Some Memories of The Old "76"

By MRS. S. E. WARREN, Vauxhall, Alta.

"T"he Old 76 . . . the very name is suggestive of adventure. It echoes richly with that romance which always clings to what is definitely past. There are a few in the fast-thinning ranks of old timers who still remember it in all its early greatness of thundering herds and vast open spaces. Their voices still hold that note of warm respect and something of veneration when they speak of it. A few weeks ago I was talking to a man who as a lad lived in the Walsh district, and he spoke of the great herds of black cattle that often passed his homestead dwelling. These herds were so large that it often took hours for one herd to pass by.

The first beginnings of the old 76 date back to 1887 when Sir Lester Kaye at the head of a British syndicate received grants of large tracts of land from the Canadian Pacific Railway Company. There were ten or twelve of these grants strung along the railway line all the way from Balgonia, Sask. (east of Regina), to Calgary. They were at first known as the Lester Kaye Farms.

The C.P.R. had granted them under two very definite conditions; all buildings erected on these lands were to be put up close to the railway line, and extensive operations in the way of crop experiments were to be carried on. The latter was with the object of discovering definitely what kinds of crop were most suited to each region. It was a wise and far-seeing move on the part of the railway company, but, sad to say, no successful type of farming was ever achieved. Some crops were grown in some places but, judging by the reports that have come down to us, the experiments in farming were mostly failures. In fact they were classed as failures.

But these wide acres of grass-land were soon put to another use, the raising of cattle, sheep and horses. Many of the earliest cattle herds were brought in from Wyoming, and with them came that colorful figure, D. H. Andrews, whose initiative and energy stand out so prominently in the history of the 76.

D. H. Andrews

When the Lester Kaye company found themselves unable to carry on any longer with their project, it was D. H. Andrews the head of a newly-organized company consisting of many of his Old Country friends who bought them out. His first move was to rent or otherwise dispose of many of the large tracts. He retained only the Swift Current, Gull Lake, Stair, and Crane Lake properties.

Horses had previously been raised at Swift Current and Gull Lake. Now they were raised at Crane Lake. Sheep, mixed breeds, which ran anywhere from twenty thousand to thirty thousand in number, still pastured in the Swift Current and Gull Lake areas.

Cattle, which numbered around twenty thousand, were raised at Crane Lake and Stair. According to the best information available, three breeds of cattle were raised, Herefords, Shorthorns and Aberdeen-Angus. The purebreds of all three breeds were kept at Crane Lake, purebred bulls being imported from the Old Country. Grade cattle were kept at Stair. All cattle ready for market were shipped alive to the Old Country.

Crane Lake was the headquarters of the new company, with D. H. Andrews residing there as manager. He also appointed managers in charge of each of the other units. With him at Crane Lake were Fred Craig, his ranch foreman, and Robert Needham, his farm foreman. This layout was often called the Canadian Land and Ranch Company.

The Crane Lake headquarters had their buildings about 200 yards south of the main C.P.R. line at a point about two miles east of the present town of Piapot. There was a big house as residence, also a stable large enough to hold 50 horses, with a hayloft above. The barn was surrounded by a windmill which kept the premises supplied with water from a 90-foot well. There were stables for the purebred Shorthorns, about 70 in number. There were three sheds with their yards for hospital purposes; sick cows, sick calves, and sick stock unit.

These buildings were built on high ground and could be seen for a considerable distance.

Days of Open Range

At this time there was an immense expanse of open range available for stock. Practically all the country north to the South Saskatchewan River and as far east as the junction of the Swift Current with the South Saskatchewan was open country. From Crane Lake south-east through the Old Wives country as far as Pinto Horse Butte was unoccupied. (There was a small detachment of the N.W.M.P. stationed near Pinto Horse Butte in early days.) On the south the American Border was boundary line for their cattle. Around 1900 the Conrad cattle company, known as the V outfit, came into the northern part of the range. Also the Day Brothers, known as the Turkey Track, came into the Old Wives country about the same time. Still

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there was range, and to spare, for all three.

After some years Mr. Andrews and his
advisers decided to ship in Eastern steers,
yearlings, better known as "dogies." Within
three years they had shipped in between
dozen and fifteen thousand. Then there came a bad outbreak of
mange which killed off the Eastern cattle
in great numbers. Following this no
more of them were shipped in.

As it was the custom to ship alive,
Mr. Fares of Gordon, Ironsides & Fares
generally visited the ranches, bought the
beef on the hoof, and arranged for its
shipment. The cattle would then be
shipped to Rush Lake where the most
suitable facilities for shipping were
located.

David Andrews was a bachelor, an
Englishman, and he spent his winters
alternatively in England and Calgary. He
spent the winter of 1904-1905 in England,
returning to Canada in early spring.
While on the way he became ill and had
to be taken off the train at Winnipeg.
He died in hospital there, and he was
buried in Calgary. A beautiful little lake
near the Crane Lake headquarters is now
called Andrews Lake in honor of his
memory.

The manager who succeeded him was
Mr. Springett, whose Christian name is
unknown to this writer. He had quite
different ideas as to how the 76 should
be run and suffered some severe losses.
On top of that came the winter of 1906-
1907 which killed off a great many of the
cattle. Also homesteading and settle-
ment had begun to increase rapidly and
the open range was fast disappearing.

