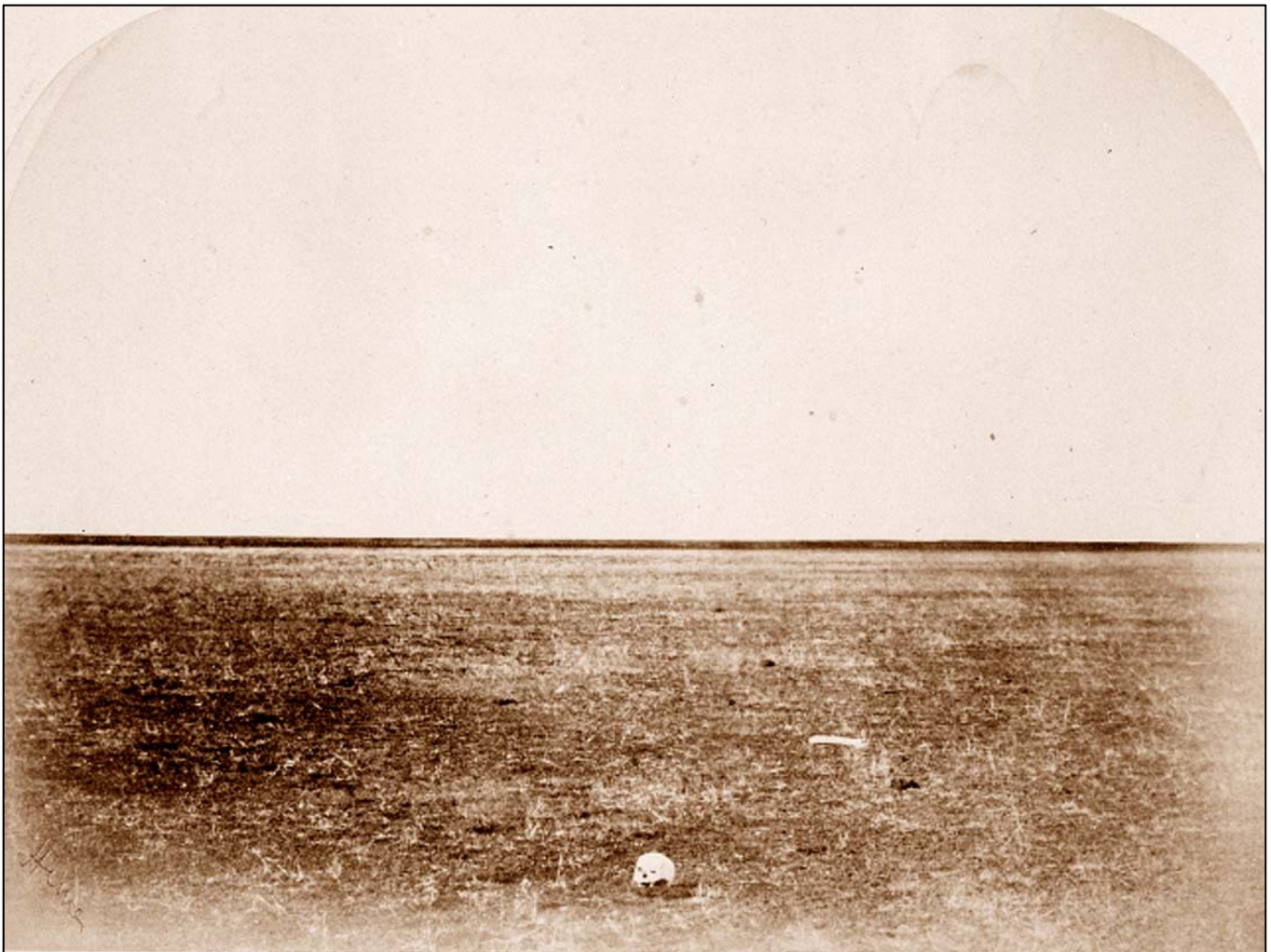


## The Wanderings and Sufferings of John Pritchard

John Pritchard, the victim and hero of the following incident, came to XY Fort Souris from England about 1800. Pritchard later joined the Hudson's Bay Company, and was one of the few survivors of the Battle of Seven Oaks in 1816. In 1820 he became president of the Buffalo Wool Company, formed in the Red River Settlement. He later moved to East Kildonan and conducted a school there. Still later, he became a member of the HBC judicial Council of Assiniboia. Pritchard's letter to his brother is reproduced by permission of The Hudson's Bay Company in whose magazine, "The Beaver," the letter appeared in June, 1942. It was also published in *The Assiniboine Basin* by Martin Kavanagh.

