to the right bank of the Saskatchewan River and set up camp. There they remained for nearly two weeks, awaiting supplies of ammunition, food and medicine. The settlers of the area were quick to take advantage of the situation. They supplied food for the troops and hay for the horses at exorbitant prices. On May 5, supplies and reinforcements arrived on two barges towed by the steamer, Northcote. With these additional forces, the Canadian troops numbered approximately 1,000. They immediately began to prepare for an attack on Batoche.



*The Steamer "Northcote", 1894.*

## The Northcote

Once the Northcote had completed her mission of delivering supplies and reinforcements, Middleton's men began preparing her for battle. Observing this activity, the Métis devised a strategy that would render the steamer helpless. They planned to lower the ferry cable, thereby preventing the Northcote from reaching Batoche. Although the plan was only partially successful, the lowered cable severed a funnel and the steamer was forced to dock to put out the fire. Dumont's description of the incident follows:

> *Meanwhile Middleton was encamped at Fish Creek, on the right bank of the Saskatchewan, where he had brought his left column back across the river, waiting for reinforcements and especially the arrival of the steamer Northcote which was descending the river with provisions, two companies of the Midland Regiment, and a Gatling gun.*
>
> *The vessel which had been put in a state of defence with pieces of wood, sacks of oats etc., having arrived at Fish Creek, on May 5, Middleton embarked 35 men of "C" Company, School Corps, and set out on the 7th for Gabriel Dumont's ferry, where he halted and the boat anchored.*
>
> *This ferry is 30 miles from Clarke's Crossing and 6 miles from Batoche.*
>
> *It was there my farm was located. The troops burned my house and pulled down my stables to strengthen their steamer which they made arrow proof all around. They also destroyed the outbuildings of my neighbour Jose Vandal.*
>
> *On May 8, Middleton marched eastwards, then northwest on the open prairie, for fear of being surprised.*
>
> *The English troops* ***debouched*** *about 9 miles from Batoche, on the main road from Humboldt to Batoche and they set up camp there for the night.*
>
> *It was my wish to go to meet them among the wooded groves, because I knew well that if our men were to fight at Batoche, their resolution would be weakened by the cries and tears of the women and children.*
>
> *When I learned that the enemy had torn down my stables to strengthen their steamer, I concluded the steamer was descending to Batoche to take part in the impending attack and to divert the attention of a part of the defenders. These were in fact the orders which Middleton had given.*
>
> *I had a body of men placed opposite the Batoche church, to keep the crew from landing. Since the boat, which had set out on the 9th, had to pass through a rapid caused by a bend in the river, before it could continue on its way, I suggested that at this spot we cripple the helmsman, so as to set the boat adrift, and*

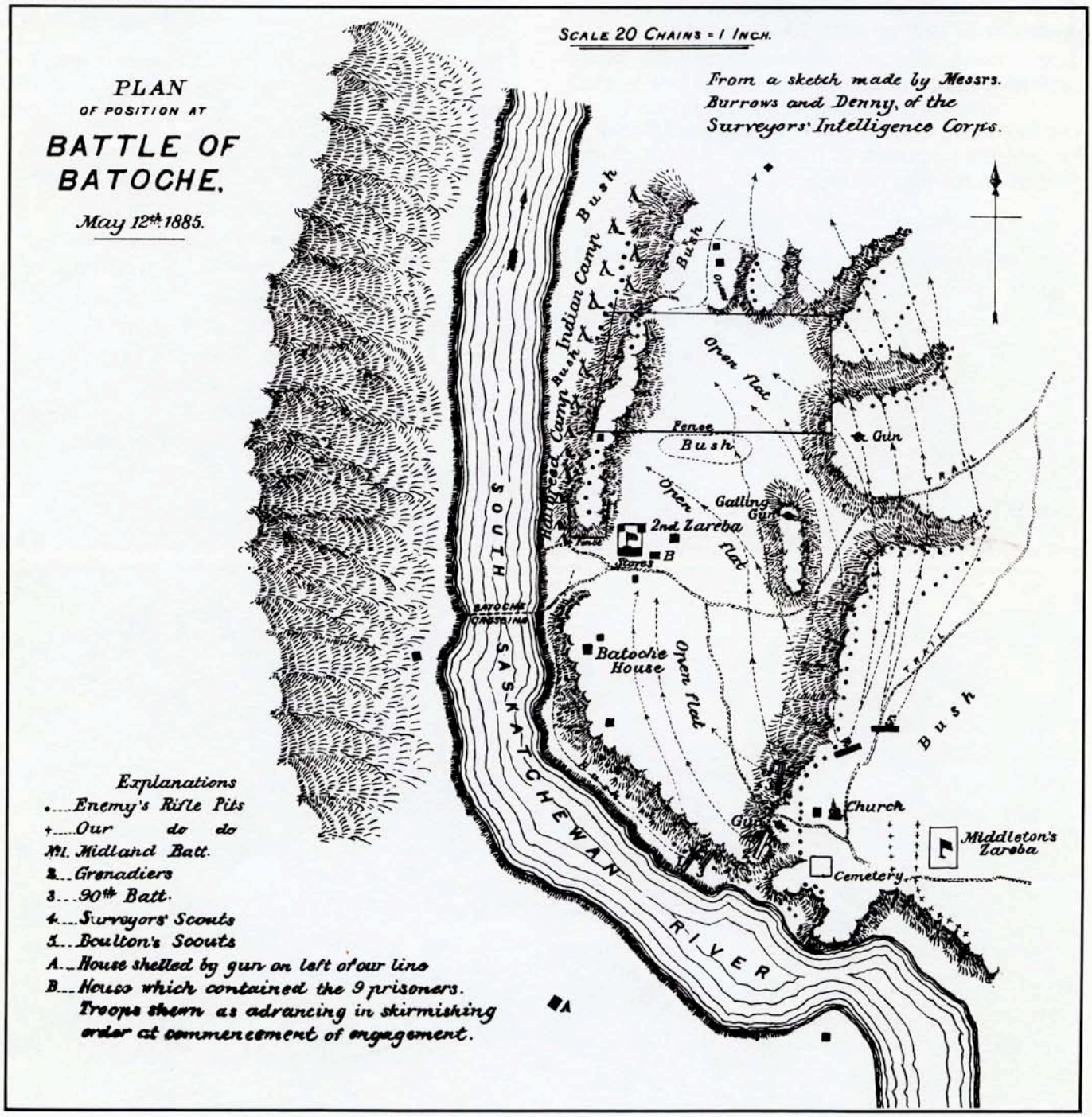
that an iron cable, thrown across the river, would make the vessel capsize.

