

LOUIS RIEL



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Produced by
The Curriculum Unit
Gabriel Dumont Institute
of Native Studies and Applied Research, Inc.

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ISBN 0-920915-04-X

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Regina, Saskatchewan

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THE EARLY YEARS

More so than that of any other individual, the life story of Louis Riel has been linked with the history of the Metis people. As leader of the Metis in their struggles for social and political justice, he influenced their history and, consequently, the history of Canada.

Louis Riel was born on October 22, 1844, in St. Boniface, a parish in the Red River Settlement. He was the eldest of eleven children born to Louis Riel, Sr. and his wife, Julie Riel, nee Lagimodiere. Jean Baptiste Riel, Louis' paternal grandfather, was French and his grandmother was Metisse. From his family and upbringing he acquired the religious beliefs and leadership traits which became determining factors throughout his life.

Riel's Mother



Julie Riel

Riel's Father



Louis Riel, Sr.

Photos courtesy Manitoba Public Archives.

Riel's father possessed strong leadership qualities which influenced Riel during his formative years and which also contributed, years later, to the tendency of the Metis to look upon the younger Louis as a leader. Early in Riel's childhood, Louis Riel, Sr. organized the Metis to bring an end to the Hudson's Bay Company's monopoly on trade. At that time there was a restriction on trade which prevented people from trading in furs with anyone except the Hudson's Bay Company. Guillaume Sayer and three other Metis had been charged with illegally trading in furs. On May 17, 1849, Louis Riel, Sr. organized an armed gathering of Metis outside the courthouse at the Sayer trial. Although the defendants were found guilty of illegal trade, the large gathering organized by Riel, Sr. intimidated the court to such an extent that no fines were imposed for the infraction. The Metis interpreted this as a sign of victory and free trade was declared. It would be only natural for the Metis, later, to look to the son of such a man when the need for a strong leader arose again.

Riel's religious convictions were deep-rooted and a guiding force throughout his life, as well. His mother had intended to become a nun before her marriage to Louis Riel, Sr. For two years Riel's father had studied for the priesthood with the Oblate Fathers in Lower Canada. In addition, Riel's education contained a strong religious influence. At the age of seven he attended a St. Boniface school operated by the Grey Sisters. Bishop Tache soon took an interest in his education and his schooling continued at the Bishop's home under the instruction of the Christian Brothers. When Riel was fourteen, on the recommendation of Bishop Tache, he was sent to Montreal to study for the priesthood. It was hoped that he, and two other boys who were sent with him, would return to the Red River area and become the first native-born priests to practise in the district.



Photo Courtesy Sask. Public Archives

Bishop Tache

RIEL'S TRIP TO MONTREAL

One of the three boys selected to study in Montreal was Louis Schmidt, who would later play an important role in the events of 1869-70. In his memoirs, written in 1911-12, Schmidt described their trip to Montreal and the sights the boys were seeing for the first time:

I now come to my departure for college. It was June 1, 1858 when Riel, McDougall, and I took the St. Paul caravan for this new destination....

We travelled by oxen, and each one drew a cart. But we were under the supervision of different carters. I was with Amable Gaudry and my ox was called Lady.

We followed the West side of the Red River until we reached Pembina. Then, since we had to take the bush road, because there was less danger of Sioux, we crossed the river at this place and we penetrated into the wilderness. We were not to see any habitation until l'Aile du Corbeau (Crow's Wing), at the crossing of the Mississippi.

At the crossing of Red Lake—Crookston now, I believe—we met Mr. Riel Sr. who was coming back from Montreal with a machine for making cloth.

The conversation between the father and son was very touching. This was to be, alas, their last one in this world.

Finally, after a 28 day journey, we arrived in St. Paul, the capital of Minnesota.

We bid farewell to our travelling companions and boarded a steamship which took us to Prairie du Chien (Prairie Dog) from which the railroad took us to Montreal....

One can easily imagine our emotions and admiration at the sight of such beautiful things so new to us. We had never seen a city, steamboat, or railway.

And sailing down the Mississippi—what could be more charming!

Our first stop was at Chicago, a superb city built on the shores of Lake Michigan. Then Detroit and we entered into Canada.

In Hamilton, on the western most part of Lake Ontario, we stopped again. What a beautiful city. What a magnificent view....

