

STEVE MANN, RANCHER-NATURALIST OF SKULL CREEK (1895-1968)

by Margaret Belcher, Regina

At the turn of the century, before Saskatchewan became a province, the first settlers were already learning to know the flora and fauna of a new land. If they were ranchers or farmers interested in animals and plants, the daily round of activities provided them with opportunities to pursue their hobby. Driving oxen on a breaking plough, or sitting for long days in the saddle, they made observations that would escape the notice of their present-day counterparts with noisy tractors or ranch trucks.

At first, there were no natural history societies or museums to encourage reports from these unassuming observers. However, when a modest Provincial Museum was established in Regina in 1906, people who wanted to share their observations with others began to write in. The names of people like George Lang, farming at Indian Head, or Laurence B. Potter, ranching at Eastend, figure largely in the Museum's early correspondence. Indeed, when H. H. Mitchell drew up a catalogue of Saskatchewan birds (1924) he used the observations of farmers and ranchers who were watching birds in widely separated parts of the province. One of the persons who established contact with the Museum at that time and with other people in the province interested in nature, was Steve Mann of Skull Creek, a little country post office in the ranching country near Maple Creek.

Unlike Lang and Potter, Stephen A. Mann was not a newcomer to the province. He was born in the Southwest in 1895—the first white child born in the Skull Creek area. Today his son Robert Mann lives on the family ranch where both he and his father were born, and where Robert was in partnership with his father in their combined ranching and farming operation until the latter's death in

August, 1968. Robert Mann's account of his father's life shows how the rancher's hobby of nature study must be viewed in the larger framework of the operations by which he makes his living and his contribution to the life of the community:

"My father was born here on the ranch on the eleventh of June 1895, the second living son of James and Charlotte Mann, née Syred. James Mann came from Devonshire, England, and as he grew up learned the tanner's trade. He emigrated to Montreal at the age of 18 and there worked as an orderly in the Montreal General Hospital. Charlotte Syred was born in Torquay and emigrated to Canada with her parents when she was a child. She trained as a nurse at the Montreal General Hospital and nursed the wounded of the Riel Rebellion of 1885 at Winnipeg. In 1892 James and Charlotte saw an ad for a married couple in this area so they were married and came west, working at the ranch two miles up the Skull Creek from where they eventually settled in 1894. The farm on which they settled was taken up as squatter's rights, and later homesteaded.

"One day in 1900 the Mann family sat down to dinner, their usual one of roast beef, potatoes and possibly a suet pudding, when Jules Quesnelle, an old scout and freighter, dropped in with a bag of mail. He said to Mr. Mann, 'Here is the mail and you are the postmaster.' The dishes were moved over. They had no key to open the bag so it was slit open. From then on for 65 years the mail plied between Maple Creek and Eastend. At the last, there was only one delivery a week, from Piapot, and the post office was closed in 1965, when my father, at the age of 70, retired from the position of postmaster which he had taken over from his father.

"The Mann home was for many



Steve Mann in front of Skull Creek Post Office which served the community from 1900 to 1965.

years a kind of crossroads for the community and early settlers for 15 to 20 miles to the south and east of here. Dad had the opportunity of meeting and knowing the drivers and travellers who travelled on the stage route between Maple Creek and East-end, and told many stories about them. One of the visitors from the road whom he remembered as a boy was an Old Country Frenchman who stayed a week because my grandmother knew French, and who taught the children some of the rudiments of the language.

"My father did not tell us much about his boyhood. His playthings, I know, were simple. I remember him telling of making play corrals of buffalo bones, and I'm sure his father made him a wooden toy wagon, just as he made me one when I was small, with wheels cut from the cross section of a log and axles from a straight branch, the rest being put together out of odds and ends that were at hand. His keen interest and observation of nature must have started early

because he knew every piece of ground, particularly along the creek, for three or four miles in either direction.

