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1875:  
METIS GOVERNMENT  
AND METIS LAW

THE SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT used by England and many of its colonies, including Canada, was thought to be the most progressive in the world throughout the 19th century. But the British system of government was not truly democratic. For example, in Canada many people were not yet enfranchised. Women could not vote. Indians could not vote. Working people and poor people could not vote unless they owned some property. Substantial wealth was required of potential appointees to the Senate in Canada. Appointees had to be British subjects aged 30 or over, who owned real property valued at \$4000 and clear of debt.

The Metis system of government, on the other hand, was described by historians as uncivilized, yet it was in many ways a model democracy. All positions of social importance, save that of the priests, were filled by elected members. This was true not only in the political positions, such as council members, but also in the economic sphere of activity. Men who had proven themselves good hunters, or men of wisdom or compassion, were elected to the Metis council.

At St. Laurent, the Metis council became a permanent facet of village life. This was simply a natural progression from the hunting councils of earlier times, which were elected only for the duration of the buffalo hunt. Traditionally, captains and leaders were elected to office on the eve of a hunt, and served only until the hunt ended.

The laws that were developed through this practice, known

as the laws of the prairie, served only to regulate the hunt, and did not attempt to regulate civil or criminal matters on a permanent basis.

Then, in 1873, the Metis of St. Laurent updated and formalized the laws of the prairie into a written document, known as the Laws of St. Laurent. These laws covered all aspects of Metis life in the district, not just the conduct of people engaged in the hunt. The traditional principles remained unchanged, however. All laws were made by elected representatives of the people. Hunters were governed by hunters. Community members were governed by members of the community who had no special status apart from their proven record of ability and generosity. The only exception to this was the priests who, as part of the Catholic Church, represented forces and ideologies that did not develop and emerge directly from within the Metis community.

The representatives of the Church, particularly Fathers André and Moulin, played a prominent part in the creation of the Laws of St. Laurent. As a result, a stern religious morality was built into these laws. The Laws of St. Laurent went far beyond the creation of a moral civil code of conduct, however. They set up a written system of enforceable guidelines for both the hunting and the preservation of the remaining buffalo herds.

By 1873 the scarcity of buffalo was becoming critical, and the spectre of starvation hovered over the people of the North West.

In September, 1874, the federal government received a petition from the Metis of Fort Qu'Appelle, asking that steps be taken immediately to preserve the remaining buffalo as a food supply for the Natives. The government in Ottawa, however, exhibited little concern for such matters, and no action was taken on this request.

This government inaction tended to justify the steps taken by the Metis of St. Laurent in creating their own laws for the protection of the buffalo. There were three groups of people on the prairies whose very existence depended upon the buffalo.

There were the Indians who had not settled on reserves, such as the numerous Cree bands under the leadership of Chief Big Bear. There were the Metis hunters under the direction of Gabriel Dumont, and there were the Hudson's Bay Company's northerly posts such as Fort Edmonton and Fort Carlton. The Company simply could not carry out its winter operations without pemmican, the vital food staple made from smoked buffalo meat. As competition for the scarce buffalo herds increased, these three groups came into open conflict with each other.

While the Laws of St. Laurent served to ensure an equitable share of the dwindling herds for the Metis families involved, the laws came into conflict with the needs of the Hudson's Bay Company. Lawrence Clarke, the Company factor at Fort Carlton, was also the legal representative of the federal government in the Fort Carlton region. Clarke had been appointed by the federal government as a magistrate. In this role, he sat in judgment when people entered into civil or criminal litigation. The Laws of St. Laurent conflicted with Lawrence Clarke's interests in both his positions: as Hudson's Bay Company factor, and as magistrate of the federal government.

In drawing up the Laws of St. Laurent, the Metis had been careful to impress upon the federal government that the laws were not designed to usurp Canadian authority in the North West territories. They were intended as an interim measure only. The preamble to the Laws of St. Laurent stated:

It is well understood that in making these laws and regulations the inhabitants of St. Laurent in no wise pretend to constitute for themselves an independent state but the actual situation of the country in which they live obliges them to take measures to maintain peace and union amongst them. . . . But in forming these laws, they acknowledge themselves as loyal and faithful subjects of Canada, and are ready to abandon their own organization and to submit to the laws of the Dominion, as soon as Canada shall have established amongst them regular magistrates with a force sufficient to uphold in the country the authority of the laws.

In 1875, Lawrence Clarke took bold action to regain his power over the Metis hunters whose laws gave them effective control over the buffalo. Clarke, using his position as magistrate, requested that federal troops be brought in to crush what he considered to be a rebellion against the Canadian government. He complained to the Lieutenant Governor that the Metis "have assumed to themselves the right to enact laws, rules and regulations for the Government of the colony and adjoining countries of a most tyrannical nature." Clarke closed his letter by stating:

Unless we have a certain protective force stationed at, or near Carlton, the ensuing winter, I cannot answer for the result. Serious difficulties will assuredly arise and life and property be endangered. . . . I have thus presumed to address you not as an officer of the HBC but in my magisterial capacity.