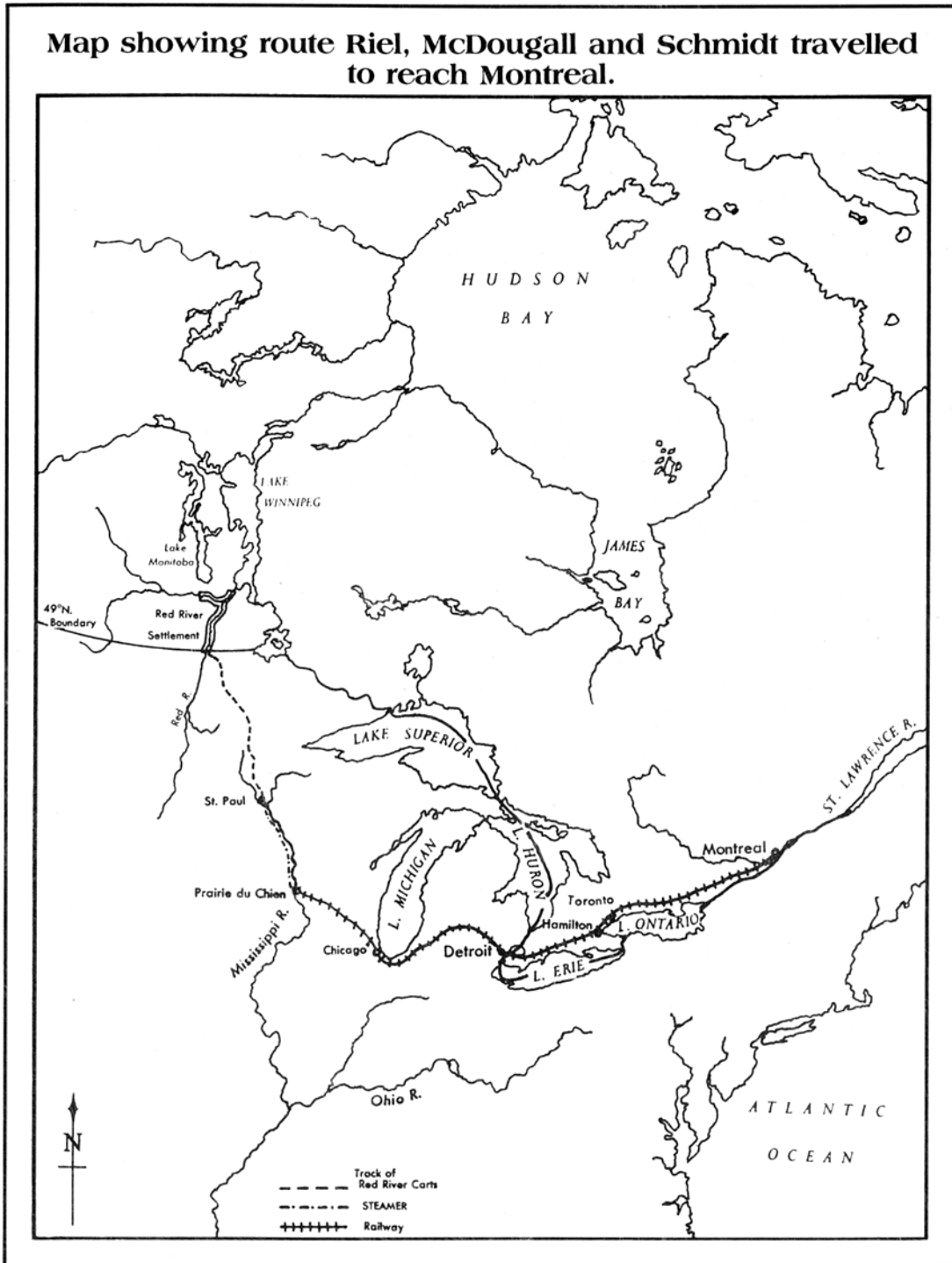
We arrived in Toronto on a Saturday evening, spent Sunday with the Sisters to the east of the city and finally we arrived in the beautiful city of Montreal with the majestic St. Lawrence River. It was July 5th.

We went directly to the Grey Nuns near St. Anthony's Market and it was only here that we learned of our respective destinations. Riel was to go to the Sulpicians in the city, McDougall to Nicolet, and me to St. Hyacinthe.¹

As stated in Schmidt's memoirs, during this trip to Montreal, Riel met his father who was returning from an eastern trip. It was the last time Riel was to see his father alive.

In the fall of 1858, Riel enrolled in the College of Montreal. The curriculum at the college was based on a seventeenth century French classical education model which emphasized Latin, Greek, philosophy and theology. Initially, Riel ranked only 24th in the class of 33 students. It was not long, however, before his work improved. Thereafter, his academic reports rarely rated less than a very good to perfect². It is reported that "during the course of his studies he showed a strong liking for literature, poetry and history and he soon proved that he was a born orator".³

Map showing route Riel, McDougall and Schmidt travelled to reach Montreal.



THE DEATH OF LOUIS RIEL, SR.

On January 21, 1864, Riel's father passed away. His Father's death had a profound influence on Riel and, consequently, his school work suffered. He became morose and withdrawn, frequently missing classes. During this period, Riel composed the following poem:

*In the midst of the crowd, rolling and restless,
When a man is seen, a man with pensive look
And air of sadness and nobility,
Others throw him a glance of suspicion
They whisper to one another
"Brother, who is that fellow?"
But the attention that he momentarily evokes
Is limited to a vague uneasiness, nothing more.
He wanders, lonely, his heart full of sadness.
He suffers.
The emptiness in his heart is filled only with sighs,
Alone with his sorrow, an exile from all pleasures,
In pain he lives out his days overflowing with
bitterness.⁴*

Although Riel's destiny was not that of a great poet, the poem does reflect the loneliness and alienation he felt at this period in his life.

RIEL'S WITHDRAWAL FROM COLLEGE

In March 1865, Riel withdrew from college only four months before the end of term. His teachers recommended that he should leave the seminary "*owing to his continual infractions of the rules of the house*".⁵

The "infractions" referred to were extended absences from classes, during which he was looking for work. Riel may have been seeking employment in order to help support his mother, brothers and sisters back in the Red River Settlement or he may have been trying to win the approval of the parents of his fiance, Marie-Julie Guernon. Possibly because of his background, Riel was not highly regarded by his future in-laws as a proper marriage partner for their daughter.

When Riel left the college in 1865, he moved in with his aunt and uncle, Mr. and Mrs. John Lee, who lived in Miles-end, near the home of his fiance. During the year that he remained with them, he found employment at the Montreal law firm of Rudolphe Laflamme, where he worked as a law student for several months.

In 1866 Riel suddenly left Montreal. On June 12, 1866, Riel and his fiance had secretly entered into a marriage contract. When it became known to Mr. and Mrs. Guernon, they abruptly terminated the engagement. This may explain Riel's sudden departure or it may have been that Riel, who was only 22 years old, decided that neither the law profession nor the priesthood were to be his life's work.

RIEL'S TRAVELS IN THE STATES

Riel travelled to the United States, where he spent two years. Little is known about this period in Riel's life and his only diary entries of this time are brief:

*Left Montreal 19th June 1866. Came to St Paul, lived in Minneapolis, St Anthony and Saint Paul 2 years. Left St Anthony in July 68 and came to St Joe, Dakota.*⁶

Riel, after working in various cities in the United States, returned to St. Boniface in the Red River area on July 28, 1868.

Riel wrote in his diary:

It was early in the morning, when I saw my birthplace again; a Sunday, before sunrise. It was a beautiful day. I saw my very dear mother, brothers and sisters that very same day.⁷

RIEL'S RETURN TO THE RED RIVER

Riel had left the Red River Settlement in 1858, a 14 year old boy. He returned, ten years later, a young man of 24. Like Riel, the land he returned to had changed in many ways. The population of the settlement had increased to about 12,000, of whom approximately 10,000 were French-speaking Metis and English-speaking Halfbreeds, the Metis being the slightly larger group. The Hudson's Bay Company, although still the legal governing body, had ceased to have any real authority. Confederation had taken place in 1867 and with it came rumours of an impending sale of the North-West to Canada. The news of the sale was viewed apprehensively by most of the residents. The Metis, in particular, feared that their religion, language and culture would be threatened by union with a largely English-speaking Protestant Canada. Most of the residents shared common concerns about the validity of their ownership of lands and guarantees of responsible government.

