The "74" Mounties

By Major FRED A. BAGLEY, late of Banff, Alberta

CHAPTER VII

The Noisy Red River Cart

Winter snows and summer rains
Met you as you crossed the plains.
But your heart was brave and strong,
Like the ones you brought along.

Groaning, creaking, as you'd start—
Just an old Red River cart.
Held in one by wooden bolts,
Bravely taking all the jolts.
(Anon.)

The Red River cart was, above all, a noise maker. It was made wholly of oak, and it was the boast of its makers, and of the halfbreed drivers, that there was not a particle of metal in its make-up. Applying lubricant to an axle was unheard of, and breakdowns were frequent. No old time Red River cart but had yards of Shaganappi (rawhide) wrapped around its spokes and felloes. (By the way, there may be some who are unaware that the original, unabridged name of Moose Jaw was "The place where the white men mended the cart with Shaganappi and the jaw bone of a moose".)

As to the noise made by them when travelling — well, I have stood in Swift's packing plant in Chicago during a hog killing, and I venture to say that the clamor of the protesting porkers as they were being helped on their way to the happy hunting grounds by Swift's butchers was as a mother's crooning lullaby compared to the squeals, grunts and groans of one Red River cart. As we had no less than 114 of them, the ox-cart brigade could be heard long before it hove into sight.

I know of nothing nowadays quite like the sounds ground out by our brigade of carts when on the trail and doing their worst unless it be the musical (?) atrocities we hear via the radio, and announced by some super moron as "Ultra modern Amurr-ican ('ned) music".

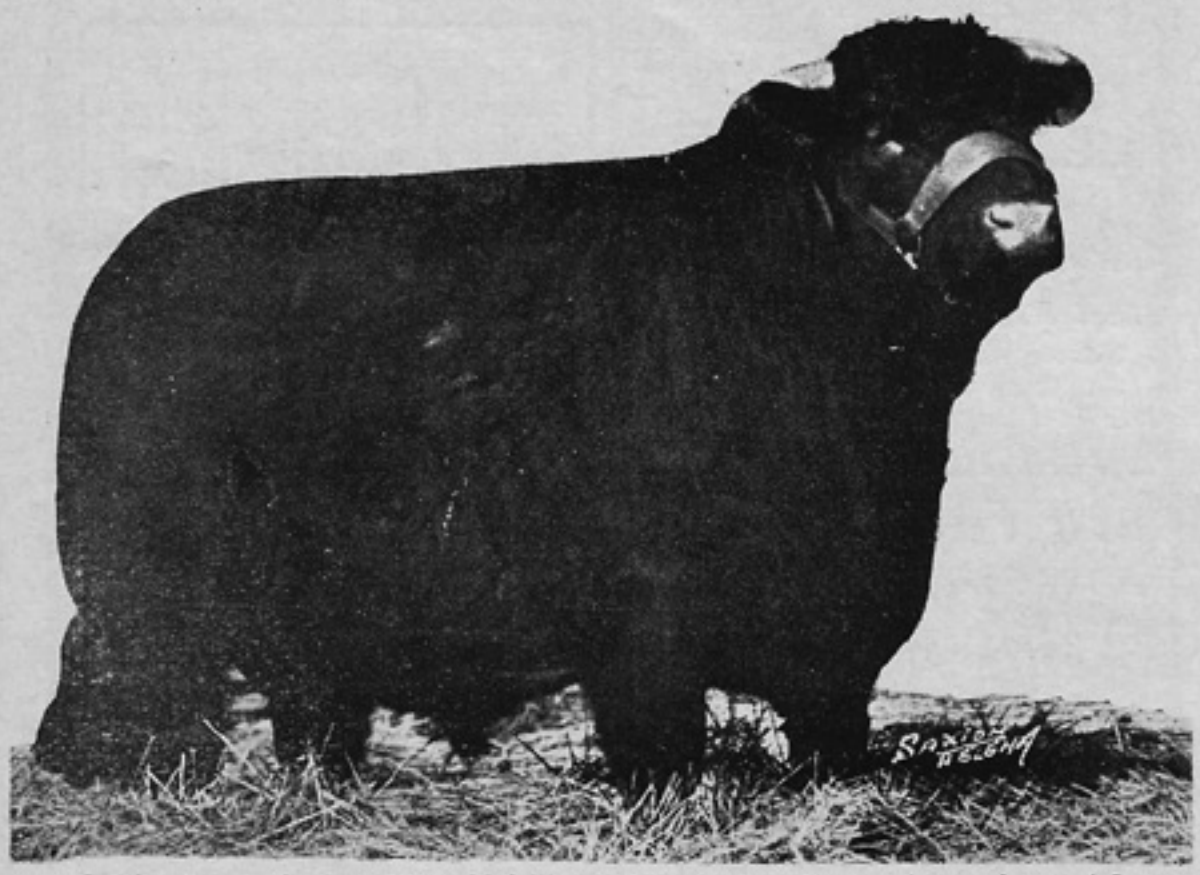
It is true that in recent years I have seen iron-tired carts, never emitting even a mouse squeak as they moved, and dubbed by their proud owners Red River carts, but they were merely poor imitations of the real thing.