Awaiting anxiously for a reply, I have the honor to be sir, your obedient servant, Lawrence Clarke, J.P. for the North West Territories.

The laws of St. Laurent were placed in jeopardy by the very man who had the most to gain from their destruction. If Lawrence Clarke could establish himself as the man who had the final say over the hunting of buffalo and distribution of the meat, he could ensure that his company would continue to have a good supply of pemmican for its winter operations. This would also be a means by which Canadian police could enter the area, not as an invading army, but as a force capable of mediating disputes and enforcing Canadian law in the North West.



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## THE 1875 INCIDENT

THE LAWS OF ST. LAURENT functioned to preserve the remaining buffalo and to set up a system of harvesting, rather than plundering, this vital food supply. The laws worked well from their inception in December 1873 until the late spring of 1875, when a group of Indian and Metis hunters broke an all-important law. This law stipulated that no one could hunt buffalo until the time decided upon at a general public assembly which was slated for the end of April every year. The article from the laws of St. Laurent stated: "No one, unless authorized by the Council can leave before the time fixed for departure."

These hunters, by starting their hunt prior to the time decided upon for the community hunt, committed an act that could have resulted in tragedy. Had they driven the buffalo out of the region, there could have been severe hardship, and even starvation for some. According to the punishments set out in the laws of St. Laurent, the culprits, if proven guilty, were to be fined heavily.

This small band of renegade hunters, under the direction of Peter Ballendine, a Metis employee of the Hudson's Bay Company, left to hunt for the Company without consulting the Metis council of St. Laurent. The council was informed of their activities, however, and an emergency meeting was called. The council ordered Gabriel Dumont to take a small armed party out on to the prairie and capture Ballendine and his group. Dumont was also instructed to put them on trial.

Dumont quickly located the hunters and arrested them.

They were tried and found guilty of leaving for the hunt prior to the time decided upon by council. Ballendine and several of his Indian companions became belligerent. They argued that the Council of St. Laurent had no jurisdiction over them. Dumont ordered that their carts, guns and equipment be seized, and in addition, Ballendine was fined \$25.

Ballendine then returned to Fort Carlton and told the story of his capture and trial to his supervisor, Lawrence Clarke, who was also acting in the capacity of a court magistrate for the federal government. In the meantime, the Metis, under the leadership of Gabriel Dumont, left on the annual spring buffalo hunt. Unknown to them, Lawrence Clarke, in his capacity as the magistrate, was using Dumont's arrest of Ballendine as an excuse to abolish the laws of St. Laurent. His plan was to bring in Canadian law, and Canadian police to enforce it.

On Clarke's advice, Lieutenant Governor Alexander Morris directed the North West Mounted Police commander at Swan River, some 430 kilometres east of Fort Carlton, to investigate the matter. A force of 50 police arrived at Fort Carlton on August 5, 1875. Colonel French, the commanding officer of the troop, immediately launched a thorough investigation. In his initial report to Lieutenant Governor Morris, French explained:

As I expected, there is no reason for alarm with reference to the affair of Gabriel Dumont. It is customary for the [Metis] when organizing buffalo hunting parties to place themselves voluntarily under rules and regulations framed by certain officers whom they elect. These regulations usually impose fines for various offences and disobediences of orders, particularly when in the immediate vicinity of, or in chase of the buffalo. In the case reported by Mr. Clarke it appears that Gabriel Dumont as president or captain of a band mostly from St. Laurent undertook to punish and fine certain individuals who did not belong to his camp. Dumont is at present hunting on the plains, and may hereafter be

arrested and tried for this offence, and as Mr. Clarke is the only J.P. in this vicinity, I propose leaving Inspector Crozier to assist him in his magisterial capacity, should Dumont be arrested within the next fortnight as is believed to be likely.

After further investigation into the affair Colonel French wrote a final report on the case, implicating both Lawrence Clarke and the HBC's new chief commissioner, Mr. James Graham, as co-conspirators who had set up the whole affair. A Metis informant named Pierre LaValee had discovered how the incident between Dumont and Ballendine had occurred. LaValee reported:

They [Dumont's party] caught up to Ballendine, took his carts and fined him twenty-five dollars and sent him back home. He reported to the HBC all kinds of things, thus the excitement. It seems the HBC are the cause of it. They supplied this man with goods and sent him out secretly ahead of the rest.

In his final report, French informed the Lieutenant Governor that both Clarke and Commissioner Graham had indeed been spreading false rumours about a Metis insurrection. The report concluded:

I cannot myself help thinking that his honor, and I fear the Dominion Government, have been unnecessarily agitated by the alarming reports received . . . I was informed that four of the persons accompanying Mr. Graham, the Chief Commissioner of the HBC, had stated when passing Fort Pelly that serious disturbances had occurred at Carlton. I however, considered that such could not be the case as Mr. Graham had sent me no previous message on the subject. I sent to the HBC's post at Pelly and inquired from the Officer there if any message or letter had been left for me by Mr. Graham and finding that none such had been left I concluded that the matter was a mere canard.

