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Stories of the Redcoat Riders of the Plains

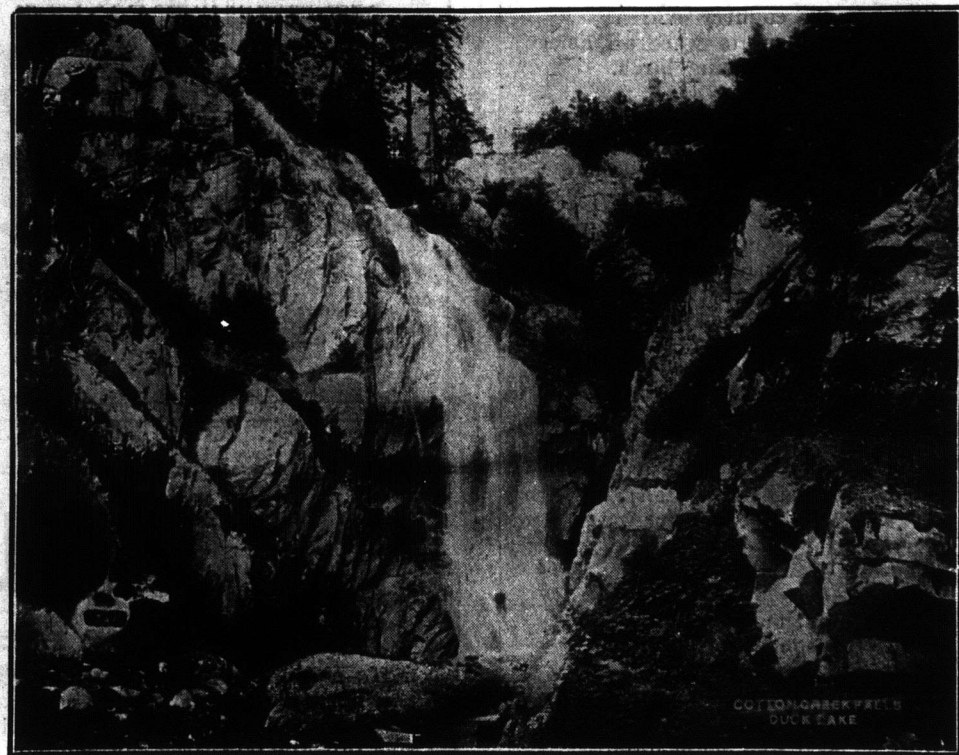
Written for The Western Home Monthly by Max. McD.

The men who do not fail, whether bringing relief to isolated settlers or carrying mail to remote trading posts.

PROTESTS from the fur companies of western Canada, and petitions from the missionaries of the West, called the attention of the government of Canada to an outrageous state of affairs existing at the foot of the Rockies. Whisky smugglers were plying an illicit trade with the Indians, and something must be done to stop the demoralization of the red men of the western plains. Hence in May, 1873, a bill was carried through the commons authorizing the establishment of a force of three hundred mounted police in the West.

The spice of danger, devilry, and adventure in the duties of the new force appealed to the popular mind. Men of all ranks tumbled over each other in their eagerness to enlist. Sons of lords, generals and famous novelists enrolled

Up, much stronger than that of the Mounted Police, with cannon, abundance of ammunition and provisions, and four times as many outlaws as there were police. Inside the smugglers stockades was whiskey enough to win the whole Blackfeet confederacy as allies of the traders. The first thing the police had to do was to win the friendship of the Indians. Colonel Macleod invited the chiefs to the new fort. They were feated by the Police, given exhibitions of military skill, and shown the cannon. Pointing out a tree more than a mile away, the Colonel bade the chiefs watch it. The next instant a cannon ball tore it up by the roots. That was a better shot than the old mortar over at the smugglers' fort could make. The Blackfeet were greatly impressed, and their visit marked the beginning of a friend-



Cotton Creek Falls

shoulder to shoulder with cashiered "Tommys" and Indian scouts; and curiously enough the mounted police retain the same heterogeneous elements to-day as when the first enlistment took place. Immediately upon organization they started from Toronto to Fargo by railway, and made a march to Dufferin, the beginning of their famous trek through 800 miles of prairie westward toward the Rocky Mountains, relying solely upon their own transport train for supplies.

On October 10th, in the very heart of the Blackfeet country, where no man's life was safe, Fort Macleod, the first mounted police fort in the West, was completed. Another force was sent north to Edmonton among the Assiniboines and Wood Crees. The main body turned back across the plains to Fort Pelley, and thence to Dufferin. In four months the force had travelled 1,960 miles, and had accomplished, without loss of life, that which had been declared as impossible without the use of an army—taking possession of the Great Lone Land.

Early Demonstration on Old Man River

Fort Macleod, on the Old Man River was a smugglers stronghold, and here Colonel Macleod, after whom the place was named, marked off a square for a fort on an island in the river. Cottonwood logs were daubed with mud, white-washed outside and lined with cotton inside. Then the British flag was hoisted in opposition to the smugglers regime.

Here then was a mere handful of men surrounded by a confederacy of Indians noted for their aggressive ferocity. Not a day's ride distant was Fort Whoop,

ship between the Mounted Police and the Indians that has lasted to the present day.

Boundary Always Required Constant Patrol

The end of open whiskey traffic did not mean that smuggling had entirely ceased. In those days, liquor was not only forbidden to the Indians, but prohibited to white men throughout the entire territories, except by special government permit for small quantities. The duty of watching all incoming freight, whether by pack train, ox-cart, or railway, fell to the Police. The most likely avenue of illicit trade was, of course, along the International Boundary, an imaginary line 1,800 miles long, with absolutely no settlement at its western end. The deep valleys and rolling hills offered countless hiding places for smugglers, and only the most vigilant patrolling could check the traffic. In summer time, with a good horse under him and frequent relays, this was pleasant work for the scout; but when winter came with blinding blizzards on fenceless prairies and a temperature that froze the mercury at forty below zero, there was work to test the mettle of heroes.

Not long after Fort Macleod was established, urgent occasion arose to send a despatch to a distant post in the south, warning an officer to be on the lookout for an incoming desperado. The thermometer stood at thirty-five below. It was night, and the north wind was humming with that peculiar half growl, half croon, which every westerner knows foretells a blizzard. To delay until the storm was past would let the criminal

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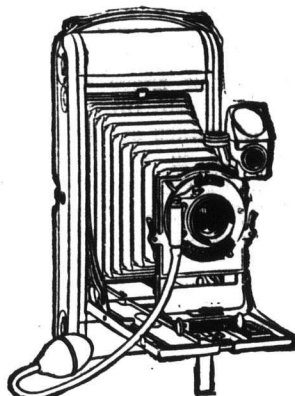
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