Early Days of Medicine Hat

By W. H. McKAY, Calgary, Alta.

SEVERAL people have asked me to write a story of Medicine Hat, its early days and early residents. The following is my effort to comply with their request. I hope it will do for them to read until someone comes along who is better qualified to do so than I.

I remember very little prior to 1888, so I will touch very lightly on a few things I remember before that year. I will also relate some of the stories that have been told me by my parents, uncles and other oldtimers.

Railroad in 1883.

The railroad was built into Medicine Hat fairly early in the Spring of 1883, which was the most important event of the year. It was a wonderful sight to the Indians and half-breeds when the first locomotive pulled in dragging a short mixed train, as they had never seen a train before. The B. and B. gang started to construct a bridge across the river at once. It was a trestle or pile bridge. It met with disaster the following spring when a sudden chinook wind caused the river to break up and fill with enormous cakes of ice, which when forced by the swift current, cut down the piles in much the same way a mowing machine cuts down dry willows. So when the river became clear of ice the old bridge was replaced by one of steel and limestone piers, the ones still used. Some years ago the bridge was widened, when concrete piers were joined to the ones of limestone. The joins are plainly visible to this day. The limestone was shipped up from Antelope, Sask., where it abounds on Antelope Creek, which is also known as Cabri or Miry Creek. The first span of the great bridge, on the town side, was made so that it could be turned half-way on small wheels, to allow the steamers of the Northwestern Coal and Navigation Company to pass. Some such are called cantilever spans. After the steamer passed the span was turned and bolted back in its proper place to accommodate the trains.

Northwest Coal and Navigation Company

When Sir A. T. Galt saw the quality and great quantities of coal on the banks of the Belly River, about 1882, where the city of Lethbridge is now located, and foreseeing the great commercial possibilities of the coal, he and his son Elliott organized The Northwest Coal and Navigation Company, with a capital of Fifty thousand pounds (£50,000). William Lethbridge, after whom the new town was named, was the president of the new company and Elliott Galt its manager.

Their next problem was the transportation of coal to Medicine Hat, which was the nearest railroad point, where the C.P.R. agreed to take 20,000 tons a year for five years at $5.00 per ton. Floating the coal down the river was their intention hence the name of the company. The next problem was to obtain the material with which to build the necessary steamers and barges. There being no sawmills in the neighborhood at the time, they decided to build their own sawmill. So Elliott Galt got a timber limit of 50 square miles in the Porcupine Hills, about 60 miles west of Lethbridge. A portable sawmill was brought from eastern Canada by steam up the Missouri river to Fort Benton, Montana territory, and then by bull train to the timber limit. To transport the lumber, square timber and mine props to Lethbridge from the sawmill the company purchased a bull train and a mule train of Missouri mules. A bull train consisted of four string teams of 16 oxen and three heavy wagons with a capacity of eleven tons—about 44 tons to each train. It was the same in the case of the mules. A fair day's journey for the oxen is said to have been about 12 miles, while the mules were able to make 18. They then engaged a man named Captain Todd of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, who was experienced in building and navigating stern wheel steamers. He had become adept in so doing on the Ohio River. Early in the spring of 1883, as soon as the building material was cut and hauled, construction of the steamers and barges was started. The first steamer to be built was the "Baroness", which was 225 ft. long, 24 ft. wide. She was able to handle six barges by pushing them ahead, the total having a capacity of 1,000 tons to each trip. As the steamers were finished they were floated down to Medicine Hat where the steam boilers and other equipment were installed, having been shipped on the new railroad from eastern Canada. The next steamer to be finished was named the "Alberta", its capacity and dimensions being the same as the first. The three other steamers built were probably somewhat smaller. Their names were the "Northcotte", the "Lilly" and the "Minnow". They were probably built in the immediate vicinity of the high level bridge. In all 18 barges were built in addition to the steamers. On account of the short season of high water, during which the steamers could be navigated, it was soon clear to the company that they could not deliver the volume of coal that was required to fulfil their contract with the C.P.R. There was also a good demand for their coal all along the line for domestic purposes. It took only 8 hours for a steamer to get to Medicine Hat during the six weeks of high water, but five days to return to Lethbridge. Seeing that they couldn't depend upon the steamers to deliver the coal on account of shallowness of the rivers, except the short two weeks of June and part of July, Mr. Galt decided to build a railroad to connect with the C.P.R. main line at Dunmore, 7 miles east of Medicine Hat. It was the only solution. So in the spring of 1885 they started the construction of a narrow gauge railroad starting from Dunmore, about 110 miles east of Lethbridge.

