

Ad McPherson, Oldtimer of '69

By WM. BLEASDELL CAMERON, Meadow Lake, Sask.

(Concluding Installment)

ONE winter Ad teamed up with Charlie Smith to go "wolfing" at Big Valley, the location of the present town of that name. Beside provisions, their outfit included among other things their rifles, tools, duffle, moccasins, bedding and an enormous supply of the quick-fire ammunition needed in their business—strychnine. They hauled their stuff in sleds pulled by their cayuses to a sheltered spot a short way back from the east bank of the Valley, put up a log cabin and a huge stack of firewood and following a heavy snowfall, set out hundreds of poison baits within a radius of a mile from their camp, already envisioning a big harvest of skins. For buffalo in great herds still roamed the Northwest prairies and the wolf packs were correspondingly numerous, the country swarming with the destructive pests. Then, all preliminaries having been attended to, Ad and his partner settled down to feast on the abundant game, smoke, play cards, darn socks, try to out-lie each other in tall stories and live the "life of Riley" generally.

On the west side of the Valley opposite them a number of Sarcees had put up a camp of a dozen lodges, but as these Indians were notorious horse thieves, the partners had made no friendly overtures to their red neighbors.

Just east of the Valley and a short way south of their cabin stretched a long ridge. Rising to some height at the east end, it sloped gradually until lost in the level plain a little more than a stone's throw from the east bank of the Valley. The winter was bitterly cold, the snow deep and coated everywhere by a crust strong enough to bear up a man but not an animal of any weight. In the course of the Northwest winter there is usually at some interval a thaw lasting anywhere from a few days to a month, before the low temperatures again take command, leaving the snow with the heavily crusted top.

One day, their supply of meat having run low, Ad took his rifle and told his partner he was going out to get a deer. Walking west, he travelled along the north side of the aforementioned slope, on the look-out for a white-tail, until presently the sound of heavy animals breaking through the crust on the opposite side of the ridge, and so out of his range of vision, came to his ears. When the sounds continued, Ad's suspicions were aroused. Their horses found their living in the winter by pawing the snow off the nutritious grass beneath, but these animals were moving, steadily, not feeding. Moreover, unless he was mistaken, they must be driven by someone. Ad went on, keeping abreast of the sounds over the ridge until it ended in the level plain and he was face to face with two Sarcees who had been driving off his horses. Without an instant's delay, Ad opened fire on the frustrated thieves, who at once started on the run for their camp, with Ad in hot pursuit, pumping shell after shell into his Winchester and throwing up clouds of snow around the heels

of the flying fugitives. The pursuit continued until they were half-way across the Valley, when realizing he was now within rifle range of the Sarcee lodges, Ad thought it prudent to drop the chase and return to camp.

On his partner learning what had happened he was panicked.

"That means, Ad", he said, "that we must get out of here and return to Edmonton at once".

Ad, however, was not ready to quit so quickly and abandon the fruits of their outlay and successful season; there were some hundreds of dead wolves buried in the numerous snowbanks, pending mild spring weather when they could be taken out and skinned. He told his partner so.

"Bud", said Charlie (who spoke with a German accent), "iv ve stay here, ve vill be murdered. Dose Injun vill nefer be satisfied until dey kill us".

Ad still objected that if they were attacked they could, with their two repeating rifles, stand the attackers off, but Smith would not be convinced, and since Ad, under the circumstances, did not wish to remain at Big Valley alone, he reluctantly yielded to Smith's arguments and the partners went back to Edmonton.

Ad hung around "Edmonton" until approaching spring and mild weather told him it was time he went back and dug his wolves out of the snow banks. Charlie still didn't want any brush with the Sarcees and Ad started back alone, taking with him two caddies of "niggerhead" tobacco. But he stopped at the Battle River to engage Solomon Laboucan, an ancient French halfbreed, to help him in the skinning.

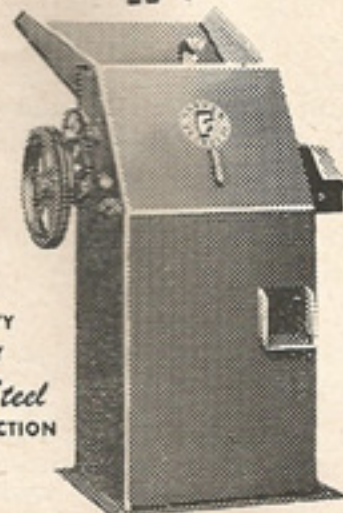
"Where you got dem wolf, Ad?" the old man enquired.