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One yearling chestnut registered Quarter Horse stud colt.
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Crane Lake Property Sold

In 1909 Gordon, Ironsides & Fares
bought out the Crane Lake property with
some 25,000 acres of range, but the days
of wide open range were gone and the
herds were kept for a few years in fenced
pastures, chiefly along the White Mud
River, now called Prichman’s Rivière.

Then the old 76 was sold but a memory,
with the many changes taking place so
swiftly.

Gordon, Ironsides & Fares had bought
the "76" brand and continued to use it,
putting the White Mud ranges in charge
of Harry Otterson, employed by a
neighboring ranch company which they
bought out in 1919. (The present Val Marie
pasture is part of the old White Mud River
range.)

In time Gordon, Ironsides & Fares sold
out to Rod MacLean of High River, who
in turn sold out to P. Burns Ranches.
The big stable at the Crane Lake head-
quarters burned down several years ago,
and the big house was torn down and
rebuilt across the highway from Andrews
Lake. The new house is the present
headquarters of the Piapot Ranch, and is
four miles east of the town.

Until 1907 Piapot had but a water-
tank, and the name seems to have been
given to commemorate the spot where
Chief Piapot and his local band of Cree
Indians met the white men in 1882 and
tried to stop the building of the railway
line across the prairie.

Some well-remembered riders are
spending their later years not so far from
their early cowboy haunts. There is E. E.
(Continued on Page 24)

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THE OLD "76"
(Continued from Page 21)
Williams who started to work for the first company in 1888, and reported still living at Gull Lake. Around Maple Creek are Tom Harrison, Charles and Percy Drury, and Babe and George Sinclair. Walter and Bertie Knight live at Swift Current, while Harry Otterson resides at Shaunavon. Charles Barton, Dave Burgess and Angus Daigleish now live on the Pacific Coast.

Right here I would like to acknowledge my indebtedness to several old-timers of the region for information concerning the old 76. High on the list is Thomas Harrison of Maple Creek who, looking back over his years with the company, has this to say: "It was a good outfit. I enjoyed the years I worked for it, and was sorry when the conditions of the country made it impossible for the 76 to carry on."

Now another day has dawned, Phoenix-like, the ranch at Piapot has risen from the ashes of its former greatness into new beauty and development. While only a prairie trail, a dirt road, a grass-grown wheel-marks invites the curious traveler to turn off the highway and explore the old buildings on the old hilltop site, a new life with more modern prosperity carries on from the new headquarters across from Andrews Lake. Forty sections are still ranchland, purchased in 1945 by Albert Green, sheep-rancher of many years' standing in the Taber and Vauxhall districts of Alberta. Along with the land he purchased 1,000 head of ewes and lambs, and 400 head of cattle. He brought in his great sheep flocks from Alberta, and Alec Walmark, his manager at Vauxhall, was transferred to the new holdings at Piapot. Mr. Walmark has made many improvements both to buildings and land within the past three years. Stables and machine shops were added to the residence, bunk-house and large silo already on the place. The residence was considerably remodelled with running water and power plant installed. It had been built with a full cement basement. It has telephone communication with the town four miles away, which is about the nearest neighbor. The site is a beautiful one with a large shelter belt following the course of the Skunk Creek, along its west bank. A fine lawn and ornamental shrubs add to its beauty.

The western boundary of the ranch lies right against the little town of Piapot and the C.P.R. stockyards there. For a distance of seven miles No. 1 highway traverses the ranch in a general east-west direction.

The Skunk River rises in the Cypress Hills. It has an exceedingly heavy flow of run-off water in spring and early summer. At that time it overflows hundreds of acres of natural meadowland on the Piapot ranch as well as on Mr. Green's adjacent lease-lands. On its way it supplies water for irrigating the grounds and gardens close to the buildings. The run-off water drains into Andrews Lake which is about two miles long, and is popularly supposed to be bottomless. (Incidentally Andrews Lake was stocked with young pickerel by the Saskatchewan Government last spring.) In times of very heavy flood the waters of Andrews Lake drain off into lakes farther north.

By the first of August the Cypress Hills run-off has dwindled down until the Skunk River is practically dry. There are a few springs higher up on its course that supply a light trickle, but the water does not come as far down as the ranch. It is a region where there is much danger of killing frost to more tender vegetables. Nevertheless, fine large vegetables of all kinds, as well as big, early-naturing potatoes, are grown on this fertile soil so easily and plentifully irrigated. The first comers to the old 76 might well rub their eyes in amazement if they could see the well-filled shelves of canned home-grown vegetables in Mrs. Walmark's larder.

With the drying up of the spring and summer overflow comes the time of putting up wild hay. Every year sees improvement to the irrigation system of ditches and dikes. The area of hay-land is increased too by the simple process of mowing out patches of wild rose and "bucket-brush". In 1947, 76 stacks of wild hay of the very best quality were put up. This hay consists chiefly of prairie grass known as "red-top" with a small mixture of clover and timothy. In 1948 there were 54 stacks of hay put up before August 23rd when I visited the ranch, and there were 200 acres still to cut. A crew of six men were working steadily with a John Deere engine and power-mower, three bucket-rakes and a stacker.

Another progressive touch was the 450 acres sown to crested wheat grass, after a 1947 crop of grain. Thus in the best modern manner, in these later days, is carried on a policy of successful ranching in the grounds of the "old 76". The while, Time changes not the timeless lakes and windings, tree-bordered creek and the old buildings on the brow of the hill still linger, a silent reminder of days that were.

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