

The Dennis and Jean Fisher Collection

On September 19, 2011, Dennis and Jean Fisher and the Gabriel Dumont Institute (GDI) formally signed a “Deed of Gift,” which formally transferred their large collection of 1885-related and Métis artefacts to the Institute.

The Dennis and Jean Fisher Collection, which contains several hundred Métis-specific artefacts, documents, photographs, ephemera, and books, is proudly displayed at GDI’s Métis Culture and Heritage Department in Saskatoon. This gracious donation forms an integral component of GDI’s Métis Centre of Excellence.

In the fall of 2010, Dennis and Jean, residents of Saskatoon, approached Karon Shmon, GDI’s Métis Culture and Heritage Director, about the possibility of donating their substantial Métis-related collection to the Institute. Negotiations continued for a few months with most of the artefacts coming to the Institute in March 2011.

Dennis and Jean have spent a lifetime collecting Métis and First Nations artefacts and memorabilia. Dennis is originally from Hague, Saskatchewan, which is near the 1885 Resistance battlefields at Duck Lake, Tourond’s Coulee (Fish Creek), and Batoche. From an early age, he acquired not only a great love of history relating to the 1885 Resistance, but also a great affection for Métis and First Nations peoples.

Throughout the late 1960s and early ‘70s, the Fishers, assisted by their three sons—Dennis Jr., Darwin, and David—found 1885 Resistance-related artefacts at Gabriel’s Crossing, Tourond’s Coulee (Fish Creek), Batoche, and Clark’s Crossing. This was done before the mid-1970s when Parks Canada bought the farmlands on which the battles of Batoche and Tourond’s Coulee were fought. After obtaining permission from area farmers to search for artefacts, the items were diligently analysed, documented, photographed, and sketched by Dennis (who is a trained draftsman).

Some of the more interesting items collected by the Fisher family, and now in GDI’s possession include a piece of Gabriel Dumont’s cast-iron stove; a partial white porcelain doorknob; items from Xavier Letendre’s home at Batoche; various used gun cartridges from Batoche and Tourond’s Coulee; and a nine pounder cannon shell, which was used by the North West Field Force during the 1885 Resistance.

Other artefacts in this collection include: two pieces of the steamer Northcote (which Gabriel Dumont’s forces disabled during the 1885 Resistance) obtained from an excavation in Cumberland House in 1971; fur trade items such as trade beads and clay pipe stems from Fort Carleton and Fort Pitt; and artefacts collected at St. Peter’s Mission, Montana—where Louis Riel taught school. In 1884, Gabriel Dumont, Michel Dumas, and James Isbister went to St. Peter’s Mission to ask Louis Riel to come back to Batoche to advocate for Métis rights.

Dennis has also led an active life in terms of commemorating Métis history and the 1885 Resistance. As president of CFQC Radio in Saskatoon, he ensured that the radio station sponsored the closing of Gabriel’s Ferry at Gabriel’s Crossing as well as the opening of Gabriel’s Bridge in 1968; in 1984-85, he chaired Commemorate ‘85 events in Saskatoon which celebrated the centenary of the 1885 Resistance. Some of the Commemorate ‘85 events and projects that he worked on include commissioning Bill Epp’s Gabriel Dumont statue, which now sits in Friendship Park in Saskatoon (he convinced Epp to make a statue of Dumont rather than one of Louis Riel); working with the Saskatoon Métis Society to re-enact Dumont, Dumas, and Isbister’s trip to Montana; and finding a “lost” image of Gabriel Dumont at the Buffalo Bill Museum in Cody, Wyoming and sharing it with various archives in Canada and with the public.

Dennis has also played a key role relating to other aspects of Métis history. For instance, in 1971, he travelled to Montréal with former Conservative MP Eugène Rhéaume to buy Louis Riel’s diary at an auction. Rhéaume purchased it for \$26,500 in order to keep it in Canada. Dennis later had the diary in his home for a brief period in the 1970s, and had a photocopy of it made. This original photocopy is part of Dennis and Jean’s gracious donation to the Institute. He was also a close friend of former Prime Minister John Diefenbaker, and was one of his pallbearers. Diefenbaker had a great affinity for the Indigenous Peoples of Canada, the Métis, the First Nations, and the Inuit. Gabriel Dumont was one of his heroes. Dennis donated a wonderful series of photographs to the Institute of Mr. Diefenbaker and others at an archaeological dig at Batoche in the 1970s. As with the artefact collection, Jean Fisher has been Dennis’ keenest supporter, contributing a great deal of time and work to their shared interests.

The Gabriel Dumont Institute is very grateful to Dennis and Jean Fisher for their donation of such a unique and precious collection.