Jerry Potts

Plainsman

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The scarlet-coated North-West Mounted Police were tired, footsore and disillusioned as they camped on the rippling prairies of southern Alberta in the fall of 1874. One hundred and fifty of them had come west to bring the Queen's law to Blackfoot country. Instead, they were stranded, their guides were unreliable, their horses were dead or dying, and winter was only a few weeks away.

In desperation, two officers rode southward to Fort Benton, Montana, for help. There a friendly trader recommended Jerry Potts, a short, bowlegged, monosyllabic half-breed, to act as police scout. He was engaged at $90 a month and in the weeks that followed he created his own legend as he guided, interpreted, advised and aided the tenderfoot lawmen until they became accustomed to life on the frontier. And during the next twenty-five years, he was one of the most valuable employees of the North-West Mounted Police. His uncanny sense of direction on the treeless plains, his vast knowledge of watering and camping places, and his great influence among the warlike Blackfoot were all virtues which made him indispensable to the cause of the red-coated force.

The legends of Jerry Potts' life are as fanciful and wonderful as any figure from the wild west. But Potts needed no tall tales to surround his life with an aura of adventure and color. Rather, the facts of his career — largely unknown and to date unwritten — are colorful enough for any national hero. These stories are told by his mother's people, the Blackfoot, and by those who knew the famous guide.

Potts was born in about 1840 to a life of violence and tragedy. His mother was *Namo-pisi* or Crooked Back, a member of the Black Elks band of Bloods. His father was Andrew R. Potts, a clerk for the American Fur Company at Fort McKenzie, on the Missouri River. He was a Scot who had come out from the old country, lived for a time in Pennsylvania, and was engaged by the trading company in 1836. Soon after arriving at Fort McKenzie, he had taken the Blood woman as his wife.

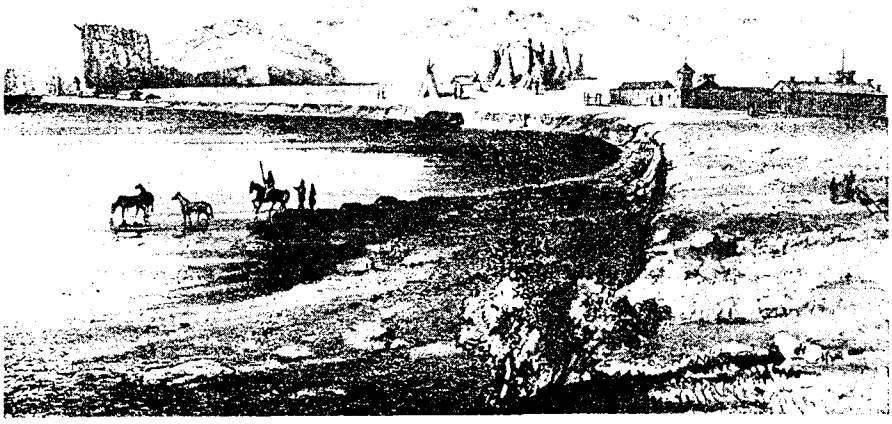
In 1840, while young Potts gurgled happily in his moss bag, his father dispensed trade goods through the stockade wicket at the fort. One day a French-Canadian *engagé* named Mercereau ejected a troublesome Peigan Indian known as *Ah-pah* or One White Eye. The Indian, believing that Mercereau would be on night duty, waited until no other Indians were in sight and rapped boldly on the closed window of the gate. When it was opened, he shoved his flintlock into the hole and fired point blank into the face of the hapless clerk who waited to serve him. It was Andrew Potts. When the Peigans were told of the wanton killing, they promptly executed their one-eyed brother.

Fatherless, young Potts was adopted by Alexander Harvey, one of the most notorious characters on the Upper Missouri. This trader took care of the boy for five years, giving him some inkling of the coarser side of life which awaited him on the frontier. A strapping six-foot saddler by trade, Harvey once commented viciously: "I never forget or forgive."[1] In 1841, he shot a Spaniard named Isodore after an argument and two years later he touched off a tragic Blackfoot massacre. Without provocation, he fired a cannon into a party of unarmed Blackfoot who had come to trade and the thirteen bodies left behind were considered a fair exchange for a Negro employee who had been murdered earlier by unknown Indians. On another occasion, Harvey wounded an Indian who was attempting to steal a cow from the post's herd. He then sat beside the injured native, passed him a pipe to smoke, and shot his brains out as he begged for mercy. By 1845, when the saddler's actions had become too gross even for the frontier, an abortive attempt was made by his fellow traders to murder him. When this failed, Harvey left the Upper Missouri country and abandoned young Potts.

The five year old boy was fortunate for he was at once adopted by Andrew Dawson, a gentle Scotsman who was called "the last king of the Missouri."[2] It was under his patient guidance that the young boy learned English and the many lessons which separated him from most of the mixed-bloods on the frontier. In the next decade, Potts learned much about the fur trade, Indian languages, and the ways of both the Indian and the white man. When he reached his late teens, he was on his own, but still retained close ties with his foster father. Potts rejoined his mother's people in the late 1840's and from that time on he drifted between the Indian camps and the American Fur Company. When he came of age he adopted the carefree mannerisms of the frontier and soon became an ardent drinker of whiskey. He was equally content with fine spirits or with the violent "Indian firewater" made from grain alcohol, burnt sugar, laudenum and other potent ingredients.