Narrow Gauge Railroad

The railway was only three feet wide and the locomotives and cars proportionately small. I am sorry that I don't

know the dimensions of the little box cars nor their capacity in tons. The narrow gauge was also built to Coutts, Shelby Junction and some time later to Great Falls in Montana, as the company found a good market for its coal to the Great Northern, and also for domestic use in Great Falls. There was also a branch line built from Stirling to Cardston, a distance of 47 miles. In 1893 the Galt road, from Dunmore to Lethbridge, was bought by the C.P.R. and replaced by a standard gauge which was completed the same summer. I remember the year well, as I was in my 11th year. It seems to me that there was a gang of men camped at every second station removing the short ties and replacing them with the standard 8 ft. ties. They also laid and spiked down the standard sized rails on the outside of the small ones. It was a double railway for a while. The work did not interfere with the running of the trains. When the standard gauge was completed to Lethbridge, all the small locomotives, cars and snow plows were taken to Lethbrigde, and the small rails torn out which were also shipped to Lethbridge. In 1886, the oldtimers say that it was a very severe winter. I heard it related that some of the trains, because of the deep snow, took a month to make the trip to Lethbridge and back. It took my father six days to take the mail from Medicine Hat to Winnifred and return with the mail that came from Fort Macleod and Lethbridge. Winnifred is only about 36 miles. I can almost hear some of the newcomers ask: "Why didn't they send the mail round by way of Calgary?" Kind readers, there was no railway at that remote time between Calgary and Macleod, neither was there any airmail. The snow was also even deeper up there on that 109-mile stretch. The standard gauge later was continued on to B.C. through the Crow's Nest Pass.

A National Service.

A few more lines about the Galt steamers. In the early spring of 1885, when the Riel rebellion broke out, the Northwestern Coal and Navigation Company had an opportunity to render a substantial national service. The greatest object of the Government was to secure speedy transportation for troops and supplies to the point of battle, Batoche and Fish Creek, in order to crush the outbreak before it spread to the Blood and Blackfoot tribes, who were becoming somewhat restless. As they were the two most powerful tribes they would have done a lot of damage, had they joined the Crees and half-breeds. Great credit is due to two men for keeping the two tribes in hand. One is Reverend George McKay who now resides in Hot Springs, South Dakota, at the venerable age of 94. He was Chaplain to the Mounted Police at Fort Macleod more than 60 years ago. In the years he was there he learned the dialect of the Bloods. Through his kind and fair treatment and good counsel he won their respect, friendship and affection. He converted a goodly number of them and they thought the world of him. He also discouraged them from drunkenness and horse-stealing. Whatever he said to them they heeded. They gave him the name "Nanastoko", which means **Chief Mountain,** to show their great esteem of the good young man of God.

The other peace advocate was the great chief of the Blackfoot, "Crowfoot". He told his braves that since they had promised never to take up arms against the people of the great white Queen, they must abide by their bargain. Reverend George McKay later accompanied General Strange on a punitive expedition to Frog Lake soon after the massacre. While looking over the buildings which had been burned by the Crees under Big Bear and Wandering Spirit, he found the charred remains of two priests and a lay brother in a cellar, and buried them in their own churchyard.

Now I will relate the part played by the steamers. One was sent down to the Saskatchewan Landing some 25 miles north of Swift Current where it was loaded with troops and their war equipment which had been shipped to Swift Current by rail. The "Northcotte" was loaded in Medicine Hat with a similar cargo. The reason for that procedure was to eliminate the 25-mile march and haul of the equipment and supplies which was necessary at Swift Current. On her way down she encountered much trouble which retarded her progress, shallow water, sand and gravel bars being the chief obstacles. The boats were on their way to Batoche, the battleground.

The "Lilly" and two barges were next loaded, not with troops, but provisions for them. The two barges were loaded with bacon and hams, mostly dry salt bacon. But the "Lilly" fared even worse than its sister steamer. She ran aground into a gravel bar while going downstream at full steam. She was so hopelessly grounded that even when the cargo had been unloaded there was no power to pull

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her out, her own power being too weak. There being no other steamer available, the two barges were towed back to Medicine Hat by gangs of men who were hired at that town. The cargo was freighted back up to Medicine Hat by all the available carts and wagons in the neighborhood. The scene of the wreck as near as I can remember was about three-quarters of a mile above the spot on which the Drowning Ford Ranch was built about 13 years later. The place was named the "Lilly Flat" for many years afterwards. The paddle wheel was visible for a long time after. The superstructure and deck had been taken off and carted back to Medicine Hat. By the time all this happened, word was received that the rebellion was all over and the troops had returned to the east. Now another little problem arose—it was what to do with the enormous quantity of dry salt bacon which was still in the two barges tied up just below the C.P.R. bridge. Wires flashed back and forth to headquarters, probably Ottawa. The trouble was solved after some 10 or 12 days. The bacon, flour, salt and tea was turned over to the Indian Department and shipped to various Indian reserves. Other goods were sold to local merchants.