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A view onto a treeless prairie, as photographed by H.L. Hime of the Canadian Exploring Expedition in 1858. This would have been very much the same environment in which John Pritchard found himself, alone and without a horse or supplies of any sort.

Neppigone, December 20<sup>th</sup>, 1805.

My Dear Brother:

*I shall now endeavour to give you an account of my wanderings and consequent sufferings last summer. Had it not been for the request I made you in my enclosed letter from Grand Portage, I should have even suppressed it, and I trust my dear parents will never hear of it.*

*On the 10<sup>th</sup> of June one of our clerks, having had one of his horses stolen, came and applied to me to assist him with two others. That not being in my power, we agreed to go to the Mountain la Bosse (an establishment distant about fifty miles) and from there he was to take a guide to the River Qu'Appelle. On our arrival at the Mountain la Bosse we could by no means procure a guide and very foolishly risked the journey ourselves, it being a distance of about 70 miles across the plains. On the second night we plainly perceived our folly and consequently determined that if we could not find the River Qu'Appelle the next morning to return, and about twelve o'clock next day changed our route accordingly.*

*My friend went to fetch the horses and I began to gather wood in order to light a fire. I, perceiving my friend's horse unfettered, called to him not to endeavour to go near to him, or they would both run and we should lose them. I then made a fire to entice them as they were much tormented by the mosquitoes and in that case will immediately gallop to a smoke. My friend paid no attention to my advertisement but kept running after the horses till I lost sight of them. It was in vain for me, who was still extremely lame from my misfortunes the preceding winter, to attempt following after him, therefore I thought it most advisable to make fires upon all the banks near me, which might be a guide to him, should he not be able to find his way to me.*

*Twelve o'clock came but not my friend, I now began to be almost disconsolate, and perceiving a hill at a considerable distance off which appeared to me to be in the plains, I determined to go there and make a fire. After having passed a thick wood, to my inexpressible grief I found the hill to be in the midst of another adjoining wood. When arrived at the hill from the top of which I had hopes of seeing the plains again, to my mortification I found myself surrounded by thick and almost impenetrable woods. I then determined to return to the encampment.*

*I had not advanced far before the sky began to darken, and a heavy storm of thunder and rain came on. It was now impossible to find my way back, having lost my guide, the sun.*

*(Note. John Pritchard started for some fort on the Qu'Appelle River. Instead of going northwest, he advanced west and then south, and eventually followed Pipestone Creek to near Oak Lake. (See map). Seeing the trees on the Souris bank he crossed the plains to that river which he mistook for the Assiniboine).*

*Towards night I found a small river with a considerable current in it. I determined to sleep there and the next day to follow its course, well knowing it must discharge itself with the great Red River. Next morning at break of day I began to prepare for my departure, but how dreadfully afflicting my situation, without even blanket, gun or knife, my shoes already worn out and nothing but my clothes to renew them with. It was then the fourth day, and I had eaten nothing except an egg and one frog the day before. The country was unknown to me and even had I known my way to my fort, the distance was so great I could have no hope, lame as I then was, of being able to reach it. I gave my soul to Almighty God and prayed that His and not my will might be done. Seeing death inevitable, I became calm and resigned to my fate.*

