

Home on the Kootenay Plains

By JOHN LAURIE, Calgary, Alta.

"MY children are hungry; they cry in the night. My young men have empty stomachs and there is no meat in my camp. So I and mine go back to the Kootenay Plains. There we shall have meat and the children shall grow fat and happy. Grass grows there for our horses and no snow lies there in winter.

"On these hills there is no grass; the snow is deep and the wind cuts us to the bone. We go."

So Moosekiller — Peter Wesley — spoke to his Indian Agent on the reserve at Morley about 55 years ago. And the Agent was powerless to stop him.

The Stonies — the Mountain Assiniboines of David Thompson, of Anthony Henry the younger, of Macdonald of Garth — had for many years had their winter camps on the headwaters of the North Saskatchewan River. Descended from a group of Sioux, their forefathers had followed the North Saskatchewan westward from its mouth to the foothills, probably sometime in the seventeenth century. That trek is lost in unrecorded history. Why they had set out no one knows; perhaps an epidemic had broken out in the camps and the frightened people had fled the plague-spot, but, all along that weary trek, are little groups of the people called by the Crees, Assinipwat — those who cook with stones. Wherever these groups have survived there are those who speak a language that is basically Siouan.

But the mountains proved a barrier and the weary travellers found a refuge in the wooded foothills and the mountain and river valleys. One group centered its life around Lac Ste. Ann and mingled with their Cree neighbors; a few miles south another group had their headquarters around Lake Wabamun and south-easterly to the district west of Ponoka. A third group penetrated to the Saskatchewan valley whence they drove out the Kootenays and followed the mountains southward to the Old Man River. Tradition says there were battles with the Crows in the Bow Valley. But always this group kept to the wooded hills. Outside the woods lay the open prairie and the buffalo range, the hunting ground of Peigan and Blackfoot and grave danger from these hereditary enemies of those who spoke the Sioux; but, into the forests and mountains these enemies refused to follow. Chance at first and later policy led these wanderers into an uneasy and unstable alliance with their Cree neighbors to the north and northeast and words of Cree origin appear in the Stony language.

Far too independent by nature ever to be subject to another tribe, the Stonies kept to their foothills and thrived and multiplied. Too few in numbers to be a real menace either to Cree or speakers of the Blackfoot tongue and secure in their hills and forests from punitive expeditions, they took buffalo from the plains when they needed them and horses when they could. In time, the Crow Indians ceased their raids across the mountains, and a more or less friendly understanding developed with the Koo-



The above steer tied his right front leg with a perfect knot of light willows and was dead when found. The two-year-old steer was owned by Albert Nemetz of Byemore, Alta. Picture taken by H. H. Cooper, Byemore, Alta.

tenays, who, by this time, roamed the valley of the Columbia river.

Since mountain sheep and goat were plentiful in the high ranges, and moose, elk and deer in the foothills, the Stonies were less reliant upon the buffalo than were the Blackfoot Confederacy. As time went on they became a deep-chested band of hunters, shorter and heavier set in body, since horses were of less value to them in hunting than were sure feet, good lungs and keen eyes. The need for trade in beaver skins was not pressing as it was to the Cree people. They had little to offer to the trader; he had little of value to them. Accordingly, their contacts with the early whites were rare and the race has remained the purest Indian blood of all the western tribes.

David Thompson speaks highly of their knowledge of the mountain passes, and Anthony Henry the Younger records meeting them during his travels between 1800

and 1810. Both speak of their friendliness and hospitality to the explorers. The first contact with whites that became permanent was through Robert Rundle, a Wesleyan missionary, who encountered them in a mountain valley about 1845. Rev. Rundle's own journal describes a spot which corresponds to the east end of Lake Minnewanka.

It remained for the Reverend George McDougall and his son, the famous Reverend John McDougall, to be the first whites to follow up the Rundle contact. These gallant missionaries identified themselves with the fortunes of the Stonies, assembled the bands and re-located them on the Bow River. To them, the McDougalls brought the elements of education and a deep, abiding respect for the Christian faith, a faith from which the Stonies have never wavered. Today, the Stonies still speak with reverence and awe of John McDougall who, until his

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death, was so closely linked with his Stoney friends.

But the Kootenay Plains, southwest of Nordegg, deep in high hills, remained always strong in their memories. Even today, every Stoney has a sentimental attachment to the Plains. Older men speak zestfully of their adventures there; young men sigh for the old days.

Moosekiller was, therefore, seeking the most reasonable solution to his problem and, since 1895 or earlier, there has been a movement back and forth from the Saskatchewan to the Bow where the main group is still living.

But even here, they were not safe from the white man. The mines at Nordegg brought the railway close to them; it brought also white men and hunters too who had little regard for the genuine needs of the Stonies. In time the area became well known for its big game and every year parties of hunters invaded this last sanctuary of the Stonies.

The group, however, developed a certain skill in coping with the invaders. They became guides and wranglers; they learned a few white tricks of finance. In all they are the same sturdy, independent people of a century ago. They have adopted many ways of the white. They learned to build their own houses, usually better than the government-sponsored ones at Morley; some acquired a few cattle independently of departmental assent and supervision; they grew little crops and good gardens; in winter they trapped quite profitably. Some of them are well known and highly respected far beyond Alberta. Silas Abraham, Phillip House, Phillip Poucette have been mentioned by travellers in their accounts of their adventures and these journals speak of the high principles and integrity of these men.

The writer once had the privilege of an invitation to spend Christmas with them, as the guest of Norman Abraham. It was a great experience. In how many homes in Canada today will people gather themselves together to sing the old missionary hymns on Christmas Eve? In how many homes or communities will there be a feast with carols and prayers and how unselfishly they remember the old and the needy among them. Truly more generous hearts do not exist. Rarely is there a more genuine appreciation of the true significance of the birth of the Christ Child.

National Parks, Forest Reserves, coal mines, big game hunters, all circumscribed the lives of these people. But the real danger to them began in 1931 when the control of natural resources was transferred to the province. Here was "a new race that knew not Joseph." Since their homes were all in the Forest Reserve, and since they had only the moral right to their homes — and everyone knows that, in modern civilization, moral rights have little significance — especially when they are the moral rights of a minority — the group had new fears that they would be dispossessed. Registered trap lines came into existence; careless slaughter of game by white hunters brought in closed seasons; fur suffered in the same way. Then came the greatest evil of all. A new highway was projected which would pass through their "lands" and open the scenic wonders of the Saskatchewan to tourists. Since they occupied one of the finest camp sites along this route, and had built up their little

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settlement, dispossession was a probability.

But, today, with the assistance of the Indian Association, they are assured of use of a small area, about 5,000 acres, as long as they shall need it. Near the junction of the Bighorn and the Saskatchewan, they have a fine log school with teacherage. The parents have made good use of the school's facilities, young men and women have attended to learn a little English, and in time community life will centre about the school.

Though many have decried the day school, experience so far has shown that, for small groups, it is superior to other types of school. Regular attendance ensures the children of their Family Allowance benefits; parents who have trap lines have taken turns in remaining at home to look after each other's families so that the children will not miss school. The average attendance has been very high.

Thus Moosekiller's plan to re-establish life on the Kootenay Plains and the Saskatchewan valley has come to full fruition, and this little group have developed as well as retained all the best qualities of independence.

U.S. MEAT PRODUCTION

The United States Department of Agriculture forecasts a total meat production of 23.2 billion pounds during 1950, a six per cent increase over 1949. The estimates are based on a 10 per cent increase in last fall's pig crop and a three per cent increase in cattle numbers on farms at January 1, 1950.

U.S. MEAT CONSUMPTION

It is estimated by the American Meat Institute that per capita meat consumption later in 1950 will reach a rate of 150 pounds. This is five pounds over that of 1949 and 11 pounds more than the 1939-41 average.

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