There was, of course, much more to this affair than a 'mere canard' or hoax. This incident, insignificant as it appeared, resulted in the establishment of the NWMP in this northern region. It also resulted in the end of the effective use of Metis law.

French's report was passed on by Lieutenant Governor Morris to the Secretary of State in Ottawa. Although officials there condemned Clarke's actions in the affair, no formal charges were ever brought against him. Instead, Gabriel Dumont and the men under his orders were captured and brought to trial. They were tried by the very man who, according to police records, had orchestrated the whole affair — Lawrence Clarke. It was also Lawrence Clarke who, in his capacity as magistrate, levied the fine against Dumont. Ironically, Clarke's punishment seemed lenient and since the Metis were not aware of his role as the *agent provocateur* who initiated the entire affair, he did not lose stature in the eyes of the Metis. Consequently, he continued to be a political ally of Father André. In fact, since the Metis were not aware that Clarke had conspired to have Dumont arrested for enforcing the Laws of St. Laurent, Clarke's leniency served to enhance his image and position in the Metis community.

But the damage had been done. Although Colonel French recognized Clarke's role as a *provocateur* in this affair, and also that the Metis were in no way threatening an insurrection, a permanent police force was established at Fort Carlton. The laws of St. Laurent were no longer in effect, having been superseded by Canadian law enforced by Canadian police. With the laws of St. Laurent no longer in effect the buffalo had no formal protection and the slaughter of the remaining buffalo began in earnest.





*Buffalo bones littering the prairie.*

*Photo credit: RCMP Museum, Regina.*

that god put the buffalo on earth to take the place of all other animals. The buffalo was a prominent element in the Plains Indians' cultures. Indian men proved their courage and skill through the hunt, and good hunters often became the prestigious elders who controlled and directed Indian society.

For ten thousand years, perhaps much longer, the superabundance of buffalo on the plains ensured stability for the Indian hunters whose existence depended upon them. Then, Europeans – “White Men” – arrived with a new way of life. The ancient way of the hunter was twice destroyed in a single century. Indian society began its transformation when hunters began to hunt for furs and robes for the White Man's markets, instead of for the use of their own people. Thus, *trade*, rather than the functional considerations of the tribe, began to dictate the rhythm of life. In this manner, the Indians began to lose

their independence as they came to rely upon guns, axes and other metal tools that could only be obtained through trade with the Europeans.

Disease followed the trade routes of the fur traders. Smallpox wiped out entire bands and nearly annihilated whole tribes of people. Then, by the late 1870s, the buffalo began to disappear.

By 1830, the buffalo population in North America was estimated at only 40 million, down from 60 million at the turn of the century. By 1870, this population was reduced to a fraction of those numbers, and by 1885 the species was virtually extinct. It was saved from total extinction by the foresight of a prominent Metis named James McKay, who captured a small herd of buffalo and protected them from slaughter. By 1885, mile after mile of the prairie floor was littered with the bleached bones of the buffalo. Bones were stacked like monstrous piles of cordwood at the little prairie stations dotting the rail lines of the West, awaiting shipment to the East, where they would be ground up for fertilizer.

Historians have not really addressed the question of why this superabundant species was virtually annihilated in less than a century, taking into oblivion the societies of people who had depended upon it. Basically, there were two forces at work that resulted in the destruction of the buffalo. One was the marketplace; the other was the land settlement process, for huge herds of wild buffalo were incompatible with agricultural settlement and the private ownership of land.

An immense market for buffalo hides developed during the mid-1880s, when a breakthrough in tanning technology enabled craftsmen to make leather belting from buffalo hides. The thousands of miles of belting which drove the machines in the factories of the East literally came from the buffalo. White buffalo hunters often removed only the tongue, considered a delicacy in expensive eastern restaurants, leaving the rest of the carcass to spoil under the hot prairie sun. Others killed buffalo for "sport," firing from trains travelling across the American West.

Metis buffalo hunters contributed significantly to the destruction of the buffalo. The Metis hunters of Red River killed millions of buffalo and shipped their hides to American merchants in St. Paul, Minnesota.

The American military men engaged in open warfare with the Plains Indians knew that the most efficient way to conquer them was to destroy their food supply. Thus, the slaughter of buffalo was tacitly encouraged by some American officers. In 1879, Canadian authorities complained that the American military units along the border were preventing the buffalo from coming north by lighting fires on the prairie. This was done in an attempt to starve into submission the 5000 Sioux Indians who had fled north after the defeat of General Custer in 1876.

The buffalo were eradicated by all of these forces, leaving the Plains Indians in a state of destitution and social turmoil.

With their old way of life destroyed forever, the Plains Indians were confronted with new social problems so complex that they simply could not cope. Confined to reservations, stripped of their independence and pride, they were trapped between two worlds. They could not go backwards in time. The bounty that the Great Manito had put on the earth to sustain them was gone. The "White Man" had taken the buffalo and the land, and had subtly deprived the Indians of their age-old skills. Now they were further weakened with disease and alcoholism.

Desperately the medicine men prayed. The elders advised the people to wait in the homes of their fathers until the buffalo returned. But the ancient gods had been shorn of their power. It had disappeared with the buffalo, and the people were alone with their sorrow.