"We buried 'em in snowbanks till the spring thaw took the starch out of 'em so as we could skin 'em", Ad told him.

The old man threw back his head and went into a spasm that left Ad staring in bewilderment.

"Ha, ha, ha!" he roared. "You t'ink you find dem wolf, Ad?" He went into another hilarious convulsion. "You know de little mouse, build her nes' in ground onder de snow? Well, Injun come 'long, lookin' on de snow, have long sharp stick on hees han'. Pretty soon he's stop, see somet'ing. He's shove de sharp stick down troo de snow—up come little mouse end de stick—an' he's got his sopper. You t'ink you find dose wolf?" And the old

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halfbreed roared again until he had to stop and mop his face.

So Ad went on without a helper. The first thing he did on reaching the cabin was build a crackling big fire in the mud chimney and in no time a thick column of smoke was rising into the pulseless air.

It wasn't long until the door was pushed open and Chief Bull's Head, gun in hand (but without a "coat" this time), scowling darkly and followed by a dozen of his braves, stalked in. Ad walked over to an open caddie, tore off half a dozen plugs of niggerhead and handed them to the chief. The scowl dissolved in smiles; he was overlooking the affront he had received from Ad some years previously when Ad—then a youth—had pulled a pistol on him. And he was completely overwhelmed by the trader's generosity when Ad handed him an old felt hat.

Soon from under his blanket one of the braves drew a wolf skin and handed it to "the man with the goods"—tobacco. In payment Ad tore off another two plugs



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of the niggerhead. Then another Sarcee found a skin somewhere about his person and another exchange took place. And by nightfall McPherson had the pelts of all their poisoned wolves stacked in a pile that reached to the roofpoles of their cabin and the Indians had returned to their lodges across the Valley.

"I figured when I came down", Ad said, "that I might be able to get the wolves skinned for fifty cents apiece". He chuckled. "But they didn't cost me two bits".

"What did you do with your wolves, Ad?" I asked.

"Sold 'em to Charlie Conrad, manager at Macleod for the I. G. Baker Company".

"And what did you get for them?"

"Three dollars".

"And how many skins did you have?"

"Three hundred".

"My, that's a lot of wolves. You're sure there were three hundred, Ad?"

"Yep".

"You could cut that figure a bit maybe—say to two hundred and fifty? Throw off a few skins?"

"Not a damn skin", he maintained stoutly. "Why, you have no idea, Billy, how thick them wolves was in them days. And they was educated. You might go out onto the plain and look around and there wouldn't be a wolf anywheres in sight within a mile. But just fire one shot! Then you'd see 'em comin', hundreds of 'em, from all directions. That shot meant meat—dead buffalo—for the no-good varmints".

"Well, you ought to know how many wolves you had, Ad—you poisoned them. But that figure of three hundred still looks to me as if it might be a trifle high. You couldn't throw off maybe a couple of skins?"

"Not a damn skin", said Ad.

Transaction in Spirits

Among the many tales of his adventures Ad told me, the following stands out in my memory as characteristically McPhersonish.

In the early '70's, before the coming to the Canadian North West of the Mounted Police, dealing in liquor was a business any man not having a criminal record might engage in without damage to his reputation. As evidence of this, I might cite the case of a liquor dealer of that period who was later elected to the House of Commons at Ottawa and one night entertained his fellow-members by staging an exhibition, on a billiard table in the basement, of a Blackfoot war-dance, complete with trimmings, including blood-curdling war whoops.

Ad McPherson liked money and one day it occurred to him that he was being bypassed by others in the race for dollars and he took immediate steps to catch up.

A German located on one of Montana's northern territorial streams was known to be doing a thriving wholesale trade in wet goods and Ad one noon appeared at his place to negotiate a purchase. Preliminaries were brief and Ad presently found himself the possessor of a barrel of whiskey, to be paid for in gold dust. An invitation to join the merchant at dinner was refused by his customer on the ground that he had eaten on the trail a short time before and couldn't swallow another mouthful even to oblige his grandmother. So the German went off to dine alone, leaving Ad in sole occupancy

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of his liquor warehouse, entirely surrounded by whiskey.

But Ad had an altogether different reason for declining the German's invitation. A trace of moisture on the top of his barrel seemed to require looking into and he lost no time in getting to work on the job. The result was that he discovered near the top of one of the staves a small wooden plug. "Hm", commented Ad, "so that's how it is. Watered!"

