Pioneering the Cochrane District

A brief story of the Copithorne Family.

By DORA DIBNEY, Calgary, Alta.

"NOW look," Sam Copithorne remarked, "there's no use writing a story about me. I'm not a pioneer because I didn't come out to this country until 1904. It's my two brothers you ought to write about, if you HAVE to write about the family.

"Where was I born? Oh, in Clonakilty, that's in County Cork, Ireland. My father had a dairy farm, dual purpose Shorthorns and we milked about 25 cows. Guess we had about 120 acres.

"Besides John and Richard, I had four other brothers: James and William and Robert and Edward. We had one sister; she was the eldest. John came out here in 1883 and Richard came out four years later, in 1887.

"James went to Central Africa as a missionary and before that he was in the civil service. But he was in Africa, oh less than a couple of years, when he got fever and died.

"John was the first to make a move though. He just decided to come to Canada so my father got him a lot of letters of introduction to people in Montreal, but he never used one single letter.

"He didn't like Montreal so he bought a ticket through to Winnipeg. Well, he looked for work and somehow or other he met a man who wanted someone to drive eight mules. John had never had a thing to do with mules, but he said sure he could drive them, so he got a job and $10 a month. That was doing farm work.

"It wasn't long after that, that a man from the west came to the farm and he bought the mules. He couldn't drive them so John got the job of taking them to Brandon.

"That was the time of the rebellion, so John volunteered for the army and he was sent to live with the Indians and watch their movements. Well, he lived with them for a long time; he took part in their powwows and he got so he could talk Cree with the best of them.

"He lived with them so long that they nearly forgot he wasn't an Indian. They used to call him Wapooshwian, which means Rabbit-Skin-Robe. I remember him telling us about the way they used to eat. They'd put all their meat into one big pot and they'd sit around and fish it out when it was cooked. Sometimes they'd fish out a piece of dog-meat and then they'd remember and say 'white man no eat dog' so they'd find a piece of rabbit meat for him.

"John told about the Indian Sun-Dance. It was about the time of the Frog Lake Massacre and the Indians were pretty touchy. He had given out rations of print, etc., to be made into clothing. Instead they tore it up into little pieces and stuck it on the tree tops long before the Sun Dance. He described the Sun Dance much as you read about it today but the braves cut holes in their shoulders, put thongs through the muscles and dragged poles, and sometimes ponies around and around the lodge, always yelling at the top of their voices, until they would faint.

"Well, he got a job with the Indian department as farm instructor at Crooked Lakes, near Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan, and then he followed the railway to Sarcee. You remember they were issuing rations to the Indians in 1886 and 1887 and that's what John was doing and running freight from Sarcee to the Stonys. He used to drive a bull team; took him two days to make the journey.

"He had to stay overnight at the home of Napoleon Blache; that was the only house between the two reserves. Nearly always John had an Indian guide.

"There is a story that Mr. Blache tried to raise hogs just like cattle. He would turn the sows out on the range in the spring. It would be nothing to jump a bunch of razor-back hogs during the summer as one rode across country. In the fall the hogs, as many as could be found, were gathered in. The next problem was the slaughter and dressing of these porkers. Apparently Mr. Blache was not very skillful at the job for when scalding and shaving off the hair failed, he decided to skin them. After all were skinned they looked such a gory and disturbing sight that he decided to put them up in the hay loft. He stood the frozen carcasses on their feet and covered them with hay so that nobody could see them. However, a neighbor made a friendly call one evening and went to the loft to get feed for his horse. Uncovering one of the skinned hogs gave him such a start that he backed up and fell down through the hole in the floor to the manger below. He wasn't injured but certainly had a good fright.

Showing, on left, Richard Copithorne's first cabin, 1890; on right, second home, built at time of marriage.

"It was a mighty different life to what my folks had planned for him. He'd taken the civil service examinations in Ireland, and he'd passed. But he just wouldn't take a job. That's what my father wanted for me too, but I wanted to go farming. I was going to go to Australia, but I came out to my brothers' place instead.

"Anyway, Dick was the next one to come to Canada. He got here in 1887 and first of all he got a job in Calgary working on the old Mission Bridge so that he'd have enough money to buy a team and wagon.

