
HABITAT

NATURAL HISTORY FROM A GRANDFATHER'S KITCHEN TABLE

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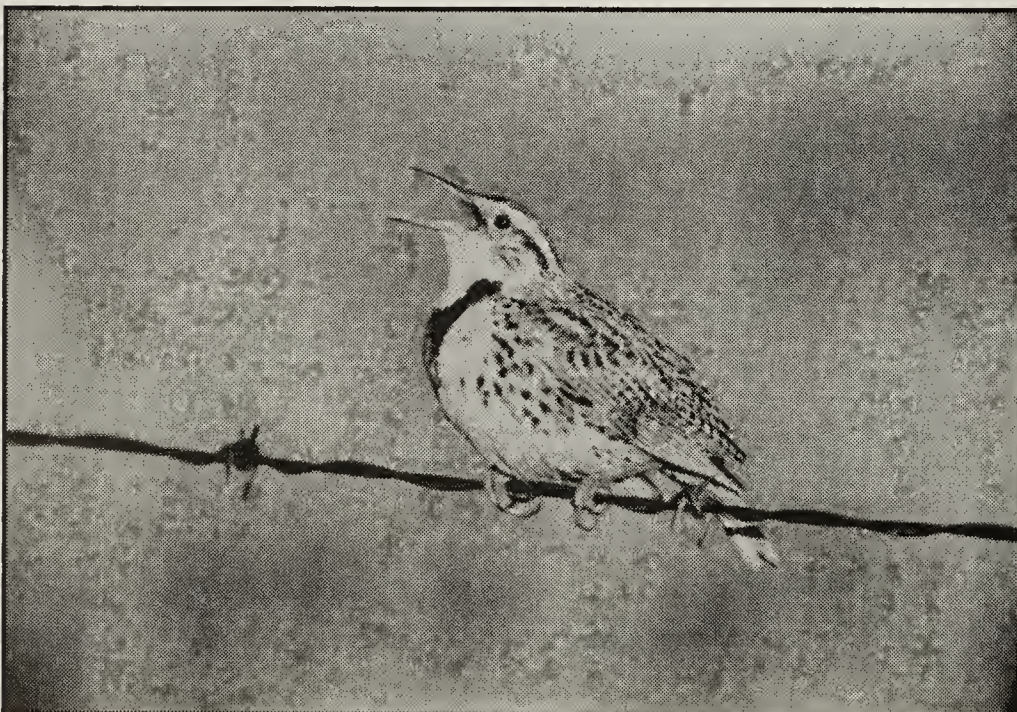
My grandfather, Tobias Switzer, entertained his family at Sunday dinner by telling stories about his life. Tobias was born in Pefferlaw, Ontario, on September 9, 1861. He learned the shoemaking trade from his father but developed an urge to head west, and in the spring of 1883, at the age of 22, he set out on the Canadian Pacific Railway, then being built. His destination was the York Colonization Company homestead lands in the vicinity of present-day Yorkton. One way to get there was to leave the CPR at Fort Ellice, Manitoba and travel into the Northwest Territories by Red River cart along a trail that went through Yorkton to the northwest. Not wanting to endure the screeching and groaning of the wooden wheel hubs on dry wooden axles, Tobias put his supplies on Red River carts and he walked from Whitewood. In his backpack, he carried only the necessities: bedding, supplies and

extra clothing, pup tent and a pan for cooking and boiling water. He also carried an axe and a 12 gauge shotgun. The walk would be sixty some miles north to claim his effects and then he had to get out to his homestead, which was located southwest of the present day community of Rhein on the SE 1/4 section 12, township. 27, range 3, W 2.

Several of Tobias' stories related to the grassland through which he walked. South of the Qu'Appelle, though much of the grass was flattened by the previous winter's snow, he talked about knee-to-thigh high grass. There were no trees or shrubs, except some 'wolf willow' as he called it, and a few sloughs with some willows on the margins. The only wooded areas of consequence were on north-facing slopes of the Qu'Appelle River Valley. Grasses on the valley floor were waist-to-chest high.

Some larger trees grew along the river banks, and the south-facing valley slopes were covered with very short grass. Thick shrubs grew in the coulee bottoms as well. North of the valley, grassland stretched as far as the eye could see.