Just outside the warehouse he had noticed a pile of lime and the materials usually found with it. He stepped out to have another look. "Figurin on doin' a job of plasterin', the Dutchman, looks like", he concluded. "Wonder where?" He ran his fingers through the pile, caught up a handful and guessed at its weight and ended by filling his pocket with some of the stuff before re-entering the warehouse. "Might come in handy sometime", he reckoned.

The German soon reappeared, rubbing his stomach and declaring his customer had missed "a goot meal". Ad handed him the payment, the barrel was hoisted into Ad's wagon, he mounted to the high spring seat and gathered up the lines. But the German halted him.

"Vait a minute", he said. "A frient a biece down der trail to visid I am vishing und mit you I am riding".

"Hop in then", said Ad and his passenger being seated, he gave the word to his impatient horses and away they went as if they were on a racetrack and were out to take first money.

The springs under the wagon seat were extraordinarily strong, the passenger was big and heavy, the trail a succession of drops and rises, and as he bounced up and down it took all the German's strength and strategy to keep the seat under him, while his protests that Ad was driving too fast were drowned in the rattle of the wheels. And when at last the wagon hit a particularly high bump, the German lost all holds and—like the man on the flying trapeze who sailed through the air with

the greatest of ease—out he went, to a crash landing on the hard, rutted road behind the wagon.

Ad was out and at his side immediately—to find the air filled with groans and mutterings of "Ach" and "Mein Gott" as the ejected victim nursed his violently-complaining rear section. However, as soon as Ad determined that the sufferer's hurts were limited to distressing bruises, Ad cut him a crutch from a nearby bush and the last he saw of his Teutonic acquaintance he was hobbling painfully but successfully on his homeward stretch, his visit to his "frient" indefinitely postponed.

A month later Ad walked into I. G. Baker and Company's trading post at Fort Benton—to be met by a riotous outburst of laughter and a torrent of endearing if scurrilous abuse from the crowd of cowpokes, prospectors, bullwhackers, trappers, muleskinners and gentlemen of no recognizable profession that filled the place.

"Hi, you band of low-down hoss thieves", Ad said in acknowledgment of the rousing reception he'd received, "what's the joke? You know I'd swap my daily pork and beans any time for a good laugh. Spit 'er out!"

"Listen at him!" mocked a humorist in the crowd. "As if he didn't know! You shorely ain't dranked up all that whiskey you gypped the Dutchman out of a month ago, Ad?"

"Me? Whiskey? Whoever seen me buyin' whiskey exceptin' over a bar?" he demanded.

"And did he trim that Dutchman with the poke he give him! A cryin' shame, I call it," pursued the humorist.

"Now you know, you blackmailin' gang, I'm a poor man. What'd I be doin' with any poke o' gold dust? And I ain't held up nobody lately, either."

"We know you ain't got it now, but you cain't squeeze out of it nohow, you robber. What you went an' done to that

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AD McPHERSON

(Continued from Page 9)

poor shorthorn was a crime. He took the poke into the bank an' they shook a pound o' sand out of it!"

Ad laughed. "But I bet the feller never told you longhorns he tried to gyp me first. That whiskey he sold me was more'n one-third water."

Stalking a Defaulter

A humorist has said that the only thing he couldn't resist was temptation. He must have been related to Ad McPherson.

On one occasion in the early '70's, before there was any established mail service to Canada's North West Territory, Ad made a trip from the vicinity of the future Fort Macleod to Helena, Montana, with mail and express, to be forwarded from there to the States, and to bring back a load of merchandise for I. G. Baker and Company. To look after his horses and to help in the handling of heavy cases, Ad had engaged an acquaintance to accompany him.

Now here was a temptation and a wide-open opportunity for fun that Ad simply couldn't resist. He told his employee—evidently a gullible sort of man—as a dark secret, that the packages they were carrying (supposed to be express) were dynamite, or, in other words, counterfeit money — and that if the authorities learned of it, it was going to be just too bad for them both.

They drove into the back yard of a livery barn and stabled their horses. Soon afterward he missed his employee, and after waiting a reasonable time, he went in search of him. Turning from a side street into the main thoroughfare, he spotted his helper on another corner a block away. At the same instant the man turned and saw Ad.

"I never seen such a rapid disappearance," chuckled Ad. "One second he's there, the next he ain't. If that feller was ever out of a job, all he'd have to do was step up to a conjurer — some calls 'em magicians — or a high-class medicine-man an' put on one of his fast disappearin' turns an' right away he's on the payroll. I follows him all afternoon, up one street an' down another, an' while I got a flash of him once in a while, I never caught him." Ad said he laughed so hard over the manoeuvring of the desperately-scared fugitive to avoid being seen near him that he had to lean against a post for support, as just listening to his ridiculously funny telling of it put me almost in the same condition. I don't remember that he ever told me the outcome.