"As he grew up he had very little formal education and his 3R's came mostly during two hours after supper in the long winter evenings when my grandfather taught the children from an old speller that he had brought from England and I think from books bought out of the Eaton's catalogue and sent by grandparents from Montreal. Young and old alike worked hard together to survive, but schedules were not apparently so rigid and there were not the modern conveniences to demand your attention, so there was much time for reading from the large stock of books which were kept on a high shelf behind the big easy chair in the living room. There were geography books, an encyclopedia set, a good dictionary (which I think Dad knew by heart), and also a large number of newspapers and periodicals, for example the *Winnipeg Free Press*, *Family Herald*, *Farm and Ranch Re-*

view, *Saturday Evening Post*. Later there were also books by authors such as Gene Stratton Porter, Zane Grey, J. Fenimore Cooper, Curwood and many others. Reading was difficult in the poor light; I remember Dad telling of reading by the light of a wick set in tallow in a jam tin or saucer before the days of coal oil lamps. He was also taught for a time by an aunt who then lived nearby. His only school education came when a local school was established for a brief six months.

"His chores consisted of running the old hand swing washing machine, the barrel churn (the family milked cows and sold a great deal of butter) and tending a small flock of sheep (which he hated owing to the complete disregard that an old ewe, the leader of the flock, had for fences). This seemed to leave plenty of time for wandering about the bush and country looking for adventure. He told of finding buffalo bones and skulls, old firearms, pieces of carts, a canoe paddle and human skulls; of visiting the old "76" ranch chuckwagon which used to camp a quarter of a mile below the building when trailing and during fall roundup; of a string of cattle four or five abreast stretching from north of our place to the top of the "Bench" (Cypress Hills) four and one-half to five miles away; of a lightning storm which struck after camp was pitched and stampeded the herd, so that a portion of the Manns' fence was completely carried away and saddles, bridles and other pieces of the riders' equipment were found later where they had been lost in the haste of trying to get remounted to turn the herd. He told of several prairie fires that set the grassland dangerously ablaze. He also remembered the winter of 1906-07 when it turned cold and snowy the beginning of November and remained that way without a break until the middle of May. After a blizzard his father discovered a "76" cow buried in a snow bank in the yard when he saw its breath coming out of a hole in the snow. A large band of sheep was

also lost when they drifted over a cut bank before a storm. He also told of how the "76" tried to recoup some of their losses by hiring local settlers to bring in the hides. They would start the hide with a knife and then hitch a team of horses to it and pull it off. The stench of dead cattle was in the air for some time after the big blizzard.

"It was during his childhood and youth that his interest in nature began, when he had time to roam and when nature was still untouched. He watched the drummer partridge make its peculiar drumming sound on a two-foot thick hollow cottonwood log across the creek behind the old house, and the shrike single out a sparrow from the flock to chase and kill it. He discovered that the sound of packs of coyotes that he loved to hear, and are now almost gone, was made, not by a pack, but by two coyotes only standing face to face, as he watched them in the moonlight, yapping into one another's mouths. He watched the sharp-tailed grouse dance and the weasel hunt. After dinner one day he took eleven gophers away in half an hour from a weasel who was feeding her young. These are but a few of the things he observed and later shared with us and with his friends from childhood, Peter and George Swain. He also had a fine collection of birds' eggs."

In Robert Mann's account of his father's childhood we see the natural development of his life-long interest in nature and the outdoors. The comments of Steve Mann's sister Helena (Mrs. J. Bennetto of Skull Creek) reflect this, too, for she tells how she used to tramp with him on his bird nesting and bird watching tours, and on his hunting and trapping trips, as well as riding, skating, dancing and playing tennis with him. Later, when Steve Mann had children of his own, his wholesome enjoyment of life was communicated to them.

In the summer of 1928, Steve Mann married Marjorie Nickell, a young woman from Ontario who had been teaching a few years before in the local Manville school. As their two



Ranching country at Skull Creek — the Manns' "7-Anchor Ranch".

children, Helen and Robert, grew up, they came to share their parents' love for their ranch home and to appreciate in their father what Helen called his "immense awareness and love for everything in nature." "As a youngster," Helen tells us, "I can often remember climbing the hill behind the house with him to watch an oncoming thunder storm. Even in the rush of spring work there was always a bouquet of the first crocuses — carried under his hat, as he would have his hands full with a four-horse team, or saddle horse. The first shooting stars would be brought in, as well as any unique or particularly beautiful specimens, to be shared and admired. Fine Sunday mornings were usually spent in the hills on horseback. We used the excuse that he wanted to look around the cattle, but there was always an eye for antelope, deer, or coyote—any bird or animal life. I can remember riding out one evening checking cattle, and Dad's amusement at the activities of a coyote, teasing the dog — luring him away, then pursuing him almost up to where Dad was sitting, waiting for me to complete my circle. He had immense affection for the coyote, and

never allowed bait on our land, even though he was unable to persuade others around us of the value of the coyote economically and esthetically. If he wasn't out on horseback, he often went for a walk in the bush, "just to see what's there." Numerous were the occasions when he would appear at the back door, saying "Come on out: there's something I want you to see" (or hear, as he was an authority on bird calls and song).

