Buffalo Pound

By W. S. SCARTH, 11450 - 79th Ave., Edmonton, Alta.

"BUFFALO POUND" is based on the eye-witness account contained in Henry Y. Hind's "Journal of the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition — 1858". In July of that year Hind and his party examined the Qu'Appelle Valley to its source and made a track survey of the "River That Turns" (Aiktow Creek) to the Elbow of the South Saskatchewan River. While in the vicinity of a large Cree encampment they were invited to observe the impounding of buffalo by Shortstick, Chief of the Sandy Hill Crees. The writer visited the locality in the summer of 1951.

Even to Chief Shortstick, skeptic that he was, the signs were good. For three days now the sun had gone down in a glow of golden light behind the Elbow of the Saskatchewan. The air was sharp and clear with no smoke dimming the endless roll and billow of the prairie. This was good — the great buffalo herd would be grazing quietly, no fear of racing prairie fires to keep them constantly alert. That source of all wisdom, old Sky Thunder, ancient medicine man of the Sandy Hill Crees, had promised well for a good pound, and all things were happening as he had said. The gifts of tobacco and dried meat left for the spirits on the great rock in the valley had disappeared. It was well that the Manitou had need of them, for now good fortune must surely be with the hunters.

By some uncanny foresight Sky Thunder had also foretold the coming of the strange little group of white men to their camp in the sandhills. They travelled with only two carts and a few horses so certainly could not be hunters. In one of the carts they carried a bark canoe, indeed a strange burden to drag across this parched prairie. True, they had come from the east up the Qu'Appelle but apparently found the "River That Turns" too shallow or crooked for good canoe travel.

Last night, in a long talk with their chief, already named by Sky Thunder as "He Looks At The Hills", the Crees had discovered that the white men would go down the Saskatchewan and through the great forest to the north. They had made anxious enquiry about the Blackfeet war parties, said to be approaching from the south. Shortstick's scouts brought little news, and the Chief had an uneasy feeling that his young men were more concerned with the excitement of the coming buffalo pound than with the danger from a few marauding Blackfeet. Even Sky Thunder had been vague and uncertain in reading the smoke signals. No doubt he, too, thought only of the buffalo.

He Looks At The Hills must have brought good medicine with his strange weapons. From a hill behind the great Cree camp Shortstick had watched these people closely all the previous day. He noted how hurriedly they moved; it seemed so needless in this summer heat. Their chief would look through a sort of tube, much shorter than a musket, set up on a stand, while far ahead another man would hold a long thin wand. This performance would be repeated as they moved down the valley of the River That Turns. As he walked along, the chief cast some shining object into the stream and appeared to fish but never with the patience to make a catch. Last night in their teepee the white men had books like those of the Praying Man at the Qu'Appelle Lakes Mission. Shortstick remembered well his own impressions of the Mission when he had made a trading trip to the Fishing Lakes two summers ago. It was a place of lovely trees and cool water, so different from this sun-scorched prairie land.

But this was no time for idle daydreaming. Evening was near and a final inspection of the pound must be made, tasks allotted to each hunter youth and squaw, and last minute plans discussed with the captains of the drive. Threading his way through the clumps of buffalo-berry and along the base of the sand dunes, following a well-beaten path for about a quarter of a mile from the camp, Shortstick reached the site of the pound. Dusk was gathering now, but its outlines were still clear, hidden in a natural arena formed by high sand hills. Here in a great circle lay brush and tree trunk interlaced to form a wall higher than a man could reach above his head. The trees had been dragged great distances from coulees, the building of the enclosure representing many days of exhausting toil under the beating sun. Every able-bodied person in the camp helped except the most skilled hunters. These latter were a privileged group who must save their energies for the great day of the final drive to the pound.