A Game of Poker

One more incident in the life and adventures of Addison McPherson and then, so far as this chronicler is concerned, his book is closed.

With the extension of the C.P.R. rails from Red River to the Rockies, the era of the annual thousand-mile-cart-haul from Winnipeg to Edmonton ended, though McPherson did not entirely abandon freighting — he had carts on the trail between Calgary and Edmonton. But I don't think he was greatly interested after the curtailment of what had been a major activity of the early days. He missed, I am sure, a certain element of danger or romance inherent in the old

freight trail. The owner of a freighting outfit never knew when leaving Winnipeg what difficulties or dangers he might encounter before he reached its end. And truly it was a thrilling sight and one to quicken the blood of any young man who felt the pull for a life of freedom and the open road to watch a train of these "ships of the desert" launched out of Winnipeg on its slow thousand-mile venturing into what was then still a wilderness.

As I have said, I don't think Ad was much interested in any piffling substitutes for the old trail. What he was interested in at that time was, I believe, principally poker. He liked to play and spent the greater part of many of his days — and probably nights also — over Calgary gaming tables. It was probably about this time also, or a little later, that he went into sheep ranching, his location being in what is still, I've been told, known as "McPherson's Coulee," somewhere in the vicinity of the present town of Didsbury. But to get back to the '70's.

Ad and his friend Charlie Smith (if I am not mistaken, the husband of CANADIAN CATTLEMEN's exceedingly interesting contributor, Marie Rose Smith) were engaged in a game of poker one night on the river-flat above Fort Edmonton with a comparative stranger who was having phenomenal luck. He couldn't seem to lose. Unfortunately for him, however, he was caught with more aces in his hand than he was entitled to, and on the return of some of his ill-gotten winnings being demanded, he drew a knife and stabbed Charlie Smith in the shoulder. Ad instantly snatched a block of stovewood from a nearby pile and hit the crook a blow on the head that put him out for ten minutes. Then, after disposing of the fellow's knife, he somewhere found a puff ball which he stuffed into Smith's deep and crippling wound and stopped the flow of blood.

When the crook came to and staggered to his feet, Ad gave him some advice. He said: "Fella, this country isn't big enough to house decent people, and birds like you. You've got two minutes to get out of it. Start fast an' keep on movin'." Ad pulled out his watch. "And if you ain't gone when time's up an' I have to hit you again, you'll fall so hard you'll



Charlie Smith received a deep shoulder wound at the hands of the stranger.

have to wait till Judgment Day to get up again." The man went.

"What became of him, Ad?" I asked.

"Don't exactly know," he replied. "Last I heard of him he was down somewhere around the North Pole. Tryin' to learn them nice good-natured white bears down there poker probably, with their clothes for stakes. Skin games was his specialty."

End of the Trail

Ad owned 240 acres adjoining the town and oilfield of Turner Valley and this was his headquarters until after the death of his wife, when he moved into a Calgary hotel. There was good coal on his land and for many years, I believe, he supplied the farmers and ranchers in the district with their fuel. But with the discovery of oil on the adjacent land, this source of revenue was cut off and his mine was closed down. However, he had already become interested in the search for oil and had at least a substantial — he stated a predominant — interest in the Record, the first deep sinking in the territory south of Turner Valley. But at about 3,500 feet the drilling tools were lost, Ad professed to believe designedly in an attempt to freeze him out. Of what

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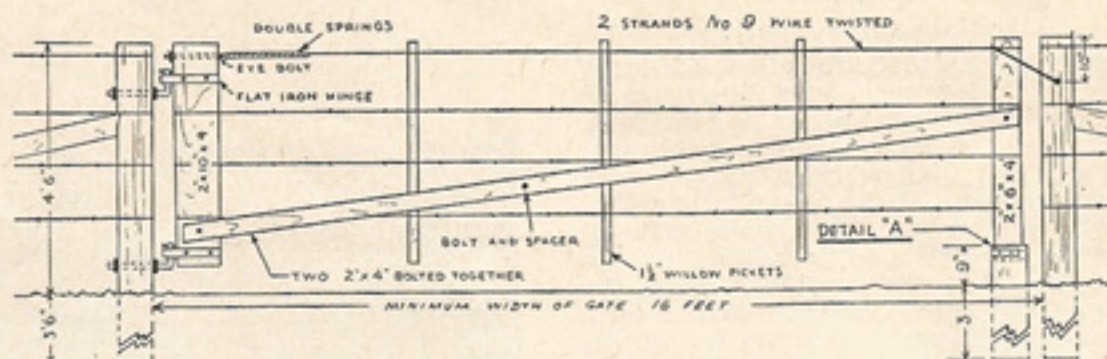
merit, if any, there may have been in this charge, I have no knowledge, but it remained a lasting thorn in his side.

