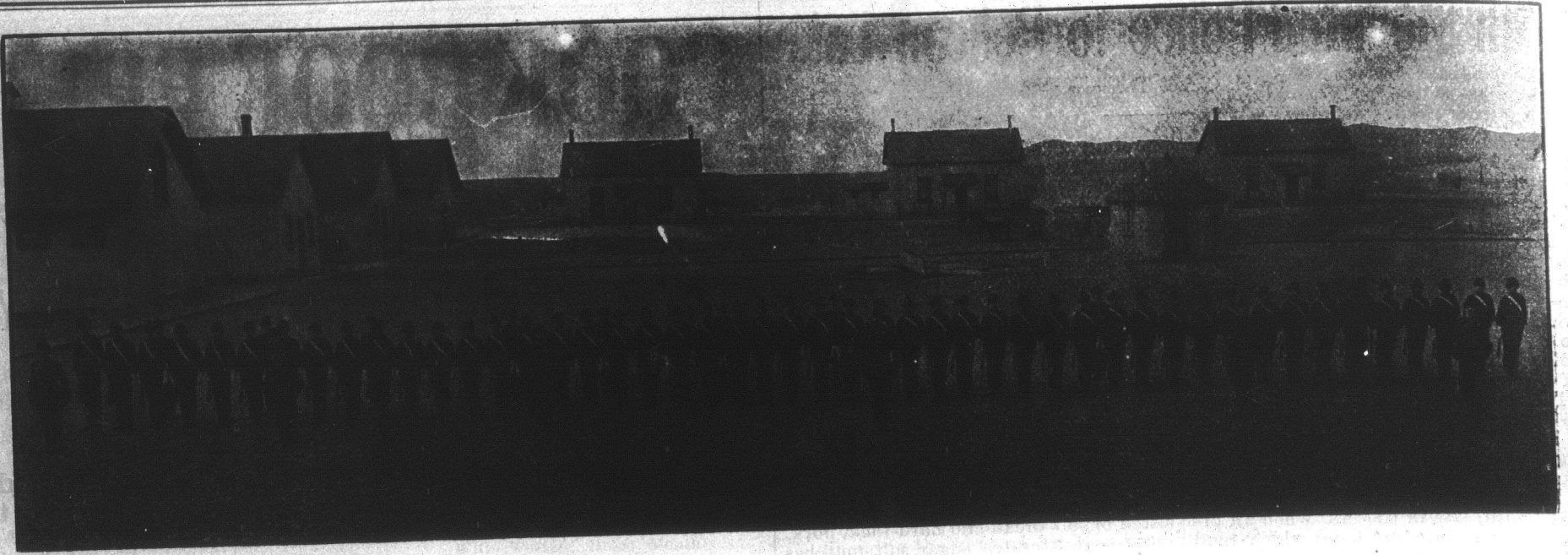




MOUNTED POLICE AT MACLEOD, ALBERTA.

We already had colic mixture for our horses and we now laid in a little colic mixture for ourselves. It is always well to be prepared for emergencies. A short drive brought us to the bank of the Saskatchewan (great river of the north), which is here crossed by a steam ferry. The boat was on the other side as usual. The crossing took about half an hour, but, finally, we bowled away merrily for our prospective noon camp at Round Hill, eighteen miles away. A fresh team, a good trail, and a perfect day—no wonder we were in the best of spirits.

As we proceeded the country unrolled itself before us in a constant but varying succession of river, lake, prairie and woodland. At our feet, between its high, wooded banks, flowed the mighty Saskatchewan, stretching away in many varied curves, like a long thread of silver, to the distant northern horizon. Off to the south and west the Eagle Hills reared their blue summits against a bluer sky, while the prairie itself, dotted with its bluffs of poplar and cottonwood, extended before us like a vast park.

The general rate of travel is about six miles per hour. This may not seem very much, but an average of sixty miles a day, up hill and down, across swamps, and creeks and rivers, over good trails and bad (or no trail at all), is very good travelling indeed. The only method of measuring a distance is by the time occupied in travelling it, and a man soon gets to know the exact speed of his team, and can judge distances most accurately. I have heard two old hands coming in off a trip argue whether they had travelled forty-seven or forty-eight miles, and finally agree on a little over forty-seven, so exact does long practice make them.

About two and a half hours after leaving the ferry we came in sight of Round Hill. As its name implies, it is of a rounded outline, and, rising high above the surrounding country, serves as a valuable landmark. It rises a sheer six hundred feet out of the waters of a pretty little lake of the same name, a regular oval in shape, and about a mile long. Here and there upon the shore are Indian teepees, and very picturesque they look, nestling down among the trees, the blue smoke curling lazily upward, and the brightly clad natives passing to and fro. The numerous dogs and ponies, without which no Indian encampment is complete, add life and motion to the scene.

A detachment of our men is stationed here during the summer and autumn as a fire patrol, and we could see their white tents upon the farther shore. Skirting the lake we soon pulled into their camp and turned out for dinner. It would surprise the average Eastern camper-out to witness the speed with which an experienced prairie hand will prepare a meal. A very few minutes generally suffice, if wood and water are convenient, though generally our food is of the simplest description.

