

The Lost Wanderings of John Pritchard 1805

MR. JOHN PRITCHARD WAS KNOWN TO BE A POSITIVE and optimistic man, skilled in the ways of the fur trade and adept at wilderness life and travel. He was stationed at an XY Company fur trading post neighbouring Fort Brandon near the confluence of the Souris and Assiniboine Rivers.

In the summer of 1805, when he was 28 years old, Pritchard agreed to accompany a clerk from his fort part of the way to Fort Qu'Appelle to deliver two horses. On the way, the horses spooked and Pritchard's companion went in pursuit of them. When he did not return, Pritchard made his way to a nearby lookout hill and could not find his way back to their encampment due to a sudden prairie thunderstorm. He became direction-turned and lost. Thus began his 40 day misadventure in the wilds of the southwest corner.

Unable to return to camp, he faced the days ahead with very few materials. His shoes were badly worn and he was forced to use his clothing to wrap around his cut-up feet. This left the rest of his body perfectly naked (except for his hat) and thus vulnerable to blinding sunlight, droves of mosquitoes, and the brutal barbs of spear grass, which often left his bare legs black and bleeding. He was without a blanket, knife, or gun, and it rained almost every second day making fires difficult to light. On many nights he laid his naked body on wet grass to sleep.

Pritchard attempted to find his way home by following streams and trying to read the landscape. He lived off whatever he could scavenge and anything he could catch or kill. This often amounted to frogs, magpies, grouse and at times a tuberous plant known as Indian breadroot (*Psoralea esculenta*) which looks like a turnip. He made a fishing pole at one point, using his own hair as fishing line, but caught no fish. He spent many days on the edge of starvation, and his body became quite wasted until he resembled a mere skeleton covered by skin as thin as paper. Being a religious man, he found the physical and mental strength to carry on, even past several bouts of absolute despair when his weakness, pain and hunger

became almost unbearable.

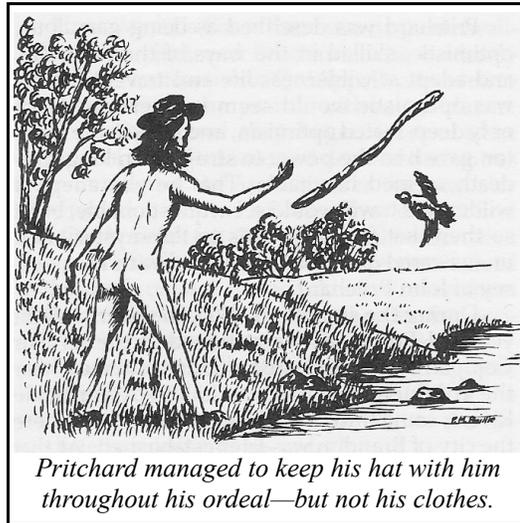
Pritchard kept a tally of the miserable nights by marking with his teeth a stick he carried with him. On the 30th day, he made his way towards an elevated part of the plains which he discovered to be an island in the middle of a lake (it turned out to be Whitewater Lake). On the southern side of the lake, he came upon two abandoned trading posts and rejoiced at finding remnants of human existence. He began taking note of his surroundings and discovered himself to be somewhere familiar – Turtle Mountain! Renewed by the knowledge of where he was, he looked through the trading houses and was glad to find a pair of boots and several pairs of socks.

He struck out northeast in the direction of home. One day towards evening he saw a band of Assiniboine crossing the

plain in front of him and gained their attention by raising one of his boots into the air with a stick. Though at first frightened by his appearance, the Assiniboine wrapped him carefully in blankets, fed him some pemmican and gave him water to drink before rigging up a sleigh on which they transported him back to his fort.

Many of the men of Pritchard's fort did not recognise him and had thought him to be dead long ago. His appearance was quite transformed from 40 days alone in the wilderness: his beard was full from going over a month without shaving and his hair was full of filth and scabs. John McKay, Factor of the rival Brandon House, took over the task of nursing him back to health, refusing to let him look into a mirror for 15 days, such was the terrifying emaciation of his face and body.

With the resilience and hardihood characteristic of many frontier men, Pritchard made a full recovery and went on to become the Factor at Fort Esperence until his retirement in 1814. He then became a colonist at Red River. John Pritchard's painful struggle across southwestern Manitoba remained a popular story around the firesides of the time and has worked its way into the legend and lore of the area.



Pritchard managed to keep his hat with him throughout his ordeal—but not his clothes.

References:

Duncan, Hal G. *The South-West Corner*. Altona: Friesen Printers, 1984.
McMorran, G. A. *Souris River Posts*. Souris: Souris Plaindealer Ltd., 1948
Illustration: Baillie, Pauline. *The South-West Corner*. Altona: Friesen Printers, 1984.