

The Cancellation of the Royal North West Mounted Police Contracts with the Prairie Provinces in 1917

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In the Prairie provinces the Royal Canadian Mounted Police constitute the provincial police forces of Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan. The history of the Force in this region began when the North West Mounted Police was authorized by an Act of Parliament on May 23, 1873. The purpose of the new Act was to bring law and order to the Canadian west. During 1873 and 1874 the Mounted Police arrived on the Prairies and built posts. For the next forty years or so the Royal North West Mounted Police was the sole law enforcement body in the Northwest Territories, except for municipal forces. After 1905, when Alberta and Saskatchewan became provinces, policing was carried out by the Force on a contract basis. The two provinces paid \$75,000 a year each to the federal government for the services of the Mounted Police. On renewal of the contracts in 1915, it was arranged that either the provinces or the federal government could cancel on giving one year's notice. However, as the First World War entered its third year in 1916, this arrangement was interrupted.

After war broke out in 1914, many members of the Royal North West Mounted Police took their discharge to join the army. There had been a move to send a Mounted Police cavalry unit overseas, as had been done in the South African War, but this plan was abandoned because no more cavalry was required at the time. Moreover, the Force was needed at home for duties beyond routine law enforcement. The United States was still neutral in 1916 and the federal government was fearful of raids by enemy aliens and sympathizers resident in that country. Since not enough soldiers were available, the task of patrolling the border fell to the Royal North West Mounted Police. In addition, there were large number of Germans and Austrians on the prairies whom the government wanted to keep under surveillance.

The fears Ottawa had about raids from south of the border were heightened in 1916 with the interception of a telegram from the German Foreign Office to the German Embassy in Washington. This telegram called for the destruction by sabotage of the Canadian Pacific Railway. This information made the Canadian authorities even more apprehensive about the aliens in the prairie provinces. The long border with the United States presented enough problems in the prevention of raids. If enemy aliens in western Canada were incited to acts of sabotage to coincide with raids from American territory, the situation could become even worse.

The federal government was not about to take any chances. In July 1916, Ottawa requested Mounted Police Commissioner A. Bowen Perry to give his opinion on the matter. Perry stated that he did not believe there was any likelihood of trouble on the Prairies at the moment but the danger certainly existed. The Commissioner had no doubt that effective measures needed

to be taken to discourage any possible act of sabotage. However, under current conditions, the Royal North West Mounted Police could not assume any further duties. In order to do so, Perry stated, the Force would have to be relieved of all ordinary police duties and more men would have to be recruited and manpower redistributed.

Acting on the instructions of Prime Minister Robert Borden, the Commissioner investigated the matter further and submitted a full report to Ottawa on October 11, 1916. His basic recommendation was that the Royal North West Mounted Police should be relieved of ordinary police commitments in the prairie provinces (excluding the Northwest Territories and the Yukon Territory) and restricted to federal service for the duration. Thus freed, the Force could then deal effectively with the alien problem.

Following Perry's report, the federal government decided to withdraw the Force from all regular police service in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. With proper notice the contracts with Alberta and Saskatchewan could not have been terminated earlier than June 30, 1918. The contract with Manitoba was not due to expire until July 1, 1918. However, these contracts were only temporary, and the federal authorities felt that the provincial governments concerned would consent in the interests of the war effort and the defence of western Canada.

As it turned out, the three provincial governments offered no resistance to the cancellation of the contracts. On November 29, 1916, the appropriate orders-in-council were issued by Ottawa. The date set for the termination of the agreements was January 1, 1917, but the government of Alberta requested an extension to March 1, on the grounds that their arrangements were not yet complete. The federal government agreed without hesitation.

All that remained was to define the jurisdiction of the Royal North West Mounted Police in the prairie provinces. Essentially, the Force was responsible for federal laws, patrolling the international boundary, and handling any trouble with enemy aliens. All other police duties were to be taken care of by provincial and municipal forces with Mounted Police assistance when requested.

The cancellation of the contracts in 1917 ended over forty years of policing the prairies by the Royal North West Mounted Police. The Force was a respected organization in the Canadian west and this change did not come without protest. For example, on January 6, 1917, the livestock and agricultural associations of Alberta submitted a petition to the federal government calling for the retention of the Mounted Police. At a convention of the United Farmers of Alberta, held in Edmonton on January 27, 1917, a resolution urging the retention of the Force was passed unanimously. But these and other protests failed to move the federal government. Ottawa was not to become involved in provincial policing in the west until 1928, when the Royal Canadian Mounted Police absorbed the Saskatchewan Provincial Police. Alberta and Manitoba followed suit in 1932.