

Eighty Years on the Plains

INSTALLMENT II

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CHAPTER III

Home Industries

WHILE living in Teepees we didn't need lamps, as the fire in the middle of the floor gave sufficient light; but when we changed to canvas tents we had to have a different kind of light, so the buffalo grease lamp came into use.

This lamp consisted of a tightly-twisted rag of any kind soaked in buffalo grease and then with one end lying in a shallow dish of the same fat, we lighted the opposite end. The grease kept feeding through the rag and it made plenty of light by which to work.

As the years went by and we spent our winters in log huts we required greater illumination for the long winter nights, so we used candles which we made ourselves. First we ripped seamless sacks, took the strings thus ravelled and twisted them together. Then into a deep kettle of melted buffalo fat, floating on water, we dipped the twisted string, in and out, in and out, letting the fat harden between each dip and gathering more grease with each immersion until at last the candle was the thickness we required. It was a slow process.

With the coming of the settlers, coal oil lamps were introduced to us, but we would not use them as we were afraid they would explode, and moreover lamps were costly to buy. But as time went on we became used to them.

We also made our soap. There were, along the various streams, several places known as Poplar Point, and near one of these we made camp. The men at once began to cut down the trees and make huge fires, keeping them burning both day and night; the ashes thus obtained were put into large sacks.

Water was then boiled in great copper kettles, and while still boiling, the con-

tents of the sacks were emptied into it and stirred over and over again, until a strong liquid or lye was formed. The liquid was ladled into open gunny sacks and held over the kettle to drain; this again was mixed with buffalo grease and again boiled. It made excellent soap.

Our most important industry was the making of pemmican. First I will tell you how second grade pemmican was prepared. Buffalo meat was cut into very thin slices or sheets, and then hung up to dry on rows of sacks made for this purpose. A fire was made underneath, so no flies would bother the meat while it was being smoked for curing and also being dried by the heat of the fire and the hot prairie sun.

When dry, stone mallets were used to pound the meat to powder in a parchment and when fine enough it was mixed with hot grease and dried berries. This mixture was then packed in large sacks of buffalo hide. Sometimes, for lack of time, the hair was left on the outside of the hide; the French called this *Taureaux*, others called it *Pimikan*, The Manna of the Plains.

To make first grade pemmican, the meat was first dried, then put into the fire for a minute or two to scorch. Big skins were laid out and the slightly scorched meat was placed on them and was ready to be pounded with a flail. The men beat it again and again, for the finer it was the better it would be for making first class pemmican. The beating was done by the men as it was too hard for the women to do. Hot buffalo grease was then melted and mixed with the powdered meat; so you see the difference between the grades of pemmican was the degree of fineness into which the meat was pounded.

It was the women's work to have the bags of buffalo skins ready. Just before this high grade pemmican was packed the

