

## **First Nations Involvement in the 1885 Resistance**

For decades, it was once assumed – in the popular imagination, and in history books and textbooks – that the Cree and the Métis had formed an alliance during the 1885 Resistance. This was the dominant view until the early 1980s when scholars such as John Tobias, Hugh Dempsey and Blair Stonechild, using Oral History as recounted to them by First Nations Elders, argued that the Cree and the Métis had two different strategies to deal with the federal government's indifferent Aboriginal policy. They also argued that the Cree leadership consistently rebuffed any overtures from the Métis to make a formal alliance, and that any First Nations involvement that occurred during the 1885 Resistance was isolated and sporadic.

In 1885, however, many Euro-Canadians were fearful that that all of Western Canada's Aboriginal peoples were in a state of armed insurrection. Sensational newspaper accounts played upon these fears and offered harsh remedies to quell future discontent. For instance, on April 23, 1885, the editor of *The Saskatchewan Herald*, P.G. Laurie wrote:

*Untamed and untamable, they (the First Nations) turn on the hand that fed them. Providence has decreed their disappearance and that they should give place to another race. They have, in the wildest and most unprovoked manner, and with the basest treachery, begun a war of desolation such as has never been equaled in the history of Canada.*

Events from overseas coloured Canadians' opinion of First Nations' participation during the 1885 Resistance. At this time in history, Canada was part of the British Empire. In order to maintain its vast empire, Great Britain was in conflict with Indigenous peoples throughout the nineteenth

century. In one such conflict, Sudanese Muslims under the guidance of a prophetic Imam (or holy man) named Mahdi first besieged and then decimated an entire British column under the command of General George Gordon on January 26, 1885. Fear of "Native" resistance to British rule was therefore a reality among Euro-Canadians and other British subjects. Thus, during the 1885 Resistance, Euro-Canadians transferred this fear to the North-West Territories' First Nations population.

By contrast, the Cree's Oral Tradition maintains that they had no vested interest in joining the Métis or engaging in violent resistance in 1885. However, it was true that this was a trying period for Plains First Nations: many Cree and other First Nations were starving and therefore felt that the terms of their treaties (Treaty 4 – 1874 and Treaty 6 – 1876) were not being honoured. By the mid 1870s, the bison had effectively disappeared and the Plains First Nations were in the process of being instructed on how to become agriculturalists. Moreover, many First Nations were dying from diseases such as tuberculosis. The Crown said that it would provide for First Nations during times of famine and pestilence.

During the 1880s, the strategy of many Cree chiefs was either to have the previous treaty terms honoured, or to receive more favourable terms. Cree chief Pitikwahanapiwiyn (Poundmaker) tried to maintain an open dialogue with the federal government to improve his people's plight. In 1876, when Treaty 6 was signed, Pitikwahanapiwiyn protested measures to parcel his people's land, but nevertheless accepted the treaty because most of his band had signed it. From this time until the outbreak of the resistance,

he led those Cree who felt that Ottawa was not doing enough to ensure the First Nations' successful transformation from semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers to sedentary agriculturalists. Ottawa considered the activist chief as a troublemaker. In addition, chief Mistahimaskwa (Big Bear) had not yet signed onto a treaty and was seeking a treaty with better terms for his people.

Both chiefs used a passive form of resistance in order to achieve their objectives. They realized that the government's and Euro-Canadian society's retribution would be exceedingly severe if the Cree resorted to armed resistance. Furthermore, they were concerned for the welfare of future generations. The Woods Cree, living in what is now central Saskatchewan, therefore were not looking to ferment an armed resistance. It was only when news reached the Cree of the Métis victory over the North-West Mounted Police and the Prince Albert Volunteers at Duck Lake (March 26, 1885) that some warriors in Mistahimaskwa's band took it upon themselves to feed their hungry people. Warriors in Pitikwahanapiwiya's band in turn only fought against the Canadian Army when they themselves were attacked at the Battle of Cut Knife Hill, May 2, 1885.

