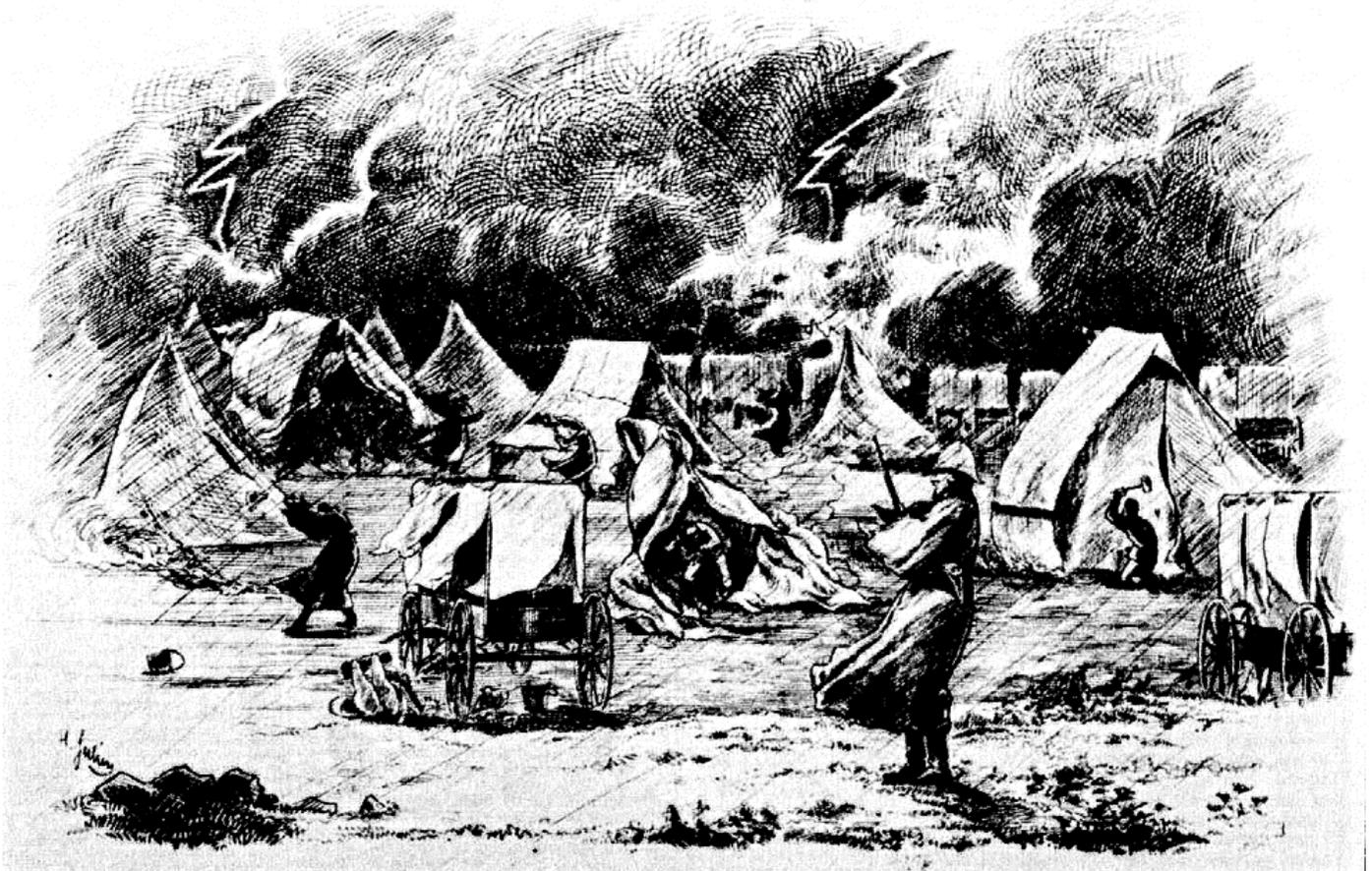


Stampede!

By G. S. Howard,

in **The RCMP Quarterly**,

Vol. 39 No. 4, October 1974, p. 3 – 11



The NWMP camp during a summer storm, 1874. Canadian Illustrated News, Feb. 27, 1875 , page. 132.

Since the inception of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, which last year celebrated its centenary, the horse has been a major factor in its development and history. Canadians would do well at this time to remember the complete reliance placed on that wonderful quadruped by the Force and the essential role it played on the Canadian prairie frontier.

That impressive figure, the Mounted Policeman astride his horse, is etched indelibly in the minds of the public as a symbol of fair-dealing and justice. That image is of course richly deserved, for the splendid reputation of Canada's federal police was painstakingly earned down the years by strenuous effort and fearless devotion to duty. Though today the hitching post has been replaced by the parking meter, it should never

be forgotten how significantly the horse contributed to the trooper's well-being, humanity, character and all-round success.

One of the great ironies of the Mounted Police saga surely lies in the fact that this animal which served the Force so well for so long, itself nearly founded the North-West Mounted Police before they even got started on their epic March to the mountains to establish law and order to *Maintiens Le Droit*.

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"Stampede on the 20th June, Dufferin, 1874". Canadian Illustrated News, October 3, 1874, page. 132.

On June 19, 1874, Commissioner George A. French with newly-recruited D, E and F Troops from Toronto rendezvoused with Asst. Commr. James F. Macleod and A, B and C Troops newly arrived from Stone Fort 20 miles from Fort Garry (now Winnipeg, Man.). united for the first time the six NWMP troops encamped on the Boundary Commission compound at Dufferin (now Emerson, Man.) near the confluence of the Red and Pembina rivers just north of the International Boundary.

With most of a year's training and seniority behind them the veterans of A, B and C Troops could be forgiven their air of superiority toward the rookies from the east. With good-humored condescension they fingered the smooth scarlet Norfolk jackets of the newcomers, then disparagingly felt the drab serge of their own coarser make -do military frocks. But many of them secretly envied D, E and F troops their horses – reputedly the finest lost (244 all told) ever shipped from Toronto up to that time.

"They were all over 15 ½ hands, with almost perfect forms..." observed Staff Cst. S. B. Steele (later Maj.-Gen. Sir Samuel Benfield Steele), a

sound judge of horse flesh, "but they were soon to have a hard time and their perfect forms were reduced to living skeletons."

Sleek and shiny of coat, the eastern animals won easy popularity over their scruffy native counterparts. The westerners were smaller and scrubby-looking. But they were exactly what the frontier demanded – hardy, adaptable and sure-footed – and soon to prove their worth in an unexpected, remarkable way. The second night at Dufferin provided a testing of what lay ahead – a baptism of fire as it were that proved to be almost a nightmare.

The evening of Saturday June 20, 1874 was oppressively warm. During mid-afternoon thunder had growled in the distance, then storm clouds scudded across the sky and overhung the camp. As evening closed in the reverberations rumbled ominously in the distance, and soon gusts of biting wind drove huge drops of rain into the thirsty earth. By ten o'clock one of the most dreadful electrical storms in Manitoba memory broke over the camp. High winds lashed hail and rain down with stinging fury, forked lightning streaked incessantly across the sky, and thunder shook the earth. The whole prairie was transformed into an ocean of electric flame and pelting downpour.

Upon joining up together the NWMP camp had been formed up in a quadrangle with a free passage down the middle. Three sides consisted of the canvas-covered wagons and carts while the tents of the men closed in the fourth. The new arrivals, dubbed "the left wingers," corralled their long-faced pals in this enclosure by securing them to picket lines facing the heavily-loaded transport.

At every peal of thunder the eastern horses exhibited extreme nervousness and alarm. The broncos of the right wing, on the other hand, being inured to prairie conditions, reflected a remarkable nonchalance and unconcern by comparison. The later were tethered outside the corral – a most fortunate arrangement as unfolding events were soon to prove. As the storm deepened all six troops were turned out at the double. In the midst of the roaring elements, the veteran right wingers stood to their horses, about 60 in number, reassuring them gently, however throughout the turmoil of the ensuing hours the broncos stoically hunched their backs against the elements with an incredible air of indifference.

Soon the weather worsened to cyclonic proportions. The wind rose and crystallized the rain into hail which lashed man and beast unmercifully. Canvas coverings on the wagons were ripped open by the first heavy gusts. Adding to the lurid scene, lightning now zigzagged directly overhead and forked crazily to the horizon. The effect that a wind – strong enough to overturn several laden wagons and rip off their coverings – can have on unseasoned horses is easier imagined than described. Whirling canvas squares frightened them practically out of their hides. The terrific claps of thunder, the driving rain and hail, the howling wind, and the loose and flapping tarpaulins drove them into a frenzy ordering on panic. Then it happened! A lightning bolt struck the zareba. Rearing and plunging, the poor crazed beasts battered the makeshift barrier with frantic hoofs. Finally it gave way and with high-pitched screams some 250 terror-stricken animals broke loose from their halters and careened wildly amuck from their prison toward the camp.

For the next few minutes pandemonium reigned – shouting, waving, running men only added to the general confusion. Luckily flashes of lightning revealed the main body of the camp and the approaching horde shied off past the wildly gesticulating troopers. The stampede swung toward the gate of the outer field where the animals converged and scrambled madly over one another, leaping high into the air only to crash back in a kicking frenzied heap and try again in their anxiety to escape the fury that surrounded them.

Nothing could have stemmed the tidal wave of horse-flesh as it streamed southward with the wind behind it. Amid the havoc of overturned wagons and flattened tents several men lay motionless on the soaking ground. Acting Cst. W. Latimer's scalp was partially shorn from his skull – cut from ear to ear and pulled down over his forehead – but miraculously no other serious casualty resulted from the overall gallant efforts to stop the stampede.

Outside the gate, the maddened beasts pounded headlong across the Pembina bridge and within seconds vanished into the black wilderness beyond. In the general melee some of the men, including Staff Cst. James B. Mitchell (later Col. J. B. Mitchell), Cst. Joe Francis, a veteran campaigner who had been in the Charge of the Light Brigade at Balaklava, and Sub-Csts. William Oliver and Charles Sinclair seized the manes of a few critters as they swept by. Trumpeter Frederick a. Bagley recalled:

“Of course there was o sleep for us that night... The storm having subsided at daybreak I managed to find my water-proofed kit bag and got some dry clothes therefrom to put on in place of the rain-soaked ones I had worn during the storm, and then saddling a horse I found had been tied so securely that he could not get away with the others. I mounted him and rode out with Sub-Insp. James Morrow Walsh, our aim being to recover some of the escaped horse. By riding hard all day, changing horses frequently as we found them, we managed to round up about 80 of the runaways.”

For the next 24 hours this 15-yr-old youth was without rest or food. When his munt trudged back into the police camp over the squishy prairie at midnight on June 21 fatigue had exacted its toll – he was fast asleep in the saddle and so used up that he had to be lifted off and put into bed. With the aid of forked lightning, men from the right wing had swung into saddles on the trusty, reliable broncos and crossed the Pembina, the Red River, they knew would block the runaways on the east so they fanned out westward to cut off the fugitives. Hour after hour they rode at a steady gait, then gradually veered southeast and east.

By noon those Riders of the Plains, to use a term by which the Force was soon to become universally and affectionately identified, stretched from the Red westward in a long thin line, each of them barely within sight of those on either side. At a given signal each horseman broke into a trot, sometimes a canter. As they advanced they scanned the territory before them, and every rise, clump of trees and ravine capable of concealing a horse was inspected. First a bay mare was seen, then two greys which had sought shelter from the hot afternoon sun in the shade of a tiny bluff, their light color revealing their presence. As the hours wore on, others were found in ones, twos and threes.

By the time the sun had dipped from sight the distances between the men had narrowed and the net was almost closed with the escapees within it. And thus systematically those riders of 1874 combed the countryside between themselves and their home-base back at Dufferin. The roundup continued many long weary hours into the summer twilight and night before the exhausted patrols got back to camp, their mission accomplished. The quick recovery of the horses was an outstanding achievement. Without horses the Force faced disaster. Its predicament was apparent to all. That the roundup be effected with the utmost dispatch was imperative from the outset, for in addition to other hazards there was the ever present danger the escaped animals might be captured by wandering Sioux known to the skulking on the Dakota plain.

Under the leadership of Sub-Insp. James Walker – an anchor man of purpose and tenacity – the pursuers had spurred on after the flying horses which halted only when exhaustion brought them to a tottering standstill. By morning most of them had gone 30 or more miles, some indeed were caught as far away as 50. Every man jack responded to the challenge. With the daring and ingenuity tht was to characterize the Force's activities down through the years and build the tradition for which the Royal Canadian Mounted Police are so justly renowned today those originals tackled their gigantic task.

* * *

In his official report Commissioner French records:

“About midnight 250 of the horses stampeded from the corral in which they were placed, breaking halters, picket ropes, and even knocking over some of the wagons which encircled them – it was a fearful sight. Several of our men had the hardihood to attempt to stop some of the horses, but it only resulted in their being knocked over and trampled on, and in this manner six of our pluckiest men got hurt, one of them seriously injured about the head.”

To emphasize the problem posed by horse stampedes on the open prairie the Commissioner followed the foregoing comment by quote from pp. 254-255 of *Army Life on the Border*, by General Marcy, U.S.A. One extract he said will suffice to describe and illustrate a stampede:

“Soon after the storm set in, one of our herds of 300 horses and mules broke furiously away from the herdsman who were guarding them, and in spite of their utmost efforts ran at full speed directly with the wind for 50 miles before they stopped. Three of the herdsman followed them as far as they were able, but soon became exhausted, bewildered and lost on the prairie.”

On the subject of the NWMP stampede Commissioner French's report closes with these remarks:

“We had the good fortune to recover most of ours within a distance of 35 miles, probably in a great measure due to the freshness having been taken out of them by their 160-mile march from Fargo. Many days were lost in recovering the horses, and much injury done, riding in every

direction looking for them. Our loss eventually was reduced to one, and this one was supposed to have been drowned in the Pembina River.”

* * *

Years later, Sub-Inspector Walker, in command of D Troop, in a well-publicized diary described his experiences during those exhausting hours of search in *Macleans Magazine* April 15, 1928.

“The night was pitch black, except during the flashes of lightning. Fortunately there were no wire fences in those days. The horses took the trail and I followed their tracks by the lightning flashes until daylight. When I got to the Pembina River the round poles that covered the bridge had got shifted and some of the horses had fallen through. It took me some time in the fark to repair the bridge and get my horse over.

“After daylight dawned I began to find stray horses feeding along the road, and to make sure that I had got ahead of all the horses I rode into Grand Forks some 60 miles from our camp. I then turned and started driving the horses back to camp, and afterwards was met by a sergeant and party with horses about eleven o’clock that night – just 24 hours after they had left....

“During that time I had caught up and ridden five different horses, and had been wet through and dried three different times, and had ridden 120 miles by trail besides rounding up horses all the way.”

A former pupil of Canada’s first school of Gunnery at Kingston, Ontario, and of which Commissioner French had been Commandant, Sub-Inspector Walker from the beginning had been assigned special responsibility for horses.

* * *

Staff Constable Steele, mounted on a horse named Blucher, turned in the usual sterling performance that marked all his efforts. In his memoirs (*Forty Years in Canada*, pp. 63-64) he gives this graphic account of that fateful event 100 years ago:

“About ten on the following night (June 20, 1874) a terrific thunderstorm burst upon us, the worst that I had seen in the west since 1870. I was riding near the large corral at the time, the incessant flashes of lightning making every object visible for a long distance. A thunderbolt fell in the midst of the horses.

“Terrified, they broke their fastenings and made for the side of the corral. The six men on guard were trampled underfoot as they tried to stop them. The maddened beasts overturned the huge wagons, dashed through a row of tents, scattered everything, and made for the gate of the large field in which we were encamped. In their mad efforts to pass they climbed over one another to the height of many feet.

“At the time Constable Colman (sic) (Cst. John Coleman) had just cleared the gate with his tea, which ran away at its utmost speed; but the powerful

driver hung onto the reins and brought them to a halt in about half a mile. The stampede continued south over the Pembina bridge.

“Crazed with fright, the horses crossed the river and continued their flight on the opposite bank, and the majority were between 30 and 50 miles in Dakota before they were compelled by sheer exhaustion to halt.

“I shall never forget that night. I had full view of the stampede, being not more than 50 yards from the horses as they rushed at the gate and attempted to pass it, scrambling and rolling over one another in one huge mass. This and the unceasing flashes of lightning, the rolling of the thunder, the loud shouts of the troopers as they vainly attempted to stop the horses and the mad gallop of Colman’s team, gave to it a weird and romantic complexion, typically suggestive of the wild west.

“Our bronchos and Shaddock’s horses came in now that the other steeds had taken flight. We started after the runaway horses the next morning, covering over 100 miles during the following 24 hours. The fugitives were brought in with only one missing. When they reached camp several of them lay down and rested for some days.

“The stampede had such an effect on the horses that for the remainder of the summer they were ready to repeat the performance on hearing the slightest unusual sound, and every thunderstorm brought us out of our tents at night, and in the daytime we had to be among them to calm their fears.”

* * *

Sub-Cst. Edward H. Maunsell, who was engaged as a member of D Troop at St. Paul, Minnesota, U.S.A., on June 11, 1874 when the Force passed through that centre on route to the end of steel at Fargo, North Dakota, just before his death in the late 1930s, included this impression of the stampede in a notable series of articles on the early days of the Canadian northwest.

“I accompanied a man named Jack Dunbar when we arrived at camp. Dunbar asked me if I was hungry. As I was always hungry those days I answered ‘Yes,’ ‘Well,’ he said, ‘I have a lot of hard-tack and we can get some milk from the cows.’

“The police had brought a lot of cows and calves which were to be taken with us as we were supposed to become a self-supporting force. The cattle were near the camp. We got a couple of empty fruit cans and started on our raid. At this time a heavy thunderstorm was going on in the distance.

“It took us some time to capture a cow. I held her by the horns and Dunbar officiated as milkmaid. Before he got through milking, the storm burst over the camp. The thunder was continuous, and only a few seconds between flashes of lightning. Notwithstanding the thunder we

suddenly heard a noise in the direction of the camp, and by the aid of the lightning we saw the horses tearing toward us. They had stampeded.

“Dunbar ran one way and I another. But I went the wrong way. I had not gone 50 yards when the horses were on top of me. How often I was toppled over I could not tell. When the horses had passed I shouted for Dunbar but could get no reply. Thinking he was killed, I searched but could not find him, so I made for camp. By this time I commenced to feel there was something wrong with myself.

“I found that the sole of one of my boots was almost off, one sleeve of my shirt was gone, and I felt queer all over. When I got to camp I collapsed. When I recovered I found myself in a tent and the doctor examining me. He said I was much bruised, but could not say if there were any internal injuries then.

“Next day he examined me again and pronounced I was not internally injured. Inside a week I was fit for duty. Dunbar escaped injury. The horses passed him about 20 yards.”

Edward Maunsell took his discharge when his time expired June 25, 1877 at Fort Macleod where he lived out his remaining life as a successful rancher and an esteemed old-time of the community. It is interesting to note that his brother, Sub-Cst. George H. Maunsell, who had been a member of Her Majesty's North American Boundary Commission in 1873, engaged in the NWMP Feb. 25, 1875 at Dufferin, and after his discharge joined his brother at Macleod.

Maunsell's milk-pilfering companion, Sub.Cst. John E. Dunbar took his discharge when his time expired May 1, 1877 at Fort Macleod. He met a tragic end 11 years later by drowning at Willow Creek and is buried at Macleod.

* * *

Sub-Cst. William Parker recorded his adventures during the stampede in a recently-published book. *William Parker: Mounted Policeman*, edited by Hugh A. Dempsey, and reviewed in the April 1974 issue of *The Quarterly*.

Sub-Cst. William Latimer, the most seriously injured during the stampede, recovered sufficiently to allow him to start out on the great march to the mountains on July 9, 1874. He was with his sidekick Bagley at La Roche Percee – near present-day Estevan, Sask. – when the column tarried there from July 24-29 for a pleasant interlude of bathing and clothes-washing in the Souris River.

Some 35 years ago Major Bagley – as he was later to be universally known – told this writer that outcropping of coal at this location was satisfactorily used in the Force's portable forges, and that etched on the rock the men found a number of names including that of General Custer who in less than two years was to make his famous last stand against the Sioux at the Little Big Horn in Montana.

According to Bagley, himself an accomplished musician and the bandmaster of one of the Force's early bands, the evenings at this comfortable camp were enlivened by the music of a band – doubtless the force's first, if it can be called such – composed

of a file in the capable hands of Bill Latimer and a drum improvised from a tin dish and played upon with tent pegs by that accomplished British Army drummer-trumpeter, Sub-Cst. Frank Parks. Parks incidentally, was discharged as medically unfit when the expedition reached the Sweet Grass Hills and died at Fort Benton, Montana, about September 25 a few days later – the first member of the new Force to pass on.

In addition to the enjoyment produced the primitive music-makers, a cause of great merriment on the march was the continuing problem of Veterinary Surgeon John L. Poett. Throughout the trek the grave condition of the livestock kept him constantly busy and worried. His many-shouted orders to his assistant, Cst. Joseph Clark Marlin for “more carbolic” created the distinct impression that Poett considered this medicine the sole remedy for any and all ills pertaining to animals. The half-breed drivers and scouts especially found the good vet’s incessant orders and vociferous concern nothing short of hilarious, and they hooted and howled after each outburst.

Frequently, apropos of nothing at all, they would stir up periodic spells of excitement and pseudo anxiety by yelling in union: “Quick Hoe, fetch along de carbolique, dere’s going to be a stampede!”

* * *

Some 80 years after the event the son and namesake of Commissioner French, who at the age of 9½ years had been at Dufferin with his father and witnessed that display of Nature’s pyrotechnics, summed up his sentiments as the only survivor of all who had been present on that awesome occasion:

“I recollect the violent thunderstorm that broke out at Fort Dufferin and the stampede of the horses,” he said. “This was a bad beginning for the long trek to the Rockies.”

* * *

In retrospect the stampede on that wet squishy night 100 years ago actually proved to be a blessing in disguise. The awesomeness of it all impressed on all ranks the need for taking precautions against similar occurrences later on a while crossing the virgin plains. Thereafter throughout the epic trek* of the North West Mounted Police to the Rockies the horses were hobbled and seldom left without a picket. (*In all it covered 1,959 miles – excluding distances covered by special patrols – reputed to be the longest march in the history of the British Empire of a military column carrying its own supplies.)

Though it’s impossible to pinpoint the moment when military tradition is born it does seem likely that the crisis generated by this unexpected foretaste of prairie duty drew all the men closer together. A fresh pride and renewed spirit doubtless quickened their hearts and gave birth to the *esprit de corps* which, handed down from decade to decade, is the proud legacy of the RCMP today.

As perhaps no other single incident could, it brought those amorphous veterans of less than a year and those rookies of but a few months together and welded them into a more solid, loyal organization, crisscrossing left wing right till they became one and indivisible.

It is no idle statement that only the presence of the Force kept Canada's vast western plains from slipping into the hands of the United States. Had this memorable stampede occurred on the open prairie, leaving the men stranded in an unknown and inhospitable territory, the history of the Force, indeed of Canada, might have taken a far different course.

*Source: RCMP Quarterly, Vol. 39 No. 4, October 1974, p. 3 – 11.
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