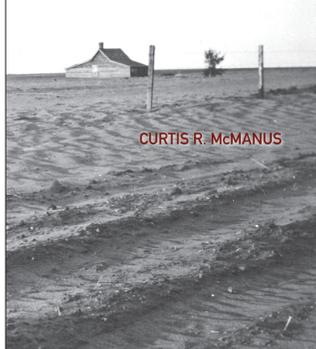


Happyland

A History of the "Dirty Thirties" in Saskatchewan, 1914-1937



HAPPYLAND: A HISTORY OF THE "DIRTY THIRTIES" IN SASKATCHEWAN, 1914-1937

by Curtis R. McManus

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During the “Dirty Thirties”



THE SOIL QUITE LITERALLY TURNED TO SAND (SAB R-A3368),
(SAB R-A16398).



THE BOUNTIFUL HARVEST. THE YEAR'S CROP LAY IN THE FOREGROUND "CUT WITH A MOWER AND RAKED INTO A PILE." UNDATED (SAB R-B8275).



MR. ALTON REICHERT AND HIS FAMILY LEAVING THE CHAPLIN AREA OF SOUTH-WEST SASKATCHEWAN IN 1935. THEY WERE ON THEIR WAY TO LESTOCK, LOCATED NEAR THE TOUCHWOOD HILLS REGION OF EAST-CENTRAL SASKATCHEWAN (SAB R-A8188).

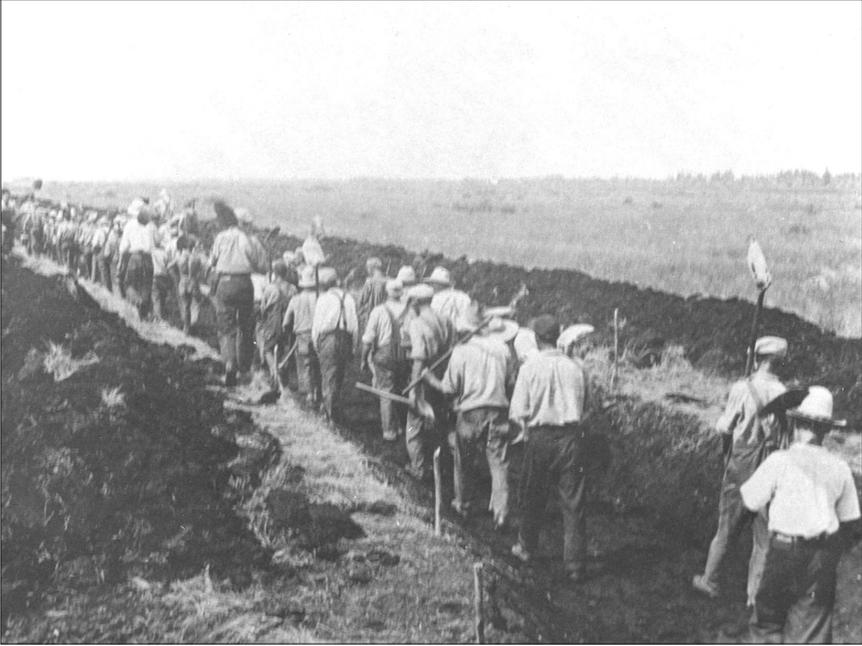


“MOVING NORTH.” UNDATED (SAB R-A8540).





LIKELY ONE OF THE COLONEL'S WORK CAMPS. THREE VIEWS OF THE SETTLERS WORKING IN A HARD-LABOUR ROAD GANG IN THE RM OF SHAMROCK. NOTE THE COOK-HOUSE AND BUNK-HOUSE IN THE BACKGROUND (SAB R-A7632).



THE LAST BEST WEST. SETTLERS DIGGING A DRAINAGE DITCH IN THE 1930s (SAB R-A8578).



ORIGINAL TITLE: "DUST BOWL KIDS." THREE YOUNGSTERS FROM SOUTH-WEST SASKATCHEWAN IN THE 1930S, WELL-SHOD, CLOTHES IN ONE PIECE, STANDING BEFORE A CLEAN AND STURDY IF ILL-PAINTED HOUSE. "THEIR LAST NAME MAY BE DEBLER" (SAB R-B8272).



SETTLERS LINING UP FOR FODDER. THE LINE STRETCHES INTO THE DISTANCE (SAB R-A515).



HERBERT MEN FROM SOUTH-WEST SASKATCHEWAN GETTING THEIR HANDS ON THE ELUSIVE "VEGETABLE" (SAB R-A3341).



ANEROID MEN UNLOADING ONE OF THE THOUSANDS OF RAIL CARS THAT WERE SENT INTO SOUTH AND WEST SASKATCHEWAN LOADED WITH FOOD (SAB R-A6729).



LOOKING FOR WATER IN A DRY LAND (OR PERHAPS FLEEING THE RM
OF BIG STICK) (SAB R-A5213).



ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE DROUGHT. IN THE END, THINGS WORKED OUT FOR THE KONSCHUHS IN CLUNY. THE LARGE AND HANDSOME ADAM KONSCHUH BROOD, LATE 1940S OR EARLY 1950S. COURTESY OF *MEMORIES OF CLUNY* (WINNIPEG, INTERCOLLEGIATE PRESS, 1985) AND STANLEY AND HADDIE KONSCHUH.

