

PROMOTERS, PLANTERS, AND PIONEERS: THE COURSE AND CONTEXT OF BELGIAN SETTLEMENT IN WESTERN CANADA

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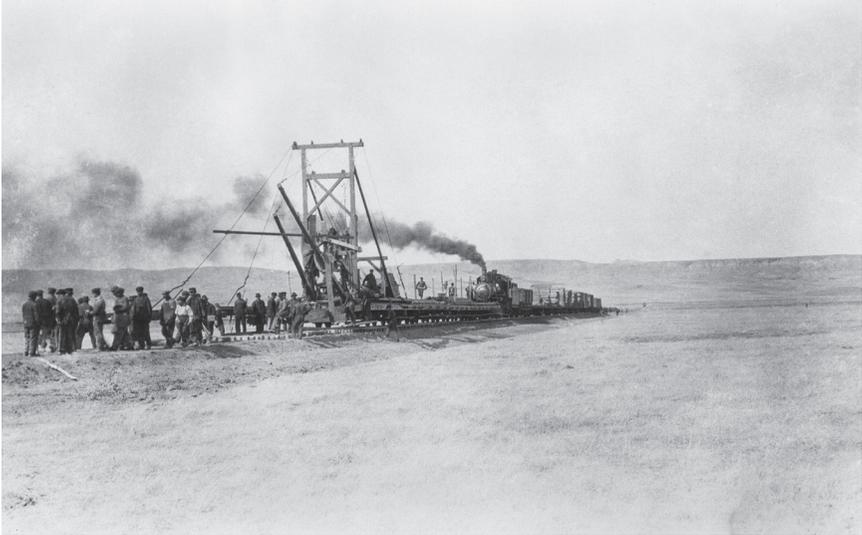
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*Laying tracks for the Canadian Pacific Railway. (Sask. Archives R-A 6820)
The CPR encouraged immigration and hoped to attract settlers to its vast tract of arable land.*

WESTWARD ONTO THE PRAIRIES

From Manitoba as a springboard, and Winnipeg/St. Boniface as the point of entry to the West, settlement moved onto the second and third prairie levels. The challenges could be quite different from those encountered in Manitoba because these were mostly open treeless plains with a southern dry belt earlier identified as Palliser's Triangle, a northern extension of the Great American desert. This open region offered newcomers windswept grasslands that had once been the home of millions of bison, a semi-desert with shallow alkaline lakes, and badlands with modest buttes. Only the parkland corridor running northwestwards from the Riding Mountains to the Peace River basin offered the more familiar landscape of deciduous forest, rolling hills and scattered lakes.

Alberta and Saskatchewan emerged from the North-West Territories as autonomous provinces of Canada in 1905, marking an important stage in the economy of the region. Farming was centred on wheat-growing, a staple for which there was an open and free-trading world market. At the same time, the central Canadian industrial base, protected since 1879 by high tariffs, found a market for its goods at interesting profits in the new West. However, this also meant that duties on imported goods shut out cheaper American goods and forced western Canadians to buy high-priced domestic products. American companies circumvented this protectionism by setting up branch plants in Canada, but their products were no cheaper than those of their competitors. In short, the "national policy" of the Dominion government worked counter to the interests of the immigrants.

Rural places are rooted in commodity production and their soil, climate and natural resources such as water, wood and coal are attractive to immigrants. But their social and institutional services are relatively low, their population small and the distance from major population service centres usually great. Smaller communities where Belgians settled were limited in the programs they could offer. What seemed of more immediate interest to them was the economy. The provincial government concept was that the province should be based on one dominant culture, engaged on one dominant economic activity in one dominant zone of activity. The province's destiny was focussed on wheat-production for export in the southern half of the province.¹

When Saskatchewan, with Alberta, celebrated the twenty-second anniversary of its provincial status in 1927, it was, according to some, the "granary of the world" with the third largest population among the Canadian provinces, third largest gross domestic product, and third highest personal income. It ranked first in production of wheat, rye, oats and flax, also first in the breeding of horses. It had the largest number of telephones per capita in Canada and the number of automobile licences and of movie theatres tripled in a decade. But there were storm clouds gathering on the horizon. The long Liberal dominance of provincial politics gave way to an anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic movement, expressed explicitly in the infiltration of the Ku Klux Klan from the United States. The stock market crash of 1929 was accompanied by the beginning of nine consecutive years of climatic catastrophe, severe drought and cyclonic dust storms, grasshopper infestations, and outbreaks of equine encephalitis. The sky became dark with swirling dust and hordes of ravenous grasshoppers the hopes and aspirations of many settlers sank into deep despair.²

Regional Exigencies

In 1876, Belgian economist Gustave de Molinari wondered why Francophones did not seem attracted by the agricultural potential of the North West Territories.³ There were several regional characteristics to consider. The relative inaccessibility of the region before the advent of the transcontinental railway and the construction of branch lines cannot be discounted. At first, new arrivals had to rely on freighting outfits, creaky wagons and carts, operated by "bullwackers."⁴ Secondly, soldiers returning from World War I took up sparsely settled and undeveloped

lands while the immigrants of the 1920s often had to settle either on marginal land or abandoned farms.⁵ Thirdly, as settlement proceeded from east to west onto the semi-arid plains, dry farming without irrigation was adopted in areas of scant precipitation. Insufficient rainfall during the growing season did not support continuous cropping, so summer fallowing and crop rotation were required.⁶ During World War I farmers were encouraged to grow wheat on a large scale as part of the war effort. But after 1918 agricultural experts encouraged crop diversification and mixed farming as a way to increase farm income and reduce soil erosion, which would become an enormous problem in the 1930s. Large grain-growing farms meant keeping many horses and large expensive threshing gangs each autumn. Technological advances such as the gasoline tractor and the combine further altered farming practices.⁷ The depression and drought added to the pattern of internal migration. It was becoming clear that settlement had been largely unplanned without much thought to what was sustainable for the rural economy. The land had been occupied either by chance – what was still available – or according to the devices of colonization agents, railway and land companies.⁸

This was the environment into which Belgians ventured. At Duck Lake, in 1901, Baron Huysmans de Deflal, agent for Crown lands, described as being helpful to “settlers of all races and beliefs who made up the population of the region,” took Consul De Vos to the reserve and residential school of Okemasis and to two Belgian farmers “whose farms were developing well.”⁹ This no doubt reassured him that the former Aboriginal threat had been removed and that newcomers were becoming well established. The Saskatchewan government prepared a special booklet in 1915 containing two hundred recommendations for those seeking employment as “hired men,” this being a common entry point into the economy. Many newly arrived single males were unable to profit from this paternalistic advice because of a language and literacy barrier.¹⁰

The speed of immigration and railway construction resulted in a widely dispersed rural society that required an extensive and expensive system of local government, no fewer than 302 rural municipalities in Saskatchewan by 1916. These municipalities bore the burden of collecting school taxes, road building, telephone service, and some health care and welfare services. By 1930 most municipalities were faced with mounting tax arrears. Immigration had filled vacant lands but it had spawned some harsh economic realities that gave rise to a feeling that external controls,

powerful interest elsewhere, were responsible, the genesis of a populist sentiment of western alienation.