Ducks arose from sloughs so numerous that Tobias decided that to walk around all



Western Meadowlark

Fred Lahrman

of them would take too much time. Coating his boots with an extra heavy layer of boot grease, he walked through as many as he could.

We know that Tobias was reasonably well acquainted with birds because he had done a little taxidermy while in Ontario. He had a small glass fronted display case containing mounts of a meadowlark, robin, Yellow-shafted Flicker, Common Grackle, Red-winged Blackbird, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Willet, Franklin's Gull, Herring Gull, Red-tailed Hawk, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Bobolink, Great Horned Owl, bobwhite, woodcock, Upland Sandpiper, coot, Horned Grebe and an unnamed sparrow.

Two species of birds that he saw along the way were meadowlarks and Sharp-tailed Grouse (called "chickens"). He recalls that on the way to the valley he saw meadowlarks but heard no song. It wasn't until he saw a meadowlark sing as he was putting his clothes back on after swimming and rafting his effects across the Qu'Appelle River that he connected the melodious bird call he had previously heard with the meadowlark. Being from Ontario, he was acquainted with the two note whistle of the eastern race, and when he connected the call with the bird, he was quite enthralled with the difference.

As the walk progressed north of the valley, more sloughs were encountered and the height of the grasses increased. Most of the grasses were waist high, some chest high and some, he said, were so tall that he had

to drop his pack and jump up and down to see over the grass to get a bearing. Pushing through these meant that ample warning was given to ducks on sloughs and a deliberate stalk was needed to bag a few for meals. Tall grass also made it difficult to find a place to pitch his tent; not only was it hard to find a safe place for a fire for cooking and boiling water but also, should a grass fire approach from somewhere, the chances of getting to a slough were diminished.

Late one afternoon, he chanced upon a bit of a hill where the grass was very short and well trampled down: an ideal spot for an overnight stay. The next morning, the story went, it sounded like people dancing all around the tent. Gingerly the tent flap was opened and there, all around, were



Sharp-tailed Grouse

Jim Sutherland

dancing chickens! The story continued with a recounting of shooting enough chicken for breakfast, dinner and supper that day. It would appear that this change in diet was most welcome after eating duck. As a matter of fact, there is not even a recollection of duck, tame or wild, that was ever served at the Tobias Switzer dinner table.

Interesting observations can be made today on a similar trip from Whitewood to Yorkton. To approximate the 1883 route,

drive along Highway 9 north to Stockholm, take municipal grid roads to Bangor, then work your way north and west to the east side of the Leech and Crescent Lakes and to Highway 9 into Yorkton. In spite of extensive cultivation, the country appears quite wooded. This area is more heavily wooded than it was back in the 1800s. The first settlers broke sod with a plow, lived in sod houses and had to import logs for roof rafters. The second wave of land breaking involved cutting bush, with the back-breaking task of picking roots. When the railroad became operational, sparks from CPR steam locomotives often set off grass fires that swept across some of these wet meadows. This continued up until the change from steam engines to diesel. The great sweep of the prairie fire has been extinguished by road and cultivated field, and the absence of fire has allowed trees and shrubs to grow.

This change in habitat from prairie to wood has profoundly changed the make up of wildlife populations. Shade-tolerant plant species became established in the poplar bluffs as the prairie grasses retreated. Grassland bird populations diminished and

aspen grove species extended their range. The make-up of mammal species also changed. The buffalo were gone by the time of homesteading. Now, White-tailed Deer, that had inhabited the more wooded elevations and the wooded valley complex of the Qu'Appelle, are the common large wild ungulate. Most of the grassland small mammals are still around. However, woodland species have extended their range. Two recent examples are the White-footed Mouse and Raccoon.

It is now rather interesting when habitat conservation is undertaken. What is being conserved? Is it the small remnants of native grassland still existing in uncultivated places? Is it the wooded places that have come into existence because fire ceased to play a role in the ecosystem? Are we trying to conserve the memories of our youth? It will never be the same as when my grandfather came to homestead. Changes from 1883 to 2003 are profound.

Are there any more oral or written family histories for this time frame of natural history?



Alfred Langston plowing on his homestead near Plunkett, SK in 1907

Saskatchewan Archives Board RA-8207-2