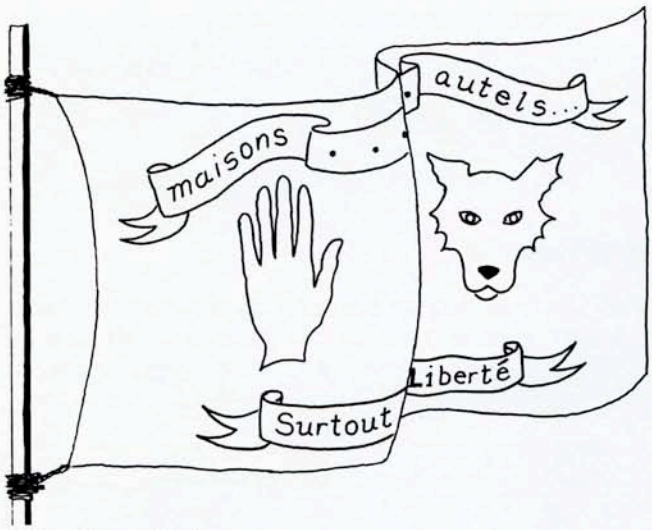
My men did, in fact, fire on those who were on deck and several of them threw themselves into the water. And the boat, as I had foreseen, went adrift. I galloped on horseback along the bank to give the signal to lower the cable, but it was done too slowly, the cable only caught the funnel which was torn away and a fire started. The crew however extinquished it, although my men fired on any that showed themselves on deck.12

## Batoche

Middleton sealed off Batoche by sending troops to the east, west and south. The attack was set for May 9 at 9:00 a.m., with the Northcote attacking from the river and the troops from the other three sides.

**Battle plan for Batoche.**






***Métis Flag, 1885.***

The Métis dug trenches on the outskirts of Batoche for defense purposes. In Dumonts' account of the resistance battles, he says:

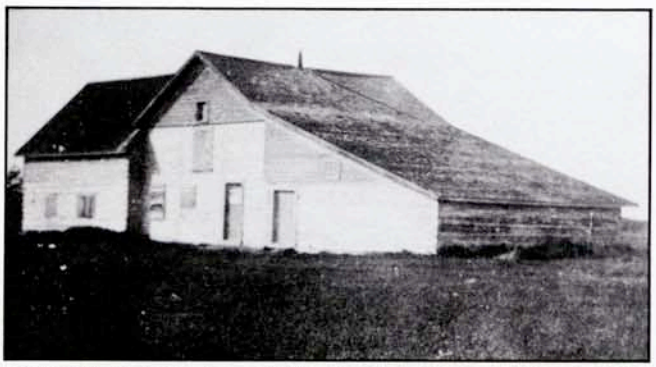
> *We held the enemy in check for three days, and each night they went back into their holes. And during those three days, they didn't kill a single man; they only hit some dummies which we stuck up for them and on which they concentrated their shots.*[13]

Although the attack from the Northcote was foiled by the Métis,Middleton's strategy included engaging the Métis in a series of skirmishes, with the intention of exhausting their ammunition. It was a strategy which was ultimately successful. On the morning of May 12, with the Métis' ammunition badly depleted, Riel pleaded with Middleton for the safety of the women and children.

Later in the day, when the Métis had no more ammunition, they retreated. Middleton ordered a cease fire but his order was disobeyed by Colonel Arthur Williams, who led a bayonet charge into the Métis trenches. Many of the older men, who had stayed behind to delay the troopers while the younger men escaped, bore the brunt of this attack. Dumont describes the final hours of the battle:

> *On the fourth day, the 12th of May, around 2 o'clock in the afternoon, on definite information furnished by those who betrayed us, that we had no more ammunition, the troops advanced and our men came out of their trenches; it was then were killed: José Ouellet, 93 years of age; José Vandal, who had both arms broken first and was finished off with a bayonet, 75 years; Donald Ross, first fatally wounded and speared with a bayonet, also very old; Isidore Boyer, also an old man; Michael Trottier, André Batoche, Calixte Tourond, Elzéar Tourond, John Swan, Damase Carrière, who first had his leg broken and whom the English then dragged with a rope around his neck tied to the tail of a horse. There were two Sioux also killed.*[14]

***Smoke from the first cannon ball fired at Batoche, May 9, 1885.***



*Old Mill at Batoche, Riel's headquarters during battle, 1885.*

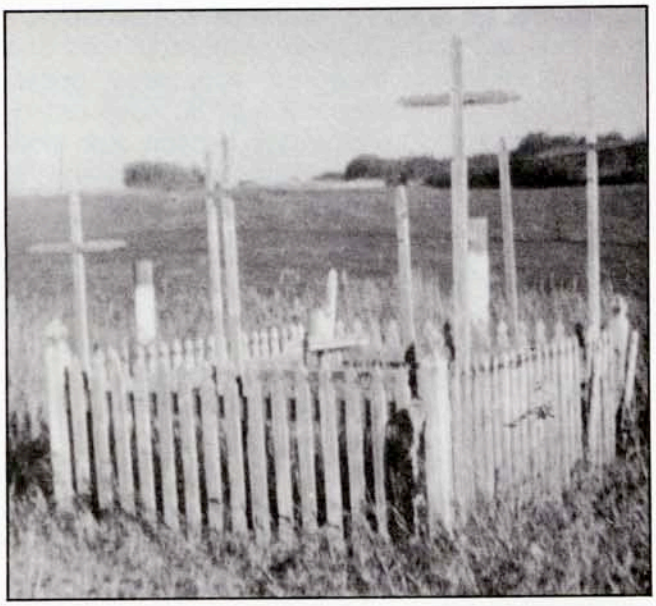
## After Batoche

Batoche had fallen; the Métis were defeated. Middleton's troops began searching the area, taking any Métis they found as prisoners. They were unable to find the women and children, who were hiding in caves along the river bank. Gabriel Dumont was able to secure a small amount of food and some blankets for them but, exhausted, undernourished and confined to the cold, damp caves, many of the women and children became sick. More Métis died from disease and starvation following the Battle of Batoche than during the fighting.

