

Eighty Years on the Plains

By MARIE ROSE SMITH

(Editor's Note: In this issue, Canadian Cattlemen presents to its readers the initial installment of a fascinating book-manuscript prepared by Mrs. Marie Rose Smith. Each succeeding issue will carry an additional installment until the manuscript in its entirety has been presented. From her childhood days Mrs. Smith has been a part of Western Canada's history. She, in this series of installments, will present personal experiences covering her 80 years in the West. Everyone will want to read each succeeding chapter of this interesting and informative story.)

CHAPTER I

"Liza! Liza!" I called softly, bending over the sleeping form of my elder sister and nudging her gently, "Wake up!". I was very excited as any other little girl might be, who, at the early age of ten years, was embarking on a winter trip over the great western plains, from the Great Lakes to the Rocky Mountains.

The rising sun was just beginning its morning dance on the grey-white waters of the Assiniboine River, as my father, Urbain Delorme, with all his household sat down to the early morning meal. Today, October 5th, 1871, father was taking all of us on his annual fur-trading trip into the great North-west, and for the winter months, we must bid "Au revoir" to the farm on White Horse Plains, and until our arrival back in the spring, father would now be known as Trader Delorme.

White Horse Plains was the birth place of my two brothers and us three girls, on a farm near St. Francois Xavier. As children we played about the river banks, gathering shells and hunting for frogs. We believed that if we killed a frog, and turned it on its back, rain would come. We also liked to catch little green garter snakes. I remember one time I caught a little snake by the tail just as it was disappearing into a gopher hole, and I tried to pull it out. I held on for dear life and pulled and pulled but the snake pulled, too, and then — there I was, the snake out of sight completely down the hole, but no, not completely, for I was left with the end of the tail in my hand.

Mother was a good fisherman and as she sat upon the river bank holding her line, we younger ones brought her our tiniest frogs for bait, at which the "gold eyes" anxiously snapped. Sometimes she helped us make necklaces out of the many snail shells we gathered, piercing them with a "square needle"; or from the large seed of the "white berry".

I was too young, when we lived on the farm, to be of much use about the house, but the lessons I learned by mother's side were later put into use when my hand-made, buckskin gloves were much sought after by the early settlers of our community, from Macleod to Pincher Creek.

When my grandfather left the province of Quebec for the great Canadian West, he found a settlement of Scotch half-breeds living on White Horse Plains, a few miles west of Winnipeg, and decided to cast in his lot with them.

Most of these families had small farms of six chains fronting the river and extending back as far as they cared to culti-

vate. They raised a few chickens and hogs; kept a cow or two; and a team of horses or oxen to plow the land and put up hay. The settlers were quite satisfied with their lot, asking only for a home, food for their families and companionship with one another.

Grandma Vivian

There was one vivid character I would like to tell you about. She was an old blind woman, known to all as Grandma Vivian. She lived in a log shack with her granddaughter, Adelaide, and a little mutt of a dog named Macoons, or Little Bear. Macoons was a short-legged, curious looking animal and so hairy one could scarcely see his eyes. But what he lacked in beauty he made up in intelligence, and seemed to understand that the old woman was blind.

"Macoons," she would call and the dog then ran to her and licked her hands as much as to say, "Here I am."

Every day the trio, the old woman, the young grand-daughter and Macoons went visiting the neighbors, the girl leading her grand-mother while Macoons brought up the rear. Their only means of living was charity provided by the neighbors. As Adelaide grew to womanhood she became ashamed to be the object of neighborly bounty, but being a very pretty girl, she was soon led to the altar, leaving the old grandmother and Macoons alone.

But still the daily tours continued and now Macoons was in front leading the old woman along the path. When meeting any obstruction, such as a stick or stone, over which the old woman might stumble, Little Bear would stop and begin to whine and sniff until Grandma Vivian, feeling around with her cane, was able to avoid being tripped. She lived a great many years with her dog as sole companion.