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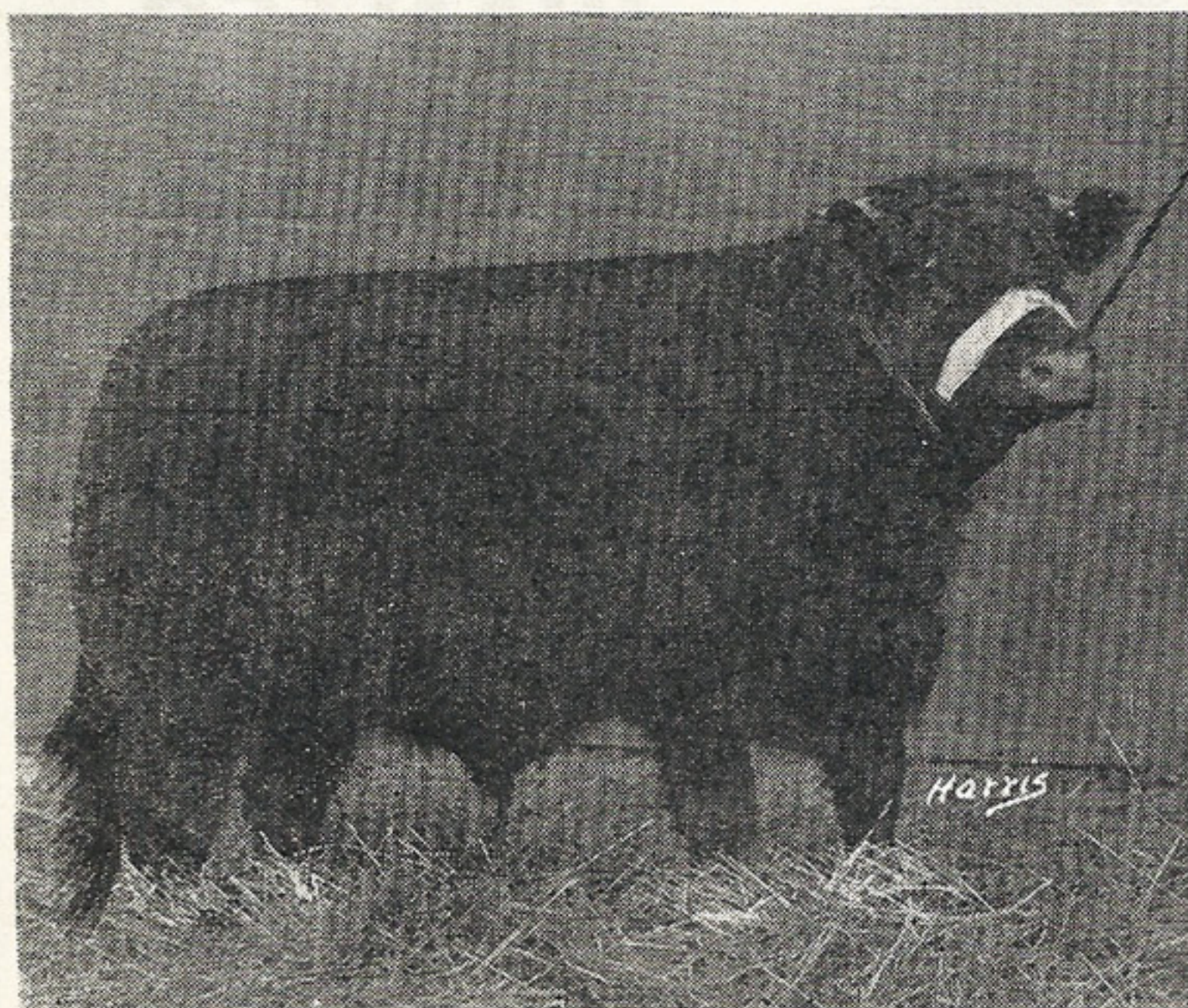
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dried and crushed berries were mixed into it, and then with a heavy stick it was beaten into the bag, packed tightly and sewn in. After the pemmican was set an axe was used to get a piece to eat.

The sacks were square in shape and held about one hundred pounds each. They were stitched with sinew, using a square needle. A square needle is not as its name implies, but is three-sided in shape with a very sharp point, the thread end being round like an ordinary sewing needle. The razor-like edges of the needle, along the sides, cut the skin to allow for the passage of the sinew. This sinew is taken from each side of the back of the animal. It is a long strip stretching from under the shoulder to the thigh. It is really a gristle that is scraped clean of all meat and then dried. It is so strong and tough,



Top selling Shorthorn bulls at Killearn Farms' Fourth Annual Sale held May, 1948, in Edmonton. Left, KILLEARN MAX IAN (\$6000.00), purchased by Lester Brown, Sandpoint, Idaho, and right, KILLEARN BEGG (\$5600.00), purchased by Searle Grain Company, Winnipeg, Man.

that it can be split as fine or as coarse as needed. It can be stretched fine enough for stringing beads. It was also used for violin strings. The Hudson's Bay Company used to pay us Twenty-five cents for a sinew.