Most of the Métis soldiers surrendered to Middleton in the hope of sparing their families further hardship. Moise Ouellette arrived and reported to Gabriel Dumont that Louis Riel had surrendered to Middleton three days after the battle. Dumont refused to surrender, saying that he had ninety cartridges for ninety troopers. Madeleine Dumont, Gabriel's wife convinced him to flee to Montana where she promised to join him later. Accordingly, Gabriel and Michel Dumas set out for the United States with only meagre provisions to sustain them on their journey.

*Batoche, following the conflict in 1885.*

*Refugee camp at Batoche, 1885.*



**After Batoche**

*Above: Women refugees after Battle of Batoche, 1885.*
*Left: Mass grave of the Métis who perished at the Battle of Batoche.*

*Gabriel Dumont, 1885.*

*Michael Dumas, 1885.*

*Thomas Hourie, scout who arrested Riel, May 15, 1885.*

## Riel's Surrender

Louis Riel surrendered to Thomas Hourie, a Métis employed by General Middleton as a scout. He was taken to Middleton, placed under arrest and kept in a tent next to that of the General. From there he was removed to Regina and placed in the jail at the North West Mounted Police barracks to await trial. While in jail, he sent a letter to his brother, requesting him to come to Saskatchewan and take his wife and two children back to St. Vital (now a sub-division of Winnipeg).

Riel's trial was set for the latter part of July. A Riel defence committee was organized in Montreal and many of the larger centres in Québec. The committee raised the necessary funds to engage a defence lawyer for Riel at the trial.

*Louis Riel, as a prisoner after his arrest, May 16, 1885.*


***Picture of Louis Riel's council in 1885. Taken beside Regina Court House at the time of their trial. 1. Johnny Sansregret, 2. P. Paranteau (Famous Buffalo Hunter), 3. Pierre Gardiepui, 4. Philip Garnot (Riel's Secretary), 5. Albert Monkman, 6. Pierre Vandall, 7. Babtiste Vandall, 8. Touissaint Lucier (reputed Strongest Man in the North West), 9. Maxime Dubois, 10. Timmus Short, 11. .....Tourond, 12. Emmanuel Champagne.***

## The Trial Of Riel's Council

The members of Riel's council who were arrested were charged with treason-felony. According to Garnot, one the Métis councillors, the prosecuting lawyers offered the councillors a choice between a charge of **high treason** or **treason-felony**:

> *One day, they came and called us all together and explained to us the difference between the charge of high treason, for which we should infallibly suffer sentence of death, and that of treason-felony, for which we could suffer imprisonment of from one day to life....*
>
> *[The lawyers said,] "The Crown offers that, if you plead guilty, they will charge you with treason-felony, but if you refuse, you will be charged with high treason and many among you will be executed."*15

At first Garnot and some of the other councillors refused to plead guilty to the lesser charge. Eventually, however, they decided to plead guilty to the charge of treason-felony. By doing so, their cases were effectively separated from that of Louis Riel. The councillors were tried and received prison sentences which ranged from one to seven years.

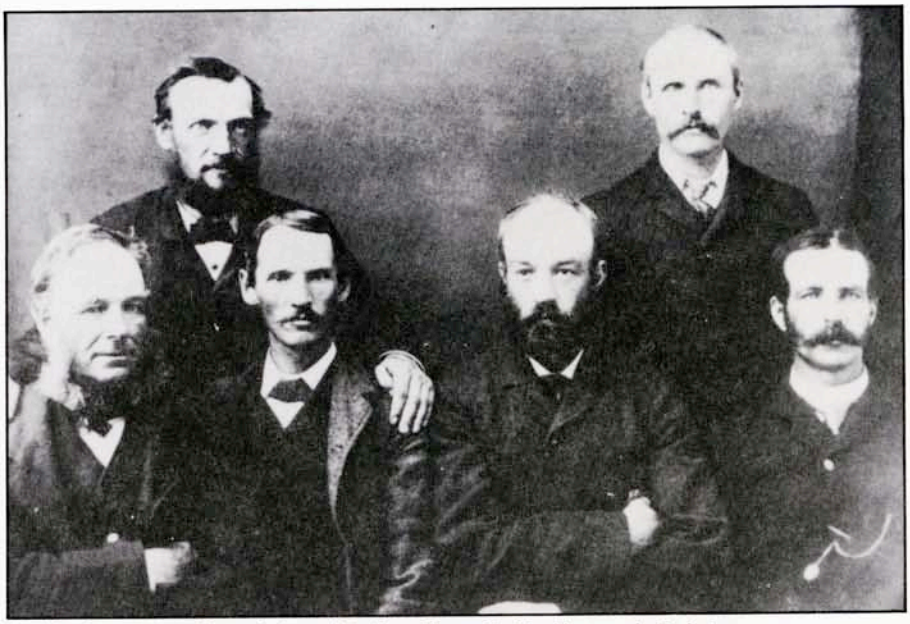
## Riel's Trial

Riel was charged with high treason. Lieutenant Colonel Hugh Richardson, the **stipendiary magistrate** of the North West Territories, was given the responsibility for Riel's trial. Stipendiary magistrates were paid political appointees of the federal government. Ordered to select a jury of six men and to preside over the trial, Richardson chose six English-speaking Protestants who would not be sympathetic to Riel. Because the proceedings of the trial would be primarily in French, the jury would be dependent on translators.