Two of the steamers plied between Prince Albert and Edmonton after the rebellion. The "Minnow" was anchored at Medicine Hat the spring of 1888 and sent downstream as soon as the river was considered deep enough in June. I saw one of the steamers at Fort Pitt in June, 1896, on her way to Edmonton. She unloaded about 12 tons of flour and other goods for the Hudson's Bay store of Onion Lake. I was going to the Anglican Indian School there, which was managed by Rev. J. R. Matheson. The Coal and Navigation Company also had the contract to build the barracks for the N.W.M.P., Fort Macleod, Maple Creek and Medicine Hat. The spot on which the Fort was built at Medicine Hat was the most beautiful I have ever seen. It is too bad that the buildings were not preserved by some strong enclosure.

Sir Alexander Tilloch Galt, was born in Chelsea, London, September 6th, 1817. In March, 1835, he sailed for Canada. He died September 19th, 1893. He was survived by Lady Galt and by three sons and eight daughters. I have only mentioned a few of his great works in Western Canada. His other great achievements throughout Canada are too numerous to mention here.

Horse Stealing

There was a lot of horse-stealing the first two years of Medicine Hat, done mostly by the Blood Indians. The owners of the horses would go up to Fort Macleod and lay their complaints. The Mounted Police would try and usually did, recover their horses for them and put the culprits in jail. On one occasion when my uncles, Frank La Fromboise and Norbert Poitra went after some 30 head of my grandfather's horses that had been stolen at Medicine Hat, one of the Indians would not disclose where he had hidden 10 head of the horses, which was his share. Jerry Potts, who was a scout and interpreter for the Mounted Police, told him he would shoot him if he didn't produce the horses at once. The brave drew his scalping knife and dared him, whereupon he shot him through the head killing him instantly. Brandishing his smoking revolver he told them that he would shoot some more of them if the horses were not found. That produced results immediately. Two of the Bloods brought the stolen horses to the Fort in a couple of hours.

Reverend George McKay overheard the Indians saying that on account of one of their fellow tribesmen being killed they would follow the two half-breeds on their way home and re-steal the horses. So the Reverend gentleman started out with my two uncles early next morning, thinking that by so doing the revenge-bent Bloods would not follow, but when they had gone about 16 miles he saw that he had been too optimistic. On looking back from about where the village of Monarch now stands they saw what appeared to be about 40 mounted savages following them, all fully armed with rifles. When the Bloods were within 200 yards Reverend George bade goodbye to the half-breeds and told them to go on and not give their horses up if he should fail to stop the Indians. He was unarmed. Turning his horse, he raced back and forth in front of the pursuers, waving his right hand. My uncles said that the Bloods all drew rein and stopped to a man as soon as they recognized their preacher. They said it was a great relief to see their pursuers wheel their steeds and start back west with Mr. McKay.

Early Recollections and Discovery of Gas

My first recollection goes back to 1887, when I was about 4½ years of age. My mother had placed me in a hammock under a large cottonwood tree near where she was working. I heard the sweet cooing of doves overhead. A big rattlesnake was almost under my hammock. There were sage brush and cactus all over. I also remember when the General Hospital was built in 1888. The sand stone was hauled from Robertson's Coulee west of where Starks and Burton had their horse ranch some years later. I also remember when natural gas was first discovered by Mr. Colter in 1889.