Red River Carts

You will be interested to know about the Red River carts in which the traders used to carry their merchandise into the interior of the country and then to bring their furs out. The noise of these carts could be heard miles away in the prairie stillness. They were made entirely of wood—oak from Winnipeg—and rawhide, no iron at all being used. One often wondered if it were possible for them to hold together but the rawhide thongs were strong and they always finished their journey. With a small amount of repairing they were soon ready for the next trip. Traders always carried extra spokes to mend the carts if needed on the trail.

Perhaps the greatest work among the women was the tanning of the hides. After the skin of the animal was well scraped of all meat, it was stretched and dried. Later it was immersed in the river or lake for a few days and, when well soaked was ready to be scraped free of all hair. There were two different kinds of scrapers used; first, the draw knife, and second, one of the animal's ribs, the latter being the better to use as it did the work more evenly.

The best scraping was done by following the "grain" of the hide. It made the finished work of softer texture and an even thickness. (Scraping crosswise of the grain made the leather shiny and crusty.)

As the neck of the animal was thicker than the other parts of the hide, the scraping began at the neck end of the pelt and worked downward. The fingers of a good tanner were very sensitive in detecting any unevenness in her work and knew just the right pressure to bear to obtain an even thickness.

Now the finished product was white and felt velvety, but the women did not stop here, for if a rain storm caught them with the white leather garments, they would turn hard when dry. So the next step was smoking the leather, which turned it a rich tan, and would keep its softness.

(In making my buckskin gloves, slippers and other garments, I send to the Mission House of the Kootenay Indians, near Cranbrook, B.C., as I prefer their form of tanning to any others.)

Though we can now buy glass beads in almost any shade for trimming buckskin garments, the Indians in earlier days used porcupine quills which they dyed with natural juices, and had quite a gift for fanciful patterns. They often paid dearly for white horse tail, which they also dyed for trimming moccasins or making horse hair ornaments.

Young mothers, too, when on the trail, vied with one another in seeing who could make the prettiest Ti-ki-na-kan (baby beaded bag) which is the cradle of the papoose and is strapped to the mother's back when travelling. We were just as proud to "show off" our bead work on the baby bag as you are to display your knitting or embroidery.

We made our own shoes or moccasins, beading in pretty designs the ones we wore for holiday wear. Long hours were spent beading the front of vests, the cuffs of coats; and the lad with a nicely beaded buckskin was proud indeed. Solid beaded belts were quite common among the

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braves; and fringed, beautifully beaded trappings for the horses lent a distinguished look to many a mounted chief.

This beaded work was once laid upon the graves of the Indians only to be filched by passing white men. Now the much-prized work is handed down from father to son. The Calgary Stampede, each year offers special prizes to the best decorated Indians and Squaws on horse back, the beaded harness aiding in the judges' decision. It would be difficult, indeed, to match the wonderful display shown there.

Bead work is a tedious process, for each bead has a stitch of its own. Much of this work I learned from my mother, and I enjoy making original designs on all my buckskin work.

Do you remember our old "quilting bees"? We must have adopted the idea from the elderly squaws, who held "Tee-pee Bees". When any woman of the tribe had gathered enough Buffalo hides, had tanned and smoked them, then the elderly

women met together for a "bee", to make the covering for a teepee.

The best-experienced squaw would cut the hides into shape, then with the necessary "square needle" and sinew the rest of the women began to sew the skins together. While the sewing was going on, the "hostess" made bannock and berry stew. This was a real treat, berries boiled together and thickened. If flour was scarce the thickening was done with dried, powdered root of the "wild white turnip". And, of course, pemmican. Bannock, berry stew, and pemmican! A banquet indeed in those early days.

An interesting item in making the teepees was the "ears" at the top. Each section of the hide was cut wide at the bottom and tapering at the top. This top section was lined inside for several inches; these were the ears. They were used to regulate the draft inside the tent. A long pole was used to lift or lower the

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80 YEARS ON THE PLAINS

(Continued from page 73)

ears, according to the direction of the wind. A pioneer form, indeed, of air-conditioning.