Jerry Potts killed his first man when he was twenty-three. Little is known about the incident except that he was involved in a drunken argument with a French-Canadian named Antoine Primeau at Fort Galpin, Montana, and shot him. Because he was neither arrested nor dismissed from the American Fur Company, it might have been a case of self defence. Although a number of Indians later fell under the plainsman's rifle, this was the only white man to die by Potts' hand.

1. *H. M. Chittenden,* The American Fur Trade of the Far West, 1954, *p.* 693.
2. Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana, *vol.* 10, 1940, *p.* 266.



Fort Benton, on the upper Missouri River, was the home of Jerry Potts during his years with the fur traders. This sketch of the post was made in 1853 by John Mix Stanley.

During the 1860's he began to gain fame as an Indian warrior. He took part in several battles with enemies of the Blackfoot and brought considerable honor to his mother's tribe.

Once, while camped with the Bloods and Peigans, he set out alone to hunt buffalo. He had crossed the Missouri and was following Shonkin Creek south when he met seven Crow Indians. Four were armed with rifles and three with bows and arrows. After a short parley in sign language, Potts discovered the Crows had a large camp on a creek several miles from the Shonkin. The Crow warriors, feigning friendship, invited the young man to visit their chief. Seeing that he had no choice, Potts cheerfully consented. The three Indians with bows and arrows preceded him, while the four with rifles took up the rear.

As they travelled along the trail, the Crows began to talk about Potts, not realizing that he had learned their language during his travels with his foster father. He heard the Crows discuss his fate and finally decide to kill him immediately, rather than take him to the camp.

Forewarned, Potts tumbled from his saddle at the warning click of a rifle. Surprised, the Crow leader shot wildly and missed. Before he or the others could fire a second shot, Jerry was on his knees and firing in deadly earnest. The four members of the rear guard were killed in their tracks while the lightly-armed trio in front fled for home.

Catching his horse, Potts rode to Fort Benton where he found a large camp of Blackfoot, Bloods and Peigans. Quickly organizing a war party, he led them to Shonkin Creek where they struck the main Crow camp at nightfall. When the bloody battle was over, the Crows were fleeing in disorder, leaving dozens of dead and wounded in their abandoned camp.

That evening the victorious Indians returned to Fort Benton to celebrate. Scalp dances and war dances were held, firearms were discharged and the residents of the post were kept awake all night with the hootings, yellings and howlings of the warriors.

It is difficult to saw whether Potts' greatest allegiance was towards the whites or the Indians. Although he was engaged in numerous fights with Indians, it was always against the enemies of the Blackfoot. There was only one known occasion when he assisted a white man in settling a score with an Indian.

In the 1860's, a Fort Bentonite named W. S. Stocking purchased a gray horse for one hundred and fifty dollars. No sooner had he taken it to his ranch when it was stolen by a Peigan Indian. When he learned that the horse was in a camp on the Marias River, and Jerry Potts was in the same camp, he decided to attempt to recover his prize animal.

"Jerry was about the most decent specimen I ever met with," he commented. "He was a sort of sub-chief, that is, he had a camp of six or eight lodges on the Marias River, about fifty miles northwest of Fort Benton, the same being peopled by his Peigan relatives by marriage."[3]

Meeting Potts in the frontier town, Stocking outlined his problem. The plainsman agreed to help and next morning the two men went to the Peigan camp. After supper, Potts sent for the Peigan horse thief who claimed he had purchased the horse from an Indian of another tribe. When the settler offered to pay a reasonable sum for its return, the Peigan presented a long list of goods, ranging from hatchets and knives for himself to needles and calico for his wife. Both Potts and the settler realized the Peigan was the real thief and the five hundred dollars worth of goods had been demanded so that an honest recovery would be impossible. Early the following morning, Jerry solved the problem by stealing the horse from the Peigan and giving it to Stocking before the camp was awake.

Although young Potts was employed by the American Fur Company for several years, there is only one record of his experience with that trading firm. This was in 1863, when the annual trade goods for Fort Benton were left at a post four hundred miles downstream because the water in the Missouri was too low for navigation. Potts' foster father, who was in charge of Fort Benton, chose chief clerk Matthew Carroll, Bob and Jim Lemon, Joe Cobell and young Potts to go with him to bring the goods by wagons through dangerous Sioux territory to the fort.

The trade goods were transferred from the company's boats to

3. *W. S. Stocking ms. "Fort Benton Memories." Historical Society of Montana files, Helena.*

The Peigan Indians considered Jerry Potts to be a great warrior and the leader of his own group of relatives. This view shows a Peigan camp in 1889 as members prepare for their annual Sun Dance.

wagons and on October 2nd Dawson and his men set out for Fort Benton. Three days later, when passing Ash Point on the Missouri, they were attacked by a large war party of Sioux. The teamsters quickly formed a circle with their wagons and everyone was in fighting position when the Indians drew near.

The Sioux, realizing that a general attack would be too costly, sent a man forward to talk with the traders. As he approached with his hand raised in friendship, Matthew Carroll went to meet him. When they came face to face, the warrior suddenly drew a knife from beneath his blanket and prepared to attack. But Carroll pulled a hidden revolver from his belt and ordered the Indian back to his war party. Humiliated, the warrior retreated and the Sioux abandoned all attempts to raid the wagon train.

On another occasion, Potts was employed as a guide by George Steell, who later became Indian Agent for the Blackfoot in Montana. While on a gold prospecting expedition, the party was attacked by two hundred Sioux warriors. The trio, made up of Potts, Steell and a tenderfoot, fled along a coulee bottom, attempting to outrun the Indians. But the Sioux had superior horses which were rapidly decreasing the space between them and the prospectors. On Potts' orders, the men quickly turned the horses and raced towards the oncoming Sioux. Taking them by surprise, the prospectors rode through the war party's lines and reached a log cabin about two miles back along the coulee bottom. Because the doorway was so low, the men turned their horses loose and prepared to make a last stand.