*"Towards evening I discovered the plains and, as I thought, the great Red River, which pleased me much as I should then die with the hope of my body being found by the canoes in the fall; but what was still more pleasant to me, I found a kite's nest with two young ones. They were still unfledged and about the size of a full-grown pigeon, I made a fire and singed the down off one, which I hastily devoured, the other I subsisted upon two days. What appeared to me to be the Red River was nothing more than a point of the woods on the river where I was. I walked or rather crept along this river for about ten days more, living chiefly upon frogs except three young magpies. I now perceived my body completely wasted. Nothing was left of me but my bones covered with a skin thinner than paper, I was perfectly naked, my clothes having been worn in shoes. I now perceived at a considered distance to the right of me a river which appeared large, and being almost certain it was the Red River, purposed the next morning to make an effort to get to it. Accordingly I set out. Having advanced a considerable distance across the plains, I became so thirsty I could not proceed. I then prayed to Almighty God that He in His great goodness suffer me to die of hunger and not of thirst, but if so it was His pleasure not mine, but His will be done. Our Heavenly Father was pleased to hear my prayer, and I found a small spring very near me and was determined there to die, being fearful if I left the spring I would find no other water.*

*Oh, my dear brother, how shall I describe to you my feelings at this moment: what crimes, said I, have I committed to deserve so dreadful a death. My body I have seen wasted away by degrees. I have not a friend to close my eye or blanket to cover my body and far from a holy sepulchre receiving this my earthly frame,*

*that wolf and yonder bird of prey wait only my parting breath to devour my poor remains.*

*On the next day I arrived at the river, and found it to be much smaller than the Red River. I forded it, and advanced into the plains to a small lake, where I slept. Some days before, I had found nest of small eggs about the size of sparrows, and I had eaten nothing else. How mortifying to me to see the buffaloes quenching their thirst in every lake near to which I slept, and geese and swans in abundance whilst I was dying of hunger in this land of plenty, for want of wherewith to kill.*

*(Note. Disappointed by the size of the Souris, John Pritchard journey southeast towards Turtle Mountains, all the time imaging himself far up the Assiniboine.)*

*After having wandered about for some days, I perceived some woods at a distance which I again supposed were upon the banks of the Red River, but was again disappointed, and found it to be a mountain or chain of banks. I proceeded along the same till I found some water in a small brook, and, supposing there might be small fish, devoted a part of the next day to making a fishing line with my hair, and the wire of my hat buckle I worked with my teeth into the form of a hook, but had no opportunity of making use of it, as I found no fish. I here passed two days without eating, and on the second evening began to arrange my bed in the best manner I could, in order to breathe my last. Pain, disappointment, and hunger had now given way to despair. I was now so weak I could not get up the bank of the river, in order to put a mark, but upon my hands and knees.*

*I had not lain down many minutes, before my mind, or rather my soul, suggested to me my want of confidence in God's power and goodness, and the heinousness of my offence in thus abandoning myself to despair. I immediately rose and prayed my Heavenly Father to forgive, strengthen and support me. An old wolf trap being near to me, I took two sticks from it in order to help me up the bank. I was no sooner on its edge when a hen grouse flew directly in my face, as I suppose to protect its young. I threw my stick at it and she fell dead at my feet. It was not I that killed it, it was the Almighty, for I had not then sufficient strength. In an ecstasy of joy and gratitude, I threw myself upon the ground, and poured out thanks to the Giver of all goodness. I ate part of the bird that night and the next day the rest, and then continued my route, not leaving the little river as I dreaded the want of water elsewhere. A serene and pleasant calm had now taken possession of my mind and never after forsook me. I this day found a plant, whose root the Canadians call the turnip of the plains. But not having a knife or axe to make a stick, I had no hope of digging them up; the root being at least a foot in the*

earth, and the ground extremely hard. The root is from two to three and one-half inches long and one and one-half in girth, by no means unpleasant to the palate. I thought upon the sticks I had taken from the wolf-trap, one of which I still retained. It having been pointed for its former use was in every respect fitted for my purpose. I therefore set to work, which was very great labour for me in my weak state. Having eaten a few raw, I returned to my encampment with about half a dozen, roasted them for supper, and found myself greatly refreshed next morning. I continually wandered about this river, living upon those roots and with now and then a frog, in the hope of seeing some hunter or other.