The preparations on the open prairie could be carried on only under the cover of darkness and with the greatest stealth. Nothing unusual must disturb the small groups of buffalo that made up the vast herd now gradually moving southward to cross the valley. Extending about four miles back from the pound, two converging lines of "dead men" had been established days before. These were actually small clumps of brush set up at intervals of about thirty paces. They must be so arranged as to blend with the natural scrubby prairie growth. Before the earliest glimpse of

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dawn on the morning of the drive, a squaw or youth must be concealed behind each "dead man". Only when the buffalo finally approached their station and attempted to pass outside the line of travel to the pound must the hidden ones appear, and then only for a moment to wave a blanket or shawl and frighten the charging animals back to the chosen path.

Quickly circling the main enclosure, Shortstick noted that those working here had overlooked digging a shallow pit just inside the main gate. This detail was important because once the buffalo had sprung across the pit into the enclosure it was almost impossible for them to jump back, and they would continue to circle the fence in frantic efforts to escape. The trap could be made even more effective by laying several tree trunks just at the entrance. Directing those putting other last minute touches to the enclosure to fix the gate properly, the Chief hastened back to the clustered tents of the main camp. Cooking fires and general noise must be kept down because they must not chance arousing the suspicions of the buffalo. Fortunately the wind blew towards the encampment and old Sky Thunder should get some credit for that. Even the camp dogs seemed to sense the need for silence, and reduced their customary weird howling to a few spasmodic barks. Later the coyotes would answer from across the valley.

As Shortstick approached his own lodge he was met by the first group of hunters, now mounted and ready to leave for the start of the great encircling movement which would eventually surround about five hundred of the buffalo herd. Allowing for the usual mishaps and escapes from the approaches to the pound, they should finish with at least two hundred in the final enclosure. Experience had proven that there was a limit to the number they could safely impound and kill. The Chief well remembered the disastrous happenings several years ago when they were helping the Qu'Appelle Crees in a drive along the steep banks of Buffalo Pound Lake. They had encircled a great herd of almost a thousand when the final stampede to the enclosure had broken through everything and trampled a dozen of the squaws and young men to death. His own son had gone down before that avalanche of thundering hooves, trodden to a shapeless mass.

Summer night settles on the prairie, the great camp now almost silent, resting for tomorrow's labor of death — death for the buffalo, but life for the tribe in food and clothing, in hides, dried meat and pemmican for trade. Always the struggle for survival on these plains — the buffalo fewer each year, the half-breed hunters ever taking a greater toll, the Company becoming more cautious and exacting in its trade.

Dawn comes soon, the first rosy glow in the east rousing all for action. Even now the hunters will be closing in on the straggling herd, urging all forward in the direction of the "dead men". No time now for fires or food — to the pound and prepare for the kill.

There is a period of anxious waiting as the last mists of dawn clear, and still no sound from the prairie to the north. This is the time to pray to the spirits that the wind may be favorable. All are at their posts, the squaws and children concealed behind the brush fence, the young men with spear and musket ready, the older ones still giving advice and boasting of earlier hunts. Should the buffalo attempt to break out the squaws must wave their blankets furiously and keep the animals milling. The success of the kill depends largely on the confusion aroused when the buffalo find themselves surrounded.

A breathless scout has arrived to report the signal from the prairie — the herd has started. Soon the Crees' sharpened sense of hearing brought a low moaning sound as of the wind, but they knew it was the beginning of the stampede. With a favoring breeze from the west, in a few minutes a great dust cloud could be seen and the fleeter-footed animals were already in view. The buffalo did not run in a straight line, but in a weaving pattern made up of small groups. This required the greatest judgment by those posted at the "dead men" to assure that the direction of the main run be towards the pound. From his point of vantage atop a high knoll Shortstick could see that this part of the plan appeared to be working well. He waited impatiently for the arrival of He Looks At The Hills and the other white men. At his invitation yesterday they had agreed to visit the pound and see the skill of his hunters. The Chief had boasted of their prowess and must show these men of medicine that his words were true.

