



Bell of Batoche

Installation & Baptism



The Métis people of Batoche, Saskatchewan are very, very excited on Sunday September 4th, 1884. The bishop of the diocese of Saint-Albert, bishop Vital Grandin is here in person. He will be blessing the newly constructed church of the parish of Saint Anthony of Padoua, but more than that he has brought a bell for the parish, to be installed in the bell tower. It is one of a half dozen or so that he has purchased from Toledo, Spain; and what a beautiful bell it is. Highly polished, so much so, that one would easily believe that it is made of pure silver.

Not so, it is cast from a special alloy of brass unique to the manufacturing of bells. This bell's diameter at the base is 12 inches (30 cm), a height of 16 inches (40.5 cm). Its weight is plus or minus 47 pounds (21.5 kilos). Bishop Grandin's coat of arms is blazoned on the one side and on the opposing side, the words: "**Mgr grandin eveque de S A bert**" The letters T and L seem to be missing. (We can imagine an error in the casting). A few spaces below the writing, a beautiful small cross.



It is a usual procedure to baptize bells. This one is baptized "Marie-Antoinette" named after Marie-Antoinette (1755-1793) wife of Louis XVI, king of France. The god parents are Mr. Xavier Letendre dit Batoche and his sister Mrs. Marie Letendre-Champagne. They are founders of the community, therefore this honor is bestowed upon them.

Only eight and a half months later the Métis resistance of May 9th to May 12th, 1885 is put asunder by the Canadian armed forces. Of course, the soldiers have to celebrate their victory. Three or four of them scale the bell tower, lower "Marie-Antoinette" to the ground and upon being ordered back to Ontario, take the bell with them.

Lost from view for some 45 years, the bell of Batoche stripped of its vocation is now hanging in the tower of the fire hall in Millbrook, Ontario. It is condemned to a laborious existence as it calls: "Fire, fire, hurry firemen, hurry, fire, fire"!

Fire halls are not exempt from fire and, from time to time suffer this fate. So it is, in 1931, the Millbrook fire hall is completely engulfed in flames, totally destroyed. Tower and bell come crashing down. The bell is found among the debris but, alas, it will ring no more as it has suffered a crack in its side.

Blackened by soot and fire, cracked, silenced, the bell of Batoche has lost its lustre. The burghers of Millbrook hasten to exhibit the bell in the "Royal Canadian Legion" bar. Caged, under glass, "habitues" refer to it as "our spoils of war".

Another sixty years have passed! During the night of October 21, 1991, persons unknown quietly enter the Legion by the back entrance, carefully dismantle the glass enclosure, remove the bell and make their exit. With the precious bell in their possession they return to Winnipeg, Manitoba, and again the bell of Batoche is lost from view. ***(It is interesting to note that October 21st is indeed Louis Riel's birth anniversary).***

Rumors aplenty exist about the bell of Batoche. Many comments are proffered by the various media! Will it suddenly appear? Can it be repaired? Should it be repaired? Someday soon, will we hear its dulcet tone? What would it say to our Métis youth: ***"Boys and girls learn well your lessons, be proud of your heritage, culture, your ancestors and their exploits. Hold high your head, take you legitimate place as today's leaders in our present society".***

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