Agricultural Ideology

The settlement of the region was related also to an agricultural ideology. The importance of agriculture for political and social development is a concept developed by the ancient Greeks, who espoused “an ideology in which the production of food, and above all, the actual people who own the land and do the farm work are held to be of supreme social importance.”¹¹ Clifford Sifton, who became Minister of the Interior in 1896, was a supporter of this agrarian myth insofar as Western Canada’s agricultural potential opened up opportunities for immigrants such as Belgians to advance central Canadian national objectives and assure the development of its northern democratic character. He wrote: “Agriculture is the foundation of all real and enduring progress on the part of Canada.... The possession of a preponderating rural population having the virtues and strength of character bred only among those who follow agricultural life, is the only sure guarantee of our national future.”¹² Premier Walter Scott affirmed that “Saskatchewan is essentially an agricultural province, which is no misfortune. Agriculture is the basis of the business of the world. Farming is the foundation of civilization.”¹³

Belgian immigrants who took up farming already espoused some basic principles of an agricultural ideology. The first objective was to buy little in the way of food for livestock or human consumption. Women assured that groceries were obtained in exchange for dairy produce, poultry and eggs. Secondly, the farmer depended on unpaid labour of family members and restricted the educational opportunities of the children. Thirdly, they believed in the virtue of the “family farm.”¹⁴ “It begins simply, with a home and a few animals, and slowly develops over the years, growing, but always with the farmers and their families owning and living on the land – independent, self-reliant and hard-working,”¹⁵ Fourthly, although accustomed to intensive labour they were inclined to pursue some small ventures such as the farm implement business.¹⁶

Belgian agronomists and horticulturalists played a role in the improvement of Prairie agriculture. Four institutions provided expert advice: the Horticulture School of Vilvoorde (1836); the State Agriculture Institute, Gembloux (1860); the Forestry School, Bouillon (1864); and the

Agricultural Science section of the University of Louvain (1878). Three graduates from the Louvain agriculture faculty – Van Cauwelaert, Jeruslaem, Steurs – settled in Bruxelles in 1897, while François Rentier went to Aberdeen in 1908. Another graduate, François Smets took up large-scale farming in Saskatchewan. In 1912, Delphin Bricoux and Victor Mathurin came to Edmonton and Paul Mulie started a three-hundred-hectare farm in Whitewood.¹⁷ President W.C. Murray of the University of Saskatchewan was impressed by this model of agricultural science in a university setting because it assured scientific research in a humane perspective, open to women as well as men. Consequently, in 1907, he insisted on a university setting, like the Louvain model, rather than the segregated college setting in Guelph, Ontario, for the Faculty of Agriculture in Saskatoon.¹⁸

Jean Gaire's "Chain of Parishes"

Many of the first Belgians to venture into Assiniboia District were recruited by the abbé Jean Gaire. He founded the parishes of Wolseley (1888) and Forget (1892), at the western extremity of the original triangle based at Deloraine and Grande Clairière. By 1898 his vision had been transformed into a chain of Francophone parishes stretching to the Rockies, beginning with Bellegarde, on the fourth coulee near the Gainsborough Creek just west of the extended Manitoba border. He wrote: "I saw now beyond any doubt that my first foundation would not remain isolated.... I had just found the first link in this famous chain, so great was my patriotic joy."¹⁹

He had gone as far west as Wolseley in 1888, where experts at the Indian Head Experimental Farm said the soil was "of an astounding fertility and admirably suited to mixed farming: cereal growing and cattle raising combined."²⁰

In 1898, Alphonse Copet, Cyrille Delaite, Joseph Delaite and Cyrille Libert set out to break land at the location the priest had designated. They were not impressed and returned to Grande Clairière for the winter declaring that the soil was too hard to plough. Gaire insisted a few rains would remedy that, therefore the following spring a larger party of Belgians and a few French set out, staked permanent claims, built huts of three-foot lengths of prairie sod for walls and boards for the roofs. Firewood was hauled from the Moose Mountain for winter. In 1894 nine families arrived²¹ – from the provinces of Luxembourg and Hainaut. St. Maurice

de Bellegarde would become a permanent Belgian community, although until 1900, several families retired to Grande Clairière each winter.

Even when wooden frame houses replaced the sod shacks, and horses replaced oxen, migration occurred. Alphonse Tinant stayed, his brother Auguste moved to Wauchope, and his brother Gaston moved to Vanguard in 1912. Honoré George settled permanently but his two brothers emigrated to a Belgian colony in Guatemala.²² When the CPR extended its Souris line to Arcola it built a water tower at the Gainsborough Creek crossing but bypassed the hamlet of Bellegarde in favour of Anglophone Frys and Redvers. In spite of this, by 1905 there were 175 Francophones in the hamlet with Belgians decidedly in the majority. The parish priest reported they were imbued with “old country ideas,” refused to pay the tithe to support him adequately and to send their children regularly to catechism classes. They paid little attention to “the instructions given by authorized persons.” When the church burned down in 1905, the priest wanted to rebuild at Frys on the railway line, but the parishioners were attached to Gaire’s site. The matter was resolved by the Anglophone Protestants in Frys who would not countenance a Catholic church. The new church remained in the hamlet, a centre of community life and identity, but business was conducted mostly in Antler.²³ In 1899 the parishioners organized their own Catholic public school district that became a convent-cum public school six years later.²⁴ Gaire was absent during this critical period. He had moved on to bring another group of settlers from Grande Clairière to St. Raphael de Cantal, north of Alida, in 1892. Like the two earlier links in his chain, it too was not on the railway line. Belgians were well represented among the twenty-two founding householders which within a decade counted ninety-seven Francophone parishioners.²⁵ However, they were a minority in “a sea of English Protestants” whose numbers increased dramatically. In 1897, Gaire developed a plan for a bloc settlement along the southern slope of the Moose Mountains where he hoped to bring a thousand settlers to form a Francophone bloc before the railway pushed through and a flood of immigrants arrived. Archbishop Langevin, anxious to promote Catholic immigration, approved the plan saying “this beautiful district belongs to us; for we will take all the places; we are there before all others.”²⁶ Gaire conceived of another triangle of Francophone settlers with its base in Cantal and Wauchope and the apex at Forget, as compact communities isolated from external influences. Between 1897 and 1906, he made eight trips to Belgium and France to recruit settlers, but his

appeals in *Le Défenseur* to counteract Anglophone Protestant influence in the West did not meet with much response in Belgium. Consequently, Belgians were a minority in the parishes created after Bellegarde.²⁷

