A Territorial Shepherd

J.F. MacCallum

I WAS BORN ON JUNE 6th, 1882, at Inverary Argyllshire, Scotland. My father was an extensive sheep and cattle dealer in Scotland. I thus gained a knowledge of sheep and cattle. At 12 years of age, I could kill a sheep and dress the carcass.

I sailed from Liverpool, England on the old Cunard liner *Umbria* in March 1898. I was 16 years old. I arrived in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, on March 20th, 1898. It was 25° below zero. It was very cold weather for me to experience at the beginning.

After working for a time with my mother’s brother in the butcher business, I got into buying cattle. After a time I decided to get into sheepherding on the Sarnia Ranch unit north of Walsh in the Many Island District, northeast of Medicine Hat and close to what is now the boundary of Alberta and Saskatchewan. The Sarnia Ranch was a unit of the large farming and ranching company, The Canadian Land and Ranch Company. This company was a reorganization of the Canadian Coal, Agricultural and Colonization Company organized in England by D.H. Andrews, a rich Englishman who had capital in a large cattle ranch in Texas. He returned to England in 1890 and was asked to see what was the matter with the CCAC Company in the Canadian West. The early cattle were bought down in Wyoming from an outfit that used the “76” brand. That is how the outfit in Canada got the name 76.

In March, 1901, I received a letter from William Alexander, who was manager of the sheep flocks for the “76 Ranch” at Swift Current asking me to come there. Sometime in November of 1901, I was moved into the ranch at Gull Lake and with a friend, Walter Burnett, into a camp 4 miles south. Burnett’s job was to move hay from the camp to the ranch. The lambs wintered well. We had all kinds of hay, for the great hay flat north of Gull Lake was a very fine hay meadow at that time.

By my meeting Walter Burnett so often, and both of us getting letters from Jim Beattie, with glowing accounts of the high wages paid in Montana, both of us gave notice that we would be leaving on April 1st, 1902.

NOW ONE FINE THING ABOUT THE OLD 76 sheep outfit was that they had good dogs. They had so many Scots as shepherds at different times who had imported Scotch sheep dogs. They had a good strain of working dogs and when I started with the “76”, I bought a 6-month old pup from Bill MacKay, one of the shepherds. I called this pup “Pete” and he turned out to be a crackjack. I kept that dog for years and he went everywhere I went. He died in 1911.

When I left Gull Lake at the beginning of April, 1902, we bought tickets for Shelby Junction, Montana. We had two pups in a crate, and I had Pete on a chain and by tipping the baggage man, he took good care of them.

We had to stay over one day at Medicine Hat and one night at Lethbridge to make connections for Shelby Junction. This railway was a narrow gauge track that ran between Lethbridge and Great Falls, Montana.

We arrived in Shelby and stayed around there for two days. I could have got a job breaking horses for Dan Sullivan, who ran a hotel and saloon and had a big horse ranch out on the Marias River. He had a big corral at the back of the hotel and a feed barn with a bunch of horses in it. He had a man in there halter breaking.

AS I HAD LEARNED TO BE PRETTY GOOD at throwing a rope in my Moose Jaw days, I tried my luck in the Sullivan corrals and I never missed a horse he wanted. So Sullivan wanted me right there and then. But wrestling those unbroken horses was tough work and I did not accept.

Now, while Burnett and I were in Shelby, we met a Scotsman who was dark enough to be a Mexican. He did not tell us who he was, but he wanted to know where we came from and where we were going. So on the morning train going south to Great Falls, this same Scot got on also, but he got off at a place called Pondera and we thought no more about him. The next morning Burnett and I walked around Great Falls seeing the sights.

It was a lovely city, situated on the Missouri River, with fine buildings and lovely parks, but as we strolled along we were stopped by a big policeman, who wanted to know if we were the boys who had come down from Canada. Burnett and I wondered what we had done to have a policeman check us like this. However, the big fellow smiled at our plight and assured us that there was nothing wrong. He said if we were looking for work on a sheep ranch to go to a certain place right away and ask for a man by the name of Charlie Bannatyne. He said Charlie Bannatyne was also a Scotsman. We went to the address the policeman gave and Bannatyne hired the two of us, and was ready to take us out to the ranch that afternoon. He told us his brother Neil had phoned him from Pondera to pick us up.

