

## HISTORIC SITES

### A Tour of Rebellion Battlefields

THERE was high drama in the days of '85, not only in the North-West Territories but all across Canada. Fifty-five hundred troops on the march; troops and transport in lines extending nearly two miles; horses and oxen, and even a buffalo, hitched to every type of wagon, buckboard and cart. There was great excitement as the boys from Ottawa, Kingston, Quebec and Winnipeg entrained for the wilds, and much speculation as to the extent and seriousness of the rebellion.

All this is within the memory of a few old timers still living, but what of their descendants? Are the old trails and landmarks, and the stories that go with them, of any significance to them? We decided to find out.

A trip around the old battlefields northeast of Saskatoon is a nice day's outing. A round trip of about 160 miles to Clark's Crossing, Fish Creek, Batoche, Duck Lake, the old church at St. Laurent where the half-breeds' Provisional Government was formed, old Carlton House, or Fort Carlton as it was called later, and back to Saskatoon. Such a trip could be taken in reverse on nearly the same mileage from Prince Albert.

We went first to find old Clark's Crossing some seventeen or eighteen miles down the river northeast of Saskatoon. Here Middleton's column struck the South Saskatchewan during a blinding blizzard on April 16th, 1885. We drove down the river on the west side, the most direct route. "Where was the old ferry—the old Clark's Crossing of 1885?" We inquired at one farm after another in the district where the crossing should be. Only blank looks and shaking of heads. Not even the ferryman at Clarkboro knew, though his ferry turned out later to be within a few hundred yards of the old crossing. We had no better luck at Clarkboro, the hamlet up on the east bank above the old crossing where Clark himself ran a store and post office in his day.

However, there we learned the road to Jim Hunter's—ten miles up the river toward Saskatoon. Jim Hunter's mother is said to be the first white woman to reside, in a sod house, high up on the river bank in what is now Nutana, in the first Saskatoon. There she helped nurse the wounded brought down from Fish Creek and Batoche. Jim Hunter had purchased the eastern site of old Clark's Crossing. Jim Hunter went with us back to Clarkboro, showed us where Middleton's men had camped, the cellar where Clark's house stood, and the Crossing.

We then proceeded to Fish Creek where, on an upland, close to the mouth of the creek, and overlooking the Saskatchewan, we found an Historic Sites and Monuments Board cairn. A road sign pointing toward the cairn says "Fish Creek Battle Historic Site." On the plaque on the cairn we read "While General Middleton was marching to capture Batoche his forces were attacked on the 24th of



April, 1885, by the half-breeds under Gabriel Dumont from concealed rifle pits near the mouth of Fish Creek."

Having possessed ourselves of one of Middleton's maps we knew the battle took place a mile or so up the creek, so we approached the only house in that area to inquire, "Where was the Battle of Fish Creek?" "Oh, down there near that cairn," said one of the young men, pointing toward the cairn. When we produced a map showing where the first shooting occurred—not far from their front door, and that the battle was fought along the creek in their cow pasture, the boys were amazed. With them we checked the battlefield from a turn in the creek shown on the map and "the old Indian road" with its washed out bridge which happened to have been Middleton's trail. "Fifty-five dead ponies tied to trees down in that ravine," mused Walter Sikorski as we were leaving. Not a marker of any description on the actual field of battle; not even accurate knowledge by the local people to enlighten the casual inquirer. Later we travelled 260 miles to Loon Lake and brought back Charlie Trottier, who, as far as we know, is the only man still living who participated in the battle. Charlie was with Gabriel Dumont in that trap in the bend of the creek; there they got powerfully hungry. He added much to Middleton's story.

Charlie Trottier had not been back to this area in 43 years. He was expecting to see the old village of Batoche and was amazed to find it entirely gone; only a few old foundations remain. "Well, well, well, well!" he said, "My, my, my!" We asked Octave Fidler, son of old Johnny Fidler, of the half-breeds, now 94, to show us the highlights of Batoche. "Middleton's old camp?" he said, and we nodded. Bruce Buchanan, who was with me on this whole trip, and I later paced off the old entrenched grounds which were about 125 yards by 150. Inside was a deep depression, now filled with trees, where a tent for the wounded was placed during the battle. Here the "rebels" could shoot through the top of the tent without injuring the wounded. Here, too, Middleton's hundreds slept while sentinels watched through the long nights of the four day battle. A big strawpile and part of a farm yard were included in what had been the camp and what seemed to me like the east side (it may have been north or northeast) had been "brushed" for breaking. Here the trench and breast works had a depth of three or four feet in places. When going to the old camp Octave had remarked: "Middleton sure made a hell of a mess for breaking!" The logs of the old Batoche house are now part of a neat stucco dwelling near Fish Creek; the lower part of the old Champagne house of '85 is now used as a stable; these, the church, and the priest's house, are the only buildings left from the Batoche of 1885.

The distance from Batoche, on the east bank of the South Saskatchewan, across Batoche ferry to old Duck Lake, was about seven miles. On to Carlton on the east river flats of the North Saskatchewan was another fourteen. There is nothing, two or three miles west of Duck Lake on the Carlton trail, to indicate this as the scene of the first engagement of the Riel Rebellion on the 26th of March, 1885. Charlie Trottier, on the battlefield, gave the Indian agent, Mr. McLeod, the story of this first battle. Mr. McLeod, with spade and note book, noted names and places.