Wauchope was to become the springboard for Gaire's projected bloc settlement stretching beyond Moose Mountain. Five homesteads were established in anticipation of the railway, which arrived in 1901 bringing a tide of Anglophone settlers Gaire could not equal. Maurice Quennelle, who took up a homestead in 1902, opened a general store and post office and became a leading member of the Francophone community. By the 1911 census, Francophones made up 66 per cent of the population and controlled the business activity of the village that grew around the railway station, St. Regis church and convent.²⁸ Gaire was appointed parish priest but he expended much energy on raising funds for various colonization projects whose Belgian and French investors seemed more interested in central Canada than in western regions. The *Société générale de l'oeuvre de la colonisation catholique française du Canada*, which he founded in 1904 under "the high patronage of the hierarchy of Western Canada," was a small investment company whose objective was to buy up farm lands for resale to approved Catholic settlers. In 1905, he added the *Société de la Ferme du Clergé français* as an investment outlet for European clerics by buying up land "reserved" for approved immigrants. Although Archbishop Langevin approved of the measure, he warned that neither he nor Gaire should be seen as directors or shareholders in such a venture. In 1906 he received no further support from the Canadian government, in spite of a personal appeal to the prime minister, so his almost annual recruitment tours in Europe came to an end.²⁹ By 1911, funds were exhausted. Wauchope never developed into the regional service centre he had envisaged.³⁰

Forget was the next link in the chain of parishes, inaugurated with the arrival of three families in 1892. A modest chain migration from Luxembourg province resulted in twenty-two homestead claims by 1896. Two years later, the Department of the Interior's report commented:

There is also a French and Belgian settlement at Alma, on the west end of the Moose Mountains, in a flourishing condition. They have had splendid crops nearly every year, and quite a number of their friends from Bathgate, North Dakota, have come over this summer, and have taken up homesteads.... The

settlers in this district go in principally for mixed farming, and raise large quantities of stock as well as grain.³¹

A number of Belgians from Grosse Pointe, Michigan, who already possessed some capital and a working knowledge of English, settled among their compatriots at Forget. Forget became a rendez-vous for Belgians in the migratory process. In the first decade of the twentieth century, at least six families from Deloraine, and one from Deleau, came to join compatriots in the Forget district. In the same period, at least five families left for Fife Lake, two for Stoughton, and two for Coronach.³² The 1911 census revealed that the balance had shifted in favour of the English, although the number of Francophones had doubled. The Belgian government judged that a consular agent was necessary and so appointed J. Tratsaert to that function, a position he held until February 1911. He was succeeded as vice-consul by Gaston De Jardin in October 1911, a position he held in Forget until 1915, when it was transferred to Manor until 1921.

Gaire next turned his attention to Red Deer and Rocky Mountain House as the Alberta terminus of his chain of parishes. In 1902 he established the Société de la Ferme Assiniboia-Alberta, which opened a general store in Red Deer and bought up two large estates with a view to offering small farms for sale to Francophone Catholic immigrants. The company loaned breeding stock so settlers could establish their herds upon arrival. The company was liquidated in October 1909 although it reported a profit of 8.1 per cent on its investment. A handful of Belgian families remained as a result of Gaire's initiative.³³

Utopian Settlements

Utopianism referred in this context to the creation of ideal religious, agrarian, or social communities that a new region of settlement seemed destined to render feasible. Belgians who participated in these different projects never appear to have been involved ideologically, but rather they saw the opportunity to better themselves economically and socially by participating. In 1889, eight counts, two viscounts and a Belgian baron came to La Rolanderie, soon to be renamed St. Hubert, sixteen kilometres southwest of Whitewood, where Dr. Rudolph Meyer had begun a settlement for Swiss farmers. Meyer sold fourteen square sections to the

south of the Pipestone Creek to Count de Roffignac, Baron van Brabant and Archbishop Langevin, which they later sold to the archdiocese at cost to form a Francophone Catholic bloc settlement. Work was begun on imposing stone residences, including Château Bellevue for Count Jean de Jumilhac and Château Richelieu for Count Henri de Saurras, and plans were pursued for the cultivation of sugar beets and chicory. Although the property was scarcely settled and was located sixty kilometres from the railway, the Manitoba Free Press voiced the unlimited optimism of the times:

... the advent of a beet sugar factory would be a great boon to farmers of the Northwest and would practically solve the question in favour of mixed farming. It would be not a little to the credit of the new Northwest if it should succeed in establishing a beet sugar factory in advance of the old province of Ontario, some of whose residents were just now making a move in that direction. Although Whitewood is scarcely a Canadian trade centre, it is claimed that the business can be made a profitable one to all concerned in it.³⁴

It was an example of the marriage of utopianism and boosterism. The Territorial government intervened because of strong prohibitionist sentiments, fearing that alcoholic beverages and by-products might fall into the possession of the Aboriginal population.

The chicory project proceeded under the direction of Baron van Brabant and Count de Roffignac in a partnership known as the Bellevue French Coffee Company. The Bellevue farm was devoted entirely to growing chicory with a drying and packaging plant for the preparation of the chicory to be mixed with imported coffee. Unfortunately, the plant burned down in 1891. Although the chicory crops were good there was great difficulty in securing a suitable market.