During the winter of 1885, Mistahimaskwa's band was located at Frog Lake (in present-day Alberta near the Saskatchewan border). Trouble had been brewing for sometime with the local Indian Agent, Thomas Quinn. On April 2, Quinn had refused the whole band rations. Some warriors under the leadership of Kapapamahchakwew (Wandering Spirit) then took it upon themselves to get food. Kapapamahchakwew shot Quinn dead after giving him four warnings to leave Frog Lake. Following that more killing took place.

Mistahimaskwa heard the gunfire and shouted to his warriors to stop shooting, but in minutes, nine Euro-Canadians were killed. Traumatized by the killings and fearful of the retribution that would follow, Mistahimaskwa prevented further bloodshed at Fort Pitt by peacefully taking it over on April 15, 1885.

The Battle of Cut Knife Hill on May 2, 1885 was the only engagement fought by the First Nations during the 1885 Resistance. Located on what is now the Poundmaker First Nation northwest of North Battleford, Saskatchewan, the battle was fought by approximately 500 Cree led by war chief Kah-Me-Yo-Ki-Sick-Way (Fine Day) against a force of 325 undisciplined militiamen under Colonel Otter. A few days prior, Lieutenant-Colonel William Otter abandoned Fort Battleford in order to attack Pitikwahanapiwiyyin's band. The local townspeople wanted retribution for the earlier sacking of their town by Métis and First Nations on March 30, 1885. In an attempt to catch Pitikwahanapiwiyyin's band, which was asleep on an elevated bluff of trees, by surprise, Otter decided to attack with two small cannons and a Gatling gun. However, the inexperienced troops made so much noise through the swampy ground and underbrush that they alerted the Cree. The Cree then attacked from all sides as the soldiers were trapped in a clump of trees. By stealth the Cree snuck up upon the soldiers and shot them. They also threw blankets in the air in order to dodge enemy fire. By late morning, Otter realized that his force was trapped. He retreated southwards across Cut Knife Creek. Pitikwahanapiwiyyin persuaded his warriors not to pursue the fleeing soldiers. Battle casualties included six

dead and three wounded Cree, and eight dead and fourteen wounded soldiers.

Some First Nations individuals, however, fought alongside the Métis during the 1885 Resistance. In fact, the opening shot of the 1885 Resistance resulted in the death of an elderly First Nations man, Assiwiyin. This occurred during the Battle of Duck Lake, March 26, 1885. Before the battle occurred, Assiwiyin, a local Cree, was on his way home with Gabriel Dumont's brother, Isidore when the two men encountered an agitated Joseph McKay, an English-Métis interpreter with the North-West Mounted Police. A scuffle ensued whereby Assiwiyin told McKay that the police could not battle the Métis on reserve land (Beardy's Reserve). However, McKay told the elderly Assiwiyin to go back to Duck Lake. At this point, Assiwiyin said "no" and then grabbed McKay's rifle, which resulted in McKay fatally shooting the old man in the stomach. The aftermath of the Battle of Duck Lake was swift. The press throughout Canada automatically concluded that – because of Assiwiyin's death, the presence of a handful of Willow Crees at the battle scene, and the battle itself being fought on Beardy's Reserve – a First Nations-Métis alliance had crystallized.

Other First Nations individuals who fought with the Métis included members of One Arrow's Band such as Gabriel Dumont's first cousin Vital (Cayol) and his two oldest sons and those influenced to participate by Michel Dumas, the reserve's Métis farm instructor. However, most residents of One Arrow's Reserve did not take part because their reserve had recently been relocated to marginal land in order to preserve the Batoche Métis' river lot

farms. Most band members hid along the river or fled eastward to take refuge around Lake Lenore. Another local chief, Chief Beardy, chose to remain neutral, but some men from his band joined the Métis, such as Chicicum (Boss Bull), and Charles Trottier Jr. Some Dakota and Cree also fought with the Métis during the Battle of Fish Creek, April 25, 1885. Two of those who died were Dakota, one being the son of Little Crow, who was shot at the start of the battle. After the Battle of Fish Creek, General Middleton had Lieutenant Governor Edgar Dewdney issue a proclamation to keep all First Nations on their reserves:

*...all good and loyal Indians should remain quietly on their Reserves where they will be perfectly safe and receive the protection of the soldiers; and that any Indian being off his Reserve without special permission in writing from some authorized person, is liable to be arrested on suspicion of being a rebel, and punished as such.*

During the Battle of Batoche on May 9-12, 1885, fewer than 60 First Nations from Beardy's, One Arrow and White Cap participated. The Cree occupied trenches around the west side of the village and the Dakota were on the opposite side of the river near the church and rectory. Many of the First Nations participants were older and were more poorly armed than the Métis. During the battle, General Middleton sent in Whitecap's captured son to distribute copies of a proclamation saying that any First Nations who returned to their reserves would be protected and pardoned. Two Dakota died during this battle. One was Whitecap's son and the other was a twelve year-old girl who was accidentally killed. With the conclusion of the battle, Chief Whitecap and Chief One Arrow were taken prisoner, even though they

abstained from fighting and pleaded for their band members to remain neutral.

With the Métis defeated at Batoche, General Middleton's forces could then concentrate its efforts on crushing any remaining First Nations resistance. At this point, the General ordered Chief Pitikwahanapiwiyyin to surrender. The Chief agreed. On May 26, 1885, Pitikwahanapiwiyyin told Middleton the following:

*I am not guilty (of waging war). ... I am glad of my works in the Queen's country this spring. ... When my brothers and the pale faces met in the fight at Cut Knife Hill I saved the Queens' men. ... Everything I could do was done to prevent bloodshed. Had I wanted war, I would not be here now. I would be on the prairie. You did not catch me. I gave myself up. You got me because I wanted peace.*

Pitikwahanapiwiyyin concluded by stating that he had always wanted peace. However, the young men in his band wanted to fight and he had little control over them. He further stated that he never promised to help the Métis and that his warriors were only defending themselves during the Battle of Cut Knife Hill when Lieutenant-Colonel Otter attacked them. Furthermore, after the Cree defeated Otter's forces, he restrained his warriors from killing the fleeing soldiers. General Middleton did not believe him. He then took him into custody, and requested that any warriors who had committed murder give themselves up. After that, Itka and Waywahnitch surrendered. Father Cochin was surprised at Pitikwahanapiwiyyin's treatment because he felt that the chief had done everything he could to counsel restraint. Finally, after a long pursuit, Mistahimaskwa surrendered to General Strange on July 2, 1885. The 1885 Resistance had concluded.

Despite limited First Nations participation during the 1885 Resistance, the government's retribution was severe. Twenty-eight reserves were deemed "disloyal" and over 50 individual First Nations individuals were charged with various offences. This number was nearly double the number of Métis who were convicted. Pitikwahanapiwiyin and Mistahimaskwa were both convicted of Treason-Felony and were sentenced to three years in the Stony Mountain Penitentiary in Manitoba. They would both die within a few years. Seven First Nations warriors were executed for their role in the Frog Lake killings. Itka was also executed for having earlier killed a non-Aboriginal farm instructor (March 29, 1885) on the Mosquito Reserve. The eight First Nations warriors who were hanged on November 27, 1885 at Fort Battleford were: Kapapamahchakwew, Itka, Wawanitch (Man Without Blood), Napase (Iron Body), Manetchus (Bad Arrow), Pa-pa-mek-sick (Round the Sky), Kitiemakyin (Miserable Man) and Apistaskous (Little Bear). First Nations individuals who fled to the United States included Kah-Me-Yo-Ki-Sick-Way, Little Poplar, Lucky Man, and their extended families.

With the resistance crushed, all forms of First Nations' dissent – even peaceful ones – would be severely punished. All aspects of the First Nations life on the Plains would be severely regulated. The goal of government policy was to assimilate First Nations into the non-Aboriginal mainstream. These policies included residential schools, a restrictive pass system to monitor movement on and off reserves, and measures to curb First Nations' languages and spiritual systems. These policies had already been planned, however, the 1885 Resistance and the limited amount of First Nations



involvement in it provided the federal government with the rationale to fully and uncritically implement its assimilative policies.

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