The door, which was off its hinges, was turned on its side and used as a barricade while logs from the fireplace were used as braces.

The Indians dismounted some distance from the cabin and attacked on foot, but a steady barrage of well-directed rifle fire turned them back before the cabin could be reached. During the attack, Potts killed five Sioux with his revolver.

Finding their original strategy costly and unsuccessful, the Sioux drew off for a council. Potts guessed their decision: to wait for darkness before creeping close enough to burn down the cabin. Taking his saddle blanket, Potts wrapped it about him in Indian-fashion and slipped out into the early evening darkness. He crawled along for a quarter of a mile until he was well away from the cabin and then strolled cautiously through the Sioux camp. There he found the Indian horse herd, selected three of the best runners, and led them back along the same route. Approaching the cabin in utter darkness, he gave a signal to his comrades who immediately dashed from their improvised fort, mounted the stolen horses, and followed Potts down the valley. As they climbed a hill to the prairies, the frontiersman gave a blood-curdling Blackfoot war whoop in farewell.

During the 1860's, Potts became friends with another mixed blood named George Star. One of their favorite tricks when well fortified with liquor was to stand facing each other at twenty-five paces and try to "trim the other's moustache" with the bullets from their six shooters. Both men survived this prank time after time, causing the superstitious Blackfoot to believe they had supernatural powers. While Potts credited it to good shooting, he was not without the superstitious mind of an Indian. When working as a hunter at Fort Benton, he had a dream in which he was told that a cat living in the post could protect him from evil. Upon awaking, Potts searched the fort until he discovered the cat sleeping in the sun. He promptly killed it and wore its hide beneath his shirt until the day he died.

Jerry's Indian name was *Kyî-yo-kosi* or "Bear Child", an honored and respected name which had been handed down through several generations of Blackfoot. Although it had no bearing upon the plainsman's ferocity in battle, it was an apt name for him.

According to his son[4], Potts alternated between life among the Indians and the traders. He did not go on war parties after horses or scalps but if his people were attacked or there was a battle nearby, he would willingly join it.

On one occasion when on a hunting expedition with a younger cousin they were ambushed near Sun River by three Crows. The cousin fell with a fatal bullet lodged in his chest, but Potts dismounted from his mule and waited as the Crows approached. Again his knowledge of the Crow language aided him for, as they approached, the Indians were deciding how to attack. They agreed to turn the mixed blood free and shoot him in the back as he rode away. Gesturing in sign language they said they were content with a single scalp, and told Potts to go home. He mounted his mule, left his rifle on the ground, and rode slowly down the hill. At the click of a rifle, he ducked in the saddle and moments later a bullet carried his hat away. Potts fell to the ground, and in so doing he drew a revolver from

4. *Joe Potts, a son of Jerry Potts, provided many details of his father's life during an interview by the author at Two Medicine River, Montana, Dec.* 30, 1955.

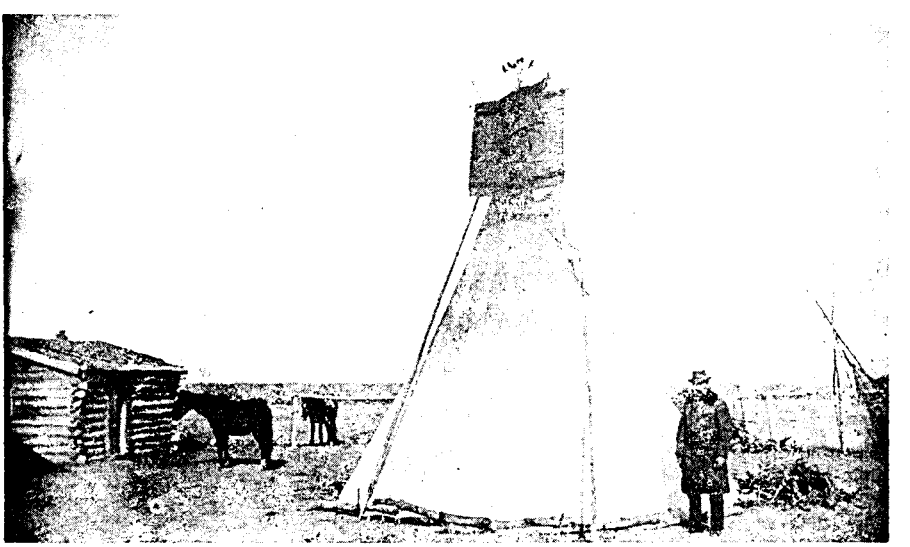
beneath his shirt and shot the Crow who had fired at him. The other two Indians, who were stripping his dead cousin, turned in surprise. Potts took careful aim and killed each man while on the dead run. He then stripped the would be victors and carried his cousin's body home for burial.

Indian names were given because of important events which affected the lives of warriors. In this battle, Jerry Potts obtained a gun which was made of blue steel. Many years later, just before his death, he named his youngest son "Blue Gun" in commemoration of the event.

Shortly after this battle, Potts was camped with the Bloods on Two Medicine River when they were attacked by a combined party of Gros Ventres and Assiniboines. This battle gave Potts a formidable reputation for although it occurred at dusk, he found a vantage point from where he shot with deadly accuracy any of the enemy who tried to flee in the darkness. The toll taken by Potts that evening was not recorded but was sufficient to establish his reputation among surrounding enemy tribes.