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## LAND TITLE: KEY TO SURVIVAL IN THE WEST

By 1880, circumstances forced the Metis to seek land title as a first step towards integrating into the new agricultural economy in the West. The Metis of St. Laurent, Batoche, St. Louis and Duck Lake recognized that it was rapidly becoming imperative for them to obtain title to their land before it was lost to the crowd of incoming speculators and settlers. The buffalo were gone, and with them the old way of life. The Hudson's Bay Company no longer provided sufficient work to maintain any of the communities along the South Saskatchewan River. Commercial farming was their only alternative.

The federal government was dragging its feet, however, and despite pressure from the members of the North West Council, the lands in the North West remained unsurveyed. By 1882, it was becoming clear to both the new settlers and the Metis that the North West Council simply did not have enough power to speak to the federal government on behalf of the westerners. In fact, the Council consisted of federal government appointees until 1881, when Lawrence Clarke became the first elected representative.

Lawrence Clarke, as the member for the District of Lorne (which included Prince Albert as well as all the Metis communities along the South Saskatchewan River) began a program of petitions to the federal government. Under his guidance, citizens petitioned the federal government's Department of the Interior for surveys and the establishment of a land titles office in Prince Albert. Father André, working hand-in-hand

with Clarke, petitioned for these same goals on behalf of the Metis of the region. Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald had taken on the portfolio of the Minister of the Interior, so, technically, the petitions went directly to him.

Lawrence Clarke was supported in his campaign of petitions by the powerful group of land speculators centred in Prince Albert. The speculators could not buy land, obtain bank loans, or carry on their business until the country was surveyed and title was issued to the country's inhabitants. With Clarke as their spokesman, this group obtained the surveys required, and land title for most of the residents of the district was issued by 1883.

By 1884, however, the French-speaking Metis along the South Saskatchewan River had still not received either the survey they required, or title to their lands. These Metis wanted their lands surveyed in such a way as to enable them to keep their existing farms, which stretched back from the river front in the long, narrow Red River pattern. Many petitions were sent to Ottawa requesting special surveys for these farms, and for land titles for the occupants. These petitions also asked that title be given to the Metis who had settled on lands that were later granted to the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR). These unfortunate people were now facing eviction, even though they had settled on the properties long before the land was given to the CPR.

The following petition is typical of those presented to the Department of the Interior by the Metis. It was sent by Gabriel Dumont and 46 other Metis from St. Antoine-de-Padoue (Batoche) on September 4, 1882. This petition clearly described the plight of the Metis and outlined their reasons for requiring title to the lands they occupied:

Compelled, most of us, to abandon the prairie, which can no longer furnish us the means of subsistence, we came in large numbers, during the course of the summer, and settled on the south branch of the Saskatchewan; pleased with the land and country, we set ourselves actively to work clearing the land, but in hope

of sowing next spring, and also to prepare our houses for the winter now advancing rapidly. The surveyed lands already occupied or sold, we were compelled to occupy lands not yet surveyed, being ignorant, for the most part, also, of the regulations of the Government respecting Dominion lands. Great then was our astonishment and perplexity when we were notified that when the lands are surveyed we shall be obliged to pay \$2 an acre to the Government, if our lands are included in odd-numbered sections. We desire, moreover, to keep close together, in order more easily to secure a school and a church. We are poor people and cannot pay for our land without utter ruin, and losing the fruits of our labour and seeing our lands pass into the hands of strangers, who will go to the land office at Prince Albert and pay the amount fixed by the Government. In our anxiety we appeal to your sense of justice as Minister of the Interior and head of the Government, and beg you to reassure us speedily, by directing that we shall not be disturbed on our lands, and that the Government grant us the privilege of considering us as occupants of even-numbered sections, since we have occupied these lands in good faith. Having so long held this country as its masters and so often defended it against the Indians at the price of our blood, we consider it not asking too much to request that the Government allow us to occupy our lands in peace, and that exception be made to its regulations, by making to the [Metis] of the North-West free grants of land. We also pray that you would direct that the lots be surveyed along the river ten chains in width by two miles in depth, this mode of division being the long-established usage of the country. This would render it more easy for us to know the limits of our several lots.

We trust, Sir, that you will grant a favorable hearing to this our petition, and that you will make known your decision as soon as possible. We await it with great

anxiety and pray God to protect you and keep you for the direction of this great country which you so wisely govern.

This petition, like all the others sent by the French Metis, failed to elicit a favourable response from the federal government. The system of survey requested here was refused, even though it had been granted to the English-speaking settlers who lived near Prince Albert on long, narrow river front farms. None of the petitions sent by the French Metis were successful in obtaining land title for the occupants. Lindsey Russell, an official of the Department of the Interior, acknowledged Dumont's petition on October 13, 1882. He wrote in response:

I have the honour, by direction of the Minister of the Interior, to acknowledge the receipt through you, of a petition, dated 4th ult., from 47 French half-breeds, on the subject of certain lands on the Saskatchewan, in the district of Prince Albert, on which they have squatted.