All harness was made of rawhide and sewn with sinew. The buffalo hide was scraped free of hair and when dried cut into long strips. Two thicknesses of hide were sewn together, the holes being bored with an awl and the sinew drawn through. Double stitching was used throughout, using two square needles, each on opposite sides of the strands of leather. Sometimes the sinew was twisted to form a hard point, then no needle was necessary.

Our wants were few and simple; home industries supplied our needs. Kindness and happiness prevailed among us, and when tragedy entered our midst we all mourned alike.

CHAPTER IV

Early Tragedies

I always thought that the worst tragedy was death when it struck at one in the full bloom of young manhood. That is why war today stabs at my heart so bitterly. The best and fittest of our youth marched to the altar of sacrifice for some tyrant's greed.

Many of our early tragedies were concerned with the need to replace hunger. One such I remember so clearly. A herd of buffalo was seen grazing beyond a clump of willows. The captain selected his best gunmen for the kill, while the women began to unload the carts in preparation to bring back the meat into camp. It was just before sundown and all was in readi-

ness; the men had been away but a short time when some one espied a lone rider returning. That spelled tragedy! As he rode slowly into camp, every eye was turned toward him. Slowly he raised his bowed head and looked along the row of women standing there, until his gaze rested on a middle-aged woman near the far end.

"It's Pi-A-Shoen", she cried. She was right. Little Thunder was a fine young man, about twenty-four years old and soon to be married to a young girl of the camp, seventeen years of age.

Little Thunder had made his third kill and was running for the fourth when his horse stumbled and fell, rolling over the young hunter and breaking his neck.

The women of the camp gathered together with the heart-broken mother and the weeping girl, as the body was brought in behind one of the riders. All night long, the still prairie air was rent by the weeping and wailing of the mourners before his teepee. Rev. Father Lacombe was in camp at this time and officiated at the last rites at the grave.

The corpse was buried near the site of the accident, but in the spring the grave was opened and the body taken to Winnipeg for permanent burial. It was not the custom of the traders to leave their dead behind on the lonely plains.

Indian Warfare

In our travels across the vast prairies, we often came upon Indian Camps. Blackfeet and Crees were not friendly with one another and carried on guerilla warfare, which often resulted in much bloodshed. I used to shudder when I heard the old

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folks tell of the time a large body of Crees was on a hunting expedition and were camping by a lake in the open when they observed a buffalo grazing quietly on the top of a hill some little distance away. The Crees were naturally suspicious of the animal's apparent disregard of them, so they waited quietly for some time, but soon other buffalo, grazing fearlessly, emerged from the woods that lay between them and the hills beyond.

Hunger drove the Crees on! They crept stealthily forward within striking distance of the animals and, jumping to their feet ready for the kill, they were greeted with a volley of shot. Each buffalo became a Blackfoot and the would-be hunters became the hunted. Not one of those hunters returned to the Cree Camp!

But the Crees got their revenge. Around the camp fire, during the long winter evenings, my step-father delighted to tell the story of how the Crees turned the tables on their enemies, one hundred strong.

This party of Blackfeet, confident in their strength, went forth to raid a Cree

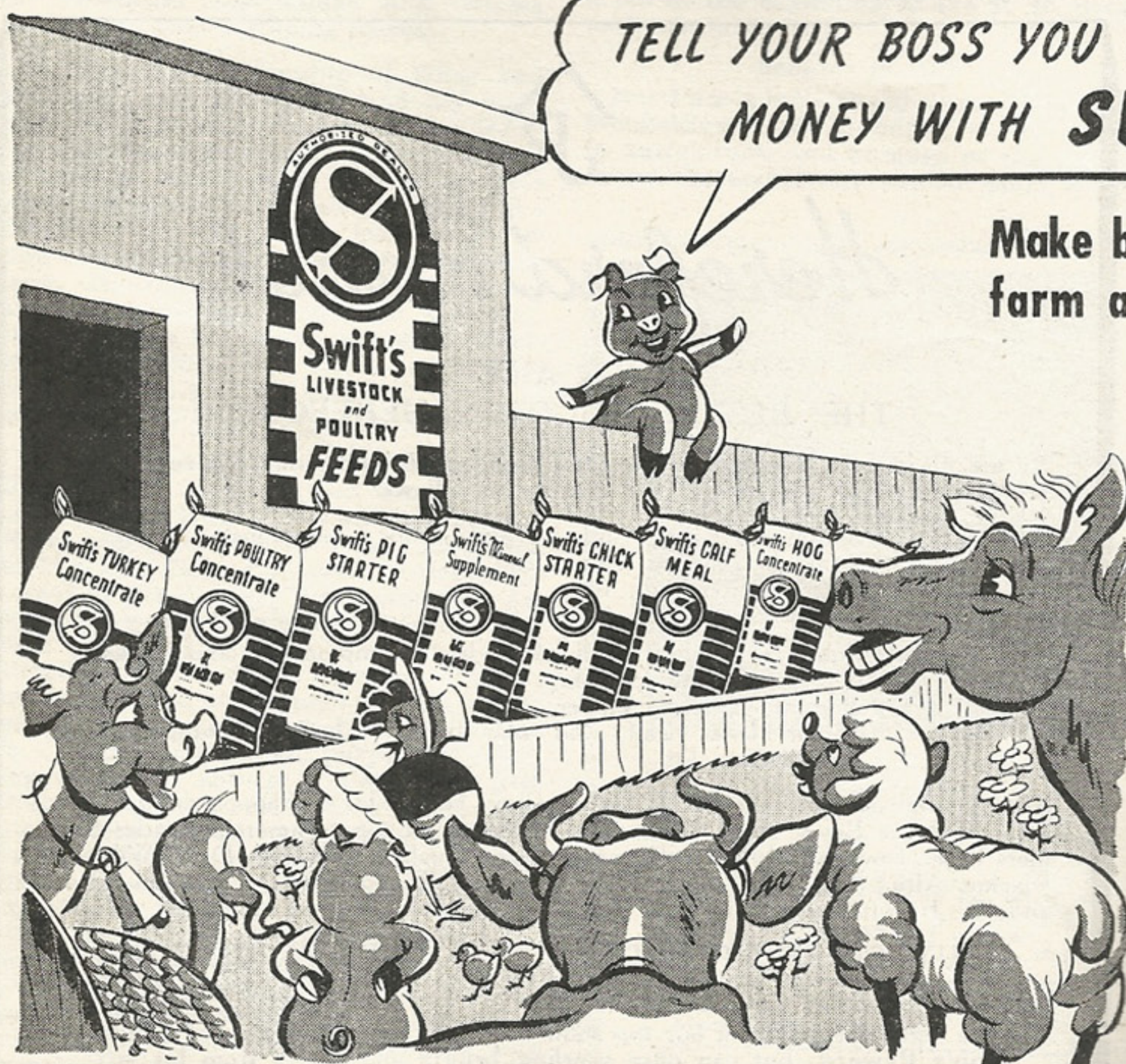
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Camp among the hills. Having accomplished their design they entered a "Pass" leading away from the stricken camp, only to find a second and a third camp beyond the first. Their presence was immediately discovered and as their sole chance of escape was to dash right through, they whipped up their horses and crashed forward—fighting.

Now they found themselves in a trap. They were hemmed in, down in a deep hollow with precipitous slopes, the tops of which were deeply covered with snow. Within a few minutes, the Crees had closed around them and a terrible massacre ensued. After seventy-odd had been slain, the Crees, their blood lust satiated, opened their ranks and allowed the sorry remnant of their foes to escape.

I related in a previous chapter of being saved from drowning by my foster brother. He had been born a full-blooded Sioux; and a few years before my father died—and he was still engaged in fur-trading—we found him at a vacant camp, previously occupied by a tribe of Sioux.

Our family, in a covered democrat, always travelled in the lead of the string of Red River carts and riders, so it was we who found the little boy near camp, crying. He was clothed only in a small calf skin around his shoulders. He had fallen into the hot ashes of the camp fire during his sleep and had burnt all his fingers very badly, and was now in a terrible state.