Jerry Potts' first wife was a Crow woman named Mary. She was eleven years younger than her husband and bore him one son, Mitchell, who was born in 1869. When Potts' work carried him northward into Canada, Mary returned to her people and Potts married again. This time he was not content with one wife, but took two sisters. These were Panther Woman and Spotted Killer, daughters of a South Peigan chief named Sitting-in-the-Middle. Potts had several children by both wives, but most of them died while still young.

During the period from 1869 until the arrival of the North-West Mounted Police in 1874, Potts worked in southern Alberta and northern Montana for whiskey traders. He was a hunter at Fort Whoop-Up in 1869 and 1870, worked at Spitze Post near High River in the following



Jerry Potts poses near a Blood tipi during religious ceremonies in 1893. Above the lodge is an offering made of eagle feathers, sagebrush and cloth.

year, and was at Fort Kipp near Lethbridge in 1872. He then returned to Montana where he worked for I. G. Baker and Company, which financed some of the posts in Canada.

During his first season in Canada, Potts was involved in a battle which added to his fame as a warrior and strategist. In the winter of 1869-70, a smallpox epidemic swept across the northern plains, killing more than fourteen hundred Blackfoot. Some of the Crees who escaped the disease saw their fever-weakened Blackfoot enemy as an easy prey. A large war party, made up of some eight hundred Crees and Assiniboines, was organized under the leadership of Piapot, Little Pine, Big Bear and Little Mountain. Travelling from what is now the province of Saskatchewan, they entered Blackfoot country and camped on the Little Bow River. From there, men who were sent to scout found a camp of Bloods in the valley of the Oldman River. However, they failed to notice a trail to the south which led to a nearby camp of well armed Peigans, who had fled north after a tragic massacre at the hands of the U.S. Army.

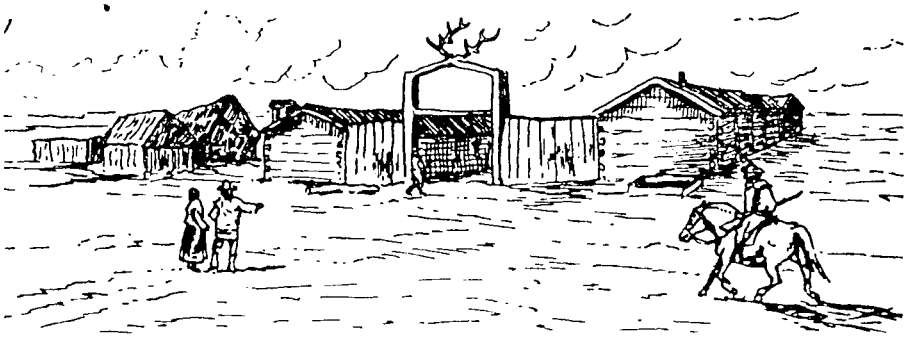
The Crees and Assiniboines arrived at the Belly River on October 24, 1870. Striking at nightfall, they killed a brother of chief Red Crow and several women in the camp. Two bands of Bloods, the Many Tumors and All Short People, put up a strong resistance and sent for help. The Peigans, armed with repeating rifles, immediately formed a large war party and arrived at the battle scene at dawn. En route, they picked up Jerry Potts and George Star, who were working as hunters at Fort Whoop-Up.

Under the onslaught of the new arrivals, the Crees fell back across the prairie towards the present City of Lethbridge. When they reached the banks of the Oldman River, the Crees took up a position in a large coulee to the south while the Bloods and Peigans chose another nearby. The two coulees were parallel, with the ridge between them varying from thirty to two hundred feet. The battle raged on for hours with bullets, arrows and rocks flying back and forth. Potts, observing a small butte which commanded a view of the Cree lines, sent a well-armed party to that point. From there a withering barrage was poured down upon the enemy. Sensing the hesitation of the Crees at the new turn of events, Potts led a general charge and the Crees fled in disorder. Hurling away their arms, they raced towards the Oldman River with the Blackfoot in pursuit. As the warriors and women struggled across the stream, the battle became a butchery. Standing on the west bank, the Blackfoot fired into the water at the fleeing enemy.

"You could shoot with your eyes shut and kill a Cree," Potts commented later.[5]

Some of the Crees reached the other side, but the Blackfoot crossed the river and continued the slaughter. One band of fifty Crees tried to make a stand in a grove of trees, but was wiped out. In the final count, the Peigans and Bloods lost forty men and women while the Crees and Assiniboines saw almost three hundred of their people die. Jerry Potts' decisive handling of the battle had contributed to its success. In the battle itself he took sixteen enemy scalps and wounded several men.

5. Lethbridge News, *Apr.* 30, 1890.



Fort Kipp, shown above, was one of several whiskey forts operating in southern Alberta in the early 1870's. Jerry Potts was working at this fort when he pursued and killed his mother's murderer. Sketch made by Dr. Nevitt, N.W.M.P. surgeon, in 1875.

The narrowest escape of Pott's life came during this fight. In the final onslaught, a Cree fired point blank into his face, but he threw himself to one side as the musket roared. He fell to the ground but, after shaking his head for a moment, he arose and resumed the battle. When the fight was over, he found that his left ear had severe powder burns from the enemy gun but otherwise he was unhurt. In later years, one of the important facts about Potts as far as the Blackfoot were concerned was that he had never been wounded in battle. This, to the Indian mind, proved he had supernatural powers.

By the early 1870's the Blackfoot hunting grounds had become chaotic. Liquor was available in quantity from the trading posts and intra-tribal killings had become common. One trader located at the present site of Calgary estimated that at least seventy Bloods had died in drunken quarrels during the winter of 1871-72 alone.