"Then they started looking for land; the country wasn't surveyed then, and they passed through Springbank to Jumping Pound. So John and Richard were in partnership from 1888 to around 1900.

"If a man had an axe and a hammer and a saw, he could build anything. So

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The John Copithorne family in 1892 showing Mr. and Mrs. Copithorne and their two sons, left to right, Jim and Jack. This original cabin home was built in 1888.

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John and Dick built a log house with a sod roof, and stables, also of logs and with a sod roof.

"The house had just one room, one window and the door was right in the centre of the front wall. The second house Richard built was nearby; it had two windows and a lean-to for a kitchen. That was on the hill. John built his house at the foot of the hill on the river bank. He got married in 1887 to Susan Toole. She was just out from Ireland. She's 86 now, and living in Victoria, B.C.

"Well, it was tough going. Dick and John carried on mixed farming. They used to make butter and bring it in to Calgary twice a year to trade for goods. No money in those days. You had to leave at daylight to make the trip in one day. There wasn't any money to pay for feed, so they took what they needed for the four-horse team, and, of course, no money either to pay for a night's lodging.

"They used to trade with I. G. Baker, probably the first storekeeper in Calgary. They did that right up to 1895.

"They had a great big barrel churn; it used to hold fifty pounds of butter and you had to have a man on each end to turn it. There was no cream separator in those days. The milk was left to set for 36 hours and the cream was then skimmed off.

"They used to pack the butter into big wooden tubs and when they took it to the store, a man used to poke a broom handle right down to the bottom of the tub and then smell the butter on the stick. That was the way he graded it.

"They had about fifty hens and were able to trade the eggs, too.

"Dick had got married by then to Miss Sophia Wills of Springbank, and the women had lots of work. No fancy gadgets then to help them with the washing and cooking and sewing. The women helped cut firewood sometimes, and the men also cut down trees to make A-fences and X-fences. We used to work in the bush all winter."

Dick and John went out of mixed farming in 1898 and into beef cattle, Herefords. It was difficult to get a good sire so they raised their own and tried to improve their stock by culling. It was a good thing when the Calgary bull sale started, Sam remarked, because a rancher could get good animals then.

Asked how Jumping Pound got its name, he said it was one of the places where the Indians stampeded the buffalo. The animals, terrified and crazed by the Indians, rushed to the cliffs and plunged over, breaking necks and legs as they crashed to the bottom. There was a good price for buffalo hides so the Indians were intent on collecting.

It wasn't all work and no play. Men and women used to hunt coyotes and great was the competition to see who had the best saddle horse. They'd foregather with their hounds and off they would go across country; no fences to bother with in those years. Percy, who is Dick's eldest son and a substantial cattle rancher in the Jumping Pound district, says, "I remember my dad mentioning Mr. Kerfoot and Captain Gardiner, father of Clem and Teddy Gardiner, as some of the enthusiasts. My mother used to take part also and was considered a good horsewoman. My dad said that very few women could sit on a bucking horse in a side saddle, but she had performed the feat on several occasions. I still have her side saddle which is in excellent condition." There were also the kit-foxes to chase, a nearly extinct specie of animal now. The men, too, went out hunting lynx, for these great wild cats were a constant menace to the cattle. Sam Copithorne killed 21 lynx in the spring of 1907.

That was the year John and Dick made a trip back to Ireland, and Sam went over in 1911. He stayed three months, but Sam just didn't care for Ireland; he said, "You couldn't give it to me".

Again I am indebted to Percy Copithorne for this bit of historical information. "At the time when the N.W.M. Police were looking for Ernest Cashel, the notorious robber and the man who was wanted for the murder of Rufus Belt on the Red Deer River, Cashel walked into my dad's place and asked for a saddle horse that he might catch his own which he claimed got away from him a few miles away. Dad was away that day but luckily his man was home and when my mother made inquiries for a horse the man said that the boss was very particular who rode his horses but that he no doubt could get a horse at a neighbor's place a mile distant. This proved to be true and Glen Healey, the neighbor, did not see his horse again for some time. That same night at midnight several police rode in and inquired of Cashel. They slept on the floor of the sod-roofed two-roomed house for the balance of the night."

Although through the years, things gradually became easier for these hardy men and women, there was still much to do. They had to be completely self-reliant. Mothers made all the overalls for their active boys. They looked after the garden, milked the cows, fed the chickens, washed and cooked for the family and brought up the children.

They helped fight fires. There was a bad fire in the spring of 1910; a dry year, but not as bad as that one which occurred some time before 1900 when the range horses fled before the advancing flames.

Jack Copithorne of Calgary has a fine photograph taken when he was a very little chap. It shows his mother, his brother and himself, just outside their home, the white-washed log shack, and looking with pride on the small group is his father seated on his buckskin pony.

Jack and Mrs. J. C. Buckley, daughter of Richard Copithorne, recall how they and other children in the district rode their ponies to school, a pleasure which the child of today rarely knows. The old school still stands one and a half miles west of the Jumping Pound Post Office, and like other buildings, is made of logs. It was constructed by John Stewart and was considered very attractive with its red roof, whitewashed walls and green trim.

Some of the teachers whose names will be remembered by old-timers are Miss M. A. Walsh, Robinson, Hart and Kent.

Church services were held in the school, and before it was built, in the various homes in the district. The minister had a large territory to cover but was always a welcome visitor.

Everyone took a great interest in politics and there was always lively discussion as to the merits of various candidates for office.

There are always amusing incidents to recall. There was the time when one of the Copithornes saw a bundle up in a tree and took a shot at it. Out fell an Indian corpse, not in good condition. Then, another time, the cowboy with his chapps and guns who was all for going out to find and capture, by force if necessary, the lost souls mentioned by an enthusiastic Salvation Army worker.

John Copithorne retired in 1912 and moved to Victoria. He died in 1933 and

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On the occasion of the last round-up in the Cochrane district in 1913, showing, left to right, standing, Sam Copithorne, Claude Copithorne, Oliver Ellis, Clem Gardner, Jack Potts, unknown, and Stan Fullerton. Left to right, sitting, Jim Copithorne, Louis Nicoll, Frank Sibbald, Bert Sibbald, Percy Copithorne (with cap), Charlie Mickle, Frank Ricks, Jack Copithorne (behind), Alf Savary and John Copithorne, Senior.

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surviving are his widow, six sons: Jim of Sidney, B.C.; Jack, Calgary and Jumping Pound; Harry, Jumping Pound; Claude of Cochrane; Ernest, Calgary; Charles, Midnapore; and two daughters: Mrs. L. D. Nicoll, Jumping Pound, and Mrs. M. Morris, Victoria. One son, Bert, died some years ago.

Richard's four sons are: Percy, now at the home place, and George who farms eight miles west; Frank, now on the old Fraser River ranch and Clarence, Clemen's ranch; his two daughters: Mrs. J. C. Buckley (Marjorie), Springbank, and Mrs. Annie Jones of Okotoks. Richard died in 1936.

Sam Copithorne's two sons are Louis and Bill, and his two daughters Mrs. J. E. Robinson and Mrs. Rex Young.

Sam is too busy these days with spring work to be bothered with talking about his family, and anyway, he doesn't think it is important. But stories of Canada's pioneers should not be lost, and who of these old-timers ever kept a diary? Their sons and daughters have heard their tales many a time, but they, too, forget, and much of Canada's fascinating and unique history remains unknown.

The debt that this generation and posterity owes to the men and women who opened up this country, can never be repaid. Not only were there great material advantages, but if we can emulate their integrity, their great independence of mind and body and spirit, then indeed we may prove worthy of the hardships which they undertook so courageously and as a matter of plain fact.

Showing Richard Copithorne in 1936.

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Announcing University of Alberta Feeders' Day

The twenty-eighth annual Feeders' Day sponsored by the Department of Animal Science, University of Alberta, will be held Saturday, June 11th.

As in former years the results of experiments conducted during the year will be reviewed and presented in printed form. Problems related to the production of livestock and livestock products under present conditions will be featured. Trials conducted during the past year have dealt with such subjects as supplementary feeding of pregnant ewes, cobalt for fattening lambs, clover seed screenings for livestock, urea as a protein supplement for dairy cows, comparison of high, medium and low protein grains for pigs and limited use of grain in finishing market cattle. There will be opportunity for inspection of the University herds and flocks.

A cordial invitation is extended to farmers, feeders and others interested in livestock production. The program will start at 10 a.m. and will be held at the Livestock Pavilion, University Farm.