

**Maria Campbell, *Eagle Feather News*, August 2010**

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### **Reconciliation means mending Wahkootowin**

It is interesting to note that I have received more response from my last column on reconciliation and Back to Batoche Days than I have for any other column I have written over the past several years.

Some agreed with me, others agreed in part, several disagreed, and one was downright nasty. One of the comments was from an instructor teaching an adult class in one of the Native communities. He said he used the column in his class and had one of the liveliest discussions of the term. He didn't realize how deeply his students felt not only about reconciliation, but also about Batoche and being Métis.

"They didn't discuss Métis identity," he said, "but they talked about what it meant to be Métis and it was quite moving."

Opinion, discussion, and debate are very important to a community and a people's good health, and certainly for this writer it is the purpose of commentary. If a column can provoke a classroom of students to voice their opinions and put words to feelings about nationhood and their place in it all, then I have done my job.

But I do have more to say about Back to Batoche Days. Too many of our people don't know the history of Batoche or the events that led to "resistance" or what governments call "rebellion" or "war." Our people don't know the names of the families who were involved or what happened to them or how the rest of the Métis and First Nations people were treated as a result of 1885.

They don't know the punitive consequences of racist policies and legislations that were imposed on First Nations people or the government neglect that rendered Métis people invisible in their homeland. But worse than all of this was the animosity that divided First Nations and Métis; this was when wahkootowin was truly broken.

An example of unknown history is the Tourond family of Fish Creek, on whose land the battle took place. It wasn't until Parks Canada, in partnership with the Batoche community and the Gabriel Dumont Institute, worked together to rename the battle site from Fish Creek to Tourond's Coulee and commemorating Madame Tourond by hosting a mini conference in 2008 and inviting the Tourond descendents to tell their family's story, and celebrating with them, their survival.

As a result of this gathering several writer/historians are looking at Madame Tourond's story and her heroism in the face of such incredible loss. We learned not only of her life but also of her strength of character. She lost a husband and three sons as a result of the battle, and one son was sentenced to Stony Mountain Prison. Her farm was burned down and her animals killed, but she rebuilt her farm and went on to buy a second one, and was at the time of death, a thriving business woman and cattle breeder.

Again in that same year, the same partnership hosted another mini conference and gathering to honour the Women of Batoche. Historians and community people were invited to give academic papers and oral histories about these nameless women who gave so much during those hard times.

It has been recorded that more women and children died in the following year as a result of the battle than soldiers killed on both sides. There are so many sad stories, but more importantly the stories are about endurance and heroism, about women like Madame Vandal who, when learning of her husband's death, fled Batoche for Cochin, to join family. She traveled on foot, carrying her crippled adult daughter on her back. Mrs. Vandal was in her seventies.

Another woman, whose name is lost, fled to Montana where she became a housemother to a home for orphaned Métis children, many of them from Batoche. The home was founded and funded by Gabriel Dumont and other old Métis buffalo hunters. So many stories that shaped who we were: stories and names of heroes, who can help shape who we are today.

The very name "Back to Batoche" is a power of its own. To come home from wherever we were dispersed, to walk ancestral land, to feel the spirit, and the spirits of place all help to bring a "soul peace" that cannot be described, only felt.

"Back to Batoche Days" would do a great service, and bring reconciliation and honour and mend wahkootowin by bringing all the families home to tell their stories of survivance. The celebration would honour them on the last day by walking 10,000 or 75,000 strong to the mass grave. This would be pretty darned awesome.

This kind of reconciliation and power would bring us justice on many levels. For sure, it would be noted by political parties. Ten or 75,000 people are votes. Votes are power.

"These people are together, united and focused. We better pay attention."

More importantly, ten or 75,000 people walking together would change the way we saw ourselves forever. We would not have to talk about identity or pride again. Because it would be there in our hearts and we would feel it every hour of our lives.

And who knows where the kind of passion would take us? Further, I think, than government handouts, divisions and agendas.