FIFTY MIGHTY MEN

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Published by
WESTERN PRODUCER
SASKATOON, SASKATCHEWAN

PRINTED BY MODERN PRESS

CHAPTER III

POLICE SCOUT JERRY POTTS

IF Canadians want a counterpart to Davy Crockett, finding one should not be difficult. The nomination of Jerry Potts has much to commend it. The great little buckskin-clad frontiersman who guided the North West Mounted Police to the spot where Fort Macleod was built in 1874, would furnish hero material for Canadian boys and convincingly rival that of the highly publicized Mr. Crockett.

Jerry Potts wasn't what anybody would call handsome. He was small, pinched in features, round-shouldered, bow-legged, pigeon-toed and his stunted growth of whiskers was as untrimmed as native sagebrush. If he were to appear on a main street today, folk would whisper, "A suspicious-looking character in town!"

But however he appeared, Jerry Potts was one about whom westerners should not be allowed to forget. He possessed the courage of a bull-fighter and the stuff from which

heroes are made. It may be that the movie people have missed an opportunity in failing to reconstruct a film story of that man who for 22 years served Canada's mounties so well.

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Apart altogether from his long and effective association with the police, Jerry Potts has a strong claim to a place in Canadian history because he was one of the leaders in the last major Indian battle on the Canadian side of the boundary. Jerry, it must be understood, was a half-breed. His father, John Potts, was a Scot in charge of the American Fur Company at Fort Benton in Montana, and his mother was a Piegan squaw. Jerry was versatile, could be either Indian or white man as occasion demanded; and strangely enough, he succeeded in commanding the respect of both races.

Participation in that last Indian battle was rather by accident more than plan. Jerry was hunting with the Bloods and Piegans in the good buffalo country now called southern Alberta. Chief Piapot's Crees, 600 or 800 of them, made a sortie into that part, looking for enemy scalps. They attacked a small cluster of Blood and Blackfoot teepees on the Belly river and massacred many of the occupants, mostly old people and children.

The few defending warriors were far outnumbered but word was carried to the Piegans who were on the St. Mary river, above Fort Whoop-Up. The Piegans smeared themselves with war paint, commanded Jerry Potts to lead them and rode away to counter-attack.

It was bound to be a bitter fight because Crees and the tribesmen of the Blackfoot group hated each other at any time. The Crees from what would today be the province of Saskatchewan and the Blackfoot alliance defending Alberta soil, made the fray a forerunner of interprovincial contests—such as an Allen Cup play-off—but rougher and in no way handicapped by referees, rules and timekeepers.

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One of the best accounts of the battle was discovered in an article appearing in The Lethbridge News of April 30, 1890, while at least a few people could remember some-

thing about it. Piegan scouts located the Crees resting beside the river, just across from the present city of Lethbridge.

Jerry and his Piegans came up quickly. They had the advantage of the more modern guns and when they attacked, the surprised Crees were forced to fall back. The retreating Indians drew toward the river and made their stand in a coulee within view of the Galt Hospital built about 20 years later.

For a time there was a stalemate, with Crees in one coulee and Piegans in another. Then Jerry Potts led his tribesmen in a frontal attack and made it a bad day for the Crees. The latter were forced back, obliged to plunge into the river and as many were shot in the water as were killed on land. According to Jerry's telling, the river was so full of fleeing Crees that all a pursuer had to do "to kill one was point his gun at the water and fire."

The Crees were almost wiped out. If, as has been told, Big Bear who took a prominent part in the skirmishes of the North West Rebellion, was with Chief Piapot's Indians that day, he was one of the few to escape.

In any case, Jerry Potts was the victor's hero, emerging with nothing he'd call a serious injury, just a head wound and a small lead gun-pellet embedded in the flesh below his left ear. The pellet he refused to have removed—having got it at the hour of his greatest success, it was his "good luck medicine."

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Danger held no fear for Potts. Throughout his life he was close to it. While still in his teens, he tracked an Indian murderer for several hundred miles and gained the revenge he sought, right in the pursued man's own camp.

The Indian, it appears, shot and killed Jerry's father at Fort Benton. The bullet may have been intended for another but Jerry's father was the victim and the 17-year-old lad set out to settle with the killer, relying upon the only law of any use at that time, the "law" men carried in their holsters.

The Indian Jerry was trailing belonged to one of the Blackfoot bands on the Canadian side and after several days of flight, supposed he had gained the protection of his

tribal encampment. But home camp or no home camp, Jerry overtook the murderer and faced him with the challenge to fight it out.

It was a terrific fight and Jerry carried scars from it, but he settled the account in the manner considered appropriate in Indian society. One might have expected the killer's fellow-tribesmen would try to take Jerry's scalp but instead, they acknowledged his courage and let him depart homeward.

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It was a fortunate day for the Mounted Police and their tasks in the buffalo country when Colonels French and Macleod met Jerry Potts at Fort Benton. To the Mounties, the country into which they were trekking was dangerously new and strange and their need for guidance was urgent. In bringing law and order to the country, their first purpose was to visit the notorious Fort Whoop-Up, but as they halted at Sweet Grass after weeks on the trail, they didn't know which way to turn in order to reach their goal.

The commissioner and his assistant made a side-trip to Fort Benton on the Missouri River and there they heard about the skill of Jerry Potts. No time was lost in making a deal with him and Colonel Macleod, in returning to the main body of the police, brought the new "hired man."

