

Gabriel Dumont (1837-1906): Biography

Gabriel Dumont is a hero to many Métis and has therefore become one of the most influential people in Métis history. In fact, Gabriel spent much of his life as a leader: as chief of the bison hunt, President of the St. Laurent Council, and finally as Louis Riel's Adjutant General (military leader) during the 1885 Resistance.

Gabriel's family experience was typical of other Métis born in the mid-nineteenth century. Born in December of 1837 at Red River (now Manitoba) to Isidore Dumont and Louise Laframboise, Gabriel had an average-sized family including his older brother Isidore and sister Pélagie, as well as younger siblings: Joseph, Isabella, Edouard, and Elie. Red River society, particularly the annual bison hunts, shaped his character and honed his skills. When Gabriel was three he saw his first bison hunt, and by the time he was ten he broke-in his own horse, learned to hunt with a bow, and was able to track with great cunning. Alexis Fisher gave him his first gun, which he named "*le petit*". At fourteen, he played almost a man's role in the bison hunt: he looked after Red River Carts, swam horses across rivers, shot small game, and helped skin bison. A nominal Roman Catholic, Gabriel learned his faith by priests who administered the Gospel to the Métis during bison hunts. He also spoke six First Nations languages along with his first language, Michif-French. However, he spoke no English and could not write.

Gabriel's first military experience came on July 13-15, 1851 during the Battle of Grand Coteau. A larger party of Yankton (Nakota) Sioux attacked three hundred Métis, who were hunting bison. While under siege, the Métis formed a defensive ring with their Red River Carts and used rifle pits to successfully defeat the Sioux, while suffering only one casualty.

In 1858, Gabriel married Madeleine Wilkie, who was born in 1840 in what is now Pembina, North Dakota. Madeleine was hardworking, resourceful, and had a reputation for being compassionate to the less fortunate. The young couple spent the early part of their marriage on the plains hunting bison. In 1863, they adopted Annie, a Métis girl from Red River, who eventually married an American named William Allen Hamilton.

In the 1860s, Gabriel was the chief of the Métis bison hunters and commanded approximately 200 hunters. He was an excellent guide: a non-Aboriginal hunter commented that Gabriel knew the prairies so well he could go anywhere blindfolded. However, due to over-hunting, the number of Plains Bison (*Bison bison bison*) began to rapidly dwindle, which meant that fewer Métis could make a living from hunting. As a result, in 1872 Gabriel opened up a ferry service called "Gabriel's Crossing" and also operated a general store. His ferry was built across the South Saskatchewan River, about 10 kilometres upstream from where François-Xavier Letendre dit Batoche had his ferry.

Gabriel built his first house in 1873 from logs that were plastered with clay and white-washed. It contained a single room, 21 feet (6.4 metres) long by 17 and a-half feet (5.3 metres) wide, with an attached kitchen of 14 square feet (4.3 square metres). He also had stables for his four horses and a large semi-underground icehouse. Over the next decade, he broke 20 acres (2.47 hectares) of land, grew potatoes and barley, mowed hay for five horses, and continued to hunt.

Gabriel Dumont's political career started in 1873 when he was elected President of the St. Laurent Council (which covered Batoche). He then chose a governing council of eight to assist in governance. Enforcement of the council's provisions was similar to the "Law of the Hunt" and was carried out by "captains" and "soldiers". The council created laws to cover criminal offences, land ownership, and labour relations, among others. Gabriel was re-elected as president in 1874, however, a few months later the council was disbanded after several Métis who had been fined for ignoring the "Law of the Hunt" complained to the local Hudson's Bay Company factor Lawrence Clarke. Clarke sent a letter to Lieutenant Governor Alexander Morris saying that the Métis were in open revolt. However, when Morris sent the North-West Mounted Police to investigate, they found nothing unordinary. Nevertheless, this incident still led to the disbanding of the St. Laurent Council, which was the only Métis self-governing institution in the northwest.

In the late 1870s, Gabriel realized that with the dwindling numbers of bison, the Métis would need government assistance for their survival. He chaired meetings, in 1877-78, to draw-up petitions asking for representation on the North-West Territories Council, to confirm Métis ownership of already-occupied lands and to ask for farming assistance, schools and new land grants. In 1880, he led a successful protest against paying a fee on wood cut on crown land. The following year, he petitioned for land grants and Scrip. However, the Métis' grievances were being ignored in Ottawa.

