

EARLY PHOTOGRAPHIC RECORD OF THE WHOOPING CRANE IN THE BATTLEFORD AREA, SASKATCHEWAN



FIGURE 1: Whooping Cranes feeding near Prongua, Saskatchewan, 25 April 1969. Photo credit: F.W. Lahrman (deceased).

Spencer G. Sealy

Department of Biological Sciences
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, MB R3T 2N2
Spencer.Sealy@umanitoba.ca

In her review of Faith McNulty's *The Whooping Crane*¹, published in 1966, Margaret Belcher commented, "People in Saskatchewan are especially interested in Whooping Cranes [*Grus americana*] since these great white birds move through the province on their migration from the Canadian North to the wintering grounds in the Aransas Refuge in Texas."² At the time that McNulty's book was published, the number of Whooping Cranes stood at only ~30 individuals³, and a vigorous international campaign for the species' protection was underway that involved the Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History (now Royal Saskatchewan Museum) and agencies in the United States. Several members of the Museum's staff were involved with Whooping Crane conservation initiatives, among them, the late Fred W. Lahrman, whose efforts spanned more than 50 years.⁴ Many of Lahrman's photographs of Whooping Cranes appeared in the pages of *Blue Jay*⁵, the journal of the Saskatchewan Natural History Society (now Nature Saskatchewan), and other publications. The design of a 5¢ stamp, issued by Canada Post in 1955, on which the Whooping Crane was featured at a critical time in its comeback, was based on an award-winning photograph taken by Lahrman west of Moose Jaw during the crane's fall migration of 1953.⁶

While conducting research on

the history of this stamp and the photograph that was used by the stamp's designer, William Rowan, of the University of Alberta⁶, I came upon correspondence in my files and a photograph of a flock of Whooping Cranes taken by Lahrman during spring migration several decades ago. On 22 March 1974, I wrote to Lahrman, seeking recent records of the Whooping Crane in the region of my home town of Battleford, Saskatchewan. In addition to several observations local residents had reported to the Museum, Lahrman included a photograph of six Whooping Cranes foraging in a field ~14 km southwest of Battleford (NE ¼ Sec. 26-42-18 W3), near the CN siding of Prongua, on 25 April 1969 (Figure 1). The birds had been reported to Conservation Officer Ken Smith on the morning of the previous day by our family friend, Robert E. Butler, who farmed nearby. On the day the photograph was taken, the birds were also observed by Gil Watson and Doug Gilroy. Smith reported later that the birds were last seen at dusk in the same area on that day (F.W. Lahrman, *in litt.*, 9 April 1974). Featured in the photograph were almost one-fifth of the total population of Whooping Cranes at the time. A few months later, during the fall migration, Lahrman photographed a group of 11 Whooping Cranes, including one juvenile, near Glaslyn, 75 km north of Battleford, on 15 October 1969.⁵ The ensuing decades have seen the number of Whooping Cranes in the Aransas-Wood Buffalo population increase to more than 500 individuals, an ongoing success story.⁷

Acknowledgements

I thank the late Robert E. Butler for initially reporting the Whooping Cranes, and the late Fred W. Lahrman for responding to this inquiry and many other requests for information in the files of the Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History.

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2. Belcher M (1967) Review: *The Whooping Crane*, by Faith McNulty. *Blue Jay* 25:45-47.
3. COSEWIC (2010) Assessment and status report on the Whooping Crane *Grus americana* in Canada. Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada, Ottawa, ON.
4. Scott L (2003) Fred W. Lahrman, 1921–2003. *Blue Jay* 61:186-188.
5. Lahrman FW (1972) The Whooping Crane in Saskatchewan. *Blue Jay* 30:146-150.
6. Sealy (2020) William Rowan and Canada's 5¢ Whooping Crane stamp: the proposal and a Saskatchewan photograph. *Blue Jay* 78(3):19-26.
7. Devokaltis M (2019) Whooping Crane population hits historic high in 2018. <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/whooping-crane-population-hits-historic-high-in-2018/> (accessed February 23, 2019). 🐦

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