

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police "Servants of the Public": an Archival Matter

by Pierrette Woods

Origins

From the very beginning in 1873, every aspect of the work performed by Royal Canadian Mounted Police officers is well recorded. Many famous cases have been published. Numerous books have been written concerning historical events in which the Force participated, such as the Riel Rebellion, royal visits, the Olympics and many others. Along with the good work, there is also a lot of criticism of the Force by the news media. However, there is a side of this organization which many people are never exposed to — the human nature of the work performed.

From the origins of the Force in the Northwest Territories, the federal policeman was sometimes the only contact with the rest of the country. In such a vast expanse of land and water, transportation was a difficult venture in climatic conditions which often caused serious problems. Communication between Indian and Eskimo settlements and other parts of the country was virtually nil. Therefore, the North-West Mounted Police officer was usually the only outsider in contact with these people. Services other than police work became a daily routine matter. While on patrol, the policeman became a customs collector, a mail courier, an Indian agent, a census taker, an electoral return officer and a first-aid administrator. These officers were called upon to corral wild stallions, record vital statistics, control the spread of contagious diseases, control prairie fires,

award contracts for mail services and compile meteorological records. Many times, the police barracks were used as a post-office; jail terms were served in guardrooms, and detachments were used as prisons. Today, the policeman is still called upon to render services beyond the call of duty, such as addressing service groups, school patrols, Boy Scouts and Girl Guides, appearing in red serge at social functions and many others. These happenings are often taken for granted by the population, but to the officer it is part of a day's work.

A Case Study

On May 8, 1925, Mr. Arthur Gibson, Dominion Entomologist with the Federal Department of Agriculture, wrote a letter to the Commissioner of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police asking if arrangements could be worked out between the two departments for the collection of insects in the far north. At that time, transportation from Ottawa to those northern locations was very slow and difficult. Travelling was usually done by dog sled and canoe (often requiring portages). Various species of insects are representative of certain regions. Their breeding habits are varied and often seasonal. Many of these insects live for only a few days, therefore, timing was a major concern. Mr. Gibson went on to explain that the Mounted Police might be the best solution to their problem. While out on patrol, the policeman could