Interlude: Public Health

The physical, sexual, emotional, and spiritual health and well-being of the settlers was grossly, almost unimaginably impaired during the droughts of the thirties.

We have seen that studies done in the 1920s on dryland kids showed extremely high cases of malnutrition, and in the thirties conditions only got worse. People were dying of rickets, scurvy, and beriberi. Between 1929 and 1938, seventy-eight people died of rickets, six from scurvy, and one from beriberi.¹ This suggests that hundreds if not thousands suffered from the effects of these nutritive diseases but did not die.

There were fourteen deaths from starvation between 1929 and 1938.²

The extremes of cold and heat were a natural part of life in Saskatchewan, and there were deaths because of it. A total of 130 people died because of excessive heat or excessive cold between 1929 and 1938.³ The worst year was 1935 when twenty people died from exposure to the elements. In the following year, 1936, nineteen people died. The category of people from amongst whom the most people died from the cold was the over sixty-five and the widowed. Likewise, the majority of the nine men who died from heat (three) were over sixty-five.

Given the fact that sexual mores underwent profound stress and change in the droughts, it should come as no surprise that the Gentleman's Disease made a dramatic reappearance in the Dirty Thirties. Each year between 1929 and 1935, the number of deaths from syphilis hovers between twelve and seventeen. But in 1936, there is a sharp spike upwards to twenty deaths,

peaking in the worst year of the droughts, 1937, at thirty-four.⁴ Twenty-eight men died of the disease that year, as did six women.⁵ In the majority of cases (nine), the men were married and in the forty-five- to sixty-four-year-old age bracket. There were, however, three young lads under fifteen who contracted the disease and died. Of the women, the majority (three) were married and between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four. Just one girl under fifteen died from syphilis.⁶

Deaths from syphilis frequently occurred in the winter months, when much of one's social activity was confined to the indoors because of the health risks associated with minus-thirty-degree winters (from which eight people died in 1937). The majority of the men who contracted syphilis (five) died in December of 1937, four died in February, and four in April.

While men were dying of syphilis, women were dying by the dozens as a result of abortions. The number of women who died in this way remained fairly consistent throughout the 1930s: seventeen died in 1932, twelve in 1934, thirteen in 1936, and nineteen in 1937.⁸ The majority of women dying were married and between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four, which tends to suggest that the pregnancy was unplanned and unwanted and the abortion pursued because there was no money left to care for another child.

At least twice a day, between 1929 and 1938, a woman died giving birth or because of complications brought on by pregnancy. In these years, 915 women died in this way.⁹

Murders were endemic to Saskatchewan during the Thirties. There were 122 homicides in Saskatchewan between 1929 and 1938, and again their occurrence roughly parallels the years of drought. The fewest murders committed (seven) came in 1932, the only year of the thirties when a crop of any substance was grown.¹⁰ Three of these homicides, the majority, involved the murder of "persons one year of age and over by firearms."¹¹ The year in which the most murders occurred was 1929 when eighteen were committed. The majority of the victims that year (ten) were women. Four were shot, and six were killed "by other means."¹²

Suicide was a major social problem: between 1929 and 1938, 920 men and women killed themselves.¹³ In 1934, for example, 105 people in Saskatchewan took their own lives.¹⁴ This means that roughly about every three days, someone somewhere in Saskatchewan killed themselves. The majority of those deaths were men – eighty-two that year.¹⁵ But there were twenty-three women who committed suicide and four of them were young girls between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four.¹⁶ Eight women between the ages of twenty-five to forty-four also killed themselves.

Suicide followed an arc. It jumped from fifty-five in 1929 to 127 the following year.¹⁷ There was a lull as the numbers drop to below eighty for the next couple years, and then they climb to ninety-three in 1933 and 105 in 1934, thereafter declining to a low of seventy-eight in 1938.¹⁸

Men killed themselves more often than women. In 1937, for example, there were eighty-seven people who killed themselves and, of those, sixty-nine were men. Eleven of them did it in August when they were supposed to be harvesting. But, in 1937, there was no harvest.

The majority of the men who committed suicide in 1937, twenty-three, were married and in the forty-five- to –sixty-four-year-old age bracket. The most frequent choice of death, probably because it was the quickest and most accessible, was death by firearms, which accounted for thirty-one suicides.

There were twenty deaths from hanging or strangulation, one by drowning, twenty-four people (twelve men and twelve women) ingested “poison or corrosive substances.”

Early Saskatchewan was a gigantic safety hazard: in the same time frame, 2,432 people died from accidental drowning, accidental firearms discharge, accidental mechanical suffocation, “accidental crushing,” and the like.¹⁹

As one might expect, alcoholism claimed the lives of many people in Saskatchewan. Fully 158 people died from cirrhosis of the liver between 1919 and 1938. The worst years were 1935 and 1936, when, in each year, twenty people succumbed to the cumulative effects of alcoholism, and here again we see a traditional gender reversal: in 1936, thirteen women died this way as compared to nine men.²⁰ The majority of these deaths (twelve), involved people over age forty-five.

Cirrhosis of the liver is one thing, alcohol poisoning is another. Seventy people drank themselves to death between 1929 and 1938.²¹ The worst year was 1930, the second year of the drought, when fifteen people died in this fashion.

In 1929, the very first year of both the drought and the economic collapse, fourteen people died this way, of whom just one was female. The majority (five) were married men between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four.

Seven men drank themselves to death in 1937.²²