Dinner disposed of, after a short rest and smoke, we hitched up and pulled out for Jackfish Creek, twenty-two miles away, where we intended camping for the night. Instead of going by the regular trail we took a short cut across country. The boys at the

detachment told us we would strike a pretty bad hill to go down. We struck it! Where we first approached it, it is a sheer cut-bank, steep as the side of a house, but a little reconnoitering discovered an easier descent—easier by comparison. But we had to descend diagonally at a great risk of upsetting, and to make things worse, there was a wide, boggy creek at the bottom, crossed by a narrow, rickety bridge—merely a few poles laid in the bed of the creek. The guide got out and took hold of the wagon behind to steady it, while I got a good grip of the reins, a good foothold on the brake, and started the team. They went down in a succession of bounds and plunges, gaining momentum at every jump. The first jump jarred my foot off the brake, and I was too busy keeping on my seat to recover it, so by the time we reached the bottom we were travelling like a steam engine. Bump—bump—bang—bump—plunk! We missed the bridge, for I had turned straight down the hill to avoid upsetting, and the "plunk" landed us in the soft bed of the creek with only the backs of the horses showing, and the wagon buried to the hubs. With considerable labour and difficulty, we pried the horses out, and proceeded to extricate the wagon. We hitched the horses to the rear axle by a picket-rope, but they could not budge it, so the riders had to give us a pull, and by their aid we "yanked her out." We crossed the bridge safely, and after a little "scratching" surmounted the opposite hill and were again on the level prairie.

We saw a great many chickens that afternoon, and Mr. M— shot several brace without going a dozen yards from the wagon, and as we neared the creek we secured some ducks. We were crossing a narrow neck of land between two little lakes, and the birds flying to and fro above our heads. The sergeant dropped behind, and lying on his back in the long slough grass, got a good many shots and soon rejoined us with

several ducks. We reached the creek about five o'clock, just in nice time to get our camp fixed up before dark. An hour or so later we were lying before the fire, blissfully inhaling the fragrant weed, and feeling at peace with all the world. As we lie there under the deep, dark blue canopy of the northern night, and musingly watch the sparks flying upward into the darkness, the voices of the wilderness come softly and whisper in our ears. The night wind sighing through the prairie grasses, the whirring wings of a passing bird, the plaintive cry of a plover, or the long-drawn, quavering howl of a distant wolf, all have a message to convey.

We silently roll our blankets around us and sink to sleep, thinking how much better we are going to live to-morrow than we did to-day. But we wake up cold, sleepy and cross. Strange how cross and disagreeable most people are before breakfast.

A cold bath and a hot meal restore our spirits to their usual tone, and we briskly set about preparation for breakfast. Constant practice makes this but a few minutes' work, and we were soon on the trail again. We are always particularly solicitous to see that our fire is thoroughly extinguished. Too many prairie fires are caused by the gross carelessness of individuals in leaving their camp fires burning when breaking camp. A puff of wind comes, a spark is blown into a tuft of dry grass, and the result is a prairie fire sweeping over miles and miles of country, and perhaps destroying a dozen settler's homes. One such fire near Battleford burned from early May until the snow flew in October.

This morning the two mounted men were riding ahead, and as they surmounted a little ridge in front, Mr. M— threw up his hands as a signal for me to stop. Riding back he told me there was a flock of geese just to the left of the trail, where there is a little lake. Giving the reins to the guide, and getting out

my rifle, I proceeded to reconnoiter. On topping the little rise, I found they were about four hundred yards away, with no shelter to stalk them from, save a small bunch of cattle. Carefully getting a cow in line with the birds, I commenced crawling forward on my hands and knees, hoping if they noticed me at all they would think I was a calf. I might, perhaps fool the geese, though they are about as cute as any birds that fly, but I could not fool the cow. As I crept nearer she took one startled look at me, bellowed for her calf, and then came for me, with head down and horns well to the front. At the first bellow, off went the geese.

We were still travelling through a fairly well settled country—that is to say, there was a settler's "shack" every ten miles or so, and we stopped at one for dinner. Early in the afternoon, however, we left the last of these behind and passed beyond the limits of civilization. At last we were in "the great lone land," our faces set toward the north, and nothing between us and the pole save a vast tract of primeval wilderness. For hundreds—yes, thousands of miles—there are no inhabitants save the red man, and a mere handful of white trappers and traders.

Our trail had been growing more and more indistinct, until at the last house it finally vanished. We struck across country for an Indian trail that leads from the reservations northward to Turtle Lake, where the "nitchies" (Indians) go every summer to fish. As soon as we got off the trail the horses seemed to get discouraged. This is always the case. No matter how dim the trail may be, a horse will jog along contentedly, for he seems to realize that it must lead somewhere, and to that "somewhere" he is willing to go. But when he gets off a trail altogether, he seems to think that he is not going to any place in particular, and might just as well stop where he is, consequently needing continual urging.

About four o'clock in the afternoon we struck the trail, which turned out to be a mere cart track. As the prairie is open it makes pretty fair travelling, and our horses jogged along merrily. We were now gradually approaching the great timber belt, and for the last few miles had been passing here and there stunted pines and spruce. These gradually attained a more stalwart growth, and toward evening we pulled up in a beautiful grove of pines on the shore of a little lake, and encamped for the night.

We were afoot with the first streaks of dawn, for we had a drive of sixty-five miles to make before night, and we wished to give our horses a good rest at noon. An hour later we were in motion heading for Turtle Lake, thirty-five miles away, where we intended to camp for dinner. Hitherto all the game shot on the trip had fallen to the guns of the inspector and sergeant but this morning I got two trophies. A couple of hundred yards ahead of us, just to the right of the trail, a badger was sitting at the mouth of his hole. Now, I very much desired that animal's skin to make a pair of winter mitts. As we approached him he, of course, dived into his hole. Giving the reins to the guide, I got my rifle out, and,



A PAIR OF OLD-TIMERS.