"His interest in archaeology was as keen as his interest in birds and conservation. A favourite form of recreation was covering a blown field, pace by slow pace, watching for any artifacts uncovered by the wind. He was a keen observer, and, as well as wild things, odd stones and artifacts of any type caught his eye. Even at the time of his death, he had some interesting pieces in his pocket that he had picked up along the way".

It was partly because he had known Indians personally in the early days, that Steve Mann was interested in Indian lore, and he belonged to both the Lethbridge and Regina archaeology groups. Many visitors called at his home to see his collections, which

he had started before his death to assemble into a little museum in his basement study. Mrs. Mann and her daughter Helen Schuler are continuing to classify the pottery and artifacts. In this little "home museum" which many of us have visited, there is also a "pioneer" collection of household articles and early weapons, and a collection of articles connected with the family history, as well as Steve Mann's collection of birds' eggs.

In an old ledger that Mrs. Mann has loaned to us are preserved the bird notes kept by her husband, of early spring migration dates and unusual bird occurrences, over a long series of years from 1927 to 1968. Because he kept such records, Steve Mann was regularly contacted by Laurence Potter who lived with his sister on a ranch at Eastend. Potter used to drop in at the Mann ranch from time to time, paying them at least one visit a year to keep up with Steve's records. The two would talk over the year's interesting occurrences, and some of these reports eventually made their way into Potter's 1943 addition to Mitchell's list, "Saskatchewan bird records made since the publication of Mitchell's catalogue of Saskatchewan birds in 1924" (*Blue Jay*, 1:25), or W. Earl Godfrey's *Birds of the Cypress Hills and Flotten Lake Regions* (1950).



Team work — Steve Mann and his son Robert building an earthwork dam to hold water for livestock and garden.

Mann also knew Charles F. Holmes of Dollard and Spencer Pearse of Eastend, although he had more contacts with Potter with whom he also corresponded.

Among the interesting bird records emanating from this little group of keen observers in the southwest (Cypress Hills) area of Saskatchewan, Mann's name is cited by Godfrey (1950) for his report of the Mockingbird (seen by Mann on October 23, 1929, and collected on November 1 and sent to the Provincial Museum). Godfrey does not mention, however, what I think to be an equally interesting collection by Mann of a Townsend's Solitaire, "taken as a specimen and sent to Regina" April 22, 1945. There are other records in Mann's field notes of which Godfrey may not have been aware—he does not include, for example, in his rather detailed report of sight and sound records, Mann's reports of species of such uncommon occurrence as the Red-headed Woodpecker (Apr. 2, 1927; July 7, 1933; June 1, 1934; May 19 and 24, and June 4, 1936; June 21, 1937; June 4, 1947; May 22, 1956; June 9, 1957; June 5, 1961; June 3, 1963; June 6, 1966; June 4, 1968), the Lewis' Woodpecker (May 16, 1949), and the Black-headed Grosbeak (May 24, 1927; May 17, 1955; May 22, 1960).

The most exciting recent ornithological report from Mr. Mann was his record of the Mountain Chickadee at Skull Creek, published in the *Blue Jay*, 25:76. For this rare species, reported for the first time in Saskatchewan, the terse entry in the old ledger simply reads: "Mountain Chickadee. [No. seen] 1. [First seen] Nov. 30. [Next seen] Dec. 3 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9 - 11. Seen every day at feeder through until March 24-25-26. Heard singing March 15 and 16 on mild spring days. Seen until Ap 10 - Ap 14 - Ap 15 - Ap 20 - Ap 22." [1966-67]

It was through Laurence Potter that Steve Mann got to know of Mrs. Isabel M. Priestly, the Yorkton naturalist who later founded the *Blue Jay* magazine. Potter told Mrs. Priestly

about Mann, and Mrs. Priestly then wrote to him about his records. Steve Mann was thus corresponding with Mrs. Priestly before the beginnings of the *Blue Jay*, which began publication in 1942 as a simple newsletter "to act as a connecting link between nature lovers in Saskatchewan."