THE RED RIVER INSURRECTION

Because of Riel's background, education, fluency in both English and French and legal training, he soon emerged as a leader in the confrontation between the residents of the Red River Settlement and the Canadian Government. He was elected secretary of the National Committee of the Metis which was formed in October, 1869. This organization was responsible for preventing the newly-appointed Lieutenant Governor, William McDougall, from crossing the United States border and taking command of the colony. Later, when the Provisional Government, representing both French- and English-speaking residents, replaced the National Committee of the Metis, Riel was elected President. Although only 25 years old, Riel proved himself a capable leader and he effectively governed the colony until July, 1870.



Provisional Government—1870: Back row: (L to R) Bonnet Tromage, Pierre de Lorme, Thomas Bunn, Xavier Page, Baptiste Beauchemin, Baptiste Tournond, Thomas Spence. Middle Row: (L to R) Pierre Poitras, John Bruce, Louis Riel, W.B. O'Donoghue, Francois Dauphenais. Front row: (L to R) Robert O'Lone, Paul Proux.

Photo Courtesy Manitoba Public Archives

THE EXECUTION OF THOMAS SCOTT

During this period Riel made a decision which would affect him for the remainder of his life: he permitted the execution of Thomas Scott. Scott, an Ontario Orangeman, had been twice arrested for bearing arms against the Provisional Government. During his last incarceration he proved himself a rebellious prisoner, attacking his guards and the President and defying the authority of the Provisional Government. He was subsequently charged with refusing to swear allegiance to the Provisional Government, found guilty and executed by a firing squad.

The results of the execution, for Riel, were far-reaching and disastrous. The backlash from an outraged Protestant Ontario led to a loud cry for Riel and his followers to be punished. Later, in 1885, at Riel's own trial for high treason, one of his jurors reported: "*We [the jury] tried Louis Riel for treason but he was hanged for the murder of Thomas Scott.*"⁸

Riel said of the execution that "*Scott was executed because his execution was necessary to maintain order and to fulfill our duty of making order respected.*"⁹

In his memoirs, Louis Schmidt, who at the time was Secretary of the Provisional Government, also said of the execution of Scott:

*It was besides necessary to give an example of severity, and at the same time of firmness. I shall not pause to try to justify that execution, which the people of Ontario have used for such a long time to raise prejudice and hatred, not only against the Metis but against all that is French and Catholic. I believe that to-day all impartial men grant that Riel and his government were perfectly right to act as they did. That government was the only one in the country, it had been established and recognized by its representatives.*¹⁰



Photo Courtesy Manitoba Public Archives

Louis Schmidt
Riel's schoolmate and
Secretary of Provisional Government

AMNESTY AND EXILE

The Provisional Government had drawn up a Bill of Rights which contained the terms for Manitoba's entry into Confederation. Delegates of the Provisional Government were invited to Ottawa to present the terms to the Canadian Government. The outcome of these negotiations was the Manitoba Act, which was passed by parliament on May 12, 1870. It incorporated most of the provisions set out in the Bill of Rights, with one exception: the item pertaining to amnesty for the participants of the insurgence. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Macdonald and Governor-General Young repeatedly gave personal assurances that the people of the Red River had nothing to fear on the question of amnesty and that an announcement to that effect would be forthcoming. However, instead of the promised announcement, Colonel Wolseley's forces were sent to occupy the Red River Settlement and Riel, having already disbanded the Provisional Army, was forced to flee for his life.

Together with his Adjutant General, Ambroise Lepine, and W.B. O'Donoghue, an Irish American and Treasurer of the Provisional Government, Riel fled to St. Joseph on August 24,

1870. He remained there until early 1871 when, after recovering from an illness, he returned to his mother's home in St. Vital. There he remained, relatively inactive, until the fall of 1871.

In the fall of 1871, O'Donoghue attempted to organize a Fenian invasion of Canada and he sought to enlist the Metis' support for a raid on Winnipeg. Riel could have used his powers of persuasion to try to induce the Metis to join the plan. Instead, he offered Lieutenant Governor Archibald, who was without troops, the services of the Metis army he had helped to organize. Lieutenant Governor Archibald visited the Metis troops gathered at St. Boniface and publicly expressed his gratitude for Riel's loyalty and assistance. It was hoped that this display of loyalty would help Riel gain amnesty, but once again there was a cry of outrage. The people of Ontario loudly protested that, not only was Riel allowed to roam free, but he was greeted in public by the Lieutenant Governor of Manitoba. Edward Blake, a Liberal Member of Parliament from Ontario, offered a \$5,000 reward for the capture of those involved in the execution of Thomas Scott. Once again, the provision for amnesty was not forthcoming.

Instead of granting amnesty, Sir John A. Macdonald asked Riel and Lepine to leave the country temporarily. He offered them \$1,000, to sustain themselves while in exile and their families who remained behind, with the stipulation that the two men leave the country for five years. Riel's continued presence in Manitoba had created an embarrassing situation for Macdonald: if he granted the amnesty, he would alienate the Protestant vote in Ontario but, if he prosecuted Riel, he would alienate the French element in Quebec. The results of an impending federal election hung in the balance. Removing Riel from the public eye was Macdonald's temporary solution to the problem.

On February 23, 1872, Riel and Lepine left for St. Paul, Minnesota, but Riel did not remain out of sight for long. He returned to Manitoba, with the intention of campaigning as the Member of Parliament for Provencher. However, he was persuaded not to run in that particular election. Once again, on a promise of amnesty, Riel was asked to allow Sir George Cartier, who had lost his seat in his home riding in Quebec, to run in the riding of Provencher. Cartier was elected to parliament but became very ill and died shortly after the election. Riel ran in

the by-election after Cartier's death in 1873 and twice in elections in 1874; he was elected Member of Parliament for Provencher on all three occasions. On March 30, 1874, he succeeded in slipping into Ottawa and signing the Test Roll in the Parliament Buildings. This qualified him to take his seat in the House of Parliament, but he was prevented from doing so by the outstanding warrant and the \$5,000 reward put up by Edward Blake.