Riel's lawyers argued that the court did not have the authority to conduct a case of so serious a nature. They requested that the trial be moved to an area that had provincial status and that the jury consist of twelve men: six English-speaking and six French-speaking. They also argued that Riel had applied for and had been granted American citizenship, which made it illegal for him to be tried under Canadian law. These arguments were disregarded and the trial began in Regina, as scheduled.

The Crown produced letters said to have been confiscated from the Indian leaders. These letters, the intent of which was to incite open rebellion among the Indian people, were allegedly from Riel. The defence questioned the legitimacy of these letters:

Judge Hugh Richardson, 1900.



Riel's jury: standing, l to r, Walter Merryfield, Henry J. Painter; seated, l to r, Francis Cosgrove, E.J. Brooks, Pat Deane, Ed Evett.

*Why was Poundmaker not produced here by the Crown and examined as a witness to prove that he got this letter, that he read it and that he understood the* **purport** *of it? Why were Big Bear and the other Indians to whom this man is supposed to have written not brought here? They are within a stone's throw of this very building, they are here under the control of the Crown, and if this man is guilty of the savagery of which he is accused, if this is the contemptible bad rascal that he is represented to you to be by the Crown, why is it not proved? Why is not proved so that we may all understand the position that we occupy so that we may all know the true inwardness and character of this man? Why make the statements and not prove them? Why are those Indians not produced?*[16]

Big Bear and Poundmaker as prisoners, 1885.

***Riel's trial, held at Regina in July, 1885.***

Riel pleaded "not guilty" to the charge of high treason. Although his counsel attempted to prove him innocent by reason of insanity, Riel disagreed with his lawyers and maintained that he was sane. His argument was that, should he be found not guilty by reason of insanity, the cause for which he and the Métis had fought would not be recognized as legitimate.

The court found him guilty of high treason and recommended him to the mercy of the Crown. After the discharge of the jury, Riel rose to make a final speech to the court before the passing of sentence. A portion of the speech reads as follows:

> *The court has done the work for me, and although at first appearance it seems to be against me, I am so confident in the ideas which I have had the honor to express yesterday, that I think it is for good, and not for my loss. Up to this moment I have been considered by a certain party as insane, by another party as a criminal, by another party as as a man with whom it was doubtful whether to have any intercourse. So there was hostility, and there was contempt, and there was avoidance. Today, by the verdict of the court, one of those three situations has disappeared.*
>
> *I suppose that after having been condemned, I will cease to be called a fool, and for me, it is a great advantage. I consider it as a great advantage.*
>
> *If I have a mission—I say "if", for the sake of those who doubt, but for my part it means "since", since I have a mission, I cannot fulfil my mission as long as I am looked upon as an insane being—human being, as the moment I begin to ascend that scale I begin to succeed.*[17]

On the afternoon of August 1, 1885, Mr. Justice Richardson pronounced sentence upon Riel. He outlined that Riel had been found guilty by the jury, therefore reflecting that much grief and bloodshed had been caused by Riel. The sentence read:

> *It is now my painful duty to pass the sentence of the court upon you, and that is, that you be taken now from here to the police guard-room at Regina, which is the gaol and the place from whence you came, and that you be kept there till the 18th of September next, you be taken to the place appointed for your execution, and there be hanged by the neck till you are dead, and may God have mercy on your soul.*[18]

## Reaction To Riel's Trial

Riel's defence launched an appeal which succeeded in postponing the execution date to October 16. A second appeal granted him another stay of execution to November 16. During the time between the passing of Riel's sentence and his execution, controversy over the decision continued. A number of government officials strongly supported the sentence. In a letter to Macdonald dated August 7, 1885, Edgar Dewdney, Lieutenant Governor of the North West Territories wrote:

> *Riel came out in his true light on making his final speech before being sentenced and it did more to settle his case with the jury than anything else, he just [showed] that he was a* ***consummate*** *villain. I hope sincerely that he will be hanged he is too dangerous a man to have a chance of being let loose on society.*[19]

Hayter Reed, the Indian Agent at Battleford, also felt that Riels' execution was necessary. On August 31, 1885, he wrote to Dewdney:

> *I trust Riel will swing for if he does not it will have a great prejudicial effect on the minds of the Indians.*[20]

However, not everyone shared these views. Sympathizers in Québec began to agitate against the federal government. To them, Riel's sentence represented a racial and religious issue in which Québec was pitted against Ontario; Roman Catholics against Protestants. The Liberal Party used the controversy to gain political support against the Macdonald administration. Macdonald, however, remained unmoved:

> *Throughout the raging tide of agitation Macdonald stood firm. In his eyes Riel was twice guilty of rebellion. His offence was therefore doubly unpardonable and Macdonald cried "He shall hang though every dog in Quebec bark in his favour." Political* ***expediency*** *probably dictated the same decision, for Macdonald was always an astute politician. He fully appreciated the feeling in Ontario and possibly felt that he stood to gain more in Ontario than he would lose in Quebec.*[21]

Macdonald, himself, came under attack from some quarters. The Member of Parliament for Ottawa, Alexander Campbell, wrote to T.C. Patteson, the Toronto postmaster:

> *...things have been going badly in the Ministry for a year or more—Macdonald has lost his grasp, and does nothing he can help. Putting off, his old sin, has increased upon him, until it has become an irritation to have relations with him.*[22]

## The Execution

As the controversy in the East continued, Riel awaited his end in the Regina jail. His days were filled with writing letters, writing in his diary and prayer. On the day before his scheduled execution, Riel sent this letter to his mother:

> *My Dear Mother,*
>
> *.... Yesterday and today I have prayed God to strengthen you and grant you all his gentle comfort so that your heart may not be troubled by pain and anxiety.*
>
> *I embrace you all with the greatest affection.*
>
> *You, dear mother, I embrace you as a son whose soul is full of* ***filial*** *devotion.*
>
> *You, my dear wife, I embrace you as a Christian husband in the Catholic spirit of* ***conjugal*** *union.*
>
> *My dear little children, I embrace you as a Christian father, blessing you to the full extent of divine mercy both for the present and for the future.*
>
> *You my dear brothers and sisters, brothers and sister-in-law, nephews, cousins and friends, I embrace you all with all the cordiality of which my heart is capable.*
>
> *Please be joyful,*
> *Dear Mother,*
> *I am your affectionate, submissive and obedient son*
> *LOUIS "DAVID" RIEL*[23]

On the morning of November 16, 1885, Riel was taken from his cell and led to the gallows. Father André was at his side as he went to meet the hangman, Jack Henderson. While Riel prayed, the trapdoor was sprung and Riel was hanged.

