

## Life at Depot

Playing jokes on the newest tyros soon became a tradition at Depot. In the 1880s, Easterners still believed that the West was a wild and savage frontier inhabited by murderous Indians. In those days, gullible new recruits could be sent out on their first night-guard pale, scared out of their wits after being told that two or three members had been scalped recently. Another favourite ruse was to tell them that they had to go to the post carpenter to be measured for their own sentry box. The carpenter, who went along with these larks, took the necessary measurements then reminded the recruit to be sure to pick up his box to take with him on his first guard duty. Disputes were settled in traditional cavalry fashion in the hay corral. The instructors would turn a blind eye to the fray. The Marquis of Queensberry Rules were generally expected to be observed and heaven help anyone who resorted to biting, gouging or kicking.

Commissioner Herchmer established the Depot canteen in 1888 as a means of providing the men with necessary supplies at reasonable prices and to keep them from the saloons in Regina. It was managed by a committee and its profits were used for the benefit of all members. It also sold beer at five cents a glass, about half of the price for a similar quantity in town. Herchmer hoped that the recruits would remain in barracks to do their drinking, where the duty NCO would see that they did not over imbibe. The canteen experiment was successful, but not popular with the Regina hotel keepers. It became a lively place in the evening where the men could relax, play cards or dominoes, throw dice for drinks, and work off their frustrations. It also became the scene of a form of initiation: liberal libation was given to a new recruit who was then hoisted onto the piano where he was expected

to entertain his seniors satisfactorily with a song or two. If his performance was less than adequate, he was required to buy a round of drinks.

In the days before television and radio, members relied upon their own resources to entertain themselves. During the winter, dances, concerts and skating parties were organized. By 1890 numerous sports teams had been formed: baseball, cricket, football, lacrosse. On holidays like Victoria Day and Dominion Day, contests between teams from the barracks and the town became regular fixtures. The wives of the officers and the NCOs often played a big part in promoting recreation for the recruits. Mrs. Herchmer was the founder and "president" of the baseball team which was familiarly referred to as "Herchmer's Pets."

The young men also found other attractions to pass the time. The *Regina Leader* referred obliquely to this activity:

"... the red-coat of the Mounted Policeman is seen flashing in and out from these dens at all hours. As no arrests have been made the character of these visits may easily be surmised."<sup>8</sup>

As Kipling had said, "Single men in barracks don't grow into plaster saints."

The funds for providing the sports equipment, musical instruments, games and books came from the canteen profits. In 1890, for example, \$1600 was spent outfitting a bowling alley. That same year it also financed a trip to Winnipeg by the football team to compete in the first championship of the Northwest Territories. The Mounted Police team, which was nicknamed the "Rough Riders," was beaten by the local boys from Winnipeg who emerged as champions.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *Regina Leader*, May 17, 1886.

<sup>9</sup> *Manitoba Free Press*, September 29, 1890.