So Burnett and I started out to the Bannatyne Ranch, which was situated on the Teton River about 40 miles north of Great Falls. Charlie Bannatyne drove us out with our trunks and dogs with a fast driving team hitched to a democrat.

It was dark when we got to the ranch, so we did not see...
much, but by daylight, Neil Bannatyne woke us up, and sure enough, it was the dark Mexican-looking Scotsman we had met at Shelby Junction.

THE SYSTEM THE RANCHERS HAD in Montana was to get hold of all the land with water on it. Instead of getting a quarter section in a square of 160 acres like we do in Canada, they could get a quarter section in 40-acre parcels in a row; consequently the first settlers were able to get a lot of grazing out on the open prairie on both sides of the rivers and creeks. Cattle and horses running at large would not be grazing these places when they could not get access to water. Some sheepmen would also build a dam and have a reservoir to hold water out in some of the coulees. They would fence these coulee reservoirs, too, so that cattle and horses would not get at them. Sheep, however, could go under the fences and by this system the sheepmen controlled a lot of grazing range. Today, I understand, all these bench lands on both sides of the Teton River are ploughed up and growing grain.

It would be about the 15th April, 1902, when we both were taken out to the farthest camp on the Teton River, about 6 miles from Collins. We had to fix up the sheds and corrals as a band of 3,500 ewes were being brought in to start lambing. Here the ranch joined the T.C. Powers outfit laying to the west.

The ewes came with an old herder by the name of Wylie in charge. They were the oldest ewes and we had quite a problem to save the lambs, as there was little grass and the ewes had not much milk. However, by toil and sweat and watching them day and night, we got through the lambing and the Bannatynes were satisfied with the percentage we saved.

When we had finished with the 3,500 old ewes, we were taken down to the other end of the Bannatynes holdings on the Teton, where they shared the boundary line with Herman Mawer. They brought a band of 2- and 3-year-old ewes into this camp. The ewes were in good shape and by this time there was lots of grass. We had a high percentage of lambs from the young ewes.

The one difficulty we encountered was a flood on the river. We got a very heavy rain about the end of May, and the Teton River rose and overflowed its banks in a few hours. We had a lot of lambs in the different bends of the river bottoms and we had to wade through water pretty near waist high in places to carry ewes and lambs out. But we saved them all! The vexing part, however, was that the tent we slept in stood in a foot of water. Our beds, which we spread on the ground were, of course, soaked. The log cabin in which the cook slept and cooked leaked like a sieve through the sod roof, but we sat around that night, wet from head to foot but making the best of it. I often wonder why I am crippled up with rheumatism now, until I think of that and similar experiences I took in my stride when I was a young fellow.

However, next morning the sun came out nice and bright and we got our wet beds and clothes spread out to dry. We pitched the tent in a fresh place and went on to forget all about the flood and the soaking we got.

Neil Bannatyne did not come around until it was all over. I expect he had plenty to do to attend to a band they were lambing out at the home ranch. They lost some ewes and lambs in the river bends by the home ranch. However, they had dry buildings and beds to sleep in.

Neil Bannatyne was a smart sheepman and he was a smart dealer too. When we met him at Shelby he was buying wethers around Shelby and Pondera. He put 5,000 dry sheep, mostly wethers, on the trail.

IN THOSE DAYS OF PUTTING DRY SHEEP on the trail, it was the idea of starting out a band of from 4,000 to 6,000, with a herder, a camp tender with wagon, and a foreman in charge, all with the object of grazing bands wherever you could find grass and water, and work east as far as possible. Some got right through the Dakotas. The further east you got the less freight there was to pay the railroads to the nearest markets. Of course, the farther you got the sheep the better. Neil Bannatyne had a band on the trail he figured on getting as far as Culbertson, Montana.