Steve Mann was a contributor from the first to the *Blue Jay* magazine, and therefore also a charter member of the Saskatchewan Natural History Society when it was organized in 1949. It was through the Saskatchewan Natural History Society that I met the Manns, at the first summer meeting of the Society held at Fort Qu'Appelle in 1955. Two years later (June 1957), the Manns themselves organized the SNHS summer meet at the Cypress Hills' Provincial Park, and in October 1962 Steve Mann became the president of the society for a two-year term. Because of his open and outgoing personality, as well as his long connection with the organization, Steve Mann was certainly one of the most widely and well known of the Society's members.

This connection with the Saskatchewan Natural History Society does not tell the whole story, however. In fact, the SNHS would never have come into being had it not been for many long-established friendships that preceded the official organization of the Society. Typical of these friendships was the one that developed from very simple beginnings between Steve Mann and Manley Callin, one of the most dedicated amateur birdmen in Saskatchewan. In 1928 an uncle of Callin's, who was working in the Piapot district, told him about a Steve Mann who was interested in birds, and suggested that he should write to him.

Callin wrote twice to Mann during that fall and winter, and received two letters from him in reply, which he still has in his possession. They did not write again, but they both continued their study of birds, and finally met through the SNHS, almost 30 years later!

In Steve Mann's first letter to

Manley Callin (January 28, 1929) he told how his own interest in bird studies had increased when he began to make notes (in 1927 and 1928) of migration dates and unusual occurrences; he described the thrill of seeing for the first time in 1928 the Yellow-breasted Chat, which had only been noted by two others in Saskatchewan (H. H. Mitchell and L. B. Potter), and in the previous year the Mockingbird, which Potter had collected to send to the Museum in Regina. In the second letter (March 21, 1929) a word of caution was extended to Callin, then a young beginner, about identifying new species. I am quietly amused now, knowing Callin as one of the most scrupulously accurate of bird observers, to read Mann's advice to him: "A person cannot be too careful in identifying birds"!

The part that Mann played in the Saskatchewan Natural History Society was typical of the attitude he took toward all community activities — he wished to pull his full share of the load as a member of the team. His son remembers him telling of a characteristic incident when he signed up members for the Territorial Grain Growers, the organization that preceded the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool. His membership number was 110-103 (the second figure denoting the order of signatures) because he signed his own name last when he handed the list in!

Steve Mann was a faithful member of the Anglican Church and a strong supporter of its country parish activities. For over 45 years he was a member of the Oddfellows' Lodge, in which he held the office of Noble Grand. He served as president of the Maple Creek Old Timers' Association, and at the time of his death was a director of Tompkins Credit Union. He was a member of the Piapot Branch of the Royal Canadian Legion, having served with the Canadian Army from 1917-1919. Just as in the community, he was always part of an active team, at home on the ranch his partners were



Ranch home of the Mann's — Steve's house at left, Robert's at right.

his wife and his son, and together they planned and worked to make a worthwhile way of life as well as a living. Theirs was the first commercial herd to be placed on progeny test in Saskatchewan.

Sports and recreational activities were also entered into with great zest. In his younger days, he played soccer football, and up until the time of his death he curled every winter. He still played softball with the local teams while in his sixties, and was batting out flies to his grandchildren in his last summer. When he was younger, he and his sister maintained a turf tennis court which was a gathering place for the young people in the evening after the horses were brought in from the fields, and on a Sunday afternoon. He loved to dance, and could call a square dance — although he would much sooner take part in it!

Last but not least, he was a horseman. During his lifetime he had broken many broncs, and right to the last he rode often, "straight in the saddle", as his son describes him, "as

if he and the horse were one." His active life came to an end as a result of injury received when he was thrown against the pommel of the saddle on a bucking horse. When he died a few days later in hospital, it was difficult, and yet fitting, to think that his life had ended in action.

Many heartfelt tributes were paid Steve Mann, for he was beloved both by his own Skull Creek community and by his wide circle of friends in the Saskatchewan Natural History Society. One of the most touching was the tribute of Dr. Unger who had been the Manns' doctor at Maple Creek in his brief practice there. He wrote to Mrs. Mann: "Our acquaintance with your husband was only fleeting, yet he was one of those rare individuals whose humble character and exemplary life, quite unintentionally leaves a profound source of inspiration on one's own life; a gift rarely received from life's endless procession of acquaintances. We will remember especially his quiet love of the great outdoors."