

Fort Whoopup and the Old Traders

By Max McD.

BEFORE the Canadian Pacific Railway constructed a viaduct across the Belly River at Lethbridge in Southern Alberta, the westbound train on the Crow's Nest branch, zig-zagging across sloughs, wiggling link by link, like a measuring worm around deep cut ravines, crawled across twenty wooden bridges in the St. Mary's river bottom ere it reached the Blood Reserve of the Blackfeet Indians. The traveller, peering through the coach window at the browned hills to the north and heaving sea of prairie to the south, feels that civilization is receding farther and farther rearward, and that the fenceless fields of the last west have been reached. An owl flops up from a knoll by the roadside, and buzzards and eagles are lifting overhead in a sort of dreary enjoyment of desolation. A lone coyote is retreating beyond the hills, and equines of non de script breeding, with patches of white and brown for coloring, are feeding at intervals on the prairie grass. Indian encampments with blanketed braves and red-skirted squaws lounging against the white teepees only increase the impression of utter primitiveness.

In 1867 gold was uncovered in Last Chance gulch, Montana, and what is now the main street of Helena, the capital of the state, was merely the chief artery of the flow of gleaming yellow metal, the pay streak of Last Chance gulch.

All Western Canada once received its supplies from Fort Benton, the end of navigation on the Missouri river, and Fort Benton's only reason for existing at all in the first place was that the head of navigation necessarily was the distributing point for all the mining towns in the mountains.

It is quite generally believed that Southern Alberta was first penetrated by whitemen who sought trade among the Indians, but pioneer placer miners of Montana tell of adventurous and restless prospectors who left the mining camps at Helena, and travelled north and west, "panning" every stream in search of another Last Chance deposit of placer gold. These prospectors, returning, told of failure in their quest for gold, but related tales of vast prairies where buffalos made their breeding grounds and where their skins could be secured from the Indians. Soon traders followed in the footsteps of the prospectors, allured by the stories of the wealth of furs and the limitless range. These traders entered the country from Fort Benton and debauched the Indians with whisky, but they did not obtain possession of the land without many a hard fought fight with the aborigines. All the country, at that time from the Cypress Hills to the Rockies was controlled by the Blackfeet Indians, but their activities centered around trading posts which had been established at Whoopup, Stand Off, Slide Out, and Freeze Out, each name being fairly indicative of its derivation.

Most famous of all these trading posts was Whoopup, on the Belly River near Lethbridge. The fort was built of square timber, surrounded by a palisade twelve feet high, loop-holed for musketry, with bastions and an alarm bell, and was about 100 yards square. The fortifications of this place, it is said, cost \$12,000, and it at once became the metropolis of the whisky smugglers. It was very comfortable, and much good food, as well as drink, was stored there. It derived its name from the fact that it was a central meeting place for traders where they had great carousals and were accustomed to "whoop it up," hence the name, "Whoop Her Up," which has for decency sake been changed to "Whoopup."

Old timers relate many incidents about the liquor traffic in those early days at Whoopup. It was, of course, illegally sold. If an "informer" was caught, his punishment was sudden and summary. One such fellow was let down over a cliff by a rope. The traders did not enquire whether or not he could swim.

He was never heard of again. If he escaped, he never came back.

Mayor Steadman of Macleod tells a good tale of the early whisky days. Mr. Conrad (afterward Senator Conrad, after whom Conrad, Montana, was named) when manager of the trading post of the I. G. Baker Company, put five gallons of whisky into the safe to keep it secure from Indians and prowling whites. At the same time he slipped a roll of \$5,000 into a gunny sack and threw it into the corner of the store. Whisky was more precious in those days than hard cash, and much more likely to be stolen.

Whoopup was the centre for the whisky smuggling for the whole of south western Canada. The trail by which it came in from Fort Benton, zigzagged over the rolling prairie mainly following the bottoms of precipitous coulees and ravines for a distance of 100 miles. Heavy wagons with canvas tops and yokes of 15 to 20 oxen drew the freight of liquor through the devious passes that connected ravine with ravine. There were places where the defiles were exceptionally narrow and where the wagons got mired. Streams and swollen sloughs had to be crossed and it was often necessary to raft both freight and oxen.

Law, there was none. The traders, till the coming of the North-west Mounted Police were a law unto themselves. They entered upon mutual agreements, something after the modern trade combinations and trusts, to regulate the prices of hides, and anyone caught breaking the compact was tried

and sentenced by a court and jury of his associates in the agreement. As an illustration of the method followed in such cases, the following story is told and vouched for by pioneers, fictitious names being used for various reasons:

It was at Whoopup. Smith had been accused of cutting prices. Possibly he had put more water in the whisky than the agreement permitted. No one seemingly knows or cares to remember the exact nature of the offence. The trial was held in the post store, where whisky, flour, powder in kegs, and everything else pertaining to a trader's stock was jumbled about in disorderly hodge-podge. The evidence appeared conclusive that Smith had broken the compact, and Brown delivered the sentence which was to the effect that Smith should be taken out and shot.

The accused, who was sitting upon an upturned powder keg, listened calmly to the decree which did not suit his idea of justice to at least one person con-



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