

Jerry Potts

Legendary Plainsman, Interpreter, Guide, N.W.M.P. Special Constable,

1840 - 1896

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Jerry Potts

By John Peter Turner

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A brief picture of one who was full of wisdom in all that pertained to tracking and trailing – a firm friend, a rough though affectionate and respected man, an honest and faithful servant.

Autumn winds swirled around old Fort Benton which for years had been the American Fur Company's principal post on the Upper Missouri River in Montana. Inside the building a sixteen-year-old lad loitered near the trading counter, staring moodily at nothing. His was a problem, and a heavy one. His father, John Potts, trader and factor, was planning to return to Scotland. The boy didn't want to go; he didn't want to attend school in Edinburgh. He liked frontier life; he wanted to stay where he was. On the other hand, his father had spent many years of tireless industry in the New World, and deserved a rest in his ancestral home.

Jerry Potts shifted his position at the trading counter and became more disgruntled than ever as he weighed his prospects.

The factor had gone upstairs to close the shutters against the oncoming evening, a job usually attended to by a post employee. The latter had just had a bitter altercation with a vagrant Blackfeet who had sought to obtain some goods on credit. To terminate the argument, the factor had sent his helper on an errand, and so the routine had been changed.

Suddenly the lad stiffened as the sharp bark of a rifle sounded. His breath caught as he saw his father's body tumble from an upper window. Out in the dusk, an Indian – the same Blackfeet who had argued with the servant – sprang from near-by cover and vaulted to his pony's back.

Young Jerry stood frozen to the floor. Then suddenly the primal instinct of the wild – his mother's Piegan blood – laid hold upon him. His eyes flared; his lips set grimly. As he saddled his favourite pony he realized what had happened. The disgruntled Indian, in seeking to square matters with the post employee, had shot down the factor by mistake.

The young frontiersman made deliberate preparations, took one last look at the old fort and rode away in pursuit. Mile and mile across the plains, day after day, through long and lonely nights, the teen-age

avenger followed stubbornly, persistently. Finally, within the Blackfeet realm far to the north in British territory, he overtook his victim and pierced him to the heart.

Factor John Potts had been known far and wide for his ever-ready counsel and square dealing; his name was honoured and respected. And his son, by his boldness, added stark courage to the name. Bravery was the highest ranking virtue in the Blackfeet code. The boy had executed a daring retribution, had earned a pass to death; but, amid plaudits from a thousand throats, he turned unharmed to the vagaries of frontier occupation.

From that day on the adventurous youth enjoyed the freedom of the Blackfeet camps as had no other man of white extraction, pure or mixed. Among other recognitions, he received a crowning initiation to the inner councils of the proud Confederacy – Blackfeet, Piegans, Bloods and Sarcees.

Buffalo were unusually plentiful on the Belly plains that autumn and young Potts threw in with a large hunting camp of Bloods and Piegans.

But from the east, a war party of Crees under Chief Piapot, augmented by Assiniboines and Saulteaux, ventured to penetrate the forbidden Blackfeet territory. While spying on their hereditary enemies the invaders came upon a group of Piegan women and children gathering wood along the Belly River.

The little group was wiped out- all but one small boy who escaped to give the alarm.

The fight that followed was bitter and prolonged. Under the exhortation and leadership of Potts, the Bloods and Piegans drove their foe beyond the river. Outwitted and demoralized, the Crees fled in disorder; many were killed as they floundered helplessly in the water; others were pursued far out upon the plain.

Again and again they attempted to make a stand, but scores were cut down and slaughtered. Several hundred of Piapot's following forfeited their lives.

Jerry returned from the bloody encounter with a gaping wound, an arrow in his body, and nineteen grisly scalps. His fame grew and became imperishable. Four years earlier the Qu'Appelle Crees, on the South Saskatchewan, had repulsed the Blackfeet; and now, in this fight of 1870 the defeat had been avenged. Moreover, the strategy and leadership of Potts had held the Blood and Piegan losses to a minimum. This sanguinary clash – the last tribal battle of the northern prairies –

took place on the site of the present City of Lethbridge, the forces of Piapot being driven across the river where the General Hospital now stands.

In the summer of 1874 the newly-formed North West Mounted Police made their famous 800-mile march across the prairies. While visiting Fort Benton to secure supplies and communicate with the government at Ottawa, Asst Commr James F. Macleod engaged young Potts as guide and interpreter for the Force. Fort Macleod – the little outpost that was to be erected on the Old Man River in the heart of the Blackfeet country – would be called upon to exert a salutary influence in taming the populace in the last arena of savagery in Canada. It was therefore important that a competent man be selected to assist in establishing law and order – one who knew the wiles of the Indians and spoke their language.

The adventurous plainsman became one of the first essentials in the ticklish task confronting Assistant Commissioner Macleod and his troopers. As a trailer and scout he was to prove himself a marvel, even among the most experienced Indians. His ability to travel through blinding storm or blackest night was uncanny. Across wide stretches of open country he charted his course and invariably arrived safely at his destination. In daylight he, doubtless, after the custom of the Indian, followed a sequence of landmarks. But even when visibility was reduced to naught, he was seldom known to hesitate. Intuitively he knew which way to go, what direction to take.

The late Sir Samuel B. Steele, for long a conspicuous member of the Mounted Police, once said of him. "He possessed an uncanny sense of locality and direction. Others could guide travellers through country they had visited before, but this man, who was made war chief of his mother's nation, could take a party from place to place by the quickest route, through country altogether unknown to him, without compass and without sight of the stars. Unlike other guides, he never talked with others when he was at work. He would ride on ahead by himself, keeping his mind fixed on the mysterious business of finding the way. He was never able to give any clear explanation of his method. No doubt his gift was largely the result of heredity. He had travelled in his youth for long distances from points in Western Canada to points in the Western States before there were any railways, and his early experience certainly counted for much. Though he had not before journeyed through many parts of the country, his Indian ancestors had, and that is probably the true explanation of his weird ability."

But Potts, precise as he was in his duties as super-plainsman,

had that composite nature of dependability and abandonment so common to the frontier West. He worked hard, and he played hard. He was the superlative as a servant of the Mounted Police; he was superlative in seeking diversions that satiated his native unrestraint and freedom. He was no prairie innocent; no frequenter of pink teas, and, like most outstanding men, he mixed his failings with his virtues.

Among other frailties, he possessed an unquenchable thirst and boasted of it. Often he would say he had something a camel might have envied, and as his position with the Force was unofficial, he never in off hours grew intimate with prohibition. When not on duty he indulged freely if the spirit moved him. Jamaica ginger, essence of lemon, Perry Davis' Pain-Killer – all were tolerable substitutes, and with such in his system, his interpretations of the English and Blackfeet language might have seemed a trifle weird, perhaps too choicely punctuated, but always understandable.

In appearance he was, at first sight, more or less unprepossessing; but though short and slope-shouldered, he was tough as nails, and his nether limbs were admirable moulded to fit the saddle. His eyes were keen and piercing. He was in his own way picturesque and fascinating, a man of mingled emotions, one who harboured a strange complex of the white man's understanding and the Indian's elemental instinct. Always his integrity and loyalty were above reproach.

On July 14, 1896, Jerry Potts died from a lung affliction and was buried in the Police Plot near Fort Macleod. He had served twenty-two years with the Force. To those who knew him, he had been a pillar of dependability in hundreds of difficult situations, in danger and emergency. His influence among the Indians had often suppressed bickerings that might easily have led to barbaric war and bloodshed.

His faithful services to the scarlet troopers of the plains should never be forgotten.

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By John Peter Turner

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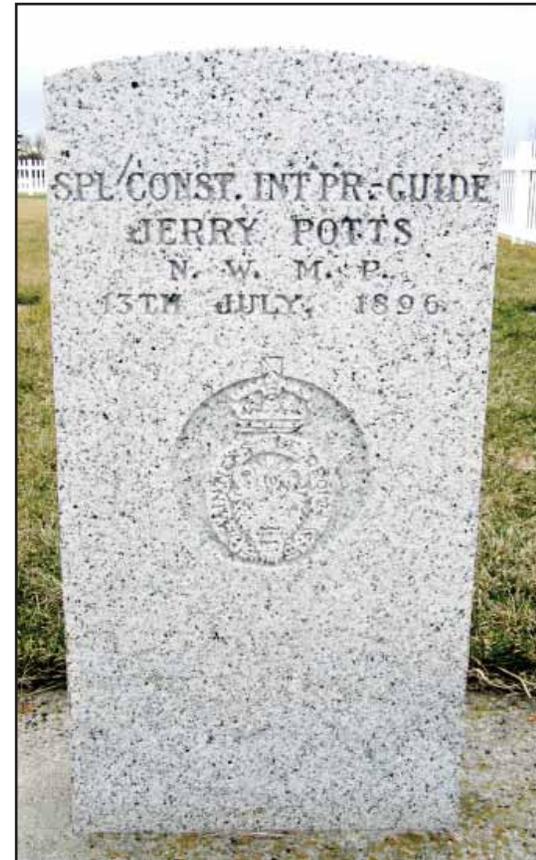
April 1942

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Jerry Potts - NWMP Special Constable

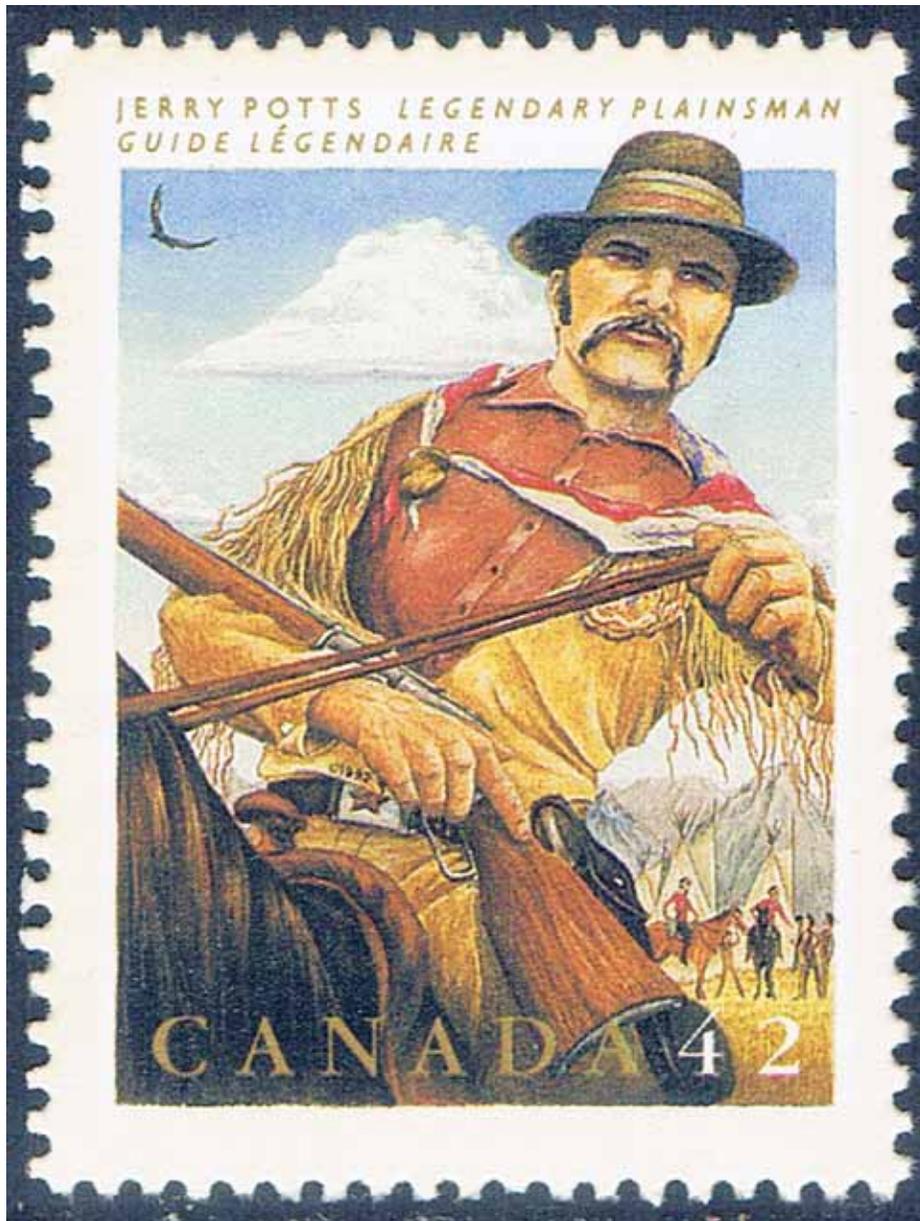
(Wikipedia)



Service headstone for:
Special Constable, Interpreter-Guide

Jerry Potts
N.W.M.P
13 July 1896"

(Wikipedia)



Jerry Potts, Legendary Plainsman

Canada Post Corporation Stamp

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The third issue in the Canadian folklore series, issued on September 8, 1992, focuses on Canadian heroes whose feats have taken on legendary proportions. Ky-yo-kosi, meaning Bear Child, was born in Montana around 1840 from a Blood Indian mother and a clerk with the American Fur Company. After his father died, his mother gave him to another fur trader and rejoined her tribe. Neglected again at age 5, a second trader, Andrew Dawson adopted him and taught him to read and write, along with the skills of an Indian warrior. In October 1870 he helped lead the Blood Indians during an attack on them by Crees and Assiniboines. The furthering violence prompted the creation of the North-West Mounted Police in 1873. Its first commissioner, George Arthur French hired Potts as a guide, scout and interpreter in 1874. For 22 years he served the "Mounties" well, fostering good relations between them and the Native peoples. After his death on July 14, 1896, the "Mounties" buried him with full military honours, firing a three-gun salute over his grave.

Designed by Ralph Tibbles Based on illustrations by Deborah Drew-Brook Based on illustrations by Allan Cormack

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Credits

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