Potts' mother, Crooked Back, had returned to the Bloods and lived with another son, No Chief, in the Many Fat Horses camp. This small band was under the leadership of a respected chief named Heavy Shield. In this same band was a man with the unusual name of Not-Afraid-of-the-Gros-Ventre-Indians. Wealthy and prolific, he reputedly had ten wives and had fathered sixty children. Because he had such a large family, Not-Afraid-of-the-Gros-Ventres had formed his own band, naming it the "Many Children". But while they were a separate group, they still respected Heavy Shield and were angry when the old patriarch wanted nothing to do with their excessive drinking and quarrelling.

In the spring of 1872, the Many Children band was camped with the Many Fat Horses but old Heavy Shield, not liking the disturbances, had moved his family a short distance away. He took with him Potts' mother and her son, No Chief, who had married a woman from the Many Children band. The move made the Many Children jealous, particularly at No Chief, whom they felt was receiving special treatment. A short time later, a member of the Many Children band brought in a gallon of whiskey for No Chief and sent word for him to pick it up. While No Chief was at the Many Children camp, he was attacked by Hairy Face, one of his brothers-in-law. As a crowd of drunken warriors began to gather around him, No Chief panicked and shot his attacker in the back, killing him instantly. Then his father-in-law, Not-Afraid-of-the-Gros-Ventres, attacked and No Chief killed

Among this group of Bloods and traders is Morning Writing (middle row, white scarf) whose life Jerry Potts spared in 1873. This man became leader of the All Tall People band. Others in the group are: left to right, front row, Dave Mills, interpreter, and unknown; middle row, Eagle Ribs, unknown, Morning Writing and unknown; back row, Eagle Head, two unknown, Good Striker, Hind Bull and Weasel Horse.

him with a knife. Big Snake, a third member of the band, was wounded in the shoulder, but at last No Chief was shot and killed by another brother-in-law named Good Young Man.

Angered by the killings, the Many Children left No Chief's body lying on the ground for the dogs to eat, but a boy told Potts' mother about the incident. She came with a travois to carry her son's body away for burial but she was pulled from her horse by Good Young Man and murdered.

Several weeks passed before Jerry Potts learned that his mother and half-brother had been killed. He grieved when he heard the news and vowed to get revenge.

Working as a wrangler at Fort Kipp, he kept track of the killers but made no effort to pursue them. Finally, about two months later, the Many Children camped in the valley of the Oldman River, not far from the fort. A few days later, while Potts was driving some horses down to the water, he saw two Indians astride a single horse. By the time he had watered the animals and returned them to the corral, the two men had finished their trade and were riding away. Squinting into the sunlight, Potts recognized Good Young Man, his mother's

murderer, and another Blood named Morning Writing.

Quickly he grabbed his gun and followed the pair. They saw him approaching and, knowing who it must be, tried to reach the safety of their camp. But Potts had a fresh horse while the others rode double on a tired one. As he approached, Potts fired twice, but missed. Then, just as they came to a steep cutbank overlooking the Many Children camp, he shot Good Young Man in the back, shattering his spine. Reining up, he watched the body tumble down to the camp below, and permitted the second man to escape.[6]

His revenge now satisfied, Potts quit his job and returned to Montana. Disgusted by the lawlessness and debauchery caused by the whiskey traders, he did not come to Canada again until two years later, when he helped the Mounted Police stamp out the trade which had caused the deaths of his mother and half-brother.

During 1873 and 1874, Potts spent much of his time in the Peigan camps and, from that time on, he preferred the company of the Peigans to the Bloods. By the summer of 1874, he was employed by I. G. Baker & Co. at their post on Badger Creek in Montana. A life of violence behind him, his best friend became the bottle and remained so until his death.

Potts was engaged by the North-West Mounted Police in 1874 as a scout and interpreter for $90 a month. Then thirty-seven years old, he was a moustached gruff little man whose dress included the jacket, trousers and cap of the white man, and the leggings, moccasins, knife belt and cat skin "medicine" of the Indian.

6. *Interview with Jim White Bull, by the author, at the Blood Reserve, Jan.* 1, 1955.

The North-West Mounted Police were in real trouble when Jerry Potts came to them in 1874. This sketch by Henri Julien, who accompanied the expedition, shows the police heading south for the Sweetgrass Hills.

His first assignment was to lead the Mounted Police to Fort Whoop-Up to attack the American whiskey traders. Potts tried to explain that the traders had fled to Montana but, not trusting their new guide, the Police forced their crippled horses and tired men on towards the fort. Under the able guidance of the little mixed blood, they travelled across the short grass country from Milk River Ridge, passing buffalo bones bleached in the sun and huge herds of the shaggy beasts grazing like domestic cattle.

"He won the confidence of all ranks the first day out," recalled Sam Steele[7], "and when morning came he rode boldly in front of the advance guard. It was noon when the party reached Milk River and found him there sitting near a fat buffalo cow which he had killed and dressed for the use of the force. To those new to such life he appeared to know everything."

It was during this trek that the Mounted Police noticed their guide did not waste words. When they found the riddled body of a dead Assiniboine Jerry was asked to explain the probable reason of the killing. "Drunk," he muttered.[8]

After burying the body, the Police continued the journey over the monotonous terrain. Finally, one officer of the force, hoping that Whoop-Up was only a short distance away, rode up to Potts and asked: "What do you think we'll find on the other side of this hill, Jerry?"

"Nudder hill," replied the laconic guide.

