

# 13

## Time of Troubles

### Chapter Outline

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the short causes of the 1885 resistance and the immediate consequences it had for both First Nations and Métis peoples on the prairies. After 1870, many Métis families migrated west and north and established themselves along the North and South Saskatchewan Rivers on river lots similar to those they left along the Red and Assiniboine Rivers. Unrest was brewing as they sought confirmation of title to lands, which were divided into ribbon lots. Due to the lack of formal Canadian government in the region at the time, they also sought to deal with the decline of buffalo through their own self-governing councils. At the same time, the Cree in particular were becoming disgruntled at what they saw as the non-fulfillment of treaty promises and key leaders such as Mistahimaskwa refused to sign treaties until they could get better terms. However, due to the loss of buffalo, they were forced to sign because of the starvation affecting their people. After this time, the lack of treaty fulfillment continued to create disillusionment, and they were becoming dissatisfied with their attempts at farming. As successive attempts failed, fear of starvation was becoming real.

With the buffalo all but extinct by 1880, the Canadian prairies were a powder keg waiting to erupt as the Métis and Cree faced starvation with no buffalo and failing agricultural pursuits, all exacerbated by the non-fulfillment of treaty promises. Perhaps most paramount for the Cree was the provision of rations in times of famine. Rather than provide rations, the Department of Indian Affairs implemented its “work for rations” program, requiring that people work to receive food. Even if a person was able-bodied and able to work, they only received 13 ounces of flour, 3 ounces of bacon and 6 ounces of beef in a day. This amount was later reduced even further, and mounting food shortages led to desperate measures such as killing the cattle provided to get them started as farmers and ranchers. The government appeared to recognize the growing potential for violence as they banned the sale of ammunition and ball cartridges to Indigenous Peoples of Manitoba and the North-West Territories.

In 1884, Louis Riel returned to Canada and went to Batoche. He began lobbying Ottawa in writing to recognize Métis rights. By March 1885, Riel had announced his intention to establish a provisional government. In response, the Canadian government sent the Canadian militia west to take control of the situation. Adding stress to the situation was the decision by some of Mistahimaskwa’s followers to raid a storehouse holding food at Frog Lake, which resulted in the killing of nine white missionaries, settlers, and government officials. This was portrayed in eastern newspapers as a full-scale uprising.

As a result of the events of 1885, the immediate consequences for First Nations and the Métis were the imprisonment of a number of their leaders and accused participants, as well as the hanging of eight First Nations men for murder, and the well-publicized hanging of Louis Riel. The long-term consequences for First Nations and Métis respectively, were that the struggles for autonomy, self-government, and recognition as a people would be thwarted for some time.

## Learning Objectives

- To understand the social and economic impact of declining bison herds
- To understand the reasons and context behind brewing tensions for both First Nations and Métis in the Northwest
- To understand the roles that individuals such as Louis Riel, Gabriel Dumont, Mistahimaskwa (Big Bear), and Pītikwahanapiwīyin (Poundmaker) had in the 1885 Northwest Rebellion
- To recognize the short- and long-term ramifications of the 1885 Northwest Rebellion

## Key Terms, Figures or Sites

**Ahenakew, Edward** Great-nephew of Pītikwahanapiwīyin and the first Cree person to attend the University of Saskatchewan. He became an Anglican priest, known for championing healthcare for First Nations, especially in the north. He wrote a Cree-English dictionary and also collected stories which were published in 1973 as *Voices of the Plains Cree*, a key source of Cree history. He has been called the “Martin Luther King of the Cree” (p. 229).

**Batoche** The headquarters of Louis Riel’s provisional government and the site of the last battle of the Northwest Rebellion, 1885, in present-day central Saskatchewan; named after François-Xavier Letendre *dit* Batoche (c. 1841–1901), the founder of the community (p. 224).

**Duck Lake** Town in Saskatchewan, 88 km north of Saskatoon; site of a battle on 26 March 1885 wherein Métis provisional government forces led by Gabriel Dumont routed government forces (p. 234).

**Fish Creek** Southern boundary of the South Branch Métis settlement, which had Batoche as its commercial centre. It was the site of an ambush, 26 April 1885, of government soldiers by Métis led by Gabriel Dumont (p. 236).

**Dumont, Gabriel** (1837–1906) Buffalo hunter, Métis chief, and military strategist. Dumont was Louis Riel’s military commander during the Northwest Rebellion, 1885 (p. 224).

**Métis** A constitutionally recognized Indigenous People created by intermarriage between Europeans and Indigenous People whose culture reflects both influences (p. 223).

**Middleton, Frederick Dobson** (1825–98) Army and militia officer who led Canadian forces in the Northwest Rebellion, 1885, and accepted the surrenders of Louis Riel and Pītikwahanapiwīyin (p. 234).

**Mistahimaskwa** (Big Bear, *c.* 1825–88) Cree-Ojibwa chief who refused to sign Treaty Six, working instead to unite the Cree and create an Indigenous territory. His band participated in the 1885 Northwest Rebellion, and Big Bear was convicted of treason-felony (p. 227).

**Northwest Rebellion** Armed uprising in present-day Saskatchewan in 1885 of Métis, First Nations, and some newcomers, who were concerned about encroachment of European settlers and for their own future with the demise of the vast bison herds of the western Plains. The Rebellion, led by Louis Riel, was quelled by troops sent from eastern Canada (p. 232).

**Pītikwahanapiwīyin** (Poundmaker, *c.* 1842–85) Adopted son of Isapo-Muxika and a leader in Treaty Six negotiations. He was convicted of treason-felony following the 1885 Northwest Rebellion though he sought to be a peacemaker during the hostilities (p. 228).

**St. Laurent** Oblate mission founded in 1871, and the site of a settlement on the South Saskatchewan River founded by Gabriel Dumont and other Métis in 1872; one of the cluster of Métis settlements known collectively as the South Branch (p. 224).

## Study Questions

1. What did the Métis petition Lieutenant-Governor Archibald for in 1872, and what was the outcome?
2. What was the St. Laurent Council and why was it established?
3. What was the outcome of the ‘free hunters’ being fined and having their equipment ticketed by the St. Laurent Council?
4. What was the primary action sought by the Métis at St. Laurent?
5. Who was Big Bear and what was his position on newcomers and the offer of treaties?
6. Why were First Nations frustrated with the government in the immediate years following the signing of Treaty Six?
7. Why were First Nations leaders, such as Mistahimaskwa, denied their choice of reserves?
8. What circumstances led to Indigenous Peoples of the prairies killing the cattle that were supposed to get them started with an agricultural economy?
9. What was the purpose of Mistahimaskwa’s thirst dance in 1884?
10. What actions did the government take to avoid such future gatherings by First Nations?

11. What were the major differences between the 1869–70 resistance and the 1885 resistance?
12. What were Riel's intentions as well as his immediate actions upon returning to the Northwest?
13. Who was Frederick Middleton and what was his role in the 1885 Northwest Rebellion?
14. What were the immediate and long term consequences of the 1885 Northwest Rebellion for the Métis?
15. What were the immediate and long term consequences of the 1885 Northwest Rebellion for First Nations?
16. Who was Edward Ahenakew? What were his contributions to the Cree people in Saskatchewan?

## Essay Questions

1. Discuss Mistahimaskwa's efforts for establishing pan-Indigenism.

As reserves were being established in western Canada during the 1880s, Mistahimaskwa resisted. Instead, he encouraged other Plains Cree chiefs to select adjacent reserves, which would effectively create an Indigenous territory in southern Saskatchewan. His efforts almost succeeded until the government realized what effect these adjacent reserves would have in uniting First Nations people. They forced Mistahimaskwa to take a remote and isolated reserve in 1882. Still, he tried to convince other reserves to be as close together as possible around Battleford (pp. 229-230). Two years later, Big Bear rallied 2,000 people for a thirst dance that was intended to select a single representative to speak for all First Nations peoples for a period of four years. He wanted to challenge Ottawa with regards to their neglect in fulfilling treaty promises. However, his efforts to unite First Peoples were not successful given the government's agenda of dividing them using food as their instrument and also providing for the arrest of any First Nations person on another's reserve without permission (pp. 230-231).

2. Briefly describe Louis Riel's requests of the government in his petition to Ottawa in 1884.

On December 16, 1884, Louis Riel wrote a petition to Ottawa. He argued that all the people living in western Canada had the right to be treated with the same dignity granted to British subjects. He was lobbying for the interest of Métis, First Nations, and whites alike. Amongst the complaints he listed were the fact that his people were starving and that white settlers were being charged too much for land. He also believed in self-government for the Métis and that the treaties should be honoured (p. 233).

3. Explain why the community of St. Laurent was seen as a threat by the Canadian government.

Led by Gabriel Dumont, the Métis community of St. Laurent established a governing body in 1873. Dumont was the first elected president and eight councillors were also chosen. This gov-

erning body enacted 28 laws based on the rules and regulations of the buffalo hunt and also added the right to raise taxes. Many other social issues were also listed including employment conditions, the settlement of disputes, crimes, and so on. This beginning seemed promising in terms of self-governance. However, the HBC was already uneasy about St. Laurent, partly because Dumont had earlier offered his services to Riel during an 1870 visit. The press began to run headlines such “Another Stand Against Canadian Government Authority;’ it was also reported that ten thousand Cree were on the warpath. The council agreed to formally disband based on promises that the buffalo hunting regulations would remain intact and that better representation would be provided on the North-West Council (pp. 225-226).

## Additional Resources

### Further Readings

- Barron, F. Laurie, and James B. Waldram. *1885 and After: Native Society in Transition*. Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1986.
- Beal, Bob, and Rod Macleod. *Prairie Fire: The 1885 North-West Rebellion*. Edmonton: Hurtig, 1984.
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- Payment, Diane. *Batoche (1870–1970)*. St Boniface, Man.: Editions du Blé, 1983.
- Siggins, Maggie. *Riel: A Life of Revolution*. Toronto: Harper Collins, 1994.
- Sluman, Norma. *Poundmaker*. Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1967.
- Stonechild, Blair, and Bill Waiser. *Loyal till Death: Indians and the North-West Rebellion*. Calgary: Fifth House Publishing, 1997.
- Wilson, Garrett. *Frontier Farewell: The 1870s and the End of the Old West*. Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 2007.
- Woodcock, George. *Gabriel Dumont*. Edmonton: Hurtig, 1975.

## Websites

University of Saskatchewan Libraries and University Archives – The (1885) Northwest Resistance (Rebellion)

- <https://library.usask.ca/northwest/background/backgrd.htm>

St. Boniface Historic Society & Centre du Patrimoine – “Louis Riel – Batoche”

- <http://shsb.mb.ca/en/node/1377>

University of Saskatchewan Libraries and University Archives - Mistahimaskwa (Big Bear)

- <http://library.usask.ca/northwest/background/bear.htm>