In reply, I am directed to request you to inform the petitioners that when the proper time arrives the case of each bona fide settler will be dealt with on its own merits; but as regards the surveying of land in question, that all lands in the N.W.T. will be surveyed according to the system now in force.

It was not long before the lack of title to their lands created grave problems for the Metis. Incoming settlers began to jump Metis claims, settling on their properties. Father André was one such victim. André complained to the government:

I hold at Duck Lake a tract of land about two hundred acres of which I have been in peaceful possession for over several years. The land was fenced in and cost me a good deal of money and was always respected as the Catholic Missionaries' property at Duck Lake. I was one of the first settlers at that place and through my exertions the settlement increased rapidly, and nobody ever troubled me in my lawful possession of that land until last March, when a man by the name

of J. Kelly jumped my claim and notwithstanding my protestations claimed the land as his own and put the frame of a house up on it, depriving me in that manner of half my property, and this is not the only occurrence of the kind at Duck Lake.

The hardships created by the federal government's differential treatment of the citizens of the North West led to much racial bitterness. In the end, the denial of Metis land claims led directly to the military conflict of 1885.





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## THE FARMERS' UNION: ITS ORGANIZATION AND DESTRUCTION

1883 WAS A DESPERATE YEAR for the people living in the Prince Albert region. The federal government and the CPR syndicate had long planned to have Prince Albert as a major rail centre on the main line of the transcontinental rail line. But speculators, having inside information about the future route of the CPR, purchased most of the valuable property in the region. As a result, the CPR syndicate decided to run the railway across the barren prairies of the South, so that the directors of the company would have more control over future development projects. This decision was made in 1881.

The small towns along the new route, such as Regina and Moose Jaw, began a process of economic boom, while Battleford, Prince Albert and the smaller Metis communities along the abandoned route sank rapidly into a severe economic depression. The settlers of the Prince Albert region, now some 320 kilometers north of the proposed rail line, would have no way of transporting their agricultural products to the international markets.

The Indians of the region were now living on reserves, with the exception of Chief Big Bear and his band. Big Bear was in no position to resist being placed on a reserve, however. The buffalo were gone, and his band faced starvation. The Indians who had settled on reserves were living on government rations. Farm instructors had been sent to these reserves to teach the Indians how to become farmers. With insufficient capital, and with no means of transporting grain to the

markets of the world, commercial farming failed on the reserves. The plan to turn the reserves into self-sufficient agricultural units was doomed from the start because of these limitations.

The Metis were little better off than their Indian cousins. Their only hope for survival was in the struggle to obtain title to the lands they occupied, and to be allowed to enter the new agricultural economy of the North West. When the CPR put the rail line through the southern prairies, however, even the new agricultural economy of the region became a precarious option for its inhabitants. One common bond began to develop among the various ethnic groups of the region: their survival depended upon a viable agricultural economy.

There were two local organizations working to bring about the necessary government actions to ensure that a healthy farm community might emerge in the region. One was the Liberal Party, under the local leadership of Dr. Andrew Porter, the first physician in the North West; and the other was the Farmers' Union, under the leadership of a well-educated young man named William Jackson.

The Liberal Party was ineffectual despite the fact that it carried a strong "reform" platform. The Liberal Party called for the construction of a branch line from the main line of the CPR to Prince Albert, and for the establishment of local government that would be more responsible to the people of the region. Dr. Porter was defeated in the critical election of 1883, when the Conservative candidate, D. H. MacDowall, won the election in a landslide.

This victory was, in large part, the result of Father André's support of the Conservative Party. Father André controlled the large block of Metis votes, and he delivered them regularly to the Conservative candidates for the North West Council. This left reformists with no political voice. They turned to the Farmers' Union as a means of carrying on the struggle for responsible government in the region.

The Liberal Reform group, known locally as the Popular Movement, understood the federal government's system of

structured regional disparity contained in the national policy. They knew that the policy was designed to enable the eastern industrialists and merchants to profit from the western farmers through high tariffs and again in the marketplace, so that they could obtain sufficient capital to launch Canada into its own belated industrial revolution. The Liberals knew that the only hope for the people of the North West Territories lay in the creation of a provincial government within the framework of Confederation.

Because of their failure to attract the Metis to their cause, however, the Popular Movement never achieved political office. Nevertheless, during the political campaign of 1883, the flamboyant William Jackson had become a well-known public figure. Never a man to mince words, Jackson summed up the people's struggle at a political meeting in Prince Albert: "This issue is plain and simple, the people's rights against monopolies, cliques, rings and clap legislation."

Jackson hoped that the Farmers' Union would have the capacity, as a non-political vehicle, to bring together the disparate elements and ethnic groups within the region – the French Metis, the poor European farmers and the English Metis. In fact, he hoped that the Farmers' Union would mold these groups into an effective political force that would eventually provide a strong opposition to the Conservative party. The long-term goal of the Farmers' Union was the same as that of the Popular Movement – to establish local responsible government through the creation of a new province.

