

bear they would kill a few Crees before the last redcoat was hacked to pieces; and by that time Heaven only knew what the blood-excited savages might do—very probably massacre the men, women and children.

It was all a sort of guesswork; and it was debated hard and long; police against the traders and the Factor who presumed on their knowledge of the Crees enough to hope they were somewhat safe, at least from bloodshed, so long as the police were out of there.

It was at night when the thirty redcoats rode out of the fort and boarded an old ferry scow that lay in the ice. They loaded her with grubstake and blankets and wood; and in the dark they poled her across the drifting ice to the southern shore, for the river there is wide, and from that side starting the drift in the morning, they would be out of reach of the Crees.

At creep of day they pulled out away from the familiar old fort, from the men, women and children; knowing they were right, but hating the way. In the grey of an April dawn they let the scow steer away into the ice, and began the six days journey from Fort Pitt to Battleford below, where Poundmaker and Yellow Sky and Mud Blanket were holding fort, burning and pillaging and waiting.

What happened to those left at Fort Pitt they never knew till weeks later, when they learned of the ten-weeks captivity in the carts of Big Bear; which was broken only by the arrival in early summer of Col. Steele and his scouts, who forced Big Bear to surrender, away up in the sloughs of the Beaver River.

In the rather bald outlines of this episode there are surely many aspects of drama. The sequence from the massacre at Frog Lake to the six-days drift of the police scow down the ice and the ten-weeks jolt of the Fort Pitt captives northward in the carts of Big Bear forms a series of incidents that lend themselves well to dramatic treatment. No such colourful series of episodes ever happened in the West before, and surely none since. The race of the railroads has just about obliterated the last vestige of old-time romance, when the unwritten law of the Great Company with its two centuries of grip on the tribes of the interior and the north-land seas was giving way to the written, summed-up, obvious law of the redcoat, making way for the settler and the civilisation which the Great Company had but crudely outlined.

That the story of the foundation of law in that land is largely devoid of the blood-red and the hair-raising is a tribute to the Royal Northwest Mounted Police. There may be belligerent critics who, loving a melodrama, will insist that the police at Fort Pitt should have stayed at their post till they were hacked to pieces and their blood drunk by the savages. But this was not the identical character of the finest police force in the world. The mounted police of the Canadian plains have never been lacking bravery. Indeed, they have done things that no other force has ever attempted by way of enforcing law. But they have done it with a minimum of bloodshed. The abandonment of Fort Pitt was as much the plain duty of the police under the circumstances as the defense of Battleford and the struggle at Fish Creek. Story-writers would have been the better off for a lurid massacre at the old fort with the police fighting to the last gasp. History is better off with things as they occurred.



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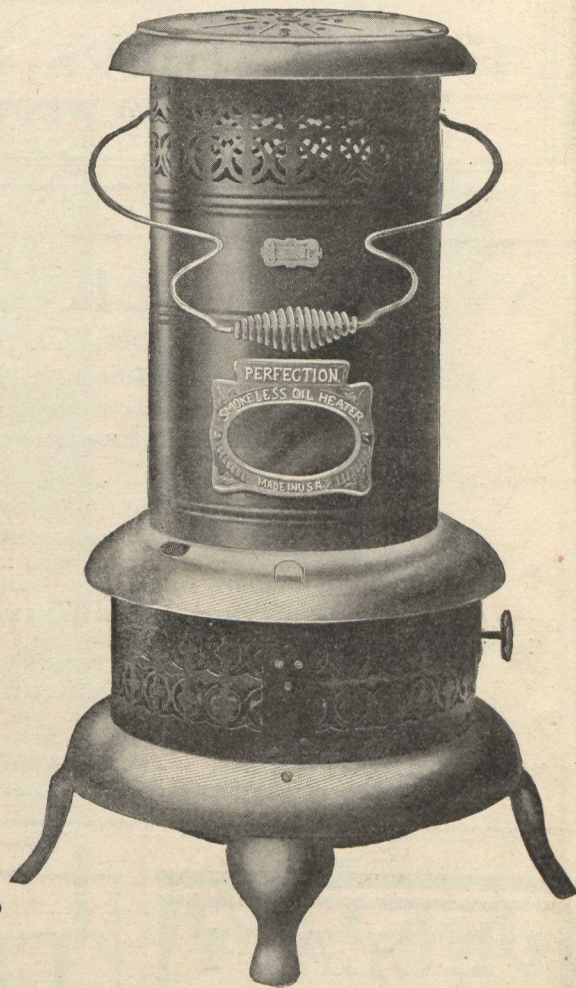
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