

The Carlton Trail

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My father homesteaded the north-east quarter of section 28-25-11 W2, and the shack he built to comply with the residence requirements of the Act was within a mile of the Carlton trail. I was then about 15 years old. Like most English lads born near the end of the nineteenth century, I was brought up on the romantic stories of G. A. Henty and R. M. Ballantyne. I never crossed the Carlton trail without stopping to look at its deep ruts and speculate about the oldtime travellers who had worn them down. There were three or four sets of ruts, some deeper than others. Some had been forsaken long ago, until the rains had washed down soil and they had reverted again to prairie sod. The relative age of each set of ruts could be clearly read.

The homesteaders seldom used the Carlton trail. They came in at first through Yorkton and later through Balcarres and Lipton after the Canadian Pacific completed its branch line from Kirkella into Manitoba.

We had been two years on the homestead when an experience befell me by which I will always remember the Carlton trail. I had been to a picnic not far from the present village of Kelliher. When I set off for home in the evening, a small cloud low down in the south west showed an occasional flash of "sheet" lightning. It seemed far away, and I paid little attention. Riding Dick, our buckskin pony, I joined the Carlton trail intending to follow it at a leisurely pace most of the way home. I was always disposed to spare my mount, especially when no audience was present to take note of what I conceived to be my horsemanship. Not that Dick was mettlesome. He had few outstanding qualities beyond a stubborn endurance and an ability to survive with very few oats.

A backward glance showed that the small cloud had become much enlarged. I realized that I had a long way to go, and urged Dick to a brisk trot. Low growls of thunder warned

that it was a vain hope to beat that storm. Black darkness closed in. Lightning was almost continuous. Thunder no longer growled. It exploded with cracks like a thousand rifles, and the earth seemed to shake with its booming echoes.

I was frightened. But there seemed nothing for it but to keep on going. Down came the rain, a lashing, drenching torrent. And with it, a new anxiety. Dick had decided that it was no night for travel. We were in thickly wooded country. He left the trail and tried to take refuge in the bush. Knowing that if I lost sight of the trail I would soon be lost myself, I reined him up and waited for a lightening flash to show me the trail. It was only seconds to wait. A flash lit up the whole countryside, and left me in such darkness that for moments I feared I was blinded. I got Dick back on the trail again with difficulty, for he was as stubborn as a mule and as hard in the mouth as he was stubborn. Soon I knew by the swish of his hoofs in the long grass that we were heading for the bush again. I was always, a stubborn individual myself, and now it was my stubbornness pitted against Dick's. I never wore a spur in all my riding days, and that was the only time I wished for one. It took all my strength to turn his head back to the trail. I was struggling to keep him on it when lightning silhouetted the house and stables of a Metis rancher about half a mile away. I said goodbye to the Carlton trail and headed for the shelter.

These hospitable people took me in, gave me dry clothing, and stabled and fed the refractory Dick, who I felt didn't deserve it. My hosts appeared, I thought, to be more sorry for the pony than for me.

I got home in time for breakfast the next day. Peace had followed the storm. How different the Carlton trail looked in the warm sunlight of a summer morning!