Near Fort Carlton there were three trails, some distance apart, up the eastern river bank from the Fort. I previously knew only the north trail and assumed that certain old cellars, on the bottom lands, marked the site of the old trading post. "No," said Charlie, "those cellars came after Carlton. That largest is where the ferryman lived, Modess Luce. Carlton was south on that plowing—that well drained knoll. That depression north of the spot, may be where Clark's house stood." Clark was the chief trader. We climbed the other trails, one of which led past a spring. Almost two miles east stands an Historic Sites and Monuments Board cairn commemorating the signing of Treaty Number 6, between the Queen's Commissioners and the Indian chiefs of 1876. Charlie was present as a boy of eleven. "No, no," said he, "the big pow-wow was just over the hill of the river bank, just over Carlton—not two miles east by the cairn."

One comes to recognize that cairns often mark events rather than places. At Fish Creek the cairn and cemetery (listing three names) is down toward the river, perhaps a mile from the battlefield. At Cutknife Hill the cairn is on the highest hill, about a mile south of the scene of battle. At Frog Lake (a few miles across the border, in Alberta) the cairn and cemetery are perhaps 300 yards from the place of the massacre. One could wish there might be markers, also, where events occurred.

At Battleford, the old N.W.M.P. barracks, which sheltered 500 persons during the Rebellion, have been reconstructed by the provincial Department of Natural Resources, and a museum has been established there. In marked contrast, Fort Pitt, perhaps, furnishes the outstanding example of almost complete indifference to history. It stood within a certain square mile along the west, northwest bank of the river. There are two or three landings dug out along the river bank and rumours of two or three Fort Pitts at different times. Nettles are growing in depressions at one place, some 70 yards back from the river. Square cut spikes and bits of broken willow pattern china indicate the probable location of a fort, but Middleton mentions the location as back half way on a 1,000 yard stretch of comparatively level land, between the plateau and the river. Here, on this plowed field, we have yet to find an old timer or anyone who can say, "Here's where the old Fort stood and that's for sure." Here, till sixty odd years ago was the leading social and trading centre between Battleford and Edmonton. Here the great men of "Hudson's Bay" called in from the river. Here the Fort fell to the Indians April 15th, 1885; some twenty N.W.M.P. under Inspector Dickens floated down the North Saskatchewan to Battleford on a scow in the bitter cold, while Hudson Bay employees, some 28, including 3 or 4 from Frog Lake, went into captivity with Big Bear. A few weeks after capture, Big Bear's Prairie Crees burned all but two or three of the buildings to keep the Wood Crees from turning back for supplies. Here, too, perhaps a mile back from the old Fort, the Indians returned to surrender to Middleton in June.

But what of the site of old Fort Pitt now? In 1947 a couple of exposed skulls were turned up by the plow near the river and a monument on this, the possible site of an ancient cemetery, has been erected by Mr. Robert Hougham, the owner



of the land. The plow has now covered trails where Loasby was wounded and perhaps where Cowan died; the warehouse position where the McLean girls stood guard with rifles behind walls barricaded with bags of flour is known no more. If you want to survey the landscape and reconstruct the old drama in your mind's eye at old Fort Pitt, you can stand somewhere near the spot, or, unknown to yourself, on the very spot, and do little more with your creative imagination than people a thousand miles away.

The battle field north of Frenchman's Butte is marked only by a hundred odd rifle pits, but these, being in a good state of preservation, will for some time carry at least the Indian's part of the story.

Back 2 miles north and a little east of the old Pitt, I saw Big Bear's dim trail up from the mouth of the Pipestone where it enters the Saskatchewan; up to the high lands above. There was beauty in the dim trail up over the steep green hill sides. Then I read Cameron's *War Trail* and imagined I saw toiling up those steep hills, Big Bear's motley caravan—500 Indians. I saw oxen straining at creaking Red River carts, saw a squaw tie her dog to the resting wheel of a cart, only to see the dog nearly hanged when the caravan started. I saw dogs and ponies pulling travois laden with papooses and kettles. I saw 28 white captives, young and old, in the caravan.

Some 60 miles northeast of old Fort Pitt, we travelled over a bridge and a narrow grade across the arm of a lake, beautiful in the sunset. This was Loon Lake—now called Makwa Lake. Later we learned what took place here early in the morning of the 3rd of June, 1885. I saw a ford instead of a grade. I saw soldiers hiding in the protection of a big hill, to the southwest, firing at Big Bear's Indians. Some of the Indians turned back across the ford to fight. I saw five Indians fall. I saw a fair haired girl with an Indian child on her shoulder wading through three feet of icy water in the ford. I heard a soldier shouting to stop firing. He had recognized Kitty McLean. Across the Big Narrows the band went with their captives, swimming their horses, polling across on rough rafts, leaving many a cart with furs, flour and bacon behind. Up the north island shore half a mile or more, then suddenly they went to the right across a muskeg a mile or more in width. Ice was still underneath on this 4th or 5th of June. In a few days, Middleton's mounted men crossed the Narrows, but they stopped at the muskeg. More ice had melted. The Indians had broken away at last.

Well, here is what lies in the commonplace landscape and in the silent hills of the Canadian west. You have to go to the old books to find it and to the few remaining old timers, usually not to the people who live where events occurred. We hope that someday all these sites will be properly and accurately marked; we hope, too, that the events which took place there so long ago may be recreated by picture, word and map, easily available to all.<sup>1</sup>

EVERETT BAKER

<sup>1</sup> EDITOR'S NOTE: Mr. Baker has himself performed a distinguished service to local historians by conducting on-the-spot investigations of all the major Rebellion sites in company with some of the few remaining survivors of the engagements. He has also compiled a magnificent photographic record in kodachrome of the sites as they are today.