In the early spring of 1883 there came to Medicine Hat a man by the name of John Charles Colter. He came from County Cork, Ireland. His parents had first settled at Stratford, Ontario. Mr. J. C. Colter was a stone mason by trade. He joined the B. and B. gang and helped to build the first railroad bridge at Medicine Hat. That done, he started a bake-shop, in a tent which he pitched where Riverside Park is now located. His tent was approximately on the spot where the gas house now stands. When the town was started he went to work as a builder. He helped Harry Yuill build the American

Hotel. Mr. Yuill was the first owner. He built himself a house joining the hotel on the west side. He had a large family, some of his children still being alive. His eldest son was Charlie, who now resides in Vancouver, B.C. The eldest daughter was Lilly (Mrs. Nichol), now deceased. Next was Nellie, now in Port Huron, Michigan; next, Manley, who died in Bassano; then Frank, who now is in New Jersey; and Winwright, who was kicked to death by a horse about 1910. Kennedy, another son, is teaching in Victoria High School in Edmonton, and Ardus is a C.P.R. conductor between Medicine Hat and Calgary at present. Then there are Edgar of Salmon Arm, B.C., and Hazel, the youngest, now living in Ashland, Oregon. There were also three other children who died in infancy. Mr. John Charles Colter was the man who first discovered gas in Medicine Hat in 1889. He drilled his first well about a quarter of a mile below the General Hospital, within 50 yards of the river. He used to burn limestone with the gas. When the Indians saw the gas burning amongst the spray of water it blew out they called it the devil's fire.

Mr. Colter later built three concrete houses on Second Street. He drilled another well back of them about 1893 when he had finished the three duplex houses. The first person to use gas for domestic purposes was Mrs. Robert Irwin. It was piped into her kitchen with a length of garden hose. Several people blew up their houses when they first started to use gas as they didn't have it under proper control.

In the next issue I will write more about Medicine Hat's early residents and business establishments.

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anyone would brand a "Maverick," but the neighborly spirit was always in evidence. The riders might celebrate in town by shooting up a bar room and breaking all the lights, but they were intensely loyal to their outfits and, in the round-ups, their employers' interests came first.

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The first members of the cattle family to enjoy the grasses of Western Canada were the buffalo. The first white man to see them was Henry Kellsey, who came west in 1692. In the 18th Century several other white men saw thousands of these shaggy animals roaming along the Red River. Even after the Police came in 1874 the Indians were living on them, eating the choice parts and using the hides for clothing and for the wigwams.

The very first cattle to see Western Canada were a bull and two cows brought in by the North-West Company and sold to Red River settlers before 1821. Shortly after this some Americans drove 300 head of cattle into the Manitoba settlement and sold them to the settlers. The cows sold for about $150.00 each and the oxen $90.00. For a time the numbers increased but later, due to lack of care and inbreeding, they decreased in numbers and in size. In the first drove the best cattle weighed about 1,000 lbs. After fifteen years about 700 lbs. was the heaviest weight.

A second drove of U.S.A. cattle came in in 1825, and it was thought that as the buffalo could live without stables so could the cattle. The result was that most of them perished during the winter.

Previous to the passing of the buffalo there was no use of putting cattle on the Alberta ranges. Buffalo bulls would kill the range bulls and the cows would drift off with the herds of buffalo.

The buffalo disappeared rapidly. The I. G. Baker Company alone shipped out 250,000 prime hides in 1874. The N.W.M.P. came in then and as they gave some assurance that law and order would prevail white settlers came in bringing a few cattle with them. Families came in from Montana like the Olsens, McFarlands and Armstrongs. They settled near the police forts and supplied dairy products to the detachments. In '74 a man named Shaw drove 500 beef cattle across the mountains into Alberta. There was plenty of grass and water but no market for the beef. There were no towns or railroads and over the prairie trails it was a thousand miles to Winnipeg and 260 miles to Fort Benton, the nearest U.S.A. supply point.

In 1876 Jim Christy and Geo. Emerson brought in separate herds of animals from U.S.A. The horses and cattle from these herds found a ready market among the settlers in Southern Alberta.

In 1877 the Treaty No. 7 was signed at Crowfoot Crossing. The Dominion Government, having taken over the whole territory except the reserves, wished to encourage home making. They hoped to get the Indians to breed cattle so some fresh meat was given to one of the bands. The Red Men took the food to their camp but threw it to the dogs because there still were buffalo available.

The next few years were years of many disasters. A prairie fire spread over the whole country and the buffalo were forced to go south to the U.S.A. Thus, the Indians lost their usual food supply and when starving they slaughtered the cattle of the Range men. The white men appealed to the police but the government could not make good the losses. The plight of the Indian tribes was indeed dreadful. They had not made homes or cared for the cattle supplied to them. They were reduced to living on rabbits, mice and gophers and naturally raided the settlers' homes and stole whatever they could. This in addition to the severe winters made the losses so great that it was clear that ranching should not have been started till the Indians were under control and the country really open. However, these hardy pioneers were not easily discouraged and gradually better times came.