

WHOOPING CRANES AMID POLITICAL TURMOIL, SPRING 1885



Photo Credit: Nick Saunders

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In 1929, Campbell Innes of the Canadian Northwest Historical Society based in Battleford undertook one of his many information-gathering exercises. This involved a newspaper article with the request that “surviving members of the General Strange Expedition of 1885 ... should send their names and addresses” to the latter Society, with this explanation: “Every effort is being made to quickly collect and publish the source of history of the settlement days based on the stories of actual eye-witnesses of

those stirring days”.¹ One of those who responded to Innes' call was a farmer from Pense, Mr. A. McCarthy, although his experience was related to the military action of Colonel William D. Otter and not General Thomas. B. Strange.²

In the spring of 1885, amid the general tension throughout the Canadian prairies, two Plains Cree chiefs, Poundmaker and Little Pine, led a delegation from their reserves to Battleford “to declare their allegiance to the Queen and secure rations for their hungry bands”.³ This so alarmed the settlers of the region that they moved into the Northwest Mounted Police fort on the height of land overlooking the confluence of the Battle and North Saskatchewan Rivers. Colonel Otter, in command of some 500 soldiers, was dispatched to deal with the situation in the Battleford region. Otter's forces, transported by train as far west as Swift Current, marched and rode north from there on April 13, following the established trail to Battleford. Over the next few weeks, trains of wagons and carts followed the military force, carrying supplies and food to support the troops and the Battleford settlers. Mr. McCarthy was a teamster in one of these caravans:

Seeing the enclosed in the paper, I herewith state what I know about the transport arrangements. I had a homestead at Pense at the time & joined the expedition from there & Moosejaw [sic] with some neighbours. We unloaded our oxen at Swift Current 12 in the party. About 20 miles North of Swift Current about one mile east of the trail in a slew [slough] was a flock of large white birds like storks or

ostridge [sic] about 500 - I never saw any of them since. When they rose to fly they shook the air like thunder though they were a mile away.⁴

It is likely that the “storks or ostridge” that McCarthy observed were Whooping Cranes (*Grus Americana*). Certainly, as a resident of the Saskatchewan plains he would have known that they were neither snow geese nor swans. As well, these cranes would have been well within their traditional range and presumably had been resting and feeding in the course of their northward migration. While McCarthy's estimate of the size of the flock must be viewed with some uncertainty, it was clearly large. Evidently, the Whooping Crane population of the North American plains was still substantial at this time, its nadir some 50 years off.⁵

No doubt, as they made their way north, some of the birds observed by McCarthy would have dropped out of the flock when they reached their home nesting grounds in west central Saskatchewan. Others may have continued north to the wetlands of northwestern Saskatchewan and northern Alberta. Certainly, Whooping Cranes, in dwindling numbers, continued to nest across the Saskatchewan plains through to the 1920s.^{6,7,8,9}

McCarthy's observation, therefore, adds to the historical record of Whooping Cranes in Saskatchewan.^{7,8,9,10} Of course, two archaeological discoveries have added considerable time depth to these historical records: Whooping Crane bones from Ft. Rivière Tremblante (1791-98)^{11,12} and from the Fox Valley site, an ancient burial.

The latter has been dated to 2290±40 B.P. (Beta-177964).¹³

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THE VERN HARMS IMPORTANT PLANT AREAS OF SASKATCHEWAN PROGRAM

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Important Plant Areas is a conservation program first developed by Plantlife International, a UK-based organization, to provide a platform for identifying and preserving significant wild plant populations. According to Plantlife, an Important Plant Areas program should “inform and underpin existing international, regional and national conservation programmes and legislation”. Ultimately, their hope is “that Important Plant Areas will act as a benchmark for determining whether the strongest protection, under any existing legislation, is being afforded to the most important sites for plants.”¹

Since the program's debut in Europe, other jurisdictions have followed suit. In North America, arguably the most well-developed programs are administered by the California Native Plant Society and our nearest neighbours to the south, the Montana Native Plant Society, for use in their respective states.

Using Montana's program as a template, the Botanical Assessment Working Group² (of which Nature Saskatchewan is a member), has adapted the program for Saskatchewan with the hope that

the provincial government will use it in its landscape planning approach. Now that the primary goal of reassessing rarity rankings for Saskatchewan's plant species is complete, the Botanical Assessment Working Group can shift its focus to a habitat level.

The hope is that an Important Plant Area designation will provide regulators and decision makers with information and an opportunity to direct development away from these significant sites. Other opportunities may include applying for funding for data collection, monitoring, or management of these sites, and working with land managers to continue to make decisions that are beneficial for the plant species and habitats that occur on these sites.

The Native Plant Society of Saskatchewan website will serve as a clearinghouse for the program. The website will have details about the program, how to nominate a site, and how sites will be adjudicated by the Botanical Assessment Working Group. Eight sites have already been designated in Saskatchewan and information on them will be available on the website soon.

Visit www.npss.sk.ca to learn more and to start your site nomination!

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