Riel's body was sent by train to St. Boniface, where he was buried. Many years later Edwin Brooks, one

of the jurors at Riel's trial, stated in an interview: "We [the jury] tried Louis Riel for treason but he was hanged for the murder of Thomas Scott."[24]

The *New York Herald* ran the following editorial on November 16, 1885, describing the political feeling in the province of Québec:

> *The prevailing opinion among the French Canadians is Sir John has sacrificed Riel to political* ***exigency****, dreading the loss of support of the Orangemen of Ontario more than the hostility of his oldtime French-speaking followers of Quebec. The portion of the French Canadian population which has not yet joined in denunciation of the government is numerically small.*[25]

Further tragedy was to visit Louis Riel's family. Their third child, born prematurely while Riel was in prison, died. Louis' wife, Marguerite, was deeply affected by the loss of her husband and child; nor had she recovered her physical health after the ordeal at Batoche. Six months after Louis' death, she died at the age of twenty-five.


***Louis Riel's grave, St. Boniface, Manitoba.***

## The Aftermath Of The Resistance

Following the resistance, the federal government launched an investigation into its causes. Superintendent William Pearce travelled to the West to conduct the investigation. Although he consulted with some residents of the area, he relied heavily on information he received from George Duck, the local agent for the Dominion Lands Office in Prince Albert, and from Father André. Pearce identified six reasons for the resistance, which he presented in a report to the Minister of the Interior. They read as follows:

> PRINCE ALBERT, N.W.T., 14th December, 1885.
> Hon. Thomas White, Minister of the Interior, Ottawa, Ont.
>
> *Sir,—In accordance with instructions received from you during your late visit to the North-West, that I should, during my present visit to this district, collect all possible information regarding the alleged causes of the recent unfortunate outbreak in the North-West, I have the honor to report as follows: The six alleged causes are the following:*
>
> 1. *That the half-breed settlers did not receive patents for their lands, through delays, the fault solely of the Government, which rendered it impossible for them to obtain entry for the lands settled upon;*
> 2. *That, owing to the system of surveys, these parties were unable to obtain the land they had settled on and improved prior to survey;*
> 3. *That they were entitled to the same rights as had been accorded to the half-breeds of Manitoba;*
> 4. *That the lands on which they had for years resided had been sold over their heads to others, chiefly speculators;*
> 5. *That the timber dues have proved very* ***onerous*** *to them, and were a grave cause of dissatisfaction; and*
> 6. *That the dues for cutting hay on Government lands were also onerous, and a cause of great dissatisfaction.*[26]

After presenting his investigation in detail and explaining the results, Mr. Pearce concluded his evidence with the six points listed below:

1st. This report shows that of all the 258 settlers at the time of the outbreak, not one was unable to obtain patent for his land through the action or rather non-action of the Government, and even in March, 1884, there were only 10 cases of delay, which delay was caused by the conflicting surveys of One Arrow's reserve and the St. Lawrence parish.

2nd. That not one man of the 258, or anyone else who ever resided in the district, ever lost one inch of land through the system of survey, when such survey was made subsequent to his settlement thereon.

3rd. That 92 per cent. of the 258 had no rights as North-West half-breeds. Of that 92 per cent., those who were half-breeds had participated in all the rights accorded those people in the Province of Manitoba.

4th. That not one settler in the district had an acre of land sold over his head to which he had any claim, or had even preferred one.

5th. That the timber dues were not onerous, amounting only to five cents per settler per annum.

6th. That the hay permit question never affected them in the remotest degree.

All of which is respectfully submitted.

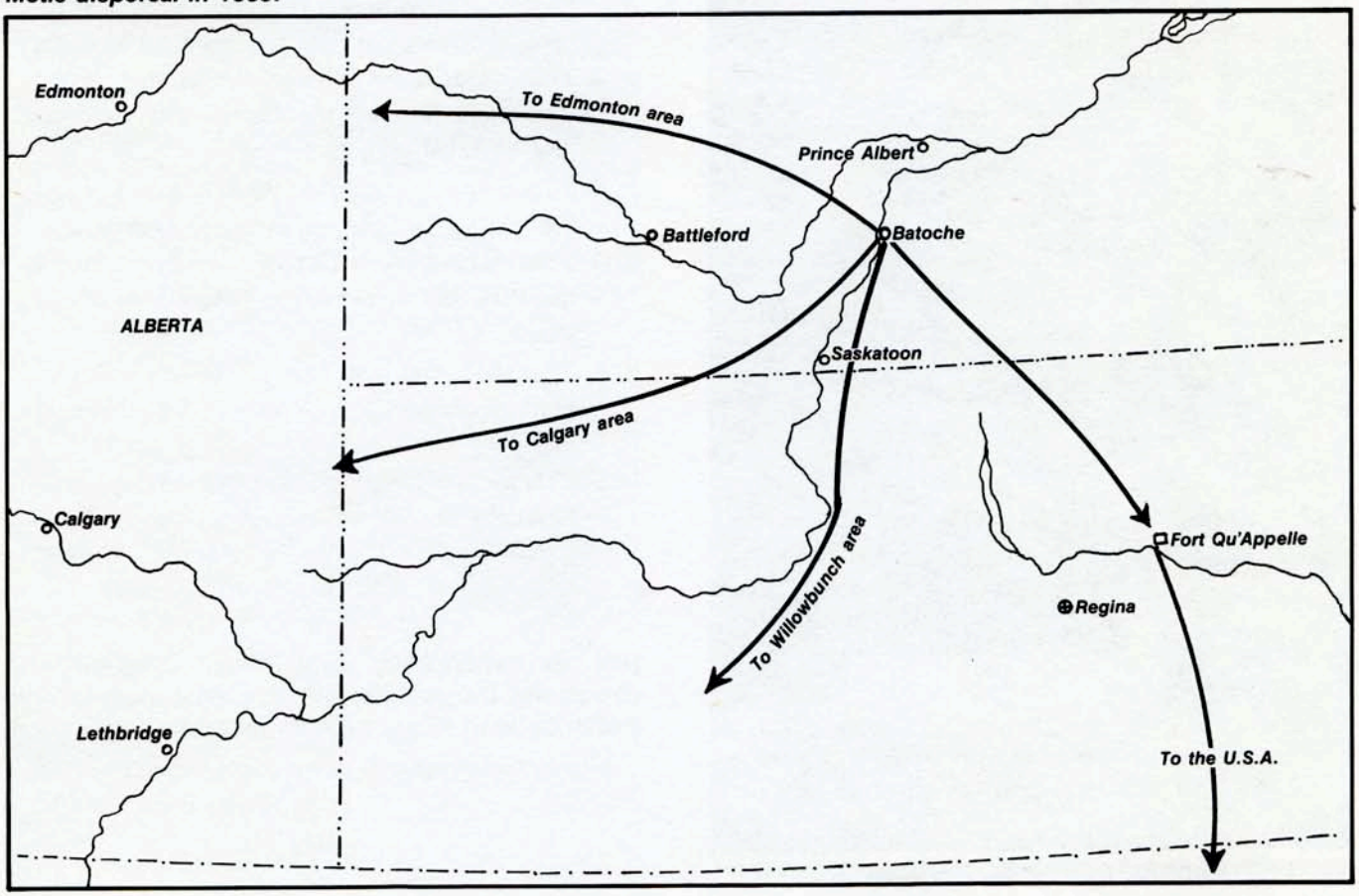
I have the honor to be, Sir, your obedient servant,

WM.PEARCE, Superintendent.[27]

The implications of Mr. Pearce's report were that the Métis had no legal claim and offered armed resistance for no apparent reason. However, as Dr. Norman Black, a noted Saskatchewan historian, indicates, Mr. Pearce's investigation was not as thorough as it could have been:

During the year Mr. W. Pearce visited Prince Albert, Battleford and other points on behalf of the Dominion Authorities to investigate the claims advanced by old settlers on the grounds of long occupation. A considerable number of these claims were satisfactorily disposed of, but Mr. Pearce could not speak French, and as the employment of an interpreter would have entailed expense, no enquiry was made into the special grievances of the French Halfbreeds.[28]

***Métis dispersal in 1885.***



## Conclusion

The year 1885 marked the beginning of a period of increased hardship for the Métis. Riel had been hanged. Gabriel Dumont and some of the leaders had escaped to the United States where they lived in exile. The remaining leaders were serving prison terms for their part in the resistance.

The Métis people, themselves, fared not much better. Those who had taken part in the resistance had been **excommunicated** from the Church. Many had their homes looted and burned and their property destroyed. Many Métis dispersed: some to the United States, some to Alberta, some to other Métis communities in Saskatchewan. The majority, however, chose to stay and start over.

> *Those who did not take up arms were granted the scrip and patents which they had demanded—a procedure which admitted the justice of the Métis cause and the* ***culpability*** *of the Federal Government for the rebellion.*[29]

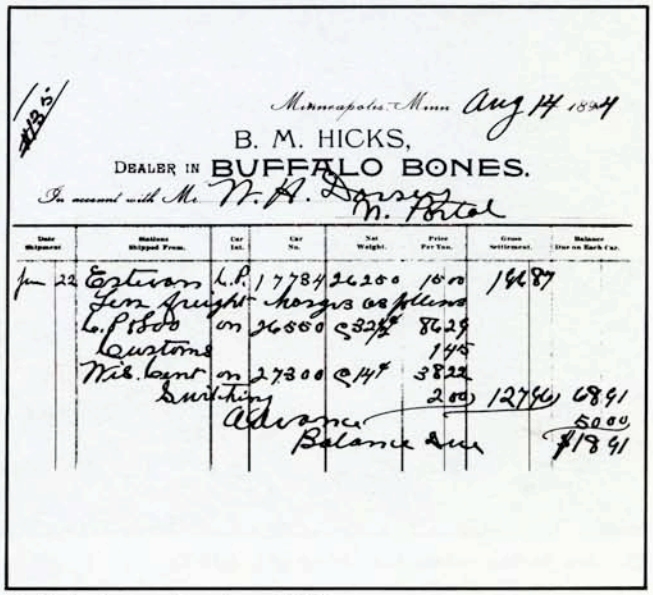
With their newly acquired patents they attempted to start over. However, lacking provisions, seed grain or implements, many were unable to farm so they sold their scrip to land speculators.

Some of those who had lost their church privileges attempted to regain them by selling what few remaining cattle they had. In a letter to Edgar Dewdney, L.W. Herchmer, N.W.M.P. Superintendent wrote:

> *It is said that the half-breeds have been selling cattle lately to make up the money required by the Priest before he will re-admit the backslides to the privileges of the church; $25.00 a man is the figure.*[30]

For the next twenty years, many were able to eke out a living by gathering the buffalo bones which were strewn about the prairie. They received eight to twelve dollars a ton for the bones, which were shipped to Eastern Canada to be used in manufacturing fertilizer and refining sugar.

