

Louis Riel's Exile 1871-1884

From 1870-1884, Louis Riel led a precarious existence. This included defending Manitoba against Fenian attack (1871; exile in the USA after a bounty was put on his head for Scott's execution. He resided in the USA from 1871-76 and 1878-84.

In 1871, Riel first went into exile at the home and trading post of Antoine Gingras at St. Joseph's, on the Pembina River in North Dakota. During the Métis Resistance of 1869-70, Gingras was a supporter of Louis Riel.

Lieutenant Governor designate William McDougall travelled to St. Joseph from Pembina on December 11, 1869 and while there was informed that Antoine Gingras on the evening of December 10th had "agreed to raise a party of 150 "Half-Breeds" and with a portion of them, to drive Governor McDougall away from his house at Pembina." McDougall also commented "These Half-Breeds" at St. Joe are principally connected with those at Red River Settlement, and many of them are inclined to fall in with Mr. Gingras's plan."¹

From that location Riel then moved to the Turtle Mountain Reserve at Belcourt, North Dakota. The local people will point out where Riel's house was located. His relative Benjamin Lagimodiere was also living at Belcourt.

In August in 1879, Riel left the Pembina/ Turtle Mountain Métis community of St. Joseph, ND and traveled to Montana. In October, he wrote his mother a letter posted from Ft. Belnap (*The Collected Writings of Louis Riel*, Vol 2, p. 208): "Je me trouve parmi des Métis: notre came se compose d'une trentaine de Loges. Il est sur la riviere au Castor, non loin du Missouri." (I am among Métis: our camp is composed of about 30 lodges. It is on Beaver Creek, not far from the Missouri (east of present day Zortman).")

In the same letter, Riel writes that there are many buffalo nearby their camp but also many people there to hunt them, including "sauvages" ("wild Indians") and Métis from Canada: Il faut que le Bon Dieu envoie joliment de Buffalo de ce cote-ci Missouri: autrement, il pourrait bien y avoir de la misere encore cette annee" ("God must send a good deal of buffalo to this side of the Missouri: otherwise, there could easily be starvation again this winter.") The early 1800s would see the last few years of the great buffalo hunts, a fact which was having as much impact on the Métis as it was on the other Northern Plains Indian peoples.

He wrote in December of 1879 (*ibid*, p. 210) "Nous sommes au grand detour de la Riviere au lait. Il y a la environ 150 familles Métisses. On m'a fait l'honneur de m'elire chef de camp. J'ai accepte mais a regret. Car je t'assure qu'il y a eu de l'ouvrage a faire. Il a fallu courir d'un Fort a l'autre pour tacher d'avoir la permission pour nos gens d'hiverner la ou ils sont actuellement. Enfin le general Terry de St Paul vient d'envoyer une epeche permettant aux Métis. au cris, aux sauteurs, aux pieds noirs aux gens de sang de passer l'hiver le long de la Riviere au lait sur le reserve des gros ventres, des Assiniboines et des Yanktons." (We are at the Big Bend of the Milk River (10-20 miles northeast of Malta's present day location). There are about 150 Métis families here. They did me the honor of electing me camp chief. I accepted but reluctantly. Because I can assure you there was some work involved. I had to run from one Fort to the other trying to get permission for our people to winter over at their current location.

¹ *Correspondence relative to the Recent Disturbances in the Red River Settlement*. Despatches from the Governor (4 A, Memorandum). Canada 1870.

The following May, Riel declared his intention to become a U.S. citizen at Ft. Benton. That summer, Riel together with 101 signatories petitioned Gen. Miles for "a reservation in this territory for the halfbreeds":

August 6, 1880 Riel petitions for a Métis reserve in Montana, by way of a letter sent to General Nelson A. Miles, August 6, 1880

In 1883 Riel began teaching at St. Peter's Mission, Montana. Riel also attended a political meeting of the Métis there, at which Gabriel Azure was elected "Chairman of the Assembly" and then spoke to the group. Finally, many of the Métis at St. Peter's gave Riel their power of attorney to sell their Canadian "scrip" rights while on a trip to Winnipeg, including : James Swan Sr. and his wife, Marie Arcand; Louis Malaterre and his wife, Euphrosine Lapierre; F.-X. Lapierre and his wife, Marie Rose Swan; James Swan Jr. and his wife, Elise Nomme; Louise Morin and her husband, Alexandre Azure; Euphrosine Malaterre and her husband, John Pambrun; Cecile Courchene and her husband, J.-B. Falcon; Charles Malaterre; Genevieve Arcand; and Antoine Azure

When Riel came to Winnipeg to attend to the scrip matters for the St. Peter's Métis in 1883 he was interviewed by an undisclosed number of Winnipeg *Daily Sun* reporters. His comments on "the Misunderstandings of 1870" was carried in a June 29, 1883, article.

The article started out with the view that the passage of time had healed the wounds of 1869-1870. Many still abhorred his methods in 1883, but there was a growing concession that Riel was responsible for creating the new direction of Manitoba and the Northwest. This supports the wide belief that if Riel had avoided the call to arms in 1885, his place as one of the patriots of Canadian history would no doubt have been assured.

Prior to Riel's visit, he had been living in Montana and by 1883 had become an American citizen. Elected and expelled from the House of Commons, he was granted an amnesty in 1875 for his role in the events of 1869-70 provided he remained in exile for five years. With his exile over, Riel could have legally returned to Canada, but he had a job as a teacher and had established a family life in the U.S. Riel told the newspaper he was permanently located at St. Peters' Mission, Louis Clark County, Montana.

On June 5, 1884, Riel came to the NWT, Saskatchewan District to once again fight for his peoples' rights.



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