Like the Liberal Reform group, the Farmers' Union voiced its dissent in printed material that was distributed to those farmers who could read. Through this medium they complained about the federal government's land and railway monopolies that worked for eastern interests, the high tariffs, the granting of land to favoured individuals for less than its intrinsic value, and the handing out of secret development information to political favourites.

Although the Farmers' Union acquired only a small membership, the group was quite clearly a threat to the Conservative

Party because of the incisive analysis applied to the political situation by William Jackson. Jackson was an excellent public speaker. As well, he published a small underground political journal called *The Voice of the People*, which was circulated for a brief period in Prince Albert.

At times the Popular Movement seemed to be reaching its desired constituency through *The Voice of the People*. In it, Jackson outlined plans to start an agricultural marketing cooperative through the Farmers' Union. He wanted millers and merchants to be excluded from membership in the union because their occupations, he felt, placed them in opposition to the farmers. Jackson warned the members of the organization that Clarke and a Mr. Sproat, a land agent, would attempt to co-opt them. He wrote:

When the mention was made of an agricultural society it was rumoured that Messrs. L. Clarke and Sproat were taking an interest in it, and that it was being organized in the Red Deer Hill district by Mr. Charles Adams, an intimate friend of L. Clarke and a late employee of the Hudson's Bay Company. These circumstances caused three things to appear to me not impossible. (1) That the society might be hampered by the admission of millers and merchants as members. (2) That politics might be introduced indirectly by an attempt to make the membership adopt and endorse certain disputed political questions. (3) That politics might be introduced directly by an attempt to confer the secretaryship to some tool or member of the political faction to which the above mentioned men belong, and through the medium summon a quorum of the faithful to endow their candidate with the prestige of nomination by the agricultural society.

It was not long before Jackson's warnings were proven correct. Lawrence Clarke managed to manipulate the members of the Farmers' Union into allowing him and his entourage of merchants, millers and businessmen to take over their organization. Jackson rose at a meeting that was flooded with

Clarke's supporters and beseeched the farmers not to allow these politicians and businessmen, whose interests conflicted with their own, to become members of the Farmers' Union.

Lawrence Clarke, who had just donated \$100 to the organization, responded to Jackson's speech by reminding the farmers of Jackson's youth and inexperience. As a consequence, the newcomers were allowed to become members, while young Jackson was refused permission to speak again at the meeting. Clarke and Sproat then demanded that all the people present pay one dollar to retain their memberships. A motion supporting this demand was passed by Clarke's followers. Since many of the farmers were poor and could not produce a dollar, they lost their membership in their own organization. Jackson reported: "The books were opened for the enrollment of members and outsiders of all sorts, mill owners, merchants, real estate agents and lawyers tabled their dollars and enrolled themselves as honest grangers, horny handed sons of toil." Clarke's guile and prestige overwhelmed the ignorant farmers: they were cajoled into electing him and his friends to directorships in their own organization. To top it off, Lawrence Clarke was granted a lifetime membership in the Farmers' Union.

After the meeting was over, William Henry Jackson was actually evicted from the Farmers' Union, which was now composed mainly of mill owners, merchants, real estate people and businessmen. The uneducated rank-and-file members of the union were simply no match for the members of the Conservative clique. Young William Henry Jackson must have been seen as something of an eccentric or a radical by the simple folk of the district. The power and prestige of Clarke's cohorts, together with Clarke's smooth tongue and generous gifts of cash, proved to be a winning combination against the underground organization of the Popular Movement. Through these devices, Lawrence Clarke, with the help of Father André, ensured that the Liberals would fail to achieve popular recognition through either the electoral process or the Farmers' Union.



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## THE TELEGRAPH SCANDAL

THROUGHOUT THE EARLY 1880s Prince Albert was a rough frontier town that attracted the adventuresome and the bold as well as some of the seedier elements of White society. Among this latter group were numbered Lawrence Clarke and his clique of land speculators. This clique of businessmen did not function as respectable and honest citizens of Prince Albert. They frequently used information obtained as members and insiders of the Conservative Party, which was in power both locally and in Ottawa, to obtain the best properties and business contracts in the region.

By 1883, when a severe economic depression threatened the very survival of Prince Albert, it was known as the roughest town in the North West. Ruffians and drunks fought in the streets. There was an insufficient police force to maintain the law, and the corrupt civic and political officials did little to cultivate confidence among the ordinary citizens of the town and region. These businessmen and government officials had laid claim to lands for several miles east and south of the town. The lands were as yet unsurveyed, and these combined circumstances did not attract many genuine settlers to the region. In fact, by 1863, the existing farmers of the District of Lorne were talking of secession and rebellion.

The incident that brought to a head the almost universal discontent in the region occurred when the telegraph line finally arrived in Prince Albert. It arrived amid a scandal that rocked the entire community and nearly resulted in an insurrection.

This scandal began in October, 1882, when Hartley Gisborne, the District Superintendent of Telegraphs, gave out a \$1000 contract to supply poles for the line coming in from Humboldt. People felt that the contract had been awarded on the basis of political patronage.