Now the main body of the stampeding animals was in sight, and the sound of their bellowing all but drowned the low thunder of the beating hooves. At last the white men came to the hillock and the Chief could read excitement in their faces. His own heart beat faster at the stirring sight of the charging herd, but he disdained to show emotion before these strangers. They took turns in holding a short tube to one eye and pointing it toward the buffalo, their interpreter assuring Shortstick that this was not a musket but a charm to bring the herd into the pound. Below them those in charge were having the greatest difficulty in keeping everyone concealed. If the buffalo sensed anything unusual, even at this distance, the whole herd could swerve aside and all would be lost. The noise increased, and now the fleetest animals charged down the sloping ground into the pound. It seemed a matter of seconds only before three hundred buffalo filled the enclosure, and beneath a thick curtain of dust all was confusion, covered by the sound of death. For now the mounted hunters

(Continued on Page 30)

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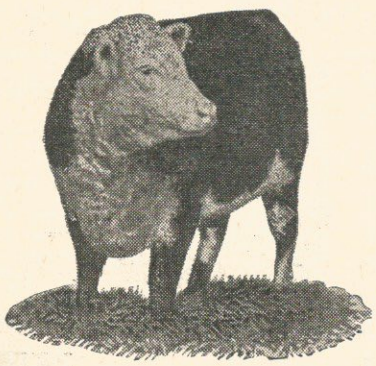

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Gleaned From Pioneer Pages

By GRANT MacEWAN

Edmonton Bulletin, December 13, 1884: "Seventeen carts of Ad. McPherson's, in charge of J. Westway, arrived on the south side on Sunday, nineteen days out from Calgary. The roads are very bad for cattle, wearing their feet out rapidly and making quick travelling impossible."

Calgary Tribune, June 3, 1887: "Mr. Fred Stimson, of the Northwest Cattle Co., received direct from England last Saturday two stallions known as Norfolk Trotters. . . . The same company also brought out a trotting horse from Montreal and a number of French Canadian fillies."

Nor'-West Farmer, June 5, 1908: "Geo. Lane of Calgary introduced a recommendation that the Western Stock Growers' Association should disband. He believed that too small a proportion of the stockmen would give support to the organization, and that the burdens of the many were borne by the few. He also complained that the men who had been recommended to the government as cattle inspectors had not been appointed. This view was shared by some of the other members, but others pointed to the good work that had been done in the past even in the face of unfavorable circumstances and contended that if they disbanded there would be no body of men to represent the interests of the industry. President Huckvale thought it would be a pity to disband at present. The benefit that the members had received in the past in the matter of protection from wolves had in itself been worth the cost of carrying on the work of the organization. The idea of disbanding was finally dropped and the election of officers proceeded with, which resulted as follows: President, W. Huckvale, Medicine Hat, re-elected; 1st Vice-Pres., George Lane, Calgary, re-elected; 2nd Vice-Pres., A. E. Cross, Calgary."

Lethbridge Herald, February 14, 1906: "A pork factory on a small scale will be started at R. Gwatkin's farm, close to town, and it is expected it will develop into a large institution in a few years. At the meeting held last Saturday several farmers announced that they would immediately commence raising hogs."

Daily Free Press, Winnipeg, July 9, 1874: "The first steam thresher in the Province is now in the warehouse. It was imported by L. R. Bentley for Farquhar McLean, Portage La Prairie."

Regina Leader, August 27, 1885: "On Monday last at Bayswater Farm, we witnessed the working of two Toronto light binders (seven feet cut), manufactured by the Massey Manufacturing Co. Mr. McCusker, local agent for the company, started the machines, and personally supervised the work during the afternoon. The draft of the machines was exceedingly light and the cutting and binding very neat and clean. Special mention may be made of the sheaf carrier which does its work to perfection."

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BUFFALO POUND

(Continued from Page 23)

circled the fence, firing muskets and heavy arrows into the bellowing mass of flesh, milling in a great circle and straining the wall of tree trunks to the limit. Throwing caution aside, those concealed behind the fence now climbed to the top and, ignoring the whistling musket balls, with spear and knife and axe cut and stabbed at the animals as they rushed by.