When they reached Fort Whoop-Up, the Mounted Police found they did not need their two nine-pounder field guns and two mortars. With the exception of an old trader the fort was deserted.

It was then early October and Col. Macleod, seeing the need for immediate quarters, urged Potts to lead them to a suitable site for a fort. Guiding the tired caravan of redcoats, winded horses, Red River carts and wagons across the rolling prairies, the scout followed an Indian trail westward until they arrived at a large island on the Oldman River. Here was a site that offered natural water protection, abundant cottonwoods for construction, and was on a well-travelled route.

While Fort Macleod was being built, Potts travelled among the Blackfoot of the area, explaining the presence of the red-coated strangers and gaining promises of non-violence. Late in October, he reported that whiskey was being sold at Pine Coulee and guided the Police to the illicit post where the five men were apprehended. This was the first successful raid by the force since arriving in Blackfoot country. Later in the month, he led a party with 77 crippled or winded horses to winter grazing lands in Montana where they were left until spring. In November he brought the major chiefs of the Blackfoot tribes to the fort to meet Col. Macleod and hear his words of friendship. First to arrive was the renowned Crowfoot, followed by Red Crow of the Bloods and Bull Head of the Peigans. The latter was so impressed with the Mounted Police that he bestowed his name upon the commander of the force. Before the interviews, Potts carefully coached

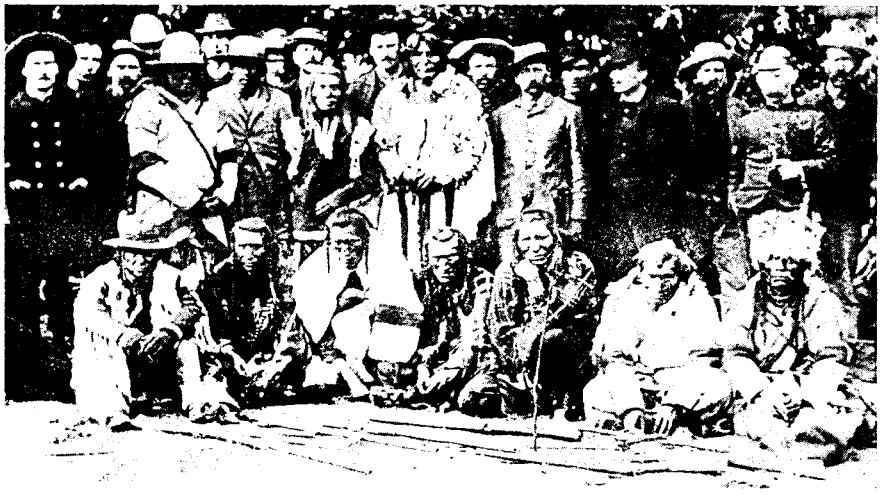
7. *S. B. Steele,* Forty Years In Canada, 1915, *p.* 76.
8. *Ibid, p.* 13.

The North-West Mounted Police scouts at Fort Macleod were photographed by F. Steele in 1890. Left to right, back row, Scout Hunbury and Jerry Potts; middle row, Cecil Denny, Staff Sgt. Chris Hilliard and Sgt. George S. Cotter; front row, Black Eagle and Elk Facing the Wind, Blood Indians.

Col. Macleod in the ways and customs of the Indian people. Hands were shaken, pipes were passed and prayers were said, all without embarrassment or incident.

Early in 1875, Jerry Potts displayed his remarkable sense of direction in two gruelling trips which would have taxed the resources of any average man. The first occurred in February when he was sent with Capt. Crozier and ten men to apprehend several Americans who were selling whiskey in the Bow River area. From the time they left Fort Macleod, the party experienced bitterly cold weather, so severe that Sgt. W. D. Antrobus commented: "Even Jerry Potts although he remained rolled up in his blankets, did not sleep at all."[9] But the taciturn plainsman led the men through one storm after another, crossing the plains without the slightest fear of becoming lost. After successfully capturing their men north of Highwood River, the Mounted Police ran into a blizzard which cut the visibility to fifty yards and obliterated any sign of a trail. "We could not be guided by the wind," commented the sergeant, "because it did not blow five minutes at a time from the same direction."[10] During the storm the party became separated, with Potts in one group and Sgt. Antrobus in the other. Seeing the futility of drifting aimlessly in the blizzard, the sergeant ordered his men to halt. In a short time their tracks had filled in and

9. *H. A. Dempsey, "A Mountie's Diary, 1875" in* The Early West, *Edmonton,* 1957, *p.* 8.
10. *Idem.*



Jerry Potts normally wore the clothes of a white man, although most of his time was spent with the Indians. He is seen here with a group of North Peigans. Left to right, standing, NWMP Sergeant Gaigen, Runs Among Buffalo, Kidney, Crow Shoe, Running Wolf, Jerry Potts and rest unknown; front row, Good Young Man, Little Plume, Running Eagle, Shining Double, Bull Plume, Green Grass Bull and Black Chief.

visibility decreased to thirty yards. But just when the men were resigned to certain death, Potts came trudging through the drifts heading directly towards the missing men. Then, reuniting the party, he guided them southward across the plains and struck the Highwood River at a point less than a mile upstream from their original camping place.

The second trip occurred in March when Col. Macleod, three policeman, and Potts started for Helena, Montana, three hundred miles away. When well out on the plains a wild blizzard struck, forcing the men to camp beside a cutbank for two days. When the food and fuel supplies were exhausted, Potts suggested travelling thirty miles south to Rocky Springs where proper shelter was available. Onto the plains of swirling snow the men followed their guide and, within an hour, everyone but Potts had lost his sense of direction. There were no landmarks and weakened men and horses stumbled in exhaustion. Finally, after several hours Potts dismounted and led the men into a narrow protected valley. It was Rocky Springs. Later, when everyone was settled before a roaring fire, the Police were dismayed to learn that Potts had been almost completely snow blind during the final part of the journey.