As she grew older the neighbors came to call upon her bringing gifts of food and clothing. The men took turns in keeping her supplied with fuel, while the women sewed for her or made her moccasins. We girls liked to pick berries and nuts to take to her, for we felt well rewarded with her stories of her early life



Mrs. Marie Rose Smith

and the many experiences she encountered on "White Horse Plains."

I think of all the tales Grandma Vivian told us, I liked best those about the Sioux Indians, who were always on the warpath against a different tribe. If a warrior succeeded in killing one of his enemies, he scalped him and now became a "Big Nina" (Big Nina meaning Chief) for he had won honor, when he brought the scalp, mounted on a stick, to the big Pow-wow and dance.

Grandma Vivian had attended many of these pow-wows and even at her great age she loved to demonstrate for us how the Indians danced, yelling and bending around the mounted scalp, when the blood was scarcely dried around its edge.

One morning, when one of the neighbors went to his barn, he was met by Macoons who began to pull him by his trouser leg. It wasn't difficult to know that Little Bear was in trouble. He followed the dog home and found Grandma Vivian quite ill and needing help, so carrying her

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EIGHTY YEARS ON THE PLAINS

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to his home, he and his wife cared for her until her death.

My sister and I were often left with our grandparents when father and mother went away on a trading expedition. Grandfather had a big house just across the road from the church of St. Francois Xavier, a fertile district abounding in wild fruit, and grandmother prided herself on "putting up" for the winter large quantities of this fruit which Liza and I helped pick. I liked best to pick the wild plums which were so plentiful on the plains.

Near the river bank were many maples. In the spring, grandmother "bled" the trees and made maple syrup and sugar by boiling the sap in a vast iron pot over an outdoor fire. For a special treat, grandmother ladled some of the boiled syrup into birch-bark baskets. The French called this "cassoo". It was our special pride to help grandmother fill her well stocked cellar.

Indian Games

Being much younger than the rest of the family I was alternately teased and petted, and many a laugh they had at my imitations of Indian games, which they encouraged me to mimic. Their favorite amusement was to have me dance and sing the game "Change Hands". "Change Hands" was a forfeit game, a mode of amusement indulged in by all the tribes. In all their games the Indians put up very high stakes.

This game required two players. First, each brought forth his forfeit; it might be a blanket, a shirt, a sack of pemmican or even a much-prized horse (which was represented by a stick). The two players knelt down; the one having a small, smooth bone in one clenched hand, and two similar bones in the other, had a blanket over his knees and as he sang,

Naw-moo-ya-ka-pask-in-yi-won

(Haw-haw, you can't beat me)

he brought his fists together, threw them apart, weaving his hands in circles, then up and down, now behind his back and again under the blanket—perhaps to change the position of the bones and to confuse his opponent, who must guess in which hand was hidden the one bone.

All this time he sang his song,

Naw-moo-ya-ka-pask-in-yi-won

and shouted "haw-haw", his body contortions waxed faster, the singing louder; sweat shone on the players' faces and now his opponent, with his forefinger outstretched, clapped it down upon the hand of the first player making his choice as he sang;

Ka-pa-cik-a-tin

(I shall beat you.)

If he chose right he won three points; nine points were required for a small forfeit, more points being required for a larger one; a horse as a forfeit called for the greatest number of points. So they played until one was a winner.

The spectators, squatting on the ground, were as fascinated as the players themselves, swaying back and forth and shouting "haw-haw" in unison. This was the game the older ones delighted in as I danced and sang mimicing the Indians.

Time passed swiftly and happily on White Horse Plains, until the morning I

awoke sister Liza to listen to the creaking of the Red River carts and the thrill of a new life ahead of us.

CHAPTER II

The Trail

Into this primeval land, with its innumerable leagues of prairie, lakes, and forest, the first white men to venture were the French Missionary Priests and the fur-traders, who readily saw its potentialities for wealth.