The discordant din raised by the carts had an unlooked-for, but not unfavorable effect of which we were unaware at the time. But when our men arrived eventually at Old Man River they were surprised to learn that the cart cacophony we considered such a nuisance had almost the same effect on the morals and bravado of our friends the enemy as had Joshua's trumpets on the walls of Jericho, for the moment the Blackfeet spread the news that judging from the mighty volume of sound given off by our column we must be "as numerous as ants on an ant hill", the warlike spirit of the whisky smugglers sank to zero, and the task of breaking up their gangs and capturing their strongholds was made much easier.

Our Red River carts when travelling were usually in groups of three, with one sturdy, short-legged ox to each cart. The driver (halfbreed or Mountie) controlled the leading ox by means of a rope attached to the beast's horns, while the second and third oxen with similar ropes around their horns were tied to the tails of the carts immediately in front of them.

My first experience of cart driving was rather disastrous. Having conquered my initial fear of the oxen, and finding them moving too slowly I ventured to hit the lead ox a resounding thwack on the back with a stout stick, whereupon all three set off on a mad gallop (and couldn't the little beggars go) across the prairie, scattering on their way the various sacks of sugar, etc., which constituted their loads. As I could not stop them, nor keep up with them in their wild stampede, and it almost seemed to me at the time that only the barrier of the Rocky Mountains would prevent them from reaching the Pacific coast, it came in the nature of a Godsend when Colonel Macleod happened by on horseback, and who, after a hearty laugh at my predicament halted my runaways and sent some men to help me gather and reload my scattered cargoes. This incident inspired me with a little more respect than I formerly had for my speedy little beasts, and I decided then and there that moral persuasion was to be preferred to a big stick when dealing with Red River cart oxen.

My next mishap occurred after descending a very steep approach to a "corduroy" bridge across a partly dried up creek. I had succeeded in navigating my leading ox safely onto the bridge, and was almost across when I heard a crash behind me, and on looking around found ox No. 2 and his cart upside down and suspended in mid-air over the side of the bridge, his whole load being dumped into the mud and what little water was in the creek bed. He himself was prevented from following his load by the fact that he and his cart were anchored fore and aft to the tail of No. 1 cart, and the horns of No. 3 ox whose sturdy legs were braced in a successful determination not to fol-



Lothian Swank, bred by W. L. McCollister, Dalroy, Alta., first in class and second Reserve Champion and second highest priced bull at the 1949 National Shorthorn Show & Sale, Kansas City, Mo., purchased by Sumption Bros., of Frederick, South Dakota.

low on. The tension was finally relieved when both ropes were severed and ox and cart dropped into the liquid mud, to be later dragged out to the bank of the creek. The load was certainly not improved by its mud bath.

This duty of driving ox carts, which at first sight seemed so humiliating to us, proved to have beneficial, not to say epicurean possibilities tending to soothe our wounded pride, and fill the aching void beneath our waist belts. For inasmuch as the brigade of carts as a whole contained a variety of foodstuffs in bulk, it was sometimes possible for us cart drivers by careful selection to get enough food from several carts for a substantial meal, and thus avoid for the time being the eternal "wet and dry" or "23" of the main column.

