



A Mountie on patrol checks back to the information centre by radio.

# Mounties go electric

By Philip Smith

Perhaps it was the sixth sense good policemen are supposed to have, but there was something about the car parked on the side road that didn't look quite right to Lionel Ellis, an Ontario Provincial Police constable on patrol near Matheson, in Northern Ontario.

First of all, the way it was tucked among the trees you could hardly see it from the highway, as if its driver, now sleeping soundly behind the wheel, had tried to hide it. While there are plenty of American hunters around Matheson in the moose season — it was November, 1972 — they don't usually travel alone. This car had California plates. California seemed a long way from Matheson, even for a moose-hunter.

Here, thought Ellis, was a good opportunity to check out that new CPIC system they were running in Ottawa. He radioed the car's licence number into his detachment — and almost within seconds, back came the news that the car had been stolen from Riverside, California. The man presumed to be driving it had a long police record and was currently wanted for murder. Forewarned is fore-armed, and Ellis waited for another car to join him before he woke the driver and arrested

him. Just five minutes had elapsed since he had become suspicious and queried CPIC — and once again, the computer had got its man: returned to California, he pleaded guilty to first-degree murder and was sentenced to life imprisonment.

The computer is the heart of CPIC — the Canadian Police Information Centre — a nation-wide automated communications system set up by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police two years ago. Plugged into it by almost 700 terminals from Whitehorse to Labrador City, police forces across the country now have at their fingertips — in as little as 10 seconds — information for which they used to have to wait hours, or days.

## Quick answers

Storing up or giving out crime information at the rate of 120 words a second, the computer handles 230,000 queries a week from police forces on the network — the provincial police in Ontario and Quebec, RCMP detachments in the other provinces, and all major city police forces. From the recesses of its capacious memory it can give the cop on the beat answers to questions there was no point even asking

before.

The Mounties established a central repository for police information in Ottawa in 1910. By 1963 its files were bulging so badly that searching them could take days. Since it's no use asking a policeman to chase a dragster in a Model-T Ford, a study team was set up to revamp the system.

In the space age, the obvious solution was a computer and the model chosen was the IBM 360/65, as used by businesses and universities. To man it, the Mounties raided the computer establishment: two-thirds of the CPIC staff of 255 are civilians sworn into the force for the job.

It was decided to launch the system by programming all existing records on stolen vehicles into the computer, and after policemen had been trained to operate the typewriter-like terminals, the system went "on line" at noon on July 1, 1972.

An hour and a half later, an Ontario Provincial Police patrolman at Burlington found a burned-out and abandoned truck. Its licence number was punched into the computer from the station and it was quickly identified as having been stolen from Hagersville, 30 miles away. While