The fur trade, indeed, was the pioneer of civilization in the north west. As the daring voyageurs pushed further and further inland they established forts which served as centres for barter with the Indians, and even at the time the two great companies—The Hudson's Bay Company and the Great North West Company—entered the field, the wild, lone land was still a wilderness.

Into this wilderness we were preparing to penetrate; but first we must go to St. Paul (east of Winnipeg) for a season's supply of Prints, Knives, Guns, Ammunition, Axes, and oh, so many things, and when all would be packed and tied securely in the long train of Red River carts we would begin our journey to the camps of the Indians, where father would dispose of his many wares in exchange for piles of furs, buffalo hides, bladders, grease, and the necessary pemmican with which the Indians were so plentifully supplied.

In the spring of 1871, with our train of 40 Red River carts, and the usual number of riders and 75 head of horses, led by the covered democrat, or schooner, which housed mother and us five children, we turned our course to the great prairies, seeking out the largest camps where the Indians would winter and the greatest trade in furs would take place.

There was no need to hurry, we made from eight to eleven miles a day, camping each evening where there was plenty of grass for the horses and good clear water for man and beast. There were no fences, gates or laws to impede us on our way.

Camp

After riding all day we children were glad to get down from the wagon. We ran about looking for fuel, which consisted of bits of wood and buffalo chips. As fuel was scarce on the bald prairie there was always a race among us to see who could gather the biggest pile. It was different if we camped along a river bottom for then we could gather the dead trunks of the willow bushes.

The older ones, too, were glad to dismount. While some hurried for water, others unharnessed the horses and turned them out to graze. I wish you could have seen the poor brutes; glad to be free, they ran for the river to drink their fill, or would lie down and roll over and over.

If the day were hot we travelled early in the morning, then after the mid-day meal we let the horses rest until evening. The men rested in the shade of the wagon or crawled under them to sleep. On such days we also travelled later in the cool of the evening. With the plentiful supply of herbage and the leisurely daily travel our horses were fat and sleek.

Wild food was abundant; when we camped near a lake we gathered wild

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duck eggs by the bucketsful and hard boiled them to eat while travelling. This would be a change from pemmican and dried buffalo meat of which we always had a plentiful supply.

The men shot wild ducks and prairie chickens, also antelopes, badgers, skunks and wild cat or lynx. I have often been asked to describe the taste of some of these animals. I was very fond of badger

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for it is very tender and tastes much like young lamb; skunk also has the taste of lamb and is nicer even than badger; but wild cat is sweeter and nicer than either, though still retaining the savor of lamb.

Sometimes we would run onto the tracks of a bear; that would be a real treat as we banquetted on bear steak. Any meat left over was dried and packed away for future meals.

We also dug wild turnips and used them as you would use potatoes, generally boiling them with meat. Sometimes we younger ones dug a white root, which grows wild and resembles a carrot in shape which also tasted much the same, eating it raw like any little girl who has just visited her mother's garden.

We had our weiner roasts, too, in those days; but in place of the sausage weiner we roasted gizzards and liver from the wild fowl that the men shot.

There was another animal on the prairie which wasn't so plentiful, but whose meat then as now was considered a delicacy. I refer to the turtle.

One time I was running around playing near a cart trail and was startled by a queer, strange-looking animal. As its small head reared up, and its beady eyes stared at me I was too frightened to move. I suppose the poor thing was much frightened too, but she recovered herself first and ran away. Then I saw she had been sitting upon a nest of eggs, and when I could get my breath I just stood still and screamed. The camp, as one person, came running to my aid and as I recovered from fright I gasped out, "A great-big-frog sitting on eggs." How they laughed at me, and led me away so the turtle could come back to her prairie nest.

Flour was not plentiful with us, so even a small bannock was a real treat to us children. Mother mixed flour, salt and water together, kneading the dough quite firm and shaping it into round cakes. As we carried but one frying pan the cakes of bannock were first crusted on it, then stood up against sticks in a large circle around a brightly burning fire, with mother keeping guard to turn them often so both sides might be browned evenly.

For butter we used the marrow of buffalo bones which we called "bone grease". To prepare it the bones of the animal were broken into small pieces and then boiled in much the same way as one renders lard today. The grease was then poured off ready for use; this grease never turned hard or set. It is the nicest grease I have ever tasted.

You might ask how we could pack it for summer travelling. Our hunters always saved the buffalo bladders after a kill; they then washed them well, blew them up like a balloon and dried them. Later the grease was poured in through a birch bark funnel, and then the mouth of the bladder was tied to seal it. As I said, this "bone grease" never set but when needed was poured out of the bladder onto a piece of pemmican or into a dish into which we could "dunk" our bannock.

We had an abundance of wild fruit in the fall. Saskatoon berries we dried; wild cherries we crushed between two flat rocks and then dried. These dried berries we mixed with the pemmican which I shall tell you about later. A cup of tea and a piece of pemmican made us a wholesome meal. We shared our meat and game with one another like one big fam-

ily, for usually several families travelled together.

Buffalo Kill

They chose a captain to keep order in the camp. It was his duty also to issue orders to the riders who were on the lookout for water, or herds of buffalo, or any other riders he might spy. Our riders were given the best horses as they had so much extra riding to do. They would climb to the top of some high hill or butte where they could see a long way off. They always carried field glasses, and if a herd of buffalo was sighted there would be great excitement, as the men hustled about catching their best riding horses, strapping on their powder horn and placing their guns across the pommel of their saddle. The captain chose the best hunters and best shots for the slaughter. It was a grand sight to see them as they galloped away, their beaded shoulder straps glittering in the sun, as each loaded his gun while on full gallop, pouring in powder from the powder horn, ramming it down and dropping in the lead ball—several of which he was carrying in his mouth.

The traders bought their supply of shot from the stores before setting out, but not so the Indians. They saved the lead from the big packages they got from the Hudson's Bay Company in which tea was shipped. They melted it and poured it into long strips, afterwards cutting it into small pieces and then chewing it into ball shape. Even the little children helped with the shaping of the shot using their fine, strong teeth.

By this time the women were as excited as the men. They hustled about, emptied the carts and made ready to drive out to bring the meat into camp, while waiting for the men to come back from the slaughter so all could go out together and bring back what was killed.

It was the women's work to cure the meat, make the pemmican and dry the hides, tanning many for buffalo robes.

If we were lucky enough to be near a stream we would make camp for a few days while the women completed their work. When pitched, our camp looked like a small village of leather teepees. On finding a suitable camping ground, the carts were placed to form a large corral. The horses were driven inside so it was no trouble to catch them the following morning.

On breaking camp, the buffalo hides, forming the covering of the teepees, were

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rolled up, the poles laid one on top of the other and the pegs gathered together. We carried extra poles and pegs, during the trek, in case of emergency.

Fuel was very scarce on the bald prairies, so we used "buffalo chips" or droppings, which when dried hard under the hot prairie sun, made a very hot fire, much like your hard wood fire.

Sometimes we had to travel a whole day before we could find water for the horses. Of course we kept ourselves supplied with empty whiskey kegs which we were careful to keep full of water in case of need.

Our horses often suffered very much from thirst, so you see, the scout, riding ahead held a very important post on the trek. At a signal from him we turned our course and the thirsty horses would lift their drooping heads and break into a trot. Near this body of water we would make camp or perhaps just stop long enough for our mid-day meal and replenish the empty kegs.

If the stream were big enough, we stopped to fish. After a big run over the prairie I liked to sit and fish too, even if

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EIGHTY YEARS ON THE PLAINS

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my hook and line consisted of only a bent pin and some coarse thread. Later we were able to buy nets which kept us well supplied with fish at all times; even in the winter, for the men chopped holes in the ice, set their nets and brought in good sized hauls.

We had very little tea while on the trail. Our common drink was broth made from boiling meat of the wild duck or prairie chicken, the antelope, buffalo, or any of the game shot during the day. When we weaned our babies they, too, were given some of the same broth.

When the Sabbath day came, the Captain called all together—men, women and children—to gather in the centre of the camp. The oldest person present was generally chosen to lead in prayer and Holy Rosary; but when we were fortunate enough to meet a travelling missionary, he would hold Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

Day after day and month after month life continued through the same routine. As I said before, fifteen miles was a long day. We had our carts loaded with groceries and other merchandise that father thought would catch the fancy of the Indians. Even the return journey was much the same, only this time father was bringing back loads of hides and furs which he would dispose of for cash in Winnipeg. As we lived mostly on wild game while travelling, father used to bank nearly all his money; thus, when he died, still in the prime of life, he left us a very considerable fortune.

But life didn't always run so smoothly. I told you how we children liked to run about after riding all day. One time we camped near a river with very high banks. Glad to be near the water we ran into the river, some wading, some swimming, but the smallest ones chased each other in and out of the caves along the bank, which had been eaten away during the high freshets in the spring, leaving over-hanging ledges. In and out of these ran the children, laughing and playing, when without warning the biggest ledge crashed down, catching four of the bigger boys and crushing them to death, while two of the smaller ones, who were closer to the bank, were dug out safely. We camped there several days, mourning until the boys were buried.

At another camping place I would have been drowned if my foster brother had not been there to catch me. We were playing near a river bank when I espied some high bush cranberries growing on the other side. "Look," I cried, pointing, "let us cross over and get some."

"No, no," said one of the older girls. "The river is too high."

"It can't be," I replied. "I see a sand bank in the middle."

"Don't listen to Marie," warned the same girl; so tossing my head I scoffed, "Well, I'm not afraid," and stepped into the stream, just as brother Charlie called out, "Marie Rose, you'll get drowned!" And Charlie was nearly right, for stepping onto a slippery stone, I slithered off and went to the bottom of the river, but as I came up Charlie was there to grab me, dragging me to shore. I didn't need the scolding I received from my mother to keep away from the river after that. Though we had canoes, none of us children was old enough to handle them.

River Crossing

Yet, whenever possible, we followed the course of a river. During the warm seasons of the year the rivers and streams



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were swollen into angry torrents and were dangerous to cross, yet it was a challenge to these early pioneers. Canoes were of no value to them in transporting their carts and other merchandise, so, using thongs of rawhide, they securely bound a few long poles to a parchment of buffalo skin and thus made a suitable raft or low-sided boat. This boat was then tied to the end of a horse's tail; the best swimmers—both of man and beast—were chosen and now began the task to cross and recross, taking over provisions, women, children and even the carts to the opposite bank. I do not remember ever hearing of any accidents from these crossings. It was a tremendous task but no one grumbled, even though the carts had to be unloaded and then re-loaded before continuing on our way.

It was along the river banks, too, where we found the most rose berries, gathering them to eat or make into necklaces, just

as we see children do today. We liked to decorate ourselves with fancy shells or other ornaments; perhaps that is why, when a baby girl was born, they immediately pierced the lobes of her ears so she could when grown, wear ear rings. Today I never feel fully dressed unless my ear rings are in place.

It was a red letter day when we came near a settler's home en route. During the long winter we lived mostly on meat, thus when we saw the settler come running to the road to meet us, we knew we would soon be feasting on home baked bread and fresh butter, some home made cheese and fresh eggs, in exchange for a sack of pemmican or dried meat. Though mother always rationed our supplies so that the flour, sugar, tea and tobacco would last until our arrival back at Winnipeg, the supply by now would be very slim after a full season on the trail.

(To be Continued.)

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