

## Notes on the Duck Lake Fight

Harry Ross, now registrar of land titles at Prince Albert, had come west in the N.W.M.P. in 1879 but had left the Police and in 1885 was ~~Deputy Sheriff~~ at Prince Albert. When the trouble started he had joined the Prince Albert volunteers and had been sent to Carlton. John W. Astley had come to Prince Albert to lay out timber limits for Moore and Macdowall. He was a surveyor. His instruments had followed him on the mail <sup>stage</sup> ~~wagon~~ and had been captured by Riel at Batoche.

Ross and Astley had left Carlton <sup>at night</sup> a day or two before the Duck Lake fight to scout toward Duck Lake. The main trail <sup>passed</sup> ~~led~~ through Beardy's Reserve but a branch led off to the north at the west end of the reserve to serve Indian houses which were some way off the main trail, which it joined a mile or two farther east. The scouts kept to the main trail. It was about two in the morning when they reached the point where the branch again ~~merged~~ merged with the main trail. A bullet whizzed past them and they heard the report of a gun. They stopped. A mounted party rode furiously up from behind; ~~and~~ their retreat was cut off.

"Bien, Ross," said the leader curtly, who was none other than Gabriel Dumont. "Scout, eh?"

They were disarmed and taken to Stobart's store at Duck Lake, headquarters at the time of the rebels, and lodged in a room upstairs. On the morning of the Duck Lake fight and

just before the half-breeds started out to meet Crozier, Charles Nolin was brought up to this room, to be held as a prisoner with the white scouts.

"Tomorrow," observed Nolin, "the rebels are going to hold a festival. They intend to celebrate it by hanging you two. Me, I <sup>am</sup> going to try to get away, but I got no shoes."

The rebel leaders had become doubtful of Nolin. They had taken off his mocassins; the ground being covered with snow, he would be prevented from escaping. Ross said:

"Well, why don't you escape? You can take my shoes; they are no good to me. <sup>And</sup> try to reach Prince Albert and bring a party to our relief, sosquach."

To this Nolin agreed. The sound of the first shot in the Duck Lake fight had hardly reached <sup>than</sup> him when Nolin jumped from the upstairs window and made off like mad. Ross and Astley watched him. An old woman was jogging comfortably down the trail in a jumper attached to a plug of a cayuse. Nolin raced up. He picked the <sup>astonished</sup> ~~old woman~~ <sup>dame</sup> off the sled and threw her far out of the trail into the snow, ~~then he~~ jumped on the sled and picking up the whip wheeled ~~about~~ and laid it furiously <sup>across</sup> the back of the <sup>bewildered</sup> animal. The pony sped away as fast as <sup>his</sup> ~~its~~ awkward legs would take him, Nolin making good his escape.

To the fact that Astley was a surveyor, he and Ross owe their delivery from death as spies at the hands of the rebels. They denied that they were scouting. Astley explained his commission to survey the timber limits. He accounted for his presence on the trail with the statement that he had become anxious about

his instruments, which were over<sup>due</sup>, and had come to look for them. Ross had rode along with him for company and they were on their way to Batoche to try to locate them. As Riel had seized these instruments and <sup>then</sup> had them in his possession, Astley's statements were believed and the sentence of death ~~passed~~ upon them was revoked.

Baptiste Arcand had been busily getting together a store of goods and provisions from the merchandise taken by the rebels from the local merchants and was sending the plunder to his house east of Duck Lake. The leaders began to suspect Baptiste of being a backslider. Baptiste's post was on the west side of the river from Batoche. He was sort of company commander.

Riel came to see Baptiste. Riel was a very solemn man. He said to Arcand: "I hear you are going to desert me."

Arcand looked at the half-breed ~~the~~ saviour. "Who told you that, Riel?"

Riel (gravely): "The Holy Ghost."

Baptiste: "Sacre! He's a — liar!"

Gabriel, as has been said, received a scalp wound in the Duck Lake fight. When he reached headquarters at Duck Lake he was taken to a room which had been occupied by Hillyard Mitchell, Stobart's manager, and his wound had been washed by his attendants with a sponge, one of the toilet perquisites of Mr. Mitchell.

Mitchell could be eloquently profane when the occasion seemed to call for it and this was one of the times. When he heard of the incident, his <sup>rage</sup> ~~fire~~ knew no bounds. Mitchell could forgive the rebels for robbing him and burning his store <sup>^</sup> but

to desecrate his sponge! That was an indignity too monstrous for any Englishman to pass over unnoticed.

Astley was the man who carried dispatches between Riel and Middleton. When the battle of Batoche was at its climax, he was shot at from both lines---the Sioux among the rebels and the white troops as well.

Charles Nolin was at one time Minister of Agriculture in the <sup>Manitoba</sup> Government of Hon. Joseph Royal. Mr. Royal was defeated. He met the Hon. Charlie shortly afterward.

"Well, Mr. Nolin," said Royal, "We are defeated. We will have to hand in our resignations."

Mr. Royal's Minister of Agriculture shrugged his shoulders expressively and extended his hands.

"Bien," he observed, "Monsieur Royal, you may resign if you wish. Me, I'm not resign."

It is probable that the Hon. Charles was reluctantly compelled to <sup>disengage himself from</sup> ~~leave~~ his profitable berth without a great deal of delay, but just when or by what painful process the separation was accomplished is not on record. However, having once tasted the sweets of office, Mr. Nolin was not disposed to lightly abandon his ambition to serve his king and country---at a consideration---and subsequent to the rebellion the half-breeds at Batoche elected him as their representative in the legislature at Regina, which speaks well for the charity of his compatriots.

The simple natives along the South Branch were misled by Riel, Nolin and other educated men among them, who surely must

have known better themselves than to entertain such fantastic ideas as they imposed on their credulous brethren. I was told by Laviolette and Fleury that they believed ~~that~~ they could take Prince Albert. Following this, the plan of campaign was <sup>a</sup>to march on Winnipeg and after the capitulation of the Manitoba capital they would be ready to treat with the Canadian Government. The terms they expected to be able to arrange would then, they were certain, be much more to their advantage than any they had previously succeeded in obtaining.

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