In May, 1883, construction began on the last 133-kilometer section of the line, from Clarke's Crossing to Prince Albert. As the line neared Prince Albert, a battle began. Businessmen vied with each other to have the line terminated on their own property. The selection of the site of the terminal was important; it would determine the value of land surrounding it, as the terminal would represent the centre of any future business community. Lawrence Clarke and D. H. Macdowall, leading landowners in the town's future suburb of Goschen, subscribed \$1250 to supply poles for the last 133 kilometers of line. Gisborne felt that this was sufficient to enable them to determine the location of the telegraph terminal. To no one's surprise, they picked their own property in Goschen.

Dr. Porter, as the leader of the Liberal Party in Prince Albert, challenged the right of Clarke and Macdowall to choose the site of the terminal, and a public meeting was called to protest this action. Gisborne, fearing a scandal, wrote to Thomas McKay, another powerful member of the Conservative clique in Prince Albert, offering to place the terminal wherever the government was offered a free site. He asked McKay to call a public meeting. But McKay did not call a meeting until October 30. In the meantime, the line was constructed through to Prince Albert.

The poles were put up directly en route to the Clarke-Macdowall property. Then the public meeting was held. The angry townspeople left the meeting, rushed out, and took down the telegraph poles that had just been put up. On November 7, Gisborne charged six men with "unlawfully and maliciously removing and carrying away the property of the Dominion Government." But when Gisborne attempted to have summonses served to the six men, the angry townspeople took to the streets.

The crowd burned in effigy Gisborne, Clarke and Macdowall. They then charged through the streets seeking out Hartley Gisborne, who, if captured, was destined to be tarred and feathered, and carried out of town on a rail. The crowd of people learned that Gisborne was seen at the home of Lawrence Clarke. This, it was felt, was proof enough of his collusion with Clarke and his fellow speculators. The crowd surged through the streets to the gates of Clarke's sumptuous residence. Sure enough, the terrified Gisborne was there, skulking behind the tall, imposing figure of Lawrence Clarke, who met the crowd at his front door with a loaded shotgun. This subdued the crowd and they retreated.

That same day, November 7, court was held for the six men who had been charged. They appeared before Judge J. J. Campbell, J.P. But they were escorted by some three hundred angry townspeople. Campbell, fearing that an insurrection was taking place, was sure that many among them were carrying concealed weapons. The handful of police in the town were on such friendly terms with the crowd that the judge did not trust them.

Out of fear, Gisborne refused to attend the trial. He left town shortly afterward, and left word with Judge Campbell that he would not return without an escort of twenty-five police or more. When the case came up again on November 15, police reinforcements had still not arrived, so Judge Campbell dismissed all charges, settling for a harsh lecture on rowdiness in the community. His lecture further inflamed the townspeople.

Then, on November 18, in response to Campbell's plea for a military force to quell the disturbances, a large force of police, under the command of Inspector W.D. Antrobus, arrived in Prince Albert. This restored order, but it did not restore the confidence of the people in their elected representatives or their civil servants. However, a compromise had been forced out of the federal government. Gisborne constructed two telegraph terminals, one on the property of Clarke and Macdowall's cronies in the suburb of Goschen, and one in Prince Albert.





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## LOUIS RIEL RETURNS

RIEL'S FIVE YEAR BANISHMENT from Canada, which began in 1870, led to the only peaceful period in his otherwise turbulent life. By the spring of 1884, Riel had settled into a routine as a teacher, husband and father in the tiny Metis community of Sun River, Montana. But events were taking place in the Canadian North West that would soon put an end to his tranquility.

During the election of 1883, the Conservatives swept the District of Lorne clean of all opposition. With all their hopes for serious reform dashed, the leaders of the European farmers and many of the Native leaders began to look for other people and other approaches to the political problems facing them. Indeed, many of the wealthy speculators in Prince Albert were beginning to seek extra-parliamentary solutions to their problems. When the CPR changed its plans and built the railway 320 kilometers south of Prince Albert, these land speculators faced imminent financial disaster. All of these groups, in one way or another, supported the Metis plan to bring Riel back to the North West to act as their spokesmen with the federal government.

William Jackson, who had recently founded the Farmers' Union, worked hard to ally the poor White farmers to the cause of the Metis, who had still not received title to the lands they occupied along the South Saskatchewan River. These groups, Jackson hoped, would be politically united under the banner of the Popular Movement. Meetings were organized in which

the farmers and the Metis discussed their mutual problems with their common antagonist, the federal government. At one such meeting, held in the one-room school house in the Lindsay district near Prince Albert on May 6, 1884, a letter to Louis Riel was drawn up. This letter, asking Riel to return to the North West as their spokesman, concluded:

Now my dear cousin, the closest union exists between the French and English and the Indians, and we have good Generals to foster it. . . . The whole [Metis] race is calling for you.

These meetings were being closely watched by Lawrence Clarke, who, as it turned out, was reporting regularly to the federal government about the activities of the Popular Movement. Clarke, whose accomplices had attended the meeting in the Lindsay district school, wrote to the Minister of the Department of the Interior:

Dear Sir, — The French Metis on the Saskatchewan River, and a section of English [Metis] living between the two rivers, have been holding meetings at St. Laurent, at which meetings all the members were sworn to secrecy. Notwithstanding this, enough has transpired to show that grave trouble will arise in the country unless repressive measures are adopted by the Government.

