

The First Public Picnic and Stampede to Be Held on the Milk River in Alberta

By HARRY C. SMITH, Milk River, Alta.

It was while doing homestead duties in the latter part of May of 1910, in the Writing-on-Stone district, that Dean Smith, Fred Miller and I were talking it over one evening in the shack on the homestead. We had heard a rumor that there was to be a picnic and stampede put on somewhere in the district. We decided to investigate the next day. So we started out on foot (we had no other means of travelling) and after walking several miles we found the parties who had intended to put the show on, but they had gotten cold feet or decided not to go through with it, after having advertised such an affair quite extensively.

The date was set for June 3rd, that being the King's birthday at that time. The site we decided upon was the mouth of the Verdigris Coulee, and known in the early days as Young's Crossing. It was about 12 miles east of the towns or villages of Coutts, Sweetgrass and Milk River. Our first big problem was to interview the lumber companies of Milk River. There were four of them at that time. After a considerable amount of talking with the different managers, one of them decided to take the risk and let us have the lumber needed for the open-air dance pavilion and refreshment booth for a consideration of 10% depreciation on the use of same, which was to be returned to the yard. None of us had any cash money, and only the prospect of becoming owners of the 160 acres of land some day, so he took quite a chance, particularly if we had gotten rained out on the day of the show.

Well, the next big problem was to find someone with horses and wagons who would haul the material out from town to the site we had decided upon. After considerable more leg work, and being turned down by different ones in the community who thought we were foolish to think of such a venture, we located a young farmer or homesteader, William Smart by name, who had considerable time on his hands at that time of year, and after agreeing to cut him in on an equal share of the profits which we might reap from the venture, he agreed to bring the lumber out from town for us; also to

help erect the pavilion. We were also to have the use of his wagon and horses. Well, that helped a lot, as we now had some means of transportation other than walking.

Next move was to talk to the butcher and grocery store regarding hamburger, lemons, and what we could get in the line of refreshments. We had no cash money of any kind, but I guess they decided to take a chance as the lumberman had done, and being bona fide homesteaders, with two years' homestead duties completed, no doubt they thought they would get paid sometime in case the show was a bust or a failure. Bread was not sold by any of the stores in the small towns at that time, and that took some tall financing to get one of the neighbor women to bake us a large amount. We were afraid if we made it ourselves it might not go over so big with the public. Now, that part of the program was settled.

The next job was to get some musicians to play for the dance. This took a considerable amount of travelling around, but we now had the use of a team of horses and a wagon, so it wasn't quite so bad. We located a Swede homesteader who was a real artist with his violin, and he was more than glad to come and show his skill to the public. We came to town and found a lady, Miss Francis Ellert, who condescended to come out from town and play the organ for us. We also found a party who would accompany the violin and organ with his cornet. Next, to locate someone who had an organ that they would loan us for the occasion. After some more travelling we found one and obtained permission from the owner to use it.

We brought the lumber out from town a couple of days before the show, and set up a camp of sorts on the site. We got the pavilion erected in a spot on the south side of the river, up against a sheer wall of sandstone with trees all around, kind of a natural amphitheatre. We hung some kerosene lanterns on wires across

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the dance floor, and we were all set for the big day. We got our provisions out from town the day before, and that night I don't think any of us slept too well; I'm sure the writer did not. We were worried about weather, whether it was going to rain or not, and if all our work and efforts would be for nothing. Well, the sun came up a red ball of fire, and that was a good sign of a hot day, which was exactly what we wanted to make the sale of lemonade good, that being the only thing in the line of soft drinks that we could get.

About 10 o'clock that morning the people started to come down out of the Sweetgrass Hills in Montana to the south, and from all other directions too. They came afoot, horseback, in wagons and buggies. Some of the people took the



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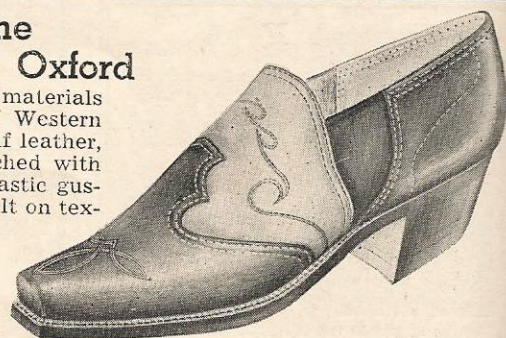
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end-gates out of their wagons, and placed one wagon against the other until they had enough to make a foot-bridge across the river, which was quite shallow at that time of the year. A sports-ground was picked out on the north side of the river. This land was quite level and free from brush or trees of any kind. A baseball diamond was laid out, and shortly after noon things commenced to take action . . . in the line of foot races, bucking contests, ball games, or any other sports that the people decided upon. I might state that there were no special committees on any of the events. A collection was taken up amongst the people as prize money for each event, and regardless of whatever the prize might be, the contestants entered into the spirit of the event with their best efforts put forward to win.

A very noticeable thing about the affair was the way the people got acquainted with each other. They had never met before, yet you would see two or three families get together and spread out their picnic lunch all in one spot, eating and conversing as if they had been acquainted all their lives. There were people there from all parts of North America, and some from the Old Country who had come to the new land to make their homes. A big percentage of the people were from the north-central part of the United States, with the two Dakotas and Minnesota predominating.

The first event to take place was the Roping Contest of Steers, in which a number of Canadian and Montana cowboys took part. There was a cowboy by the name of Art Barton, who was working at that time for Henry Webster on the Deer Creek ranch. Barton won first money in this event. Art Barton was later drowned while crossing Chin Lake on his horse. After the Roping Contest some of the cowboys got arguing as to who had the strongest pulling-horse. Art Barton and a man called Doggie Hall decided to settle the matter then and there for all time. The outcome of this was that Hall's horse was out-pulled by Barton's, and the rider, Hall, was seriously injured. (Later Hall ran a store at Coutts, Alberta, for several years.)

The Bucking Horse Contest was the next event, and there were plenty of bad bucking horses there. The Montana boys had brought along what they thought were the best. The best rider of the day was Claude Van Cleave, now of Taber, Alberta. He had a ranch in the vicinity at the time. He rode a horse named "Bud", owned by William Shields, a resident of the Writing-on-Stone district. A horse called "Sage-Hen" was brought to the attraction by a Mr. John Thompson of Police Coulee, who had a small ranch there at that time. "Sage-Hen" proved



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to be a real bad one, and bucked off any of the boys that tried to ride her that day. Later on she became a stellar attraction at all of the local stampedes held in the district, and no doubt would have given a good account of herself had she been taken to any of the larger events. Mr. Thompson had the misfortune to lose his eyesight later, and now operates a news stand at Taber, Alberta.

The names of some of the cowboys who took part in the events that day were Bill Townsend, better known at that time as "Greasy Bill", now living in the Argentine, South America, and George Armstrong, then working for Ray Knight, and now living at Maple Creek, Sask.

A very novel event took place in the way of a 200-yard race between a dog and a horse. The late Spud Murphy, who was government stock or range inspector at the time, had the dog, and he started at the drop of a handkerchief. The dog won the race. Another event was the cowboys roping each other out of their saddles; some of them took some bad spills.

There were numerous foot races for both men and children.

Finally the crowd moved over to the dance pavilion on the south side of the river where the refreshment stand was located. Some of the cowboys would

come up with a water-bucket and say "fill her up".

The speaker of the day was the late Mr. Frank Leffingwell, of Warner, Alberta. The creating of Warner Riding was in the offing at the time, and Frank, having political ambitions to become the first Member of Parliament for the district, gave the people his ideas on "Liberalism". Later on he was elected by a majority over his two opponents. No doubt there were a good number of new Liberals came into being that day, as there was an estimated crowd there of between four and five hundred people, and that was a lot of people in one crowd for those days for that part of the district.

The dance started before the sun went down, and continued until they all got played out. Needless to say, we sold completely out of refreshments before the dance was over.

Our net profit out of the venture was sixteen dollars and some cents apiece for the four of us, which amount was about that much more than we had to start with, and bought a lot of provisions to continue the homestead duties. That was the first Picnic and Stampede to be held on the Milk River. No doubt a lot of people there that day who had never witnessed anything of this kind must have gotten quite a thrill out of the events that took place.

I would like to mention a word of thanks to Mr. Claude Van Cleave, who supplied the names of some of the cowboys and some particulars of the different stampede events. The writer was too busy operating the refreshment stand to see all of the events that took place. Mr. Van Cleave, now living at or near Taber, I am told, still rides a horse every day, and not so long ago took active part in an Old-Timers' Roping Contest at the Lethbridge Stampede.

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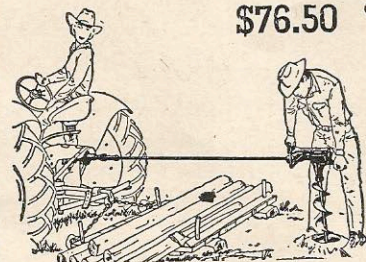
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