Deprived of their leadership and fighting for survival, the Métis were now largely at the mercy of the changes which were sweeping the Candian West rather than participating in directing them. In November, 1885, the railway was completed and it became the primary means of transporting goods and immigrants to the West, and of shipping produce from the prairies to the eastern markets. Within a few years, the Métis freighting industry had died and the freighters were forced to find employment elsewhere. As the Métis struggled to survive and to find a place for themselves in the rapidly changing society of the early twentieth century, it seemed to many that their dreams of a Métis nation had died.


Minneapolis Minn. Aug 14 1894

B. M. HICKS,

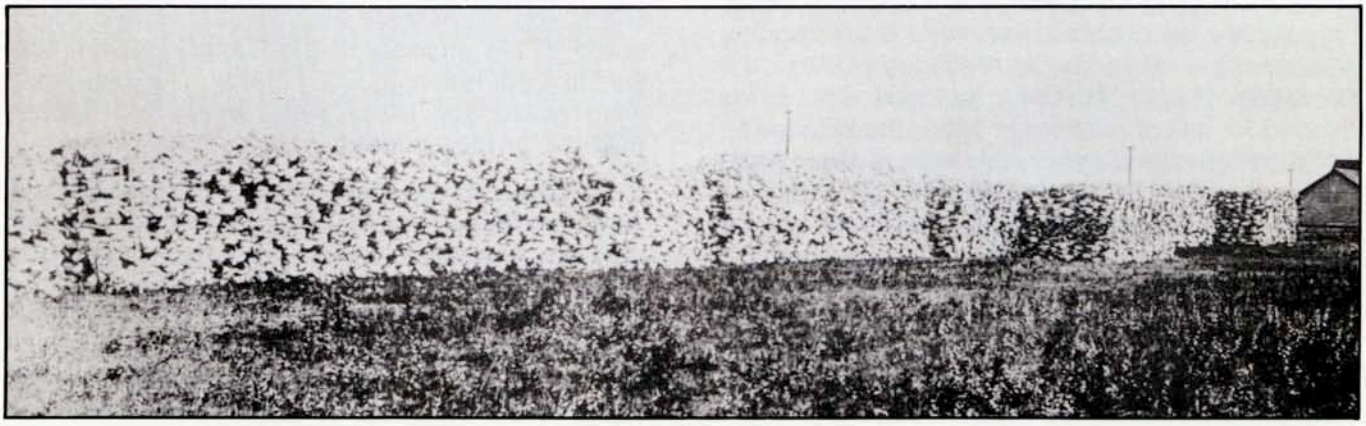
DEALER IN BUFFALO BONES.

In account with Mr. N. A. Dorsey
N. Portal

| Date Shipped | Stations Shipped From | Car Int. | Car No. | Net Weight | Price Per Ton | Gross Settlement | Balance Due on Each Car |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Jun 22 | Estevan | L.P. | 17784 | 26200 | 10 00 | 14687 | |
| | Jas Wright Moosjaw as follows | | | | | | |
| | L.P. 1500 | on | 26500 | @32½ | 8629 | | |
| | Customs | | | | 145 | | |
| | Nic. Lamt | on | 27300 | @14 | 3822 | | |
| | Switching | | | | 200 | 12746 | 6891 |
| | Advance | | | | | | 5000 |
| | Balance due | | | | | | $1891 |

***Buffalo bones invoice, 1894.***

***Stacks of buffalo bones, 1890's.***



***Buffalo bones ready for shipment, 1890's.***

## Epilogue

The Métis Resistance of 1885 played a major role in the development of Canada as it is known today. Largely as a result of its involvement in transporting government troops to the Saskatchewan District, the Canadian Pacific Railway received the funds needed for its completion. In 1905, Saskatchewan and Alberta attained provincial status. Twenty years earlier, the Bill of Rights drafted by Riel's provisional government had demanded that these areas be recognized as provinces. A Prime Minister's order, aimed at settling a long-standing issue, began the land claims process which, in turn, stimulated a flow of immigrants to the Canadian West. They farmed the prairie and, during the 1890's, established many new communities in the North West.

Métis organizations were formed in Alberta and Saskatchewan during the 1930's and 1940's under the leadership of Jim Brady and Malcolm Norris. Brady and Norris were also very active and contributed to the success of the Canadian Commonwealth Federation (C.C.F.) Party. The two world wars would see many Métis enlist and fight in defence of their country.

In the past century, a number of Métis people have achieved recognition as politicians, writers, artists, athletes, educators, and as respected members of many other professions. The majority of these people have worked hard to preserve the distinct culture of the Métis. One of their most recent successes has been the entrenchment of Métis rights in the Canadian constitution.

# Endnotes

1. George F. Stanley, *The Birth of Western Canada: A History of the Riel Rebellions*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961, p.323.
2. Ibid., p.324.
3. George F. Stanley, "Gabriel Dumont's Account of the North West Rebellion, 1885" in *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 30, 1949, pp.253-255.
4. Donald Creighton, *The Old Chieftain*, Toronto: Macmillan, 1955, p.417.
5. P.B. Waite, *Canada 1874-1896: Arduous Destiny*, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart., 1971, p. 140.
6. Macdonald Papers MG26A Vol. 526, Macdonald to Dewdney, March 23, 1885, p.137.
7. Sir Joseph Pope Papers, Correspondence, Macdonald to Middleton, March 29, 1885, pp.340-341.
8. See Creighton, p.148.
9. Peter Charlebois, *The Life of Louis Riel*, Toronto: New Canada Publications, 1978, p.155.
10. Norman Black, *The History of Saskatchewan and the North West Territories, Vol. 1*, Regina: Saskatchewan Historical Company, 1913, p.268.
11. See Stanley, "Gabriel Dumonts' Account of the North West Rebellion, 1885", pp.259-63.
12. Ibid., pp.264-265.
13. Ibid., p. 265.
14. Ibid., p. 266.
15. See Charlebois, p.220.
16. Epitome Parliamentary Documents, No. 43, 1885, p. 189.
17. Ibid., p.213.
18. Ibid., p.225.
19. Dewdney Papers, Vol. 21B, Dewdney to Macdonald, Aug. 7, 1885, pgs. 90287-93.
20. Dewdney Papers, Vol. 21B, Hayter Reed to Dewdney, Aug. 31, 1885, pp. 91322-26.
21. See Stanley, *The Birth of Western Canada*, p. 395.
22. Public Archives of Ottawa, T.C. Patteson Papers, Campbell to Patteson, Aug. 8, 1885 as cited in Waite, p.145.
23. Public Archives Manitoba, Riel Papers, Louis Riel to Julie Riel, Nov. 15, 1885.
24. Interview with Edwin Brooks, 1925, as cited in Charlebois, p. 227.
25. See Charlebois, p. 236.
26. See Epitome Parliamentary Documents, p. 336.
27. Ibid., p. 344.
28. See Black, p. 238.
29. See Stanley, *The Birth of Western Canada*, p. 378.
30. Dewdney Papers, Vol. 21B, L.W. Herchermer to E. Dewdney, Jan. 15. 1886, pp. 90405-8.