Although Potts would often use only one word when a dozen were necessary, or would color his translations with profanity, he filled the Mounted Police's immediate needs as an interpreter.

On one occasion a party of starving Indians visited Fort Macleod and the police listened patiently to the chief who kept up a constant tirade for several minutes. Potts, sitting quietly, made no attempt to translate. Finally Col. Macleod tapped his interpreter on the shoulder. "What is he saying, Potts?" he asked.

"He wants grub!" was the summation of the chief's entire speech.

The situation was much the same when several prominent chiefs were in attendance. Col. Macleod, who had learned a few words of Blackfoot, recognized "napi-okee" as "whiskey" and "napi-kwan" for "white man" and rightly guessed that the chiefs were expressing their gratitude to the Mounted Police for ridding their hunting grounds of the whiskey traders. Potts said nothing but, upon being asked, he shrugged his shoulders and commented simply:

"Dey damn glad you're here."[11]

The Blackfoot of today are probably correct when they say that some of the finest orations of their nation never reached the ears of the Mounted Police but were casually stripped of all their color by Potts. A corporal said that "the chief difficulty about his interpretations were that, after he had interpreted from the Blackfoot into the English language, you weren't very much further ahead, for his English was weird — particularly if he had had a few jolts of one of his favorite toddies."

Potts' first year with the Mounted Police was his most colorful and probably his most eventful. After locating a site for Fort Macleod, calming the worried Indians, weathering two blizzards, helping to capture some whiskey traders and performing other tasks, he led a party of police across the plains to establish Fort Walsh, in the Cypress Hills.

During this period, Potts retained his contacts with his Indian relatives. His wives and a few friends formed a small tipi village near the post with Potts as its accepted leader. His wives tended his horses, raised his children, and were in no way concerned over the busy work of their husband. But in May, 1875, the Potts family was infuriated when more than thirty-five of their horses were stolen by Assiniboine Indians who fled with them to Montana. A year earlier, Potts would have organized a war party, loaded his Winchester, and headed south.

11. *R. G. Mathews, "Life in the Mounted Police," in* Scarlet and Gold, *3rd Annual,* 1921, *p.* 18.

Fort Macleod was the headquarters of the North-West Mounted Police in southern Alberta. This view of the post was taken in about 1876.

North-West Mounted Police officers were photographed in the late 1870's. Left to right are a constable, Inspector Edmund D. Clark, Col. James F. Macleod, and Dr. John Kittson.

But wise to the ways of the new order, he approached Col. Macleod, obtained a letter of introduction to the U.S. Cavalry, and went south armed with this paper instead of a rifle. Reaching Fort Belknap, he took the message to Major Ilges who, anxious to co-operate with the newly-arrived Canadians, personally escorted Potts to the Assiniboine camps. The triumphant guide, sneering at his enemies, rounded up fifteen horses on the first day and had the remainder before the end of the week. He left some infuriated Assiniboines behind and scored one of the best bloodless "coups" of his career.

The Mounted Police were so fond of Potts that he remained in the force until his death. The bottle was always his closest companion and no white man could honestly say he was his intimate friend. Potts considered the Blackfoot to be his people and the Mounted Police his employers.

On some occasions, however, his faulty English resulted in escapades which would have caused the dismissal of any man but Jerry Potts. In September, 1877, when Hon. David Laird, Lieutenant-Governor of the North-West Territory, came to sign a treaty with the Blackfoot, Potts was the official interpreter. Governor Laird, who had participated in other treaty ceremonies, knew that Indians appreciated an expressive speech. When the council began, he arose and started to deliver a flowery address of welcome. Confused by the eloquence, Potts could only stand helplessly and blurt out the truth: he couldn't understand the lieutenant-governor's words. Embarrassed, the Mounted Police finally located an English half-breed who performed the

task. However, Potts soon redeemed himself when he led Col. Macleod and his party to Cypress Hills during a savage snowstorm, managing to find good camping grounds and fuel each night.

Potts' knowledge of the white man's way of life was almost as obscure as his facility for the language. When one of his wives saw some baby chamber pots in Fort Benton she purchased one. A short time later, Potts and his family reached Standoff Detachment with Col. Macleod who was arranging treaty payments for the Blood Indians.

"I've heard about the good water from Standoff spring," the officer remarked to Potts. "How about taking me there?"

"I can do better than that, Colonel," he replied. "We just brought some water from that very spring." He then turned to his nearest wife and told her to find a clean cup so that the colonel could drink. Mrs. Potts, remembering her recent purchase, gave it to her waiting husband. Potts took it, filled it with water and passed it to the officer.

"What's this? What's this?" exclaimed the officer when the chamber pot was handed to him.

"Why Colonel," replied Potts in surprise, "it's the spring water. My wife has even given it to you in a new cup she bought."

When Macleod explained the proper use of the vessel Potts shook his head in wonder. "You white people are crazy," he said at last. "You got plenty of open prairie all around and yet you use a good cup like this for kids to .... in."[12]

Potts' role in helping the Mounted Police and Indian Agents to keep peace among the Bloods and Peigans during the Riel Rebellion

12. *Interview with Harry Mills, by the author, at the Blood Reserve, Dec.* 26, 1953.