The men who trailed the big bands of sheep in those days in northern Montana were J.B. Long, T.C. Power, H.H. Nelson, and the Flowree Outfit. Each of them had three or four trail bands and all liked to get through to the Dakotas to clean up the stubble fields in the fall.

Well, about the first part of June, lambing was all over at the Bannatynes' and I had made up my mind that I was going shearing. There was public shearing pens at different points where shearing would last from 4 to 6 weeks. Weather permitting, they started about June 10th. From the information I could gather, the best and longest run for shearing would be at Pondera. Well, I got all my working clothes packed in a valise and I put my good clothes and things I did not need in my trunk. I stored the trunk in the Milwaukee Hotel in Great Falls as that was where I always stopped.

I had a good bed with a heavy tarpaulin that I could roll up and tie up with two good straps. In those days every man had to carry his bed with him. It was the custom. "Take up thy bed and walk," was understood in the sheep and cattle country in those days. I also had the two dogs. Pete was no trouble at all. He always knew where I was. If I went into any building he would lie outside till I came out. The pup was a bitch and I called her Gyp. She was growing and soon learned to answer, but she was still too young to do anything around sheep.

I arrived in Pondera two days before shearing started. Pondera is the place the name of which was later changed to Conrad.

The weather was good and we ran steady for about 5 weeks. In those public shearing pens everything was done for the owner of the sheep. His sheep were cut out and penned, the sheep sheared, and the wool tied and sacked, and the sheep branded whatever mark they wanted. There were 40 shearsers and they sheared an average of 5,000 to 6,000 sheep a day.

A lot of ranchers had their sheep sheared at Pondera, and a lot came from the Choteau Country, but most were trail bands passing through. I seemed to strike it lucky. The second-last band that came in to be sheared was a trail band of 5,000 wethers and 600 yearling ewes. They were owned by a man named Barrett, who had left near Boise, Idaho, in the spring. He had sold out his ranch in Idaho and his breeding ewes and he was trailing the dry band along, as he was going to ship them to the Chicago market in the fall.

The old gentleman, Mr. Barrett, was pretty well crippled up with rheumatism. He drove a nice team of drivers in a buggy, but he stayed in the hotels in the small towns most of the time.

Well—when his sheep got to the shearing pens at Pondera, his camp tender and his foreman got drunk. There was a hotel and saloon at Pondera run by a man by the name of
Kroute. Barrett's two men got on a real bender, and when Barrett's sheep were sheared his herder took them out. Their camp wagon was about 2 miles west, but there was no grazing for a radius of ten miles around. So old man Barrett was in quite a predicament. We were just finishing our last band when somebody told him about me. He asked me if I would take charge of his band. He just wanted them to graze and stop wherever feed and water could be got. But he needed a camp tender, also. There happened to be an old man by the name of Tom Henderson, who had been branding sheep at the shearing, and Tom told me he wanted a job after the shearing closed. I hunted up old Tom and he took the job of attending camp.

NOW THOSE SHEEP OF BARRETT'S had to be moved quickly from where they were. We had access to plenty of water but no grass and from Pondera the sheep had to be trailed north to cross the Marias River on a steel bridge near "Johnstone's Ranch." It would be about 35 miles from Pondera to this bridge over the Marias. And I had been told there was not any water between Pondera and the Marias. However, Barrett had a good big team to haul the camp wagon, and he had a fine saddle horse, a sorrel, and a crackerjack.

Barrett seemed to be satisfied with Henderson and me because he left me in charge and told me to do the best I knew how. Barrett, who wore those typical Uncle Sam whiskers, said he was driving to Great Falls to attend the sale of his wool clip, and would probably not see us for 2 weeks or more, but he said he would find us some place on the trail.

I instructed the herder to start grazing the sheep out north in the direction we had to go, and I got old Tom Henderson to fill the two water kegs we had in the camp wagon and to start out in the same direction and not to lose track of the sheep. I took the saddle horse and started out to see what I could do in locating water. After riding out about 10 miles, I saw a band of sheep and rode over to talk to the herder. I noticed at once that he was a Highland Scotsman and had more Gaelic than English. I could understand the Gaelic but could not speak it. But he was the same way, only the other way round. He could understand British but could not speak it. So we got along all right.

He turned out to be Norman MacLeod. He was herding for his uncles, Graham and Finlayson, who had a ranch west of Pondera. Norman told me there was no water until we got to the Marias River, excepting for a reservoir which was fenced in and belonged to a man by the name of Lewis. But Norman advised me not to go near the reservoir as the man, Lewis, was a wild guy and would shoot. However, I decided it was best to travel early in the morning and late at night as we endeavored to make the river.

It turned out to be hot in the daytime and the sheep just bunched up in a circle and were ready to lie down. So we stopped, unhitched the horses from the camp wagon and were eating dinner when all of a sudden sheep started bleating and stringing right out. I sent the dog around them but they paid no attention to him. They stampeded around him. By the time I got the saddle horse caught and saddled and got to the leaders, they were in Lewis' reservoir. All I could do was find a gate to get inside the fence and then try to stop them from piling up by trying to spread them around the reservoir. All of a sudden I heard a shout and there was a man on horseback within a rod of me pointing a sixshooter at me. He seemed to drop from no place, and he ordered me to get the sheep out of that reservoir quick—or he would shoot me. I did not doubt his word at all. I saw I had to humor him. I said if he would help me get them out, it could not be too fast for me! I knew if we did not work among those sheep where they were piling up, we would lose a lot of them.

BY THIS TIME THE HERDER and the camp tender arrived breathless on foot, and between the four of us we got them to circle around the reservoir, thus avoiding any big loss by piling up.

I told Mr. Lewis how it happened. We did not know how near the reservoir was until the sheep started for it, and as we were on the road to the bridge over the Marias we would not trouble him again. Then he calmed down, and told us we might as well let them water, provided we pulled right out. Thinking of that sixgun, I assured him we were on our way.

After we got out of the Marias River bottom we were into open range again. The next day I rode ahead and halfway between the Marias River and Shelby I found a dandy camping ground.

This was a piece of country about 1 1/2 miles west of the narrow gauge railway. There were two good springs with lots of water and plant of grazing, good grazing too. Mr. Barrett found us camped there when he came from Great Falls. He was well pleased with everything, stayed a day or two, and went away again. We camped in that spot for 4 or 5 weeks. The herder did the herding in the daytime. I took over at night. Tom Henderson, the camp tender, did the cooking and looked after the team.

After we grazed that camping place we moved east of Shelby and north of the Great Northern railroad. But it sure was hard to find a good place as all the trail bands had already been through there. We struck one spot between Shelby and Galata that was not too bad.

Mr. Barrett came out to camp on one of his visits and said he was arranging to ship his sheep to Chicago and he wanted me to go along with him, as he was going to graze them out on the prairie for a day at a place called Avoca in North Dakota.

Now Barrett had 5,600 and a man south of Galata had 800 wethers and the Great Northern gave us a special train as we had about 35 carloads. We loaded at Galata. There were large stockyards at that point.

Our first stop to unload was at Avoca where there were large stockyards—but little besides. It was a little west of Williston in North Dakota. We grazed the sheep out on the prairie, but the grass was so coarse and rough the sheep walked over it. We stopped about a day and a half at Avoca. Then we loaded up again.

The next stop was South St. Paul, for about a day, then we loaded them again, and the next stop was a little place 10 miles out of Chicago called LaFox. There were little 10- and 15-acre fields at that place with running springs through the fields, but with the number of sheep we had, those little fields looked like a corral for them.

The next and final stop was Chicago, where Barrett had the commission firm of Rosenbaum and Company handle the stock for him.

Mr. Barrett was a nice old gentleman of around 70 years old, and that was the end of his sheep ranching. He went back to Boise, Idaho, to retire. He wanted me to go with him. He said he could get me a good job with a sheep company in Idaho. I did not go. Maybe I missed my chance. However, he got me a pass for myself and dog, back on the passenger to Shelby, Montana.