In 1884, frustrated with the federal government's inaction, Gabriel called a meeting to suggest bringing Louis Riel to Batoche from the Montana Territory to help the Métis with their grievances against the federal government. The other Métis leaders agreed: therefore, on May 19, Gabriel, Michel Dumas, Moise Ouellette and James Isbister left for St. Peter's Mission, Montana Territory in order to bring Riel to Canada. By July 5, they were back on Gabriel's farm along with Louis Riel and his family.

During the early winter of 1885, Gabriel and Louis Riel concluded that negotiations with the government had failed. Therefore in a secret meeting on March 5, it was decided that Métis would resort to taking up arms, if necessary. At this meeting, Gabriel was appointed the "Adjutant-General of the Métis Nation". He soon organized, along the lines of the bison hunt, approximately 300 men for potential military action.

On March 26, Gabriel's first engagement of the 1885 Resistance occurred during the Battle of Duck Lake. The Métis outnumbered the North-West Mounted Police and Prince Albert Volunteers. Early in the battle, Gabriel suffered a slight head wound that prevented him from leading the Métis to victory. He turned command over to his brother Edouard, but when the police and volunteers began to retreat, Louis Riel ordered the Métis to not pursue them. Gabriel suffered a great loss during the battle as his brother, Isidore and three other relatives were killed.

On April 24, the next Métis battle during the 1885 Resistance occurred at Fish Creek, or as the Métis knew it "*coulée des Tourond*". The Canadian militia, commanded by General Middleton, outnumbered the Métis by a ratio of five-to-one. However, under Gabriel's leadership the Métis still managed to drive-off the inexperienced Canadian soldiers. However, the victory was costly for the Métis: they lost many horses and used much of their ammunition. Once the battle was over, the Métis headed back to Batoche to set up a defensive position.

The Battle of Batoche (May 9-12, 1885) followed two weeks later. After four days of fighting, the Métis, who ran out of ammunition, could no longer fend off the much larger and better-equipped Canadian militia. A few days after the battle, Louis Riel surrendered. At this point, Gabriel and Michel Dumas went into political exile in the United States – arriving across the border on May 27. The American authorities arrested them immediately; however, they were released two days later on orders from Washington. Gabriel had relatives in the Montana Territory with whom he

stayed until he decided upon his future. Madeleine arrived that fall at Fort Benton, Montana Territory. Unfortunately, she died in the spring of 1886 from tuberculosis – a disease that killed many Aboriginal people.

In June 1886, Gabriel joined Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show as a trick-shot artist with Annie Oakley and others. After that, he discovered a large community of French Canadians living in New York and in New England and spoke to them of the Resistance, which led to contacts with French-Canadian nationalists in Québec. He was asked to begin a lecture tour by Laurent Olivier David, president of the Société Saint-Jean Baptiste de Montréal. The first speech went badly because Gabriel was highly critical of the clergy's lack of support for the Métis during the Resistance. The rest of the tour was cancelled because Gabriel's anticlerical outbursts upset French Canadians who at the time were strongly Roman Catholic.

In 1893, after he was granted an amnesty for his role in the 1885 Resistance, Gabriel returned to his homestead at Batoche. He let his relatives farm his land and moved into a small cabin on his nephew, Alexis Dumont's farm. It was here, on May 19, 1906, that Gabriel Dumont died suddenly while visiting Alexis.

References:

Gabriel Dumont Prince of the Prairies. Edmonton: Great North Productions Inc. (Video)

Macleod, Roderick C., "Gabriel Dumont" in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*. <http://www.biographi.ca/EN/ShowBio.asp?Biold=40814&query=>. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000.

Woodcock, George. J.R. Miller, Editor. *Gabriel Dumont*. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2003.

Further Readings:

Dumont, Gabriel. *Mémoires dictés par Gabriel Dumont*. Archives of Manitoba. MG10, F1.

_____. Translated by George F. Stanley. "Dumont's Account of the North West Rebellion" in Amabite, George and Dales, Kim. Editors. *No Feather, No Ink. After Riel*. Saskatoon: Thistledown Press, 1985, pp. 17-24.

_____. Translated by Michael Barnholden. *Gabriel Dumont Speaks*. Vancouver: Talon Books, 1993.