The question of amnesty was not settled until February 11, 1875, when an unconditional pardon was granted to all participants of the insurgence except Riel, Lepine and O'Donoghue. A conditional amnesty was granted to Riel and Lepine, contingent upon their leaving the country for a period of five years from that date.

Riel spent most of 1874 and 1875 continually travelling from one place to another, ever in fear for his life. The forced exile, the seemingly endless travel and the ever-present threats on his life created great personal stress for Riel. While staying with Father Barnabe in Keeseville, New York, he was awake constantly, day and night, and kept the whole house in a state of chaos. His uncle, John Lee, with whom he had spent a year after leaving the seminary, was called in. With the aid of Dr. Lachapelle, he had Riel committed to an insane asylum in Longue Pointe, a suburb of Montreal on March 6, 1876. Riel was registered under the fictitious name "Louis R. David". Anonymity was necessary for his safety as it was feared the Ontario Orangemen would learn of his whereabouts. While in Longue Pointe, Riel pleaded with his doctors to have him removed from that institution and was transferred to another asylum in Beauport, Quebec in May, 1876. He was discharged from Beauport on January 23, 1878, having been pronounced cured.

Photo Courtesy Public Archives of Canada



**Louis Riel,
age 14 years, 1858**

**Louis Riel,
age 25 years, 1869**



Photo Courtesy RCMP Museum, Regina



**Louis Riel,
age 30 years, 1873-74**

Photo Courtesy RCMP Museum, Regina



**Louis Riel,
age 40 years, 1884**

Photo Courtesy Sask. Archives Board

RIEL'S INCLUSION OF 'DAVID' IN HIS NAME

After the Red River Insurrection, Riel had incorporated the name 'David' into his own name, making it Louis 'David' Riel. When Riel was in hiding, he used the alias "Louis R. David" to elude his captors. Years later, during his trial, Riel had the following to say about the inclusion of 'David' in his name:

The hon. judge of the court at Manitoba, Mr Dubuc, to-day is the one who gave me the name of David. When I had to hide myself in the woods and when he wanted to write me that he should write me under the name which would not be known, so that my letter could come to me, and I may say that in that way it is a legal name.¹¹

Riel saw parallels between his own life and the life of the biblical David. David defeated the giant Philistine, Goliath, and was forced to flee for his life. Riel likened this to his own battles with the Canadian Government and his subsequent exile. Riel also compared the years of suffering which King David had endured to the years he spent in exile after the Red River Insurgence. At his trial, Riel said:

Now, I have been hunted as an elk for fifteen years. David has been seventeen, I think I will have to be about two years still. If the misfortunes that I have had to go through were to be as long as those of old David....¹²

At the same time, Riel also expressed his bitter feelings toward the Canadian Government, whom he felt had badly mistreated him, further identifying himself with King David and the injustices he had suffered:

[The Canadian Government has] made a treaty with [me], [they] do not fulfill it; [they] promise [me] amnesty; [I am] outlawed; [they] take [my] country and [I have] no room even to sleep. [I come to their] help. [I govern] the country during two months and the reward is that [I am] a bandit. [I come] to the help of the Government with 250 men and the reward is \$5,000 for [my] head. It was at that time that I took the name of David....¹³

THE QUIET YEARS

After being discharged from the insane asylum, Riel returned to Father Barnabe's home in Keeseville, New York. He was warned to avoid excitement and for several months he lived quietly at the Father's home. In April 1878, he became engaged to Father Barnabe's sister, Evelina. But, like his earlier engagement to Marie-Julie Guernon, it did not end in marriage.

Riel left New York and travelled west to a Metis settlement at Sun River, Montana. He worked for a time as a buffalo hunter and trader and later became involved in American politics, campaigning for the Republicans. Eventually, in 1883, he became an American citizen. During this period he also married a Metisse girl, Marguerite Monette dit Bellehumeur and they had two children, a boy and a girl. Jean Riel was born May 4, 1882 and Marie-Angelique Riel was born September 17, 1883.

To support himself and his growing family, Riel became a school teacher and accepted a position as instructor at St. Peter's Mission in Montana. It was here, at the Catholic Mission, that the four delegates from Saskatchewan located Riel and persuaded him to return to the North-West.

RIEL'S RETURN TO THE NORTH-WEST

A meeting had been held at the Lindsay Schoolhouse in May, 1884. At this meeting the people had agreed to enlist the help of Riel to negotiate the settlement of their grievances with the Canadian Government. A resolution was passed which stated that because of the success Riel had had in bargaining with the Canadian Government in 1870, he should be invited to return to the North-West to lend assistance so that their "*just demands be granted*".¹⁴ Four delegates, Gabriel Dumont, James Isbister, Moise Ouelette and Michel Dumas, were chosen to go south to Montana and ask Riel to return to Canada.

After leaving Montana and travelling for three weeks, the party consisting of Riel, Marguerite, their two children and the four delegates arrived in Fish Creek. The next day they moved on to Batoche to the home of Riel's cousin, Charles Nolin, where the family stayed for four months.



Photo Courtesy Public Archives of Canada

Marguerite Riel, Wife of Louis Riel

That summer, Riel held several meetings with the people of the North-West, listening to their grievances. The seemingly indifferent attitude of the Canadian Government for the well-being of the residents of the North-West had created a unified voice of protest. The farmers were dissatisfied with low wheat prices, high freight rates and tariffs which inflated the prices of farm machinery. Land claim settlements and responsible government were major concerns for almost everyone, especially the Metis who wanted their traditional river lot system of partitioning land preserved. The Indian peoples, who after the signing of the treaties were forced to become wholly dependent on inadequate government rations, were in a state of extreme deprivation.