Every night I changed my encampment, each of which I supposed my last. On the thirtieth day, according to a stick upon which my teeth marked each miserable night, I perceived an elevated part of the plains, and immediately proceeded to it as from thence I could discover and be discovered at a greater distance. I found it to be an island in the middle of a large lake.

*(Note. The lake mentioned is possibly Whitewater Lake, east of Napinka, Manitoba, where the H.B.Co. and N.W.Co. had winter posts the previous year. See Youle Hinde report).*

Being, as I mentioned, perfectly naked I did not venture to sleep there, being fearful its night-air would chill me to death; therefore I turned about and gained a point of woods near, and slept or rather laid down under a fallen tree.

I next day set off in order to regain the little river, but on my way, behold and admire, the Providence of the Almighty! I fancied, and was certain, I saw Indians at a distance, on a different line to the route I was taking. I arrived at the place and found it, to my great disappointment, to be nothing more than a few bushes. I then went to gather grass to make a fire, being too weak to break the sticks for that purpose.

I had not proceeded half an acre before I perceived two old wintering houses. You cannot conceive with what ecstasy I beheld the remains of human dwelling. I supposed these houses to have been those of my friend Allen McDonald and the North West Company, at the lakes of the river Qu'Appelle.

I now went to set a mark upon a small bank near the houses, and to dig up a few roots to appease my hunger. On my return, I made a fire and afterwards arranged a bed, as far as my strength would admit, in the form of a coffin. Being so reduced I could have no hope of going on farther, the soles of my feet, particularly that of my lame leg, being worn to the bones, I now sat upon the bed, and taking a piece of birch bark, began to make with a nail the melancholy history of my

*sufferings. I had fixed upon the chimney being the bearer of my epitaph, the straw left by the winterers being my only shroud.*

*Whilst employed upon this melancholy occasion, I cast my eyes upon the ground, and, without any meaning, having taken up a piece of cord, found it to be tarred, and it struck me it must have belonged to the Hudson's Bay people. I then took notice of a sleigh that, from its make, I knew must have belonged to them. I now began to think I was mistaken in the place where I was, and that perhaps these were the Shell River houses. 'But,' said I, 'there ought to be three, namely, the Hudson's Bay Company's, North West Company's and our own. Good God,' I again exclaimed, 'perhaps 'tis the Turtle Mountain, and that its lake, but I can soon satisfy myself.'*

*(Note. Pritchard was correct in his surmise as regards distance from XT Fort.)*

*The Hudson's Bay and North West Company passed part of last spring there, and if this is the place, I shall find wood cut in the spring, which must still be green. The houses I know are three years old. I directly looked about and, to my inexpressible joy, I found a scaffold, for the purpose of putting meat upon, of green wood and many other marks of recent habitation.*

*Being now fully assured I was at the Turtle Mountain, an outpost from the establishment of my own neighbours distant from my own fort about sixty miles, I began with renovated hope to look into all the holes and corners for rags of any description to tie upon my feet which were now in almost la putrid state.*

*I had the good fortune to find a pair of old shoes the under leather of which was worn away and several pair of socks. I wrapped the whole about my feet, spent the night in prayer, and next morning at break of day, after invoking the Almighty to strengthen, guide, and support me, I took the road across the plain as near as I could judge homewards. That night I had the good fortune to find, and encamp upon, a small river where I had been to hunt buffaloes a few days before I left my fort, and from whence there is a beaten path to my house, which I was greatly in need of on account of my feet.*

*Towards the evening of the following day I discovered a band of Indians crossing the plains before me, but I was too weak to call out or increase my pace to overtake them. I raised my stick upon which I put a shoe and had the happiness to find they observed my signal. I was quite overpowered and stood immovable. Two little boys came running up to me, but my appearance was so dreadful they were afraid to approach for some time. I encouraged them by signals to come to me,*

*which they did: I gave them my hand but was so overcome at once more beholding a human being, that I fell senseless to the ground. When I came to myself, I found the little boys carrying me to their father; who, seeing something amiss, was coming forward to me with his horse.*