Attention was turned next to sheep ranching and the erection of a Gruyère cheese factory under the management of M. Janet. Count Henri de Saurras organized a ranch in the Moose Mountains area for two thousand sheep imported from Europe. The cattle ranch of imported purebred stock was managed by M. De Wolffe. While the aristocrats lived in grand style organizing a brass band and church choir and holding gala balls, with occasional visits to the English gentlemen of the proximate

utopian settlement of Cannington Manor, the domestic servants and farm labourers – not a few Belgians – carried on with the serious agricultural tasks. Bertram Tennyson, nephew of Alfred Lord Tennyson, wrote admiringly in *The Land of Napioa* of this “beautiful country gemmed with scarlet tiger lilies and golden marigolds” and its rolling prairie by “the long blue line of the Pipestone Valley.”³⁵ The Baron van Brabant spent the winter of 1891–92 in Europe “attending to immigration business in connection with the colony.” During the next eighteen months eighty-eight new settlers arrived at St. Hubert.³⁶

The influx of new immigrants did little to change the fortunes of the venture. Baron von Brabant and his brother took over Château Richelieu and their own Richelieu French Coffee brand, flavoured with chicory of course, appeared on the market. It met with little success so the operation was turned over to Count de Beaudrap. Count Roffignac had been succeeded in the over-all management by Fernand Carnoy and the joint stock company was in deep financial difficulty, as reported in the local press:

As far as is known at present the buildings and extensive lands of the company will lie idle, unless a customer can be found for them. The company has sunk a large sum in the enterprise, which has been quite an assistance to the district, and we are sorry their operations have not been attended with better success.³⁷

Archbishop Langevin attempted to rescue the faltering project, personally visited St. Hubert in 1905, and sold it to the Missionnaires de Chavagnes from Brittany who never carried through with the immigration program.³⁸

The aristocrats left, poorer if not wiser, and their utopian vision faded in the blizzards and prairie fires. But among the resilient survivors were many Belgians – the families of François Beaujot, Adolph Gatin, Elvire Raiwet, Victor Dumonceaux, Joseph Pirlot, and Justin Havelange, from Namur province. They had worked for the aristocrats and now turned their attention to their own farms. Other families came to join them, including the Moinys to work in the cheese factory; the Poncelets to take up a homestead; and the Payots to work for the parish priest in Whitewood. The agricultural expertise of the community experienced a tremendous boost with the arrival of two outstanding graduates in agriculture from

the University of Louvain – François Smet in 1908 and Paul Mullie in 1911.³⁹

The second utopian project was Montmartre, launched in 1893 by the Société foncière du Canada that had been founded by Pierre Forsin, Hector Fabre and some Parisian investors. The company was to supply immigrants with farm buildings, implements, domestic animals and seed grain upon arrival. When the first contingent arrived at Wolseley, the nearest rail link, there were no provisions waiting, so women and children remained in town while the men hurried south to the company property to erect temporary shelters. Théophile and Constant de Decker decided it was best to put up a sod house in the shape of a tipi and then dig a well to have access to water. Company agents appeared more anxious to construct a Grande Maison for officials than to provide for the immigrant families as winter approached. It was a miracle that most remained and survived the harsh winter that ensued.⁴⁰

There was no crop in 1894 and a prairie fire wiped out some of what had been achieved. The de Decker brothers persuaded two other siblings, Yvon and Henri, to come to Montmartre to work as carpenters on contract for the company. Three years later, two other brothers, Camille and Désiré, immigrated and took up homesteads. By 1901 the chief landmarks of the colony, the Grande Maison and the stables, were demolished and the company reclaimed the homesteads it had granted. So the six de Decker brothers moved on, as many others had, to British Columbia. Only the butter and cheese factory that Alfred Latreille and André Gouzée from Belgium had set up in 1894 remained in operation. Gouzée had invested his capital in wheat growing and ranching but his land was reclaimed by the Dominion government in 1906, so he sold his cattle and returned to Belgium. His departure was but another indication of the failure of the Montmartre project. André Gouzée would soon return to Canada in a more important and successful role.⁴¹

The third venture was the aristocratic colony of Trochu. Armand Trochu, a Parisian stock broker, established a ranch not far from Three Hills in a sheltered coulee close to the Buffalo Lake trail. He recruited a number of cavalry officers in 1904 to establish ranches, as well as Count Paul de Beaudrap, who had been associated with the St. Hubert venture, and his brother Roger de Beaudrap. The most successful associate was Joseph Devilder, an ambitious and wealthy entrepreneur of Flemish origin whose father had established a banking business in Lille. Devilder

invested \$50,000 in the Trochu settlement, most of it in the St. Ann Ranch Trading Company which was incorporated in 1905.⁴²

Devilder introduced a very rational approach to ranching in contrast to the trappings of the military and modest aristocratic lifestyle of Trochu. Several hundred feeder cattle were bought, fattened and shipped by rail to packing houses. In 1905 over one hundred fine Percheron horses were purchased, about half of which were lost in a raging prairie fire the following year. This was followed by an exceptionally severe winter which took a heavy toll among the cattle. Devilder diversified by constructing a large multi-purpose building to serve as a hotel for homesteaders passing through to take up their claims, as a dance hall and as a community centre. A blacksmith and a tinsmith were sponsored by the company to serve the community. In 1908, Devilder bought more than three hundred milch cows which were sold on a credit basis to local farmers who brought their milk and cream to the company creamery. The company kept one half of the cream cheque as payment for the cows. His only real failure was investment in oil drilling equipment which it turned out was only suitable for drilling water wells.⁴³

Lommel Chain Migration

A concentration of immigrants from the Lommel/ Kerkoven region of Limburg province evolved south of historic Cannington Manor after the arrival of a branch line of the CPR in 1902 resulted in the development of the village of Manor, with the usual railway station, grain elevators, loading platform, general store and post office. A. De Trémaudan left Montmartre to set up the De Trémaudan Company in the new hamlet, selling real estate and insurance. Settlers from central Canada had begun arriving in the region south of Moose Mountain as early as 1882. The first Belgians from Lommel – Henri Clemens, Louis Engelen, and Jan Hoeben – arrived in 1912–13. Henri Clemens was joined by his brothers Jan and Jacob and Frans Michiels in April 1914. Henri returned to Belgium, where a local historian in Lommel observed: “A certain Clemens from Lommel, who canvassed the area for people willing to emigrate recruited in this way about thirty families.”⁴⁴

Manor gained a certain status in 1913 when Gaston De Jardin, who served as vice-consul in Forget, set up an implement dealership and insurance office in the village. From 1915 to 1919 he was secretary-treasurer

of the village and also Belgian vice-consul from 1915 to 1921. The De Jardin family was involved in land development and investment throughout the West and they were representatives of influential Antwerp investment groups. Gaston De Jardin was instrumental in the settlement of numerous Lommel families in Manor before he moved on to join his brother in Winnipeg in the pursuit of their business interests.⁴⁵

Veterans of World War I and war brides were just returning in 1919 when a large contingent from Lommel managed to find space on-board a vessel sailing for Canada, rather than Australia where there was also a “Belgian connection,” and laid the foundation of what would be an important settlement.⁴⁶ Not all were able to settle immediately into farming, which now required some capital to make a down payment on any available farmsteads. Charel Alen worked two years in Alida to support a family of five children before returning to Manor. Drought and grasshopper plagues convinced him to move to Churchbridge where he became a successful cattle shipper. Sebastien Vanden Boer, who would later host several immigrant families, had to work two years for the CPR and three of his eldest children hired out to neighbours before the family could take up its own farm. Jef Hulsman had been Cornelius Jaenen’s major competitor as a pub owner in Kerkhoven but they came to Manor together seeking a new life and prosperity.

Cornelius Jaenen and his family settled in the hamlet, and eventually took up a modest farm, unlike some who had to work for other farmers, on the railways, or in the mines. He had intended to emigrate in 1914 but the outbreak of hostilities forced him to postpone his plans. During the war he was able to accumulate some capital, especially from his pub near the Dutch border and a couple factories, where in addition to food and libations he sold unspecified “merchandise.” His business was also near the Blauwe Kei–Leopoldsborg canal where shippers and line-pullers who pulled barges along with horses and manpower repaired for refreshments. A collector of village tales reported:

Corneel Jaenen, alias den Brak, horse merchant, rented premises containing a pub with barns for the shippers’ horses and a bowling alley. He also owned a farm and a considerable herd of cattle and his pub had many clients. His wife Hanne and their daughter Marie served the factory workers that came by, while Corneel played the harmonica.... The mussel festivals

that he organized were quite peppered and salted. It made his clients so thirsty that they drank like mole holes. During the womens' kermis there were tarts, farm ham, black prune pies and currant bread.⁴⁷

Manor did not offer the same opportunities as Kerkoven. There was not even a Catholic church in the village, the nearest church being Gaire's church in Wauchope. Father A.J. Janssen from Sedley paid occasional visits to say mass with sermons in Dutch at the Manor hotel.

This chain migration continued with the arrival of five more families,⁴⁸ in March 1920 during a blinding snowstorm that left almost a metre of snow on the ground. Arnold Van Heukelom had ten children and he had to work four years on the railway and two years in a cobalt mine at Deloro, Ontario before taking a farm in Manor.⁴⁹ Jaak Van Ham had five children and Vincent Ooms had six children so their establishment was not without difficulties as well. The Flemish community was completed with the arrival of Sool Poets in 1922, and four families in 1927: Peter Tavernier, Joseph Luyten, Peter Bax, and Jaak Clemens. These all worked hard as family units, pooling the income of its members. This was an indispensable practice considering the size of some families – Louis Geysen with ten children, Joseph Luyten with twelve children, Arnold Van Heukelom with ten children, and Koob Clemens, father of the original scouts that came to the area, with ten children.⁵⁰

Before the drought and depression of the 1930s set in, markets were stable, land was still available for mixed farming, and crop yields were good during an upturn in the economy. At least sixty cleared acres were required for a comfortable existence, which could be purchased for about \$3,000, including household goods, farm equipment and a minimum of domestic animals. Catholics organized their own cemetery in Manor in 1936. Mass was said regularly in a converted bank building until a parish church was erected, symbolic of the success of the settlement.

The Limburgers were accompanied by a small number of Walloons. Fernand Gerinrose, who had come to Gaire's settlement in Grande Clairière in 1892, where he worked for the Tinant family, moved successively to Parkman, Elrose, and then Cannington Manor where he rented an imposing historic farmhouse. A daughter recalled its frontier elegance and attraction:

Our house was a stone structure with a large dance salon and almost every week during the winter a crowd of people would come and hold a dance at our place. They supplied the music and lunch and Mom [Marie-Louise Gerinroze-Tinant] provided the coffee. We had a lot of fun but I was only 10 years old so no one really noticed me.⁵¹

Fernand Gerinrose later moved to the village of Manor, where he was mail carrier for many years, meeting the twice daily trains that served the community.⁵²

In the 1920s, Jules and Marie-Louise Minet arrived to join their daughters who also married into the Limburger community.⁵³ They were joined by another daughter, Victorine and husband Raymond Mottet, who first worked at the Staples ranch in Oxbow, but they did not take to agricultural life so they returned to Belgium after a few years. Jules Minet had international experience in Europe in setting up agricultural machinery, so he was kept busy repairing farm machinery by making the replacement parts in his own forge, travelling between Antler and Alida and Manor in summer months on “Louis,” his dependable bicycle. Victor Renault and Jack Pirlot from Deleau, and Philippe Revet from Bellegarde, completed the Walloon element in the Belgian community that was the mainstay of the Catholic parish. Locality of origin in Europe and family networks and intermarriage were important factors in a sense of identity and differentiation from neighbours for a couple generations.⁵⁴

How successful was this venture onto the Saskatchewan prairies? The Lommel contingent arrived at a time of great optimism. Up to 1925 bumper wheat crops choked rural elevators and railway companies were unable to supply sufficient boxcars to transport the wheat to saltwater ports. Then there followed a series of crop failures caused by drought followed by rust. Governments launched relief and rehabilitation programs, probably assuming some responsibility for having encouraged intensive agricultural settlement of the dry belt. A Lommel commentator wrote: “In 1918 the [Canadian] soldiers and the consulates abroad depicted Canada as a land overflowing with milk and honey, the promised land, where people in twenty years could become millionaires.” He concluded that “many did not find the promised standard of living and experienced a life of setbacks and accidents.” He believed that many of these emigrants “with their input, their sweat and their money, would here [in Lommel] have done as

well as there. But if you set your mind to it you will achieve, and some have to be far from home to prosper.”⁵⁵

Southern Horizon Country

Belgians who were accommodated at the Brandon immigration office in 1893 were not long in establishing themselves on the southern prairie beyond Gaire’s parishes, as an 1894 immigration report indicated:

The Franco-Belgians numbering some thirty families are, however, I believe, doing well. They are hard working, industrious and frugal, and being near an old settled part of the country, have profited from the example of their neighbours.⁵⁶

Techniques of dryland farming would come with experience, although they did acquire some notions how best to proceed with cultivation, crop rotation and animal husbandry from compatriots in Bruxelles or Deloraine. Two years later, the immigration agent in Estevan reported that the region was about to receive experienced reinforcements:

The French and Belgian settlement at Percy is in a flourishing condition; and from present prospects the immigration from the vicinity of Bathgate, in North Dakota, to that colony for the coming season will be quite large and will consist of a good industrious class of people, well acquainted with the ways of western [farm] life.⁵⁷

An additional attraction for those coming up by the railway line from North Portal was the availability of seasonal employment in the lignite mines around Estevan and Bienfait. Since the 1880s, pioneers had dug coal with pick and shovel from the banks of a ravine at Roche Percée and hauled the precious fuel by ox team over the open prairie.

There were numerous families settled around Estevan in 1892, but they were never sufficiently concentrated to form a distinct Belgian community. Family biographies indicate they maintained social contact through the Catholic church and inter-marriage was common. Several families found employment in the town and seasonally in the coal mine. Another cluster formed in the vicinity of Weyburn and Radville. The

first Belgian family arrived in Radville in 1903, followed by six more families in 1906, and another fifteen in 1910. They were mostly farmers from Flanders. Some chose not to file for a homestead but to work as labourers in Weyburn, especially at a brickyard, where a neighbourhood popularly known as “Belgium Town” emerged.⁵⁸ Belgians were familiar with eighteen different types of bricks that could be produced in a single plant and kiln from the same clay.

Four family histories illustrate the employment and migration patterns of settlers who arrived in 1910. Sylvain Goessaert, his wife and four children came to “Belgium Town” to work in home construction. He worked as a labourer putting in the town water mains, then as a hotel porter, while attending night school to learn English. He filed for a homestead in 1914 but also worked six months each year in the lignite mine at Gladmar. Joseph Wyndandts worked for the local telephone company, then in a butcher shop before taking up a homestead in the Gladmar district, as did his eldest son and some relatives. He became a community and church leader and host of Father Jacob Wilhelm of Diamond Crossing, the much-beloved pastor of the Flemish settlers.⁵⁹ Achiel Schepens worked in Weyburn at manual jobs and as a farm hand at Radville for settling near compatriots in Gladmar. Leon Uytterhagen had worked in a large sugar beet plant in East Flanders before emigrating and worked as a common labourer in Weyburn until he filed for a homestead. He was active in community affairs, serving as municipal road boss, school trustee for three decades, board member of the Wheat Pool committee and active participant in the local co-operative. These individuals gave Belgian immigrants a good reputation both with their neighbours and with immigration authorities.⁶⁰

The Belgian community that grew up around Ceylon after 1906 came from a wide range of occupations that ranged from operating a steam laundry to hauling coal, working in the John Deere factory in Moline, or in the brickyard at Weyburn or on the Hudson Bay railway. These initial occupations indicate that there was some ethnic networking as they eventually moved into farming communities alongside compatriots.⁶¹

A characteristic of this early settlement was the extensive mobility of individuals and families. The movements of the Lee Van de Bon family that eventually settled in Yellow Grass illustrates this phenomenon. Van de Bon came to work during the summer for a farmer in Deloraine in 1911. During the first winter, with three other young men, he went to work

in a lumber camp in Minnesota. The second winter he shovelled coal at a dockyard in Superior, Wisconsin. The third winter he went to a lumber camp in northern Saskatchewan. By 1913 he gave up on the remunerative but exacting seasonal employment and concentrated on farming activities and by 1916 he had sufficient capital to buy his own farm near Yellow Grass. In 1923 he bought a large steam engine, a threshing machine, hay racks, bunk cars, cook car, and water tanker to launch an impressive threshing outfit employing no fewer than twenty-one men each autumn. He farmed with sixteen horses, two sets of eight horses abreast, until in 1936 he sold his threshing outfit and horses and bought a tractor and combine. Successful farmers had to keep abreast of technological developments. This was the kind of progress that was much admired in the agricultural community and was crowned with a son taking over the family farm as the pioneers retired to the milder climate of British Columbia.⁶²

The light brown soil belt on the western slopes of the Missouri Coteau became a major area of Francophone settlement, including some Belgians around Verwood, Willow Bunch, St. Victor, Fife Lake and Coronach. Richard De Cock, who with his siblings came to Deloraine from Brussels in 1899 and proceeded to Willow Bunch in 1901, was probably the first settler. His was a rather erratic career because he soon went to British Columbia to work as a freighter, then worked as a trapper in the north before returning to a ranch near Maple Creek. After marrying he moved back to Wood Mountain where he operated a Hereford ranch and a lignite mine. In 1927 he went off to British Columbia again, but finally settled into farming at Willow Bunch once more in 1934. He survived the depression and drought years by growing quality vegetables, a source of amazement to many. His itinerary illustrates the high mobility of some Belgian immigrants.⁶³

There were a number of scattered communities in the region. Moose Jaw was the usual point of entry to this region where sympathetic agents at the Crown lands office directed immigrants to the desired destination. In 1907 the Augustin Assoignon, Désiré Denonceau and Emile Girard families from the province of Luxembourg formed the nucleus of a group of immigrants near the villages of Fife Lake and Rockglen. They were joined by a trickle of compatriots until 1914 followed by young Belgians who had joined units of the Canadian Expeditionary Force and who had obtained government loans to buy farms, stock and equipment.⁶⁴

Farther west, abbé Marie-Albert Royer attracted Belgians to Ponteix in 1907, to Vanguard and Pambrun in 1908–09, and to Frenchville and Lac Driscoll in 1909–10. Some chose not to settle among the French Canadians therefore they filed for homesteads at Fir Mountain, Maple Creek and Robsart.⁶⁵ Some lands were settled by the abbé Royer's recruits before they were officially put on the market and the abbé Louis Pierre Gravel had to obtain squatters' rights for them. Settlement was not always a straightforward experience.⁶⁶

The 1930s were particularly disastrous years for farmers and townspeople in southern Saskatchewan. Estevan and environs was hit first by hailstorms, then grasshopper infestations and severe drought. As many farmers migrated east and north in search of fodder for their horses and cattle, an ethnic network was again discernible because the Belgians tended to turn to compatriots in Deloraine and other southern Manitoba districts for aid.⁶⁷ Sylvain Goessaert's sons, who pioneered with their father near Weyburn, rode the rails looking for work in the forests of British Columbia and the mines of Alberta. The hard work and disappointments of those years determined seven of the eight children to abandon the prairies for British Columbia and Ontario. In Ceylon district, farmers organized haying expeditions into Manitoba in order to save their horses and cattle. Fife Lake experienced a dramatic decline in rural population. Belgians there spearheaded an exodus to Crystal Springs in northern Saskatchewan.

North Central Parklands

In 1888, only three years after the military operations associated with the North-West Rebellion, a few Belgian immigrants began to arrive at Duck Lake and Batoche.⁶⁸ François Jordens left missionary work to take up farming at Summerberry in 1906. Concentrated settlement emerged around Vonda, St. Denis and Marcotte Ranch (renamed Prud'homme in 1922). Tréau de Coeli, colonizing agent in Europe visited these settlements in 1906: "During my short sojourn, I had the pleasure of going to Edmonton and visiting the new French and Belgian colonies, along the Canadian Northern railway, at Vonda, Howell and Aberdeen where since a couple years, several Belgian families have become established and are succeeding beyond their hopes."⁶⁹

In anticipation of the success of colonizing clergy in attracting Francophones to the Prince Albert district, the Belgian government appointed C. de la Gorgendière, clerk of the Supreme Court of Saskatchewan, its vice consul there in June 1906. A certain Baron Fallon had settled at Domrémy in 1906 and claimed to be the representative of the Belgian government. The Dominion land agent in the area, J. Dubois, complained that the baron was upsetting the school trustees, the local improvement district officials and the justice of the peace with his exaggerated claims. Belgian officials clarified his true status:

Canada seems to be a paradise for sons of good families, failures in life, useless and troublesome. I let Mr. Dubois know that Baron Fallon was usurping the title of Vice-Consul of Belgium and that he belonged to no station whatever in a Belgian consular career.⁷⁰

It appears that there may have been another motive, in addition to colonization, for the appointment of a vice-consul.

The Pierre Hounjet family from Liège was not untypical of the early arrivals. They were relatively poor suburban farmers who worked together in the fields. An adolescent son delivered milk during the pre-dawn hours from a cart pulled by a large dog. A pamphlet passed on by a Canadian recruiting agent aroused their desire to emigrate to better their condition. Wisely, they sent their older son François to Canada to sound out prospects in Forget, then Prud'homme. The local priest encouraged him so the family started anew at St. Denis. They were joined later by a married brother and his family, who came by way of the United States, and the Hamoline and Dutilleux families, who became active in Francophone affairs. The seven Hounjet children settled in northern Saskatchewan, made a success of farming and never regretted the decision to emigrate.⁷¹ In 1910, twelve families from Hainaut came to Prud'homme and were all reasonably successful. Jean Hannotte served as municipal councillor for ten years, François Pirot as general merchant, Hubert Radoux as horticulturalist, and Georges Vancamphout as justice of the peace. The Baudoux family gained prominence in the community when the son, Maurice Baudoux, chose a religious life, became parish priest in Prud'homme in 1931, a zealous promoter of French Canadian causes, a

chief mover in the cause for French radio in the West, and eventually was appointed Archbishop of St. Boniface.⁷²

Two colonizing priests had some success in recruiting Belgians. Abbé Paul LeFloch of St. Brieux was able to attract both Walloons and Flemings to Vonda, Hoey and St. Denis.⁷³ Abbé Jules Piro, a Walloon nationalist who served the Hungarian Catholic community at Esterhazy, during two trips to his native Namur region recruited eighteen Walloons for Esterhazy.⁷⁴

Elsewhere the pattern of Belgian settlement was even more scattered and devoid of any systematic settlement strategy. The Saskatchewan Valley Land Company bought up seemingly arid land between the Qu'Appelle valley and Saskatoon at a bargain price and found no difficulty in attracting settlers, including Belgians. In Davidson, eight Belgian families were core members of the Catholic parish.⁷⁵ Near Watson, the Edward Behiels family took up homesteads north of the Quill Lakes in 1903, where they were soon joined by Peter Deschryver.⁷⁶ Achiel and Henry Tycquet pioneered south of Macrorie and four other families homesteaded south of Fertile Valley. These Belgians organized the local chapter of the Grain Growers' Association in 1918. Georges Delaporte introduced a new style of farm living, spending the winters in the village and the summers on the farm, combining village life with rural life.⁷⁷ In Elrose the Verbruggans family and the Lhoest, Grenade and Jeuris families in Mondou district were all successful farmers, retiring in most cases to Saskatoon.⁷⁸ When students of St. Walburg High School researched the beginning of their community, they came across memorable tales of rabbit hunts, building bees, card parties, masquerades and barn dances, often associated with John Van den Bergh who had come in 1906. They also noted the special affection parishioners had for Father Vandandaele who ministered for many years at Paradise Hill.⁷⁹

In June 1907, 250,000 acres of prime farm land at Veregin, abandoned by Doukhobors who had refused to take the oath of allegiance and abandon community ownership, came onto the homestead market. Damien Van de Sempel filed for a homestead and six sons and daughters gained patents for their individual homesteads. None of their homesteads carried mortgages or any similar encumbrance throughout the three or more years it took to satisfy requirements for the patent and registration of the individual homestead.⁸⁰ Seven other Belgian families settled in the area north of Veregin and the Indian reserve. Those who left Belgium

were seen by many as “deserters” nevertheless there was admiration of the rapid progress they could make, especially that a bride’s family could rarely equal in dowry the amount of capital a husband from Canada possessed.⁸¹

Depression, Drought and Recovery

Belgians soon learned that contrarities other than strenuous labour to achieve adequate cultivation and shelter existed. The concept of free land was misleading because less than half the acreage of a township was available for homesteads. Large tracts were for sale by the government, the railway companies and the Hudson’s Bay Company.⁸² Secondly, the influenza epidemic in 1918 revealed the inadequacy of medical services and of governmental responses. The exodus of rural dwellers to the villages, where assistance was said to exist, resulted in a concentration of people that facilitated the spread of the contagion. Many Belgians simply turned to folk remedies such as eating garlic and boiled onions. Thirdly, the inadequacy of all governmental and institutional services in dealing with a natural disaster, economic crisis and human misery was tragically revealed during the Great Depression, marked by widespread unemployment and a drastic drop in prices for farm produce, accompanied by an unprecedented drought. Very few on the Prairies were directly affected by the stock market collapse on 29 October 1919 but the general depression it represented left none untouched.

Natural disaster accentuated the negative effects of the instability of western industrial economies. In the 1930s, drifting topsoil piled into drifts that covered fenceposts and abandoned farmsteads became common especially in the southern parts of the Prairies. Infestations of grasshoppers, in search of what little vegetation survived, and wheat rust claimed whatever had managed to survive the dry conditions. By 1931 farmers were removing the motor and steering mechanism of their cars, adding hitches and tongue to convert them into horse-drawn “Bennett buggies.” Equally popular were the half versions or two-wheeled vehicles called “Anderson carts.” In this way the farmers demonstrated both their adaptability and their disdain for the Conservative prime minister and provincial premier respectively. The Canadian Commonwealth Federation (CCF) and Social Credit parties attempted to organize the

protest vote, but the Belgians like the French Canadians in the West tended to remain firmly loyal to the Liberal Party.

Mortgages on many farms were foreclosed, machinery was repossessed and land was abandoned. Relief supplies were sent from central and eastern Canada, but it was alleged that the authorities, mostly of British origin, in the rural municipalities and villages directed these supplies to their friends. Some farmers relocated outside the light brown soil zone. Charles Alen shipped a carload of cattle to Winnipeg from Churchbridge in 1937 which did not bring enough to pay for the freight charges. Similarly, John Jaenen in Antler shipped a carload of barley to Fort William and he received a bill for thirty-six cents as the grain was not worth as much as the freight charges. Peter Van Sprundel, in Manor near Moose Mountain which had somewhat more precipitation than most of the region, recorded the serious situation:

Fair crops till grasshoppers flew in by the millions, cut crop green from dawn till dark but couldn't keep ahead; [grass] hoppers cleaned up all oats and barley, only a few stems left to cut with mower, Stooks too green to thresh and grasshoppers also devouring those. Plowed some fall rye under. Will only get seed back. No slough hay. Will have to locate hay in Manitoba in exchange for stock. Railroad shipping in hay free to dried out areas. Many farmers leaving for British Columbia.⁸³

John Jaenen in Antler, for example, sacrificed to pay his taxes and relief supplies but the municipal officials accepted his payments and never informed him of the amnesty that had been granted. He was unable, on the other hand, to meet his mortgage payments so he abandoned his farm and moved to the Red River valley where Alphonse Gelaude, a compatriot, helped him get resettled. There was a sense of discrimination and one turned to one's ethnic group for support. As James Gray reminisced, the few jobs available went to those of British stock not the "foreigners."⁸⁴

Nature seemed particularly pitiless as January/February 1936 was the coldest winter on record and spring came early, ushering in the hottest summer on record. At the meteorological station at Carlyle temperatures reached 43.3C. The following year was the worst year for dust storms. Belgians recalled that around Forget the creek bottoms dried out exposing large quantities of bison bones which they gathered and sold for fertilizer.

At Wauchope, trains were delayed when hordes of grasshoppers landed on the rails and were crushed into a slippery grease.

The “dirty thirties,” a combination of drought and depression, was a phrase that encapsulated the economic dislocation, social turmoil, climatic change and psychological trauma of the period. It was a cruel time that broke down even some of the strongest men and dashed the hopes of countless. Guy Vanderhaeghe wrote autobiographically how his father was a victim of drought and the depression:

That was during the thirties when we were dealt a doubly cruel hand of drought and economic depression. It was not a time or place that was kindly to my father. He had come out of the urban spread of industrial Belgium some twenty-odd years before, and it was only then, I think, that he was beginning to come to terms with a land that must have seemed forbidding after his own tiny country, so well tamed and marked by man. And then this land played him the trick of becoming more than forbidding; it became fierce, and fierce in every way.⁸⁵

Yet, the “dirty thirties” gave rise to a romantic literature as well as a sense of community and confirmed the need for interdependence.

The role of farm women before 1940 was influenced by such factors as the lack of electricity and time-saving equipment and the care of generally large families living in poorly built houses that required a lot of upkeep and organization. These women contributed significantly to the work force during the years of drought and depression, as well as to the meagre family income by preparing and preserving food, making and mending clothing, doing farm chores, and producing and selling produce.⁸⁶ Their daughters very often had to forfeit a good education to help, and sometimes replace, their mother. When the parents were ill or handicapped, it was not unusual for girls, such as Clarice Lambert and her sister, to take over farm operations.⁸⁷ Formal schooling was replaced in many cases by a kind of apprenticeship in domesticity and home-centred industry. Hours of work depended on how long it took to finish all the multiple tasks each day. Some contributed in exceptional ways, such as Marguerite Trochu, who painted and sold postcards and Christmas cards of life in her community.⁸⁸ Eliane Silverman has described the lives of young women at

this time as “a web of obedience and obligation” to family.⁸⁹ Little wonder that a quarter million people left the Prairies, defeated and disillusioned.

World War II marked a transition in image and ideology in Western Canada. Farming was no longer seen as offering certain prosperity and government responsibility for economic and social security was now firmly entrenched. Family biographies reveal that in most Belgian farm families the children moved into other occupations, especially as they were better educated than the preceding generation. By the 1970s, revenue from potash, petroleum and uranium accounted for almost 30 per cent of Saskatchewan’s economy while agriculture accounted for under 40 per cent, a decline of 10 per cent in a decade.⁹⁰ A number of factors, such as expansion of the chemical industry with new herbicides, insecticides and fertilizers and the vagaries of international markets and government policies regulating wheat sales and beef production, accelerated change.⁹¹

The family farm, handed down from father to son usually, was considered a sign of success and evidence of continuity. After World War II sophisticated technology, specialization, international competition, credit policies and government subsidization resulted in corporate farms becoming a more successful approach. Agribusiness and diversification became the earmark of survival and success. Alphonse Jaenen and family in Fairlight, Saskatchewan, exemplified this new approach to agriculture – not only diversity of traditional and experimental crops but also diversity of enterprises that initially included an apiary and ceramics department. Through collective planning and specialized enterprises that included each of the four sons and their families, the business encompassed production of beef, poultry, and sheep and the operation of a machine shop and seed mill. A CBC program highlighted this example of diversification and consolidation in the context of rural depopulation.⁹² The Jaenen corporate farm also illustrates that with Moosomin as a service centