

Early Polo in Southern Alberta

By W. R. COCHRANE, Cowley, Alta.



THE time of year has arrived when the folks residing in this last great west like to relax a bit after the winter months and attend the annual stampedes and rodeos, which have become a famous sports institution in our fair province. Every year increasing numbers turn out to watch the cowboys in their favorite competitions and marvel at their skill and admire their fleet-footed, well-trained mounts. Our cowboys and their horses compete on even terms with the best talent that the American continent can produce and usually succeed in holding their own in the modern field of competition where horsemanship and fine horseflesh play so prominent a part.

The old timer will tell you that it is not by accident or a development of recent training that this has come about, but is a heritage handed down from the old days when hard-riding men required good horses that could cover great distances and whose training enabled their riders to subdue the most obstinant cow-critter. A feller didn't do much walking in the old days if he could help it; he opened gates, packed grub and could even do a fair amount of fence fixing on hoss-back and it was only natural that in due course he would be looking for a game, besides running races, that could be played on horse back. Most everyone had a good saddle-horse as that was the only means of getting about the country, and Alberta was even then recognized as a natural breeding ground for distinctive saddle horses. And even in these days you often hear that a particularly outstanding saddle horse's ancestry can be traced back to some famous sire of the old days, that had been imported to head the herd of one of the well known ranches.

So in the late '80's, F. Wilmot of Pincher Creek, on returning from a trip to the Old Country, brought back some Polo equipment and this grand old game, which we are informed had its origin in India amongst the English Cavalry stationed there, was introduced in Alberta.

The game immediately became very popular and our western ponies took to it as enthusiastically as the riders and in the records we find such well known old-timers taking part as Wilmot, George Plunkett, Garnett, Brown, Lionel Brook of Pincher Creek; Dr. Kennedy, Sheriff Duncan J. Campbell, Sam Heap, Brown-ning of Macleod; among the representatives from Beaver Creek, already a popular ranching community in those days, were Bob Milvain, Mike Holland, Peter Briggs and W. Humphrey; those representing High River included Geo. Ross, Harry Robertson, Justin Freeman, Dublin Rogers, Marson Sexsmith and P. Limogues and from Calgary were Oswald Critchley, McNaughton and A. E. Cross. These pioneers and many others of that period welcomed a game so closely associated with the primary industry, that of ranching, and good ponies were in great demand and quite naturally, ranchers gave



The Cowley team, left to right, Jack Graham, Rollo Burn, Jimmy Milvain and Bert Connelly, defeated the Boise, Idaho, champions in 1912.

quite a lot of attention to the breeding of good saddle stock.

Polo tournaments became quite the order of the day and no sports day was complete without a polo game. Good fields were laid out and club houses were built and new districts were soon to take up this popular sport. North Fork and Cowley had teams in the field in the middle '90's and unlike some of the present day sports the monetary consideration was not a factor for the players had to look after their own expenses. To provide some sort of token for the winners, cups were put up. One of the early cups to be played for was one the boys manufactured themselves consisting of a tin cup mounted on a miniature polo club. However, some very fine cups eventually were donated and are the proud possessions of some of the families of the former

players, and are reminders of the gala occasions at the polo tournaments held throughout Southern Alberta.

The Alberta teams became very proficient in the game and younger players gradually replaced the pioneers who must have been great instructors for in July of 1912 the High River and North Fork teams, in search of new fields to conquer, journeyed to Winnipeg, where fast polo had been played for years by both civilian and army teams. These two teams both won their first games against the eastern teams. The players for North Fork were Harry Evans, Harry Gunn, Rollo Burn and Bert Connelly and for High River, Holmes, Freeman, Nelson and Jenkinson. These two Alberta teams met in the finals for the Osler Trophy which North Fork won. Both teams qualified for the finals in the C. C. Chipman trophy which the North



ALBERTA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

HEALTHY BREEDING STOCK
IS THE KEY
TO SUCCESSFUL LIVESTOCK PRODUCTION

Plan now to guard against and eradicate contagious abortion
(Bang's Disease) from your herd by:

1. Preventing the introduction of infected animals.
2. Vaccinating all heifer calves between 4 and 8 months of age.

For full information consult your

District Agriculturist

or write to the

Director of Veterinary Services,

ALBERTA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

EDMONTON, Alberta.

Hon. D. A. URE,
Minister.

O. S. LONGMAN,
Deputy Minister.

LEARN AUCTIONEERING

America's leading Auctioneers teach you. Students sell actual sales during term. Our graduates are successful. Earn large income. Term soon. FREE catalog.

REISCH AUCTION SCHOOL
Mason City, Ia.

Fork team also annexed and they then went on to win the Earl Winterton cup, which was emblematic of the championship of Western Canada, by defeating the Fort Osborne Barracks four. The press accounts of these games make very interesting reading for anyone who is interested in horses and skillful horsemanship and many were the fine compliments paid our Alberta boys for their display of daring riding and finished play.

Returning home after their victories at Winnipeg a tournament was held at Cowley after which representatives from Spokane having heard of the fame of the Alberta teams, invited them to enter a big tournament to be held in that city and teams composed of players from Cochrane, Cowley, High River and North Fork went over and won from some of the best polo talent in the Western States. Connelly, Milvain, Graham and Burn played for Cowley and surprised the polo enthusiasts by defeating the fast Boise, Idaho, champions. In the press dispatches of that time are included glowing tributes paid to the Alberta players, particularly Connelly of North Fork and Cowley, and Robertson of High River, who afterward played with Spokane and Boise, respectively. Many fancy offers were received by the Alberta boys for some of their wonderfully trained ponies, which they very generously let their United States opponents try out in some of the games.

It is regrettable that a complete history of all the players who took part in this famous game in its early stages in Alberta does not seem to have been compiled, for Polo is still played by a few teams in Alberta and we have visions of it coming back into prominence again as



One of Calgary's polo teams, left to right, Oswald Critchley, Lansdale, Rhodes, C. R. de la Verne.

the interest in good riding horses is returning. Some of the younger generation will no doubt want to try their hands at training their mounts to follow the little ball and will likely want to attain some proficiency themselves in this game that requires so much co-ordination between a man and his horse. The harness horse races are returning and for some time there has been considerable agitation for added thrills to our stampedes and rodeos, so why not a return to polo while there are still a few of the old players left who would make wonderful instructors?

We have noted several articles lately regarding the enthusiasm displayed by Albertans in journeying great distances to support their entries in the field of sport, such as the Calgarians' invasion of the east with their football team and the pilgrimages of the province's hockey

teams. Looking back over the years it would appear that the urge to test the prowess they had attained by challenging exponents of the various games in far away places, all started with Polo and is still in the blood of Albertans. We hope this article regarding the famous old game will start some of its old friends reminiscing and might create more interest in a sport that is so distinctively Albertan. We regret that we are not in possession of more information regarding the early days of polo and have no doubt missed out on the mention of many famous players of the period when it flourished. The men who started and followed this game in the old days made great sacrifices, of time and money, to take part in their favorite sport. They took local talent in both men and horses and turned out experts. May their prowess be long remembered.

NOTICE

37th

Annual Convention

of

The Saskatchewan Stock Growers' Association

will be held at

Swift Current, Saskatchewan

JUNE 15th - 16th, 1949

An interesting two-day convention is arranged and topics of interest to the livestock producers will be discussed. The Swift Current Chamber of Commerce as hosts of the convention extend to everyone a real western welcome.

We look forward to meeting all of our friends and members at the convention.

For further particulars write

The Saskatchewan
Stock Growers' Association

Box 660

Swift Current, Sask.

THE PUBLIC MARKETS LIMITED

Owners and Operators of the

UNION STOCKYARDS

ST. BONIFACE

MANITOBA

Competition on Public Markets
is your Best Protection for Your Investment
in Livestock

Established in 1914. Our marketing facilities are recognized as the best in the West. We solicit your patronage both for the sale of your livestock, and our Feed, Water and Care-in-Transit Service.