*I was now helpless as a new-born infant, and too weak to ride on horseback, therefore the Indian carried me in his arms to his companions, to whom I was well known. On my arrival they came crying around me, one pulling off his shoes, another his stockings, and another covering me with his blanket; whilst my first friend was preparing a little pemmican of pounded buffalo meat and fat. Having eaten a little, for I was too far gone to have an appetite, and drank a cup of water; they prepared a kind of sleigh upon which I lay down, and was so drawn to their encampment, where we found about forty other tents of Indians.*

*Whilst our tents were being put up, the men, women and children formed a large circle round me. They were extremely silent and afraid to come near me. It is impossible to describe to you what I was. I had not the appearance of an inhabitant of this world. Picture to yourself a man whose bones are scraped, not an atom of flesh remaining, then cover those bones with a loose skin, fine as the bladder of an animal, beard of forty days growth, his hair full of filth and scabs. You will then have some idea of what I was.*

*The next day the Indians took me to my fort, in the same way as I was drawn to their tents. On seeing my fort I again became senseless. They carried me into my room, and you may suppose my people flocked about me, scarcely believing their senses. With tears in their eyes they kept a mournful silence round me. One of my men, an old man that greatly loved me, did not even know me.*

*Having recovered sufficient strength of mind, I gave to each my hand, and assured them nothing was amiss with me; that my intellects were as sound as ever, and that I was weak for want of nutriment. And now a universal joy played upon each countenance, one and all at the same time putting questions to me. The news was soon at my neighbours. They and their men came running breathless to see me, my friend (John) McKay of the Hudson's Bay Company (at Brandon House, a gunshot away) brought with him flour, sugar, coffee and tea with a couple of grouse and immediately set a cooking himself as I believe the people were so transported that no one would have thought of providing for me.*

*Having taken a little refreshment, they washed, shaved and clothed me. McKay dressed my feet and he became both my surgeon and nurse. I had a long*