This was all very well when there were enough carts together to supply a varied, if not luxurious menu, but on one occasion, when Sub-Constable Jean Claustre, whose carts contained only flour, and myself with loads of sugar only, found ourselves separated by miles from the rest of the brigade as we stopped beside a small pool of stagnant water, with no firewood or chips to make a fire, we were reduced to the necessity of making a meal of flour paste and water. It was, under the circumstances, a glorious feed, but by all the rules and theories of the modern food faddists we should have become seriously ill after eating such a mess. Fortunately, the existence of alphabetical vitamins and calories were then unknown to us ,and we experienced no bad after-effects.

CHAPTER VIII

Tramp, Tramp, the Boys Are Marching

Our two days' rest at the first crossing of the Souris River, with plenty of wood, water and grass, put new life into us, and improved the condition of our animals so much that on the 21st of July we resumed our weary tramp.

And "tramp" is no figure of speech, for from now on all ranks were ordered to alternate every hour in walking and riding.

Many of the men were not very well pleased at the prospect of walking in riding boots over the parched prairie in scorching hot weather.

Sergeant Smythe, who was most outspoken with his objections, deciding to disobey the order climbed into the cook wagon, and on the Commissioner happening to catch him there and threatening to put him under arrest, declared: "I don't care what you do. I joined a mounted force, not a foot one, and as I don't feel very well today I must ride on something, either a horse or a wagon. It is immaterial to me which."

The Commissioner, with a grim smile on his face which seemed to express: "Now what can one do with a guy like that?", rode off without further comment, while the Sergeant retained his seat amongst the pots and pans. Discipline suffered a setback there and then.

The boy Bagley, temporarily exempt from ox-cart driving, not possessing the "nerve" of the Sergeant, conscientiously plugged along doing the stipulated hours of riding and walking, and on taking off his boots when a short distance from camp after a long, hot march found his feet both blistered and bleeding. Whereupon Captain Walker, a handsome giant of a man, carried him pick-a-back the rest of the way into camp. In after years Captain (later Colonel) Walker often reminded me of this incident.

As we passed the "Hill of the Murdered Scout" where, many years ago — according to Indian legend — a Cree Indian during the constant tribal warfare of those times managed to creep unobserved on a spying Blackfoot (or Mandan Sioux) and killed him with a large stone, some of our men carried away (but not very far) the stone the Cree was reputed to have used. No explanation was offered by our halfbreeds as to why the blood stains were not weathered away during the many years since the killing took place. The "blood stains" were, most likely, red colored lichen growth.

On learning from the guides that St. Peter's Springs lay just ahead we had visions of clear sparkling water to come, but on arriving there found that in spite of the sanctified name the "Springs" proved to be a mere dirty hole reflecting little credit on the name of the great Apostle. However, we dug holes, and placing therein empty barrels obtained some water more palatable than the brackish stuff that was causing stomach disorders affecting both Officers and men. This place was known, and indicated on maps for some years thereafter, as "Mounted Police Wells".

Our next rest camp was at La Roche Percee (24th to 29th July) and once more there was a riot of bathing and washing clothes.

This was a most interesting and pleasant camp. There were outcroppings of coal, some of which was tested in our portable forges and found fairly satisfactory. Here we found a number of names, including General Custer's (?) etched on the rock.

Came Sunday and the inevitable Church Parade. The service consisted as usual of the reading by an Officer of excerpts from the Scriptures, and the singing of a few well-known hymns, during the rendition of which the men seemed to be impressed with the solemnity of the occasion, but later on some of them shocked the Commissioner with their ribald songs and speech. Oh, well: "Single men in barracks (and camp) don't grow into plaster saints".

Our evenings in this comfortable camp were enlivened by the music of a Band composed of a fife in the capable hands of "Bill" Latimer, and a drum improvised from a tin dish and played upon with tent pegs by that accomplished British Army drummer, Trumpeter Frank Parks.

Here Col. W. D. Jarvis and Sub-Inspector Severe Gagnon of "A" Troop were detached with 55 horses, 24 wagons, 55 carts, 62 oxen, 50 cows and calves, and 12 halfbreeds preparatory to commencing the march of "A" Troop to Edmonton via Forts Ellice, Carlton and Pitt. Also Inspr. Shurtliff, Mr. Nicolle, the Quartermaster and several sick men were left here to go eventually to Fort Ellice for the winter.

(To be Continued)