

Historica Canada Education Portal

Sam Steele

Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Sam Steele biography from [*The Canadians*](#) series. Sam Steele, knighted by the King of England, was a courageous, determined man who helped "tame" Western Canada as one of the most important leaders of the North West Mounted Police.

Aims

Steele was directly involved in several pivotal events in Canadian history – everything from dealing with Louis Riel, Sitting Bull, and the miners in the Klondike Gold Rush to his involvement in the Boer War. The following timeline activities and mind mapping exercises are designed to assist student with appreciating the connection between Steele's life and several key events in Canada's history.

Background

It was the middle of the Winnipeg General Strike and riots were raging along Main Street. A handful of Mounted Policemen had been cornered by the mob and badly beaten. One of them, Constable McQueen, was dragged into the nearest building – a funeral parlour. Unconscious, he

was laid out on a slab. One slab over was the body of Sir Sam Steele, the greatest Mounted Policeman of them all. He'd been dead for six months.

The next day there was a lull in the Winnipeg violence of 1919 as the largest funeral Western Canada had ever seen made its way through the city streets. Rioters, who just hours earlier had pelted the Mounties with rocks and bottles, stood heads bowed, caps in hand and watched as RCMP officers in full uniform followed behind a riderless black horse with Sam Steele's boots reversed in the stirrups. There was not a single voice raised in anger. Even at his funeral Sam Steele was bringing order to the Canadian West.

Few men in Canadian history have been so directly involved in the major events of their day as Sam Steele. His beat would become "The Canadian West." He was the man who arrested Riel, patrolled the gangs of men building the CPR, and protected the miners during the Klondike Gold Rush. He was the man who convinced Sitting Bull to go back across the border, promising him a fair deal. He was there for the driving of the last spike at Craigellachie. He was commander of the Canadian troops in the Boer War. Steele was a big tough farm boy who became a policeman when he was 16. He had courage and determination, but more than that he was fair – a cop's cop.

In 1885, as disenchanted workers gathered in the town of Beaverrmouth to discuss how they were going to get even with the CPR, it was Sam Steele with a Winchester in one hand and Riot Act in the other who told them that if he saw more than a dozen men gathered together he would open fire on them. The crowd dispersed.

When Louis Riel unnerved settlers by promising the Manitoba and Alberta Indigenous peoples that the Mounted Police would be wiped out

of existence within a week, Steele went after him. There were several gun battles and at the end of the day Steele forced Riel to surrender and arrested Chiefs Big Bear and Poundmaker.

When he was posted to the Klondike to make sure Canadian Law was upheld during the Gold Rush and to see that the US Government couldn't get a toe-hold in the land they wanted to annex, Sam Steele made up laws as he went along and told the drifters and miners and dancehall girls that it was for their own good.

When the Boer War broke out Sam Steele went to South Africa and laid the groundwork for the first South African Police Force. He came back a hero and was ready to go fight again as the First World War loomed, but he was foiled. He had crossed the politicians.

The new breed of soldiers, he was told, wouldn't put their trust in an old warhorse like him. It broke his heart. The sudden hatred of Sam Steele in Ottawa was palpable. When he received his knighthood in 1918, it was not proposed by the Canadian government, as was the custom, but by the British Home Forces Command.

Sam went to England to be knighted by the King and shortly after receiving his title was caught up in the great flu epidemic which was devastating London. The Lion of the Frontier, who should have died under a western sky, died instead in a small house in Putney. The troop ships returning from the First World War had no space for a corpse. It took six months for his body to be brought to Winnipeg.

Activities

Time Allowance: 1- 4 hours

Procedures:

1. Create a timeline to illustrate the key events in Sam Benfield Steele's life. First, direct the students to individually choose two or three major events in Sam's life. Next, in groups of three, they can share their choices and discuss reasons for these decisions. Finally, students present their ideas and justifications to the entire class creating a timeline either on the chalk board or on a long roll of chart paper or newsprint that can be displayed in the classroom. Be sure to emphasize that there is more than one answer and that all answers must be supported with facts and well constructed arguments.

Each student should then write a short list, description, or poem about one of the events from the time line of Sam Steele's life. Connect all the writings to create a new time line to be displayed in the classroom.

2. Conduct a formally structured debate, in proper parliamentary style, with the resolution: Be it resolved that Major General Sir Sam Steele was the best Commissioner the North West Mounted Police never had.

3. In groups of four, create a mind map of Sam Steele's life. Who were the key players in his life? With what organizations was he involved? What important events both in Canada and the world did he participate in?

4. Write an obituary or Lives Lived column for Sam Steele. (For examples of obituaries, refer to your local newspaper or go to [The Globe and Mail](#)). Be sure to include: the names of his survivors and important predecessors, highlights of his life, cause of death etc.

5. On a map of Canada, trace the military career of Sam Steele. Be sure to include all the forts where he worked and other important points of interest. Try to find out when he was there, for how long, and what he did or accomplished while he was there.

Resources

[Sam Steele Worksheet](#)

[Sam Steele - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[North-West Mounted Police - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

Garrod, Stan. *Sam Steele*. Don Mills, Ontario: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1979.

Stewart, Robert. *Sam Steele, Lion of the Frontier*. Toronto: Doubleday, 1979.

[Fort Steele](#)