

They Opened the Way for the Peaceful Development of Canada's Broad Plains

reprinted from October, 1945

In reckoning the history of a country, 71 years are but a fleeting moment, yet in that time the Canadian prairies were transformed from an unknown wilderness into the fourth greatest wheat-producing area of the world. The history of this vast region really dates from 1874 when the North West Mounted Police set forth on their march from the Red River to the Rocky Mountains.

James B. Mitchell was destined to outlive all the other participants of the epochal march. Though the intervening years are few in the life of a country they represent eons in that of a human being. But incredible as it may seem Mitchell's military activities began eight years before then.

Born at Gananoque, Ont., on Oct. 14, 1852, of a young immigrant couple from Edinburgh, Scotland, he served as bugler in his home town and at Prescott, Ont., during the Fenian Raids of 1866. In the raids four years later he helped to guard the canal at Cornwall, Ont., from where as a promising young corporal he went to "A" Battery, Royal School of Gunnery, Kingston, Ont., to take a course that would qualify him in the duties of a sergeant major. Here he drew the attention and approval of the commandant, Col. G. A. French, who perceived in the keen, well-set-up youth good material for the military.

When the Fenian raid scare subsided Mitchell attended the Art Institute in Montreal to study architecture; to build useful and beautiful things was a passion with him.

Then the startling developments on the Red River in 1871 focused his attention

on Fort Garry and some three years later when it was decided to bring the North West Mounted Police up to it's full authorized strength of 300 he resolved to enlist. Since October, 1873, Colonel French, his erstwhile commandant, had been Commissioner of the new Force. This fact dispelled any indecision that Mitchell might have entertained and he engaged at Kingston on April 1, 1874, as sub-constable with regimental number 156. (During the subsequent re-allotment of regimental numbers his was changed to 50.) Posted to "E" Troop he was in the following month promoted to the senior NCO rank of staff constable (equivalent to today's sergeant major).

The recruits were quartered in what was called the New Fort barracks on the site of the present Toronto Exhibition Grounds and their average age did not exceed 25. The only one of them under 21 was Trumpeter Frederick Augustus Bagley, formerly a bugler in A Battery, Kingston, whose father, R. Bagley, late sergeant of Her Majesty's Royal Artillery, Toronto, had known Colonel French in the Imperial Army. Born in St. Lucia, B.W.I., on Sept. 22, 1858, the younger Bagley came to Canada when ten years old and was but 15 years and nine months old when on May 1, 1874, he joined the Force as a sub-constable with regimental number 247.

To avoid the rainy season on the prairies, Commissioner French decided not to start out from Toronto until June. The two-month interval, April and May, was used to advantage. Extra men were engaged to fill vacancies which had occurred among the originals in Manitoba who were awaiting his arrival with the reinforcements; horses were bought, and