A FINAL PETITION TO OTTAWA

Petitions demanding the settlement of grievances and guarantee of rights had been sent to Ottawa from the people of the North-West continually from 1873 onward. When the final petition, drafted by Riel and William Henry Jackson in December 1884, failed to elicit the desired response from the Canadian Government, Riel moved toward more drastic measures. Riel intended to duplicate the success he had achieved in Manitoba fifteen years earlier. After a meeting held with his councillors on March 5, Riel wrote in his journal:

Lord our God, through Jesus, Mary, Joseph and Saint John the Baptist, allow us, in this month of March in the year eighteen eighty-five, to take the same position as we did in '69; and to maintain it most gloriously for Your sovereign domain....¹⁵

At the same meeting the following resolution was passed:

We, the undersigned, pledge ourselves deliberately and voluntarily to do everything we can to

- 1. save our souls by trying day and night to live a holy life everywhere and in all respects.*
- 2. save our country from a wicked government by taking up arms if necessary....*

<i>Joseph Ouellette</i>	<i>his mark</i>	<i>X</i>
<i>Gabriel Dumont</i>	<i>his mark</i>	<i>X</i>
<i>Pierre Gariepy</i>	<i>his mark</i>	<i>X</i>
<i>Isidore Dumont</i>	<i>his mark</i>	<i>X</i>
<i>John Ross</i>	<i>his mark</i>	<i>X</i>
<i>Philippe Gariepy</i>	<i>his mark</i>	<i>X</i>
<i>Auguste Laframboise</i>	<i>his mark</i>	<i>X</i>
<i>Moise Ouellette</i>	<i>his mark</i>	<i>X</i>
<i>Calixte Lafontaine</i>	<i>his mark</i>	<i>X</i>
<i>Napoleon Nault</i>	<i>his mark</i>	<i>X¹⁶</i>



Louis Riel's Council in 1885, taken beside Regina Court House at the time of their trial.

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. Johnny Sansregret | 7. Babbiste Vandall |
| 2. P. Paranteau (Famous Buffalo Hunter) | 8. Touissaint Lucier (Reputed Strongest Man in the North West) |
| 3. Pierre Gardiepui | 9. Maxime Dubois |
| 4. Philip Garnot (Riel's Secretary) | 10. Timmus Short |
| 5. Albert Monkman | 11.Tourond |
| 6. Pierre Vandall | 12. Emmanuel Champagne |

Photo courtesy Saskatchewan Archives Board.

At a public meeting held March 8, 1885, Riel put forth a motion for the formation of a provisional government. Although the provisional government was not formed at this time, a ten point Bill of Rights was drafted.

CLERICAL OPPOSITION TO THE RESISTANCE AND RIEL

The clergy, who had solidly backed the Red River Insurgence, were not supportive of the resistance in 1885. They had been in direct communication with representatives of the Canadian Government throughout 1884 and 1885, reporting on the happenings in the North-West. Furthermore, they refused absolution to anyone who participated in the resistance.

The clergy opposed not only the aggressive nature of the resistance, but also Riel's emerging religious views. Riel talked of radical religious reform within the Catholic Church and even spoke of forming an entirely new religious order.

FATHER ANDRE'S OFFER TO RIEL

In the latter part of 1884, a situation occurred which would later cast doubt on Riel's motives and the true nature of his role in the 1885 Resistance.

Father Andre, in a letter to Lieutenant Governor Dewdney and later, at Riel's trial, claimed that Riel was willing to accept monies in settlement of his personal claims against the Canadian Government and to return to Montana, abandoning his compatriots. In a letter to Dewdney written January 11, 1885, Father Andre wrote:

January 11, 1885

*To: E. Dewdney
Governor of the N.W. Territories*

Your Honor,

You must have received by last mail a letter from the Honorable Monsieur Macdowall in which that gentleman entertains your Honor of an interview that him (sic) and

I had last week with the notorious Monsieur Riel; it was by my suggestion that Mr. Macdowall consented to see Mr. Riel and last Monday 22nd instant we went together to St. Laurent to meet the gentleman in question; the interview lasted about three hours, Riel behaved well and spoke in a sensible and right way. Mr. Macdowall acted with a skill and a diplomacy that I could not but admire, he said nothing to compromise himself nor the government, he heard what Mr. Riel had to say and notwithstanding all the entreaties and tactics of Mr. Riel to draw him out he acted as a thorough diplomat as he is, keeping his own counsel to himself.

Now Governor I think it is really the duty of the government to get Riel out of mischief as soon as possible. As I told you from the beginning there has never been any fear of an outbreak but the presence of that man in the country will be a source of anxiety to the government and we do not know what may happen at last.

Riel is anxious to leave and we must provide him with the means of leaving, he has certainly certain claims against the government and those claims must be settled in some way. He wants to go down to Quebec and once there to obtain some indemnity for the losses he incurred after annexation, the time he was obliged to run away to save his life. Riel has among the Halfbreeds a great power which he may turn to good or evil according how you use him. Now he seems willing to put all the influence he enjoys on the side of the government if he gets the help he requires, he asks thirty thousand dollars as a first instalment, but obtain for him four or five thousand dollars and I am bold in saying Mr. Macdowall and I will make him agree to any conditions, but in duty bound I am obliged to say that it will be better to concede him that amount than to keep him in the country. I know that if Riel is satisfied all the Half-breeds will be united in the next election and as a man they will vote for Mr. Macdowall and we will carry everything before us; so I strongly recommend you to use all your influence at Ottawa to obtain for Riel that sum, if things are settled satisfactorily we will not hear much of Riel after that, for he desires to go back to Montana.

Now you will ask if Riel is satisfied will the other Half-breeds be satisfied! Really I believe most of them will be, for their grievances are fanciful. Let government give sure titles to their lands and remove some other grievances and they will be quiet and peacefully disposed. Riel and some other agitators are the only ones who have interest to incite the mind of the people, Riel disappearing everything will quiet down. Now I write to your Honor what I think is the best thing for the country, give us a prompt answer and let there be no equivocations about it. If the government are willing to offer to Riel 4000 or 5000 dollars as indemnity for the losses made by him we want a right answer, that sum ought not to be an obstacle to the peace and security of this part of the country.

Excuse me, I am writing in a hurry. With the best wishes for you.