The meeting of Bloods and North-West Mounted Police at Fort Macleod symbolizes the dual loyalties of Jerry Potts' life. The police were his employers but the Bloods were his people.

of 1885 was one which brought him praise and honor. Playing on the natural emnity between the Blackfoot and Crees, Potts travelled through the excited camps, offering latest news of Cree defeats, disputing wild rumours sent by half-breed messengers, and bolstering the authority of elder chiefs who were counselling for peace. His ability to deal with an explosive situation with diplomacy and tact was of immeasurable value as he went with police officers from camp to camp during the early weeks of the rebellion.

In the late 1880's, after the death of his two wives, Potts took his fourth and final wife, *Isum-its-tsee*, or Long Time Laying Down. Through this marriage he returned to his own people, for the girl was a daughter of Blood chief One Spot.

Although he was a valuable scout, Potts was sometimes a headache to the force. On one occasion, when word was received of a suspicious wagon crossing the border, the Mounted Police's loyalty was sorely tried. The scout and two constables were sent to investigate the nocturnal traveller and intercepted the wagon after a day's ride. The owners had goods and whiskey in their load so they were arrested and handcuffed together in the back of the wagon. One constable took the reins, the other took charge of the saddle horses, and Potts was placed in the back to guard the prisoners. Upon arriving at Fort Macleod a constable discovered that Potts had broken into the whiskey supply and the three men had drunk themselves into an unconscious stupor. The liquor was consumed and the evidence was gone.

On other occasions Potts had to be tied up until he slept off a particularly fiery drunk and once he almost shot a member of the force whom he mistook for an old enemy. One policeman observed that Potts had "an unquenchable thirst which a camel might have envied. He drank whiskey when he could get it. If he could not get it, he would take Jamaica ginger, or essence of lemon, or Perry Davis' pain killer, or even red ink."[13]

While giving liquor to Indians was a serious crime on the frontier, Potts did not hesitate to drink with his mother's people. One day in the 1890's, Mike Oka, a whiskey-loving Blood, bought some liquor from a bootlegger and went to visit Jerry Potts. After a prolonged drinking bout Oka and another Blood named Man Fighting a Battle staggered into a wagon and headed homeward. En route they began drinking from a half-empty bottle and started a violent quarrel. Man Fighting a Battle was later found with two stab wounds in his chest, three in the back and two on his right arm. However, he survived the quarrel and no charges were laid.

Everyone who knew Potts admitted he was an unusual man and felt that his drinking was not uncommon on the frontier. With his virtues far outweighing his sins, he was considered to be a capable scout, guide and interpreter, rather than just a drinker. Regardless of his condition, no one could question his honesty, bravery and faithfulness to the Mounted Police.

Summing up this extraordinary man's career, Col. Steele commented that "he was the man who had trained the best scouts in the force and, in the earlier days when the prairie was a trackless waste,

13. *R. G. Mathews, op. cit.*

there were very few trips or expeditions of importance that were not guided by him or the men to whom he had taught the craft of the plains. As scout and guide I have never met his equal; he had none in either the North West or the states to the south."[14]

Steele also gave him high commendation as a diplomat and gentleman. "Potts influence with the Blackfoot tribes was such that his presence on many occasions prevented bloodshed," he wrote. "The Mounted Police knew his character for tact and pluck and believed that he would stay with his party to the last moment no matter how serious the situation might be. In his dealings with the red men he was a master of finesse."[15]

In the 1890's, Potts and Const. Tom Clarke, a member of the force, went duck hunting and were involved in an incident which gave the scout his second good luck charm. During the hunt Clarke fired a low volley in Potts' direction and was shocked when the scout toppled to the ground. Rushing to his side, Clarke was relieved to find Potts sitting up. "I thought somebody hit me in the head and knock my damn block off," he said, rubbing the side of his face.[16] Clarke investigated and found that a single lead pellet was lodged beneath the skin behind his ear. Potts, always superstitious, would not let Clarke or the police surgeon remove the shot but carried it as a good luck charm. He was amused by the thought of his only wound and found the pellet to be an interesting subject of conversation. The story became a bore to the men at the barracks and one day early in 1896, a policeman decided to play a practical joke. During a party in the cabin of John Clancy, the policeman asked to see the scar marking the place where the pellet was lodged. Potts, who was in a befuddled state, obligingly leaned forward. Deftly, the policeman flicked open his penknife and removed the tiny shot before Potts realized what had happened. Next morning, when the full impact of the deed came to him, Jerry mourned the loss of his good luck charm and voiced his fears for the future.

He died a few months later, on July 14, 1896, and the Mounted Police mourned the passing of the spirited little scout. The reports listed his death as "consumption" but his son, who was twenty years old when his father died, said it was cancer of the throat, aggrevated by prolonged drinking.

A large funeral was held in Fort Macleod with full military honors being accorded the plainsman. His body was laid to rest in the tiny Roman Catholic cemetery east of the town where a trim headstone marked his plot. Three volleys were fired over his grave, a general salute being blown after each volley.

"Jerry Potts is dead," the *Fort Macleod Gazette* announced.[17] "Through the whole North West, in many parts of eastern Canada, and in England itself, this announcement will excite sorrow, in many cases sympathy, and in all, interest. His memory will long be green in the hearts of those who knew him best, and 'faithful and true' is the character he leaves behind him — the best monument of a valuable life."

14. *S. B. Steele, op. cit., p.* 276.
15. *S. B. Steele, op. cit., p.* 277.
16. *T. Clarke,* Lethbridge Herald, *Oct.* 10, 1931.
17. Fort Macleod Gazette, *July* 17, 1896.

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PHOTOGRAPHS

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