My parents washed him, doctored his fingers and clothed him. He was a wild little fellow and mother had quite a time trying to tame him. I am sorry to say that we children used to laugh at him and his actions, for he was a little savage. (Though his hands healed they have always been very crippled.)

At meal time, mother had to tie him up, for he was like a little wild animal. He would run and grab everything set out to eat, or even jump upon the table, upsetting everything upon the floor.

He was not used to tables as the Sioux ate squatting on the ground, around an open pot, set in the centre of the floor. We used removable tables consisting of boards resting upon poles that fitted into holes bored in the upright poles of the teepees, or tents, and were easily taken apart when moving.

So our little Sioux boy travelled with us during the trading season, and when spring came, and we again turned toward Winnipeg, the little fellow was quite used to our ways. On arrival in Winnipeg, Mother thought it best to have the boy baptized, so Uncle Donald Ross stood as Godfather, the child receiving the name Charlie Ross.

Charlie was a great performer of Sioux dances, and gave us many an evening's entertainment with his antics. We loved him as a true brother and he believed himself to be such, living with us until his marriage. Mother often paid tribute to him saying he was more obedient than her own children. Today he and his family are farming in Northern Alberta.

It is a sad story to tell of the reason he was left behind in the deserted camp. In those days the Sioux Indians had several wives, and when the men went out on raiding parties, the wives left behind used to quarrel among themselves. Now Charlie's father loved one of his wives more than the others, and when they found that out, one of the wives—more jealous than the rest—killed Charlie's mother, in such a way as to make it look as if she hemorrhaged to death. They

buried her up in a tree, as was the custom, and the camp moved on; but the murderess stayed behind to get rid of the boy. Thus, we came upon him and he was taken care of by my parents.

I still remember the time when a band of Crees set out looking for camps of Blackfeet that they might make war upon them and steal their horses, as their own supply was getting pretty low. It was not long before they arrived only to find the camp deserted. Old men, women and children—(although sick) had left, leaving behind their household effects. This was very unusual and showed that the Blackfeet had left in a hurry, so the Crees followed after them.

It was winter time. The snow was deep and they found many of their enemies had dropped dead in the snow; surely something terrible must have happened! So the Crees returned to the Blackfoot camp to take whatever they could find. When the Cree warriors returned home, their women and children rejoiced to receive such nice blankets and clothes as presents, never dreaming that in these spoils lurked a foe more dreaded than death; the germ of that awful scourge "Small-pox".

Already it had taken its toll of their enemy, the Blackfeet, their numbers dying like flies.

Besides the blankets and clothes, the Crees had brought back a few scalps and held a big Pow-wow and dance over their victory. In a few days these trophies did their nasty work. The Indians commenced to be feverish and then very sick. Food was not plentiful for the buffalo had gone south for the winter as the snow was so deep.

The young men could not go to the hunt, for trouble was upon them. Burning with fever some of them threw themselves into the streams to cool off. It was like a shot and they dropped dead. A few

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of those who were still well, set out to find food. They couldn't travel with horses, as the snow was so deep the crust cut the horses' legs. They had to walk! Many of them took sick and died, and the camp was facing starvation.

The few who were still able to get about volunteered to hunt for the nearest Hudson's Bay Post, and many of these, also, fell in their tracks. Mrs. Kootenai Brown—of whom I shall speak later—was in camp at the time, so putting the youngest baby on her back and leading the next one by the hand, she set out. These three travelled all one day and half the next before reaching the Post. This post today is known as Fort Pitt, near Onion Lake.

The Hudson's Bay Company had plenty of dried meat and pemmican and as fast as the Indians arrived they fed them, gave them more clothes and a weak drink of "Painkiller" mixed with warm water and sugar, and put them to bed on buffalo skins laid on the floor. Some were so hungry that they ate too much and dropped dead.

Those that survived, the Hudson's Bay Company kept until spring and when well, they worked to repay the Company. Some of these Cree girls were very good looking and became wives of the employees of the Company.

Later I shall speak of another small-pox epidemic, in which Father Lacombe labored very hard to help "his poor Indians".

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