*I remain
(sgd) A. Andre¹⁷*

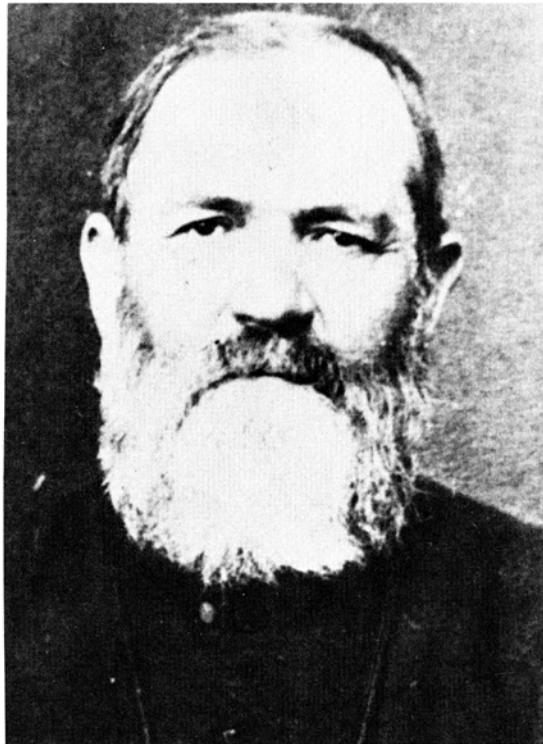


Photo Courtesy Public Archives of Canada

Father Andre

A.-H. de Tremaudan quotes a conversation attributed to Napoleon Nault, one of Riel's councilmen, which gives an entirely different view of the incident:

On December 12, 1884, Riel said to me, "Father Andre has asked for me. You will come with me," I accompanied him. Once there, after a moment of conversation, Father Andre asked Riel if he had ever been paid by the Federal Government for the services rendered to Manitoba in 1869-70-71. Riel answered, "My only recompense was five years in exile and a price of five thousand dollars on my head." Father Andre said, "But do you know that the Government owes you an enormous sum! What would you say if I got it for you?" "I doubt it very much," answered Riel, "but if you wish you can always try."

After this interview Riel summoned his Council and related the conversation he just had. He expressed the hope that if Father Andre could get this indemnity for him, he could not put it to better use than to start a newspaper which would be a powerful weapon in making his people's claims known all over the country. There was a long discussion on the amount to be asked. Charles Nolin was of the opinion that \$100,000 should be asked, but finally it was decided to hold to the amount of \$35,000, the sum judged necessary to buy the materials for printing and all the equipment needed for founding a newspaper. Riel made enquiries during the days following as to where he could obtain these. He had a place in mind when, on December 23, Riel met Father Andre again. He talked about the matter and shared his plans with him. Father Andre said to him, "But then it will still be the same question?" "Father," said Riel, "doesn't the Government owe me this money? You are the one who said so. As for the Metis Question, it will not be the same, for this money will provide us with a powerful weapon to remedy our situation." Riel made a report on this second interview to the Council but no more was heard of the matter.¹⁸

From Nault's and Father Andre's accounts, it appears that Riel met with Father Andre and Mr. Macdowall, at Father Andre's request. Furthermore, according to Nault, it was Father Andre who initiated the question of the settlement of Riel's personal claims. Nault also stated that, should Riel be successful in obtaining these funds, the monies would be used to buy a newspaper to further the Metis cause.

Riel had never made secret his outstanding personal claims against the Canadian government.¹⁹ He felt that the government owed him monies for several reasons: he had never received the lands due him under the Manitoba Act; he had governed the country from the time the Manitoba Act was signed until Canada took possession of the colony three months later; he helped raise an army to come to the assistance of Manitoba to prevent a Fenian invasion; and he had stepped aside in an election to allow Sir George Cartier to run in his home riding of Provencher.²⁰ It appears, from Nault's account and from his own letters as well, that Father Andre was attempting to capitalize on these outstanding claims to entice Riel to leave the country. In any event, Prime Minister Macdonald, who had never previously hesitated to use monies to solve a problem, would not agree to pay any funds to Riel.

This incident has led to much speculation on the purity of Riel's motives. However, the events which followed the 1885 resistance battles make it clear that Riel's motives were not self-serving ones. In his trip to the gallows, he paid the ultimate price for his involvement: his life.

THE 1885 RESISTANCE BATTLES

On March 18, 1885, Lawrence Clarke returned from Ottawa to the North West with news that would spark the events to follow. He told the Metis that their petitions would be answered with bullets and that 500 soldiers were on their way to capture the agitators.²¹ Riel's response to this news was the immediate formation of a Provisional Government which, up to this point, existed only in the form of proposals and was not an established fact. After the decision to take up arms, the support of the English-speaking Halfbreeds and immigrant settlers quickly disappeared.

Riel appointed Gabriel Dumont general of the resistance forces and he himself played a secondary role in the battles which followed. In the opening skirmish at Duck Lake, Dumont reported that: "*Riel was on horseback, exposed to the gunfire, and with no weapon but the crucifix which he held in his hand....*"²² The skirmish at Duck Lake was a clear victory for the Metis forces. The battle which followed at Fish Creek could also be viewed as a victory: while the Metis did not succeed in driving Middleton's forces back, they were able to temporarily halt his march on Batoche. The seige of Batoche, which lasted from May 9 to May 12, ended in the defeat of the Metis forces. After the defeat at Batoche, Riel surrendered himself to Thomas Hourie on May 15, 1885.



Photo Courtesy Sask. Archives Board

Thomas Hourie

RIEL'S ARREST AND TRIAL

Upon his arrest, Riel was originally ordered to stand trial in Winnipeg but this location was subsequently changed to Regina. Since the North-West Territories had been empowered to try capital cases in 1880, Riel was taken to Regina and turned over to the North West Mounted Police, to be tried at a later date.

