

Women of Batoche

Batoche's Métis women played many key roles during the 1885 Resistance. They nursed the wounded, nurtured children and Elders, melted lead to form bullets, provided supplies to the men in the trenches and a few even influenced Métis strategy.

While the fighting was raging in Batoche, most of the Métis women, children, and Elders hid themselves in a secluded flat surrounded by bluffs, on the east side of the South Saskatchewan River. Some Cree from the One Arrow and Beardy's Reserves joined them. The families stayed in tents or dugouts covered with robes, blankets or branches. Mary Fiddler said that her grandmother hid herself and her grandchildren, along the riverbank, under several coats during the day, while at night they used them as blankets. While in hiding, the women shared what little food that they possessed and cared for the children and Elders. In the village, Madeleine (Wilkie) Dumont, Gabriel's wife, and the elderly Madame Marie (Hallet) Letendre cooked and tended the sick and wounded.

Marguerite (née Dumas) Caron influenced Métis strategy during the 1885 Resistance. During the Battle of Fish Creek (April 24, 1885) she told Louis Riel to reinforce the beleaguered Métis forces. She could see that the Métis, including her husband and two sons, were under heavy enemy fire. Riel told her that she should pray for them. At that point, she told Riel that unless he sent reinforcements, she would go herself. Riel listened and sent reinforcements, which prevented the Métis from being defeated. Another strong woman, Marie-Anne (née Caron) Parenteau, told Father Fourmond, in

St. Laurent, that if the police (soldiers) came, she would "skin them like buffalo".

During the Battle of Batoche (May 9-12, 1885) the Métis ran out of ammunition. Women provided a solution: they melted lead in order to form bullets. Two women who did this were Madame Véronique Fidler (née Gervais) and Rosalie (née Parenteau), wife of Philippe Gariépy. Madame Fidler melted the lead that came wrapped around Hudson's Bay Company goods such as frying pans, while Madame Gariépy melted down lead kettles and the linings of tea tins.

Women also played a spiritual role during the 1885 Resistance. They prayed for the men's safety, attended Father Moulin's masses and received communion. They also attended Louis Riel's reformed church, where they prayed to Our Lady of Lourdes.

After the Métis were defeated at Batoche, the women had to provide for their families during this grim period. As soon as the battle concluded, women, children, and Elders, fearing for their lives, were forced to flee in a hurry. In doing so, they abandoned almost all their personal possessions. They left camp on foot to the Minitinas Hills, south of Batoche. Food was so scarce that they ate whatever was on hand, such as dog meat, plant roots, and *galettes* (bannock), which they had stuffed in their pockets. Three days after the surrender, they made the 29-kilometre walk back to Batoche.

Louis Riel's wife Marguerite (née Bellehumeur, dit Monet) who was pregnant at the time, walked down the riverbank with her two children and other women. The young family hid in the bluffs. During the cold and damp

weather, she covered her children under a light canvas. Louis Riel visited them three times before he surrendered.

When the Métis women arrived back to their homes, they found them pillaged. Some were even burned to the ground. Madame Amélie (née Poitras) Fisher, wife of Georges Fisher, found \$230 taken from her handbag. Madame Champagne (née Letendre) saw her family lose its horses, wheat and flour. Mary Fiddler said that when her grandmother returned to her house it had been burned down. All she had left was some flour that they had hid in the basement of an old house.

After the fall of Batoche on May 12, 1885, women advised their husbands to go into exile in the United States. Their advice proved timely: all the Métis leaders who stayed were arrested, even though General Middleton had promised that they would not be prosecuted. Few women blamed the men for the outbreak of the Resistance, most blamed the government.

With the conclusion of the fighting, many women suffered great hardships. Catherine Godon, widow of André Letendre, was left to provide for twelve children. Judith Parenteau, widow of Isidore Dumont, and Catherine Delorme, widow of Donald Ross, both had to accept government food relief. In October 1885, Riel's wife Marguerite suffered a miscarriage, and then died of tuberculosis in May 1886. Madame Josephite Tourond was widowed with nine children, and in addition, had both personal and property losses. Her house was ransacked, her cattle was stolen or slaughtered, and her fields were destroyed. Worse still, she lost two sons on the last day of

the battle, and then a third son died soon afterwards of consumption (tuberculosis). Then she lost another two daughters to the sickness. Madeleine Dumont died shortly after joining Gabriel in the Montana Territory in 1886. Nine of Batoche's women died from deprivations following the 1885 Resistance, either from consumption, flu or miscarriages.

Younger widows had to depend on other families for shelter and sustenance, or else they had to remarry. Josephte (née Gervais), who was the widow of Calixte Tourond, found a job teaching at Vandal School near Fish Creek, however, most other single women had to find work as domestics. The Widows, Josephte Tourond, Marguerite Caron and Marie Champagne worked and managed their family farms. Madame Tourond ran her farm with the help of her extended family until 1928.

Very few of Batoche's women were fully compensated for their losses. For instance, Josephte Tourond had sons involved in the fighting. As a result, she only received \$2,805 of her \$8,451 claim. By contrast, merchant families who had not been involved in the Resistance, such as the Letendres, Vennes, Boyers, and Fishers, were compensated while the labouring classes of farmers and freighters were not, even if they had not been involved in the conflict.

References:

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Further Reading:

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