He also became involved in a suit (over land, if I recall rightly) which he stated he carried to the Privy Council, at a heavy financial cost, and he lost the case. He was convinced he should have won but for the bungling or incompetence of his counsel. As a result, he ever afterward entertained a confirmed distrust of lawyers, which probably accounts for the fact that he left no will. And as he had no relatives—at least none for whom he felt any tie of kinship—his property probably went back to the Government or the University of Alberta. I have heard a valuation of \$80,000 placed on this land. His west line ran along the top of a high ridge and once when staying with him for a few days at his ranch I walked to the top of this ridge and from one spot took three pictures: one of the ranch and buildings; one of No. 4 Royalite on the west side of the ridge, the first large producer of gas and oil in the Turner Valley; and the third of the town of Turner Valley itself, all without moving a foot.

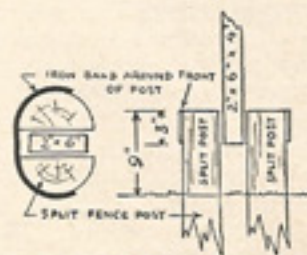
Ad once wrote to me at Vancouver, asking me to try to find a buyer for his Black Diamond or Turner Valley property at \$300 an acre. This seemed to me absurdly high (which it was at that time) and I was in any case otherwise occupied, so I could not undertake to spend time on what looked to me an unpromising proposition.

In the '20's I travelled for some years for an eastern firm, covering the West from Lake Superior on both sides of the international border to the Pacific Coast, and I never failed, when my business took me through Calgary, to stop off and spend a day with Ad. I was told that after one of these visits he talked about it for days and it was evident that he regarded them as events in a life which no longer held any great interest or pleasure for him. The last visit I paid him was on a Sunday. We went out together to lunch in the afternoon and I realized that he was becoming very feeble. Gone was all the keen wit, the zest for living, the spring in his step, and when we reached the cafe he was able to eat only some soup. He told me he was leaving next day for Banff to see his friend, Doctor Brett, at the Sanitarium and get some treatment and I learned later from the doctor that he did actually make the trip. But little could be done for him. The sands of his life were running out and he died shortly afterward.

Prior to his passing he had moved from his hotel to a private home. I called later to see the lady of the house, who turned out to have a high regard for Ad. I asked her for some details concerning his last days and she said that a few hours before he died he had called her to his bedside and placed in her hands a copy of a book I had sent him and on the title page of which I had penned a few words of affectionate regard. He said: "This book was written by a very, very dear friend of mine. I wouldn't give it to everyone." And he went on to speak of our life-long friendship and the pleasant times we had enjoyed together. I was touched to learn that one of the last thoughts to occupy his tired old brain before it ceased forever to concern itself with the things of this world was of a youth he had known and whose friendship he had cherished from the days



Showing drawing of standard gate for Community Pastures which are administered by the Land Utilization Branch under the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act. In Detail A, at right, is shown manner in which butt end of gate when closed rests between two split posts. The gate is constructed with two plank uprights of size indicated and braced with two 2" x 4" bolted together. The pickets are 1 1/2" willows. An important feature is the double springs which take off the weight of the gate end, thus facilitating easy opening and closing.



when he and the West he knew were young.

That Ad was any pattern of all the virtues he would have been the first to deny, but that he stood high in the esteem of the pioneer citizenry of Southwest Alberta, the fact that he numbered among his staunch friends such well-known Calgarians as Colonel Walker, G. C. King, A. E. Cross, Doctor Brett and many others, is sufficient evidence.

There will never be another Ad McPherson. There couldn't be. The time and conditions, the wild adventurous years that fashioned frontiersmen like him are gone forever. This is a new world. But he embodied the spirit of glamorous dar-

ing and adventure. He was one of the West's most colorful characters and he was typically representative of that vanished time. And although he had learned little from books, he was a rare repository of knowledge gained in the hard school of experience. And, while he could be "tough" when circumstances demanded, there was about him always a certain courtliness and a subtle distinction of speech and manner that stamped him as a thoroughbred. Even his name—Addison—bespoke real personages among his forebears.

The West owes a debt to Addison McPherson, for he surely had a part in opening the way for the amazing development that has followed.

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