# Vocabulary

All definitions denoted by an asterisk (*) are from *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, third edition, Oxford University Press, l973. Other definitions are explained in the context in which they appear.

p. 6 * **Parley**: to speak, talk; discuss terms

p. 12 * **Debouch**: to issue from a confined place, such as a ravine or a wood, into open country.

p. 17 * **High Treason**: violation by a subject of his allegiance to his sovereign or to the state.

p. 17 * **Treason-felony**: an offence or misdemeanor akin to treason or felony, but not liable to the capital penalty.

p. 17 * **Stipendiary Magistrate**: a salaried official of the governing body hired to perform judicial duties.

p. 18 * **Purport**: purpose, intention.

p. 20 * **Consummate**: complete.

p. 20 * **Expediency**: suitability to the conditions.

p. 20 * **Filial**: due from a child to a parent.

p. 20 * **Conjugal**: of or pertaining to marriage or to husband and wife in their relation to each other, matrimonial.

p. 21 * **Exigency**: demands, needs, requirements.

p. 21 * **Onerous**: burdensome, oppressive.

p. 23 * **Excommunicate**: to exclude, by an authoritative sentence, from the communion of the church, or from religious rites.

p. 23 * **Culpability**: guilt; blame.

# Questions

The questions which follow have been selected to reinforce the objectives of *Book 5: Ending an Era*. They can be used for discussion, research or assignment purposes. Students should not be expected to answer all of the questions. It is suggested that the teacher select an appropriate number and variety of questions for the class.

**Objective 1: to describe the 1885 Resistance battles and their outcomes.**

Questions

1. Was Major Crozier justified in sending out ninety-five police officers and volunteers to confront the Métis? Why or why not?
2. Why did Louis Riel not allow Gabriel Dumont and his men to pursue the police after the battle at Duck Lake?
3. Why was it important to Prime Minister Macdonald that the insurrection be localized?
4. After 12 years of not acting on the Métis' land claims, why would Macdonald send an urgent telegram to Dewdney telling him to adjust the land claims without delay?
5. What tactics were used by the Métis to halt Middleton's troops at Fish Creek?
6. Briefly outline Middleton's plans for the attack on Batoche. What were the eventual outcomes of his plans?

**Objective 2: to examine the trial of Louis Riel and his councillors.**

Questions

1. Examine Quotation 15 and explain its significance for the Métis councillors who were on trial. How would their decision affect Riel's trial?
2. Riel's lawyers tried various approaches to secure Riel's release. Were these attempts justified? Why or why not?
3. What did Riel mean when he said "the court has done the work for me"? (Quotation 17)
4. Examine Quotation 25. Why did the French Canadians feel that Sir John A. Macdonald sacrificed Riel for political reasons?

**Objective 3: to examine the government's investigation of the Métis land claims after the resistance.**

Questions

1. During Mr. Pearce's investigation, the claims of the French-speaking Métis were not investigated because "the employment of an interpreter would have entailed expense" (Quotation 28). In view of the fact that the federal government had spent approximately five million dollars on the resistance, is this a valid reason for not investigating the Métis' land claims? Why or why not?
2. What was the situation of the Métis people immediately following the resistance?

**Enrichment Questions**

1. Why did Lawrence Clarke tell the Métis that their petition would be answered with bullets?
2. Rather than seizing power forcibly, what alternatives did Riel have for obtaining a stronger bargaining position with the federal government?
3. How could Macdonald use the railway to defend the west and use the west to justify the railway?
4. Describe the living conditions of the women and children who had taken refuge in the caves along the river bank at Batoche.
5. Examine Quotations 19 and 20. Why do you think Dewdney and Reed held these opinions?
6. Speculate on what would have happened had the Métis won at Batoche? Would the fighting have continued? Would it affect us today?

# Recommended Reading List


A.M.N.S.I.S., *Louis Riel: Justice Must Be Done*, Winnipeg: Manitoba Métis Federation Press, l979, pp. 45-76.

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# Acknowledgements


*Ending an Era*, the fifth of five books in the series *Métis Development and the Canadian West*, was produced by the Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research, Inc. As a project of the *Five Year Action Plan* for Native Curriculum Development, *Ending an Era* was developed with the guidance of the Indian and Métis Curriculum Advisory Committee. Other individuals who contributed to the project include: Mavis Bear, Donna Biggins, Gail Bowen, Ted Bowen, Janette Heath, Howard Jesse, Edmond Lucier, Don McLean, Lorna Payne, Martin Shulman. Also contributing to the project was the Indian and Métis Curriculum Development Team, Community Education Branch, Saskatchewan Education.

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Photo Credits: Saskatchewan Archives Board, pages 5, 8, 9, 11, 14, 15, 15, 16, 17, 18, 18, 21, 23, 24; Manitoba Archives, pages 6, 13, 16, 18; Public Archives of Canada, pages 8, 8, 10, 12, 15, 16, 16, 19; Duck Lake Museum, page 6; Glenbow Institute, pages 6, 8; Montana Historical Society, page 16; R.C.M.P. Museum, pages 6, 10, 16, 23.

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