A number of resolutions were passed of a violent nature. Amongst others, resolution No. 3: "That they, the [Metis], do not recognize the right of the Government to the North-West Territories," and appointed delegates to proceed to Montana, USA, and invite Louis Riel to come over and be their leader in any further action they may determine on.

Unaware that their meetings had been attended by Clarke's agents, the Metis appointed a delegation to travel to Montana and, if possible, bring Louis Riel back with them. This delegation, consisting of Gabriel Dumont, two Metis friends named Moise Oullette and Michael Dumas, and an old

Hudson's Bay Company man named James Isbister, left at once for the USA.

The delegates were warmly received by the Riel family in Montana. The letter from the Popular Movement was given to Riel. He and Dumont spent three days discussing the problems of the Canadian North West and, in the end, Riel acquiesced to the requests of his old allies and friends.

Riel's purposes were clear and unambiguous. His plan was to return to Canada where he would negotiate with the federal government through peaceful diplomacy that would include a new campaign of petitions. Riel had no intention of staying in Canada. In fact, he planned to return to Montana in September of that year.

When the delegates left Montana, the entire Riel family was with them. This included Riel's wife, Marguerite, their three year old son Jean, and their infant girl, Angelique. It is difficult to imagine what thoughts passed through Louis Riel's mind during the hot dusty trip across the endless miles of prairie, with his small family being jostled and bounced in the crowded wagon. It is unlikely that he was aware of the tragedy that awaited him and his family.

On their arrival at St. Laurent, the little convoy of Metis leaders was met with an emotional but triumphant welcome. Old comrades hugged Riel, and the family was showered with offers of support. During the weeks that followed, Riel was invited into many homes, where issues facing the people were discussed and plans were made to start new petitions. During one such meeting, Riel met young William Jackson. They immediately became friends and allies.

Riel and his family were soon invited to dinner at the Jackson home in Prince Albert. As they were eating their evening meal an unexpected caller arrived at the door. When William opened it, there stood his old arch-enemy, Lawrence Clarke, who greeted his surprised hosts with an even more surprising comment: "How is the movement coming on?" He then pulled \$20 out of his pocket and offered it to Jackson, saying, "Here is \$20 for Riel's keep. Bring on your rebellion as soon as you

can. It will be the making of this country.”

Shortly afterward, a French Canadian employee of the North West Council, posing as a friend to Gabriel Dumont, enquired of him about Riel's intentions now that he was back in Canada. Dumont candidly replied:

The government has not treated us as we are entitled. They have ignored our rights and looked down upon us with contempt. Seeing that, and not having any among us capable of speaking and writing for us, we sent for Mr. Riel and brought him here. Mr. Riel is now with us, and it is our duty to see to his personal safety. We need him here as our political leader. In other matters, I am the chief here.

The task of seeing to Riel's safety was to be much more difficult than Gabriel Dumont anticipated. Although Riel had returned to Canada with peaceful intentions, certain members of the business community of Prince Albert, Lawrence Clarke among them, were planning to goad Riel into taking up arms against the government. These men, now facing bankruptcy, were hoping that a limited war might break out, bringing prosperity once more to the region that had been devastated by the CPR's move to the south.

Riel had no intention of playing into their hands, however. His period of banishment was over. He had come back only after much pressure had been exerted upon him by the Metis as well as many White farmers who hoped he might represent them, too.

Riel's written response to these requests was clear. He wrote: "By petitioning the Government with you, perhaps we will all have the good fortune of obtaining something. But my intention is to come back [to Montana] early this fall." It was Louis Riel's fate, however, to die on Canadian soil. The tranquil years at St. Peter's Mission, Sun River, Montana, were gone. And despite his good intentions, Riel's very presence in the North West began to stir up intrigues and tensions that were to set the frontier ablaze once more.



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## THE PRINCE ALBERT COLONIZATION COMPANY

IN 1874 the federal Liberal government amended the Land Act of 1872 so as to enable colonization companies to undertake the settlement of the West as a profit-making business. This was not a new method for populating British colonies. Nearly 100 years prior to the settlement of the Canadian West, the British government had used colonization companies to populate Prince Edward Island and parts of Nova Scotia. Tenant farmers were brought in from Scotland to work the lands granted to English aristocrats in these colonies. In this way, the British government hoped to populate regions of the Canadian colony with Protestant stock in order to offset the predominantly French-Catholic populations of Quebec and Acadia.

When Sir John A. Macdonald's Conservative government returned to power in 1878, plans were made to finance the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway from the profits expected to be earned from the colonization scheme. According to this scheme, there were some initial costs for the government. The government paid a fee to the owners of the colonization companies for every immigrant brought in to settle on their land. In turn, the government was to earn profits from the immigrants through land and income taxes, as well as from dues extracted on timber and firewood used by the settlers.

The system of granting large tracts of land in the West to the government's favoured groups promised to create over-