At first, the rank and file of constables and officers were not impressed by this bandy-legged, weasel-eyed and silent newcomer, but all that coolness toward him changed. Very soon they discovered that when they were in trouble, Jerry was the person who could help. When water was in short supply, Jerry could find a spring, and when food was needed urgently, he could always locate a fat buffalo.

One of his first acts was to guide the police in a direct course to Fort Whoop-Up at the junction of Belly and St. Mary rivers, where police anticipated a struggle but found an almost deserted post. Then on October 13, 1874, he brought them to the island in the Old Man river where they started to build their new home and headquarters to carry the name Fort Macleod.

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One of the first blows at the whiskey traders from the

south, struck without delay, was at a Negro named Bond. Chief Three Bulls reported buying two gallons of bad liquor and paying with two good horses. With Jerry Potts as their guide, police set out to find the offender and after two days and 50 miles of travel northward, Bond, his 16 horses, two wagons loaded with whiskey and 116 buffalo robes taken in trade, were securely in police custody. The trader was convicted and sentenced to jail—a fair warning to others engaging in the foul business that was demoralizing Canadian Indians.

Potts was exactly what the police needed. He could converse in several Indian languages, was an expert hunter and was no less daring in the face of trouble than the police with whom he cast his lot.

He possessed the instincts of a homing pigeon, was never lost in either storm or darkness. Only once was there evidence of doubt; he was searching for a landmark in the form of a pile of stones and having some difficulty.

"What's the matter?" asked Col. Macleod, "are you lost?"

Irked that anyone would suggest such a thing, the little man replied sharply, "No! Stones lost."

Best of all, for police purposes, he was on good terms with the Indians, being one of those half-breeds willing to live more or less like a white man but retaining the instincts of and loyalty to the Indians.

Whatever the situation or however great the danger, Jerry Potts in his silent way, knew how to meet it—for example—that day in the Montana foothills when travelling with two prospectors. A big band of Sioux Indians charged out of a coulee, bent on slaughter.

Potts and his companions fled as fast as their horses could carry them and knowing there was a chance of being overtaken, they headed toward a deserted log cabin. Reaching it, they turned their horses loose and barricaded themselves inside with their guns and revolvers ready for action.

The Indians came on and were met by gunfire—gunfire directed with deadly accuracy. The prospectors loaded the guns and Jerry fired. Eight or ten Indians fell and the

rest were shocked to discover how three men could fill the air with deadly bullets.

The survivors withdrew and held council. Jerry knew what they were planning—wait for nightfall, attack and burn the cabin and collect a trio of scalps. But, as darkness fell, Jerry, on his belly, crawled away through the tall grass, made a big circle and came upon the Indian camp from the rear.

Then, moving among them as one of themselves without creating suspicion, he untied three Indian horses, led them back the way he came and joined his friends at the cabin. The three men then mounted and rode away through the darkness to safety.

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Any man capable of performing such feats and remaining loyal, would be indispensible to the police. During his 22 years as interpreter and guide, he was constantly making rescues of one kind or another. If there was trouble in an Indian encampment Jerry would ride along with the officers and if the evidence in a cattle stealing or whiskey trading case was inadequate Jerry knew how to augment it.

In unfamiliar territory, the officers had complete confidence if Jerry was their guide. There wouldn't be much conversation as they travelled—the police knew that. When a trail-weary constable searching the horizon for journey's end, asked, "Jerry, what's beyond that next hill?" he received a typical Potts reply, " 'Nother hill."

His body was tough and sinewy. He could miss a meal or several of them without complaining. He never admitted fatigue. But little Jerry had one physical weakness—his lungs. He had a chronic cough and lung trouble led to his death.

Early in 1896, the lead pellet from an Indian gun worked its way out of Jerry's neck-muscle and the little man was disturbed; he had lost the "good luck medicine" he carried for many moons. Late that year, he died and was buried with full military honors in the police plot at Fort Macleod, the customary volleys being fired across his grave.

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"Jerry Potts is dead," wrote the old Macleod Gazette

of July 17, 1896. "Through the whole of the North West, in many parts of eastern Canada and in England, this announcement will excite sorrow. Jerry Potts was a type fast disappearing. . . . A half-breed, he had the proud distinction of being a very potent factor in the discovery and settlement of the western part of the North West Territories. When Colonels French and Macleod left their wearied and almost helpless columns at Sweet Grass in '74, after a march of 900 miles and a vain search for the much vaunted "Whoop-Up," it was the veriest accident of fortune that in Benton they found Jerry Potts, who as a modern Moses was to lead them out of the desert and bring them to the end of their difficulties.

"He took Macleod's column straight as a die to Whoop-Up; he brought it on to the present site of Macleod and for years afterward was the unfailing guide, the faithful interpreter and the true and loyal go-between that made it possible for a small and utterly insufficient force to occupy and gradually dominate what might so easily under other circumstances have been a hostile and difficult country. For years he stood between the police on one side and his natural friends the Indians on the other and his influence always made for peace."

And then the Macleod Gazette concluded its tribute to the quiet, weather-beaten man of the plains in these words: "Jerry Potts is dead but his name lives and will live. Faithful and true' is the character he leaves behind him—the best monument of a valuable life."

That was the editor's tribute and a good one. For western people it may be fascinating to speculate how the stream of development might have been changed had that great and loyal scout not been hired into the service of the Mounted Police.