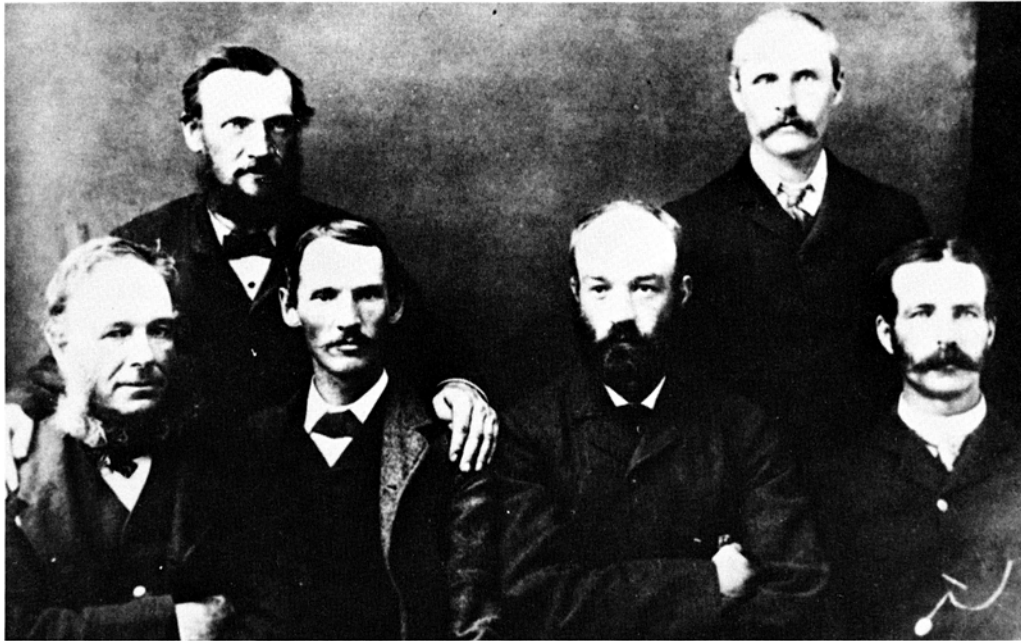
Riel, who was totally without funds, was unable to pay for his own defence. Monies were collected from his supporters in Quebec and a team of four able lawyers was assembled. The prosecution, which also did not lack talent, consisted of five of the most renowned lawyers of the day.

The trial began July 20, 1885 and was held in the Land Office in Regina. The court was presided over by James Hugh Richardson, a stipendiary magistrate for the North-West Territories. The jury consisted of six English-speaking Protestants.



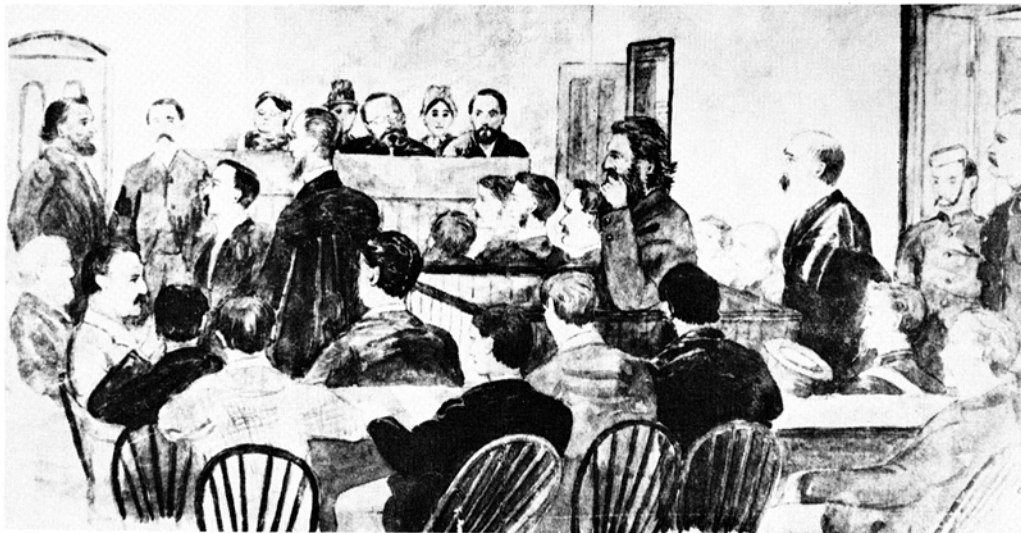
Photo Courtesy Sask. Archives Board

**Judge James Hugh Richardson
Riel's Trial Judge**



Members of the Jury

**Standing: (L to R) Walter Merryfield, Henry J. Painter
Seated: (L to R) Francis Cosgrave, E.J. Brooks, Pat Deane,
Ed Evett**



Sketch of Riel's Trial

Photo Courtesy Sask. Archives Board

Photo Courtesy Sask. Archives Board

Riel was formally charged with high treason, which carried with it an automatic death sentence. The fact that Riel was an American citizen created some problems for the prosecution, but they resolved the issue by drawing up two sets of charges. One set named Riel as being a subject of Her Majesty the Queen, the other set as simply a person living within the Dominion of Canada.

On the opening day of the trial, the defence lawyers moved for a dismissal on the grounds that Riel was an American citizen and also that a stipendiary magistrate did not have the power to try the case. Both objections were overruled by Judge Richardson. The defence attorneys also asked for a one month adjournment to call witnesses and requested that certain witnesses be granted immunity. Richardson granted an adjournment of one week only, and would not grant immunity for witnesses who were presently fugitives from the law.

Riel was in disagreement with his lawyers from the onset of the trial. The lawyers, knowing that Riel's involvement in the events of 1885 was an indisputable fact, attempted to prove his innocence on the grounds that Riel was insane and was not, therefore, responsible for his actions. Riel objected strenuously to this line of defence for two reasons. Firstly, he did not believe himself to be insane; and secondly, a plea of insanity would do nothing to address the grievances which had drawn the Metis into the encounters.

Because of the nature of the Canadian criminal justice system at the time, Riel was not allowed to take the stand as a witness in his own behalf but he was allowed to make a closing statement to the jury. He made full use of this opportunity. In a long and impassioned speech, Riel pointed out that it was the neglect of the Canadian Government which forced the Metis to take up arms. In his speech to the jury, he said:

When I came to the North-West in July, the first of July 1884, I found the Indians suffering. I found the half-breeds eating the rotten pork of the Hudson Bay Company and getting sick and weak every day. Although a half-breed, and having no pretension to help the whites, I also paid attention to them. I saw they were deprived of their public liberties.... I have directed my attention to help the Indians, to help the half-breeds and to help the whites to the best

*of my ability. We have made petitions, I have made petitions with others to the Canadian Government asking to relieve the condition of this country.*²³

Riel also devoted a good deal of effort to disproving the foundation of his defence as it had been laid by his own lawyers. Riel strongly believed that he was not insane, either now or ten years earlier in Quebec. He told the jury:

To-day when I saw the glorious General Middleton bearing testimony that he thought I was not insane, and when Captain Young proved that I am not insane, I felt that God was blessing me, and blotting away from my name the blot resting upon my reputation on account of having been in the lunatic asylum, but I thank the lawyers for the Crown who destroyed the testimony of my good friend Dr Roy, because I have always believed that I was put in the asylum without reason. To-day my pretension is guaranteed, and that is a blessing too in that way....

*Even if I was going to be sentenced by you, gentlemen of the jury, I have this satisfaction if I die—that if I die I will not be reputed by all men as insane, as a lunatic.*²⁴

On August 1st, the jury brought back a guilty verdict, with a recommendation of mercy. But a guilty verdict for high treason brought with it an automatic death sentence and Judge Richardson sentenced Riel to hang at Regina on September 18. After Riel's lawyers began the appeal process, this date was postponed to November 16, 1885 but none of the appeals proved successful.

While Riel was awaiting his execution he received news which caused him further grief. Marguerite, who had travelled to St. Boniface to stay with Riel's mother, had given birth prematurely to a child who died hours afterward. Marguerite, herself, did not live much longer, but died from tuberculosis in the spring of 1886. Riel's daughter, Angelique, also died in childhood and his son, Jean Louis, died in 1908 from injuries suffered in a buggy accident. Today, there are no direct descendants of Louis Riel.



**Riel's Brother-in-law, Sister, Mother and Children
Jean Marie Poitras, Henriette Riel Poitras,
Mrs. Louis Riel, Sr., Angelique Riel, Jean Louis Riel**

Photo Courtesy Manitoba Archives

On November 16, 1885, Riel ascended the gallows in Regina accompanied by Father Andre. *The Daily Manitoban*, a newspaper of the day, tells of how, in death as in life, Riel faced his destiny with dignity and fortitude:

At 8:15 Riel rose to his feet, and was pinioned by the hangman. Deputy Sheriff Gibson superintended the operation. Riel, standing with eyes open praying in French, the priests standing in front. He then walked firmly to the scaffold, repeating, "In God do I put my trust." His head was erect, his step firm, never showing the least tremor; as he repeated the prayerful exclamation half a smile lit up his face. Descending down a few steps of the scaffold he stood on the drop with his face turned northward. Pere Andre and Father McWilliam continued to pray, and Riel said in English: "I do ask the forgiveness of all men, and forgive all my enemies." He then prayed a short time in French. The executioner now took his place. The white cap was drawn over Riel's head, both priests holding lighted candles, continuing to repeat prayers for the dying. Exactly at 8:23

THE DROP FELL...25



Louis Riel's grave,
St. Boniface

Photo Courtesy Sask. Archives Board

FOOTNOTES

1. Public Archives of Manitoba, Louis Schmidt Papers, Vol. 31, "Memoirs of Louis Schmidt" (Le Patriote de L'Quest, Duck Lake, Sask., 1911-12), pp. 11-12.
2. George F.G. Stanley, *Louis Riel* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1963), p. 25.
3. Anonymous, *The Gibbet of Regina, the Truth about Riel* (New York: Thompson and Moreau, 1886), p.179.
4. Quoted in Stanley, *Louis Riel*, p. 29.
5. Quoted in Stanley, *Louis Riel*, p.30.
6. Quoted in Thomas Flanagan, *Louis 'David' Riel: Prophet of the New World* (Toronto: Goodread Biographies, 1983), p. 26.
7. Quoted in Stanley, *Louis Riel*, p. 34.
8. Quoted in Peter Charlebois, *The Life of Louis Riel* (Toronto: NC Press Limited, 1978), p. 227.
9. Quoted in Charlebois, *The Life of Louis Riel*, p.68.
10. Public Archives of Manitoba, Louis Schmidt Papers, pp. 83-4.
11. Desmond Morton, ed., *The Queen v Louis Riel* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), p. 363.
12. Morton, *The Queen v Louis Riel*, p. 352.
13. Morton, *The Queen v Louis Riel*, p. 363.
14. Public Archives of Canada, Canada Sessional Papers, 1886, Vol. XII, No. 431.
15. Quoted in Thomas Flanagan, ed., *The Diaries of Louis Riel* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1976), p. 55.
16. Quoted in Flanagan, *The Diaries of Louis Riel*, pp. 54-5.
17. Public Archives of Canada, Macdonald Papers, Vol. 105, Letter Andre to Dewdney, Jan. 11, 1885.
18. Quoted in A.-H. deTremaudan, *Hold High Yours Heads (History of the Metis Nation in Western Canada)*, trans. Elizabeth Maguet (Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications, 1982), pp. 187-8.
19. Public Archives of Canada, *Canada Sessional Papers*, 1886, Vol. XII, No. 431. In Riel's written reply to the delegates who travelled to Montana to ask that he return to the North-West, he said: "The Canadian Government owe me two hundred and forty acres of land according to the thirty-first clause of the Manitoba treaty. They owe me also, five lots, valuable on account of hay, timber and river frontage. Those lots

are mine according to the different paragraphs of the same thirty-first clause of the above-mentioned Manitoba treaty. It is the Canadian Government which have deprived me, directly or indirectly, of those properties. Besides if they only pay attention to it a minute, they will easily find out that they owe me something else."

20. Morton, *The Queen v Louis Riel*, pp. 361-363.
21. Norman Fergus Black, *History of Saskatchewan and the North West Territories, Vol. I*, (Regina: Saskatchewan Historical Company Publishers, 1913), p.267.
22. Quoted in George F. Stanley, "Gabriel Dumont's Account of the North West Rebellion, 1885", *Canadian Historical Review*, V. 30, 1949, p. 254.
23. Morton, *The Queen v Louis Riel*, p. 312.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 316
25. "Exit Riel", *The Daily Manitoban*, 16 November, 1885, p. 1.

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