Even above the frightful din Shortstick sensed a sharp cry repeated again and again. It came from behind them, and turning, he followed the white men's fascinated gaze. There on a nearby sand dune Sky Thunder was performing his weird buffalo dance, brandishing a charm club festooned with dried scalp locks. Only on great occasions was this sacred relic brought forth, and the Chief hoped that He Looks At The Hills was properly impressed. Through foam-flecked lips the medicine man shouted some special chant of death, the scene of slaughter below them seeming to revive the old man's shrunken frame with a new and dreadful energy.

Now the ground within the fence was slippery with blood, dozens of buffalo were down, some dead, others horribly maimed. Most of the calves and weaker animals had been overrun by the impetus of the first rush into the pound and lay struggling in a mire of trampled earth and blood. Excitement reached fever pitch. Buffalo not already killed or crippled charged madly at each other. The shouting of the hunters and the high pitched screaming of the squaws and children could be heard above the general din. Musket shots were fewer now — the closer range and general confusion rendering stray bullets too dangerous. The enclosure was already showing signs of breaking from the battering of the frantic animals and the main effort was to kill or cripple as many as possible before they escaped. It was difficult to restrain the young men from rushing into the pound, but the rule was that only the most skilled hunters were allowed to enter that ring of death. Now almost blind with exhaustion and fear, the sturdiest buffalo were singled out and hamstrung with lightning stroke of knife or razor-edged hatchet. As their charging bodies plowed into the wall of tree trunks, the ground seemed to shake from the impact. One great bull whose strength and agility had attracted Shortstick's attention had charged through the herd again and again, finally impaling a young calf with his lowered horns. Unable to free himself from its weight, he blundered into a tangle of tree trunks and was dispatched by a muscular old squaw with a long-handled axe. Her shrill screams of triumph sounded unpleasant, even to the Chief's ears. He turned to watch the white men and suddenly realized that this must be new to their eyes. The old hunter who was their guide and interpreter told Shortstick later that they did not like the sight of so much death, as they were men of peace.

Now a great shout arose, the fence had finally given away, and about fifty buffalo still able to run dashed for freedom and disappeared among the sand dunes. This seemed to be a signal for the younger men to rush into the pound and show their skill in helping to kill the maimed animals still struggling to rise to their feet and follow the survivors to freedom. The squaws were already at work skinning the choicest and least mutilated carcasses. Such skins were valuable for trade and those not too badly slashed were suitable for teepees and robes.

Even with the escape of the last fifty, this day would be marked as the best buffalo pound that the Sandy Hill Crees could remember. The great task of cutting and stripping the flesh for drying in the sun must continue as rapidly as possible. This was the season of flies and already the steaming bodies seemed covered with them. Tonight the wolves would skulk closer to the camp, and tomorrow the hawks would no longer soar along the valley but gather for their own feast. Through the long hot afternoon the labor must go on, nightfall would bring fires and feasting.

Blood red the sun sets behind a haze of smoke beyond the Elbow. Already the smell of burning prairie comes from the west where another group of hunters has set fresh fires to drive more buffalo forward to the banks of the Saskatchewan.

The prairie twilight comes, and the feasting and dancing are starting by great fires. Some unexplained longing for peace and solitude guided Chief Shortstick's steps away from the groups of merrymakers. He finally reached his chosen knoll, looking out across the valley of the River That Turns. As he sat smoking his favorite pipe, it seemed as if a blessed silence had come at last. But in the stillness of the prairie darkness there were always sounds he loved. Tonight he thought again of the stories told of the Qu'Appelle and the strange voices heard along its valley. Even now there was a new sound coming from the stream below, or was it from the hills around him? Last night the white men spoke of the great lodges below the sunrise and of the many tribes who might come to these prairies seeking new camp grounds. Perhaps it was the sound of the cart brigades who came last year and slew so many buffalo — the screeching wheels of their carts sounded like a human cry of pain. Perhaps it was the muttering of the Buffalo Spirit that haunted the sand hills above the River That Turns — who knows of these things? Enough to know that the Sandy Hill Crees would have food and clothing this year and another pound next summer.

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