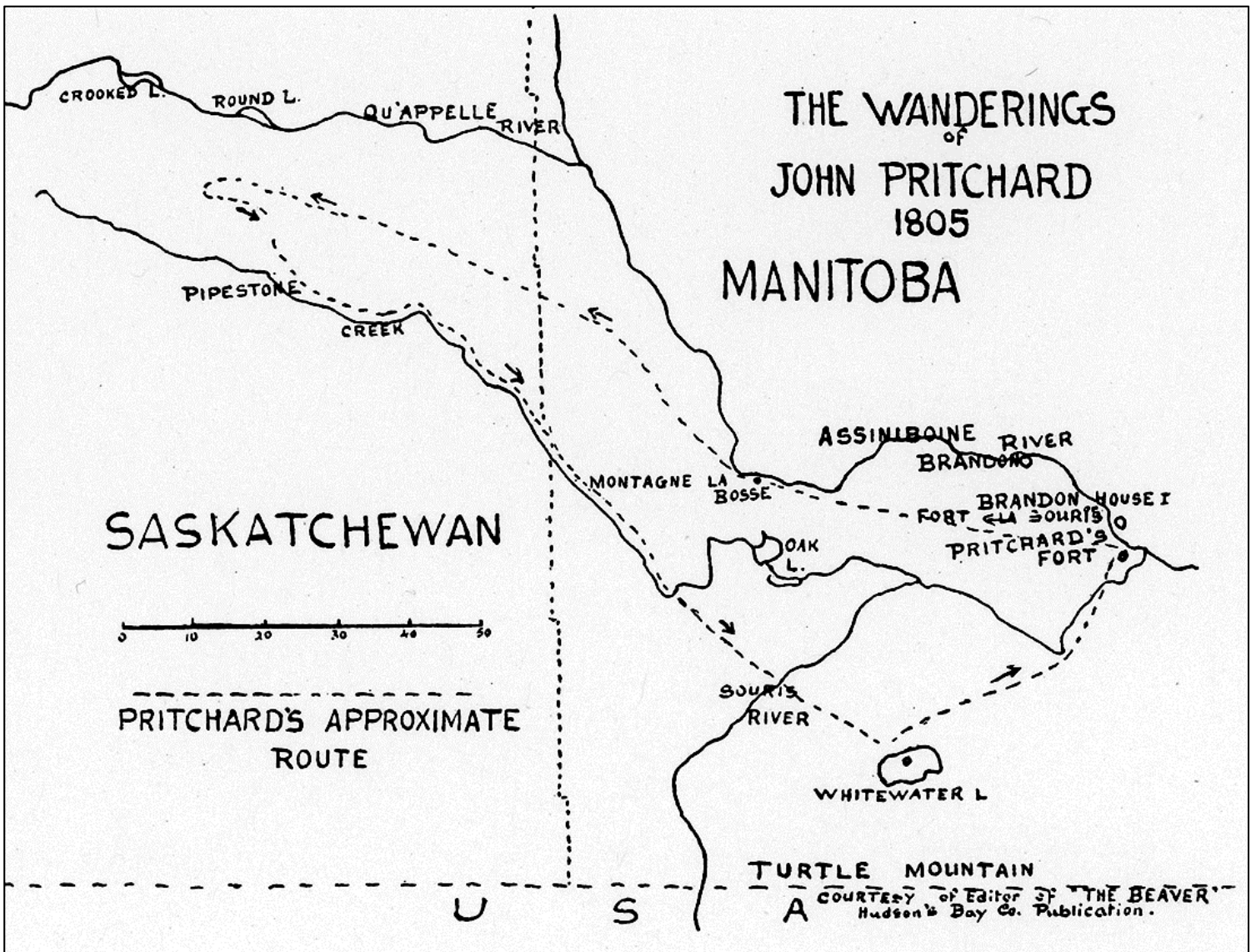
*dispute with my people, who would not for some time, suffer me to look at myself in a glass, for fear I should be disconcerted with my appearance. For fifteen days I was obliged to keep my bed and to be carried about like a child. A few days after my arrival the clerk who had been my companion came to see me. He had caught the horses, but could not find our encampment and arrived on the fourth day in a most deplorable state at the Mountain la Bosse. Every effort I found had been resorted to in order to find me. It was very gratifying to me to learn I was so dear to my friends. Every one thought me dead. The Indians said it was impossible I could be alive, and when anyone spoke of me, it was 'the poor deceased Pritchard.' Even many of my people were afraid to pass near my chamber in the night, for fear of seeing my ghost.*

*The Kinistino Indians call me the Manitou, or Great Spirit, and some of them (according to their superstitious way of thinking) got so far as to say I possess a certain stone, which preserves me from all danger; as they can never suppose a white man could endure such misery. Even the mosquitoes they say were enough to kill me: indeed being naked, I suffered much from that insect. The Assiniboine Indians call me the Cheepi, which signifies a corpse, as such was my appearance when they found me.*

*I shall now make some general remarks. I suffered greatly by a kind of grass very common in the plains, called by the Canadians, and very justly, the thorn grass. Even your shoes and leather breeches it finds its way through. At night when I encamped my legs had the appearance of a porcupine. I durst not take them out in the day, as others would immediately enter, and at night you may suppose the blood flowed. I once found a few raspberries, and I once killed and skinned a snake in order to eat it, but supposing it poison, threw it away and resigned myself to God. Both Indians and white people who saw me said they had seen the bodies of men dead from hunger, but never saw one so disfigured as mine.*

*I never saw two days without rain, and in that case could make no fire, the grass being too wet to kindle, and I too weak to break wood, therefore the wet grass received my naked body for the night. You may imagine I did not sleep, and that I anxiously watched for the rising sun to warm my blood. Let us admire God's goodness, for who, but He, made me to suppose that I saw Indians in a different route from that my ideas were taking me, and by that means brought me to the houses."*





*Map from Martin Kavanagh, The Assiniboine Basin - A Social Study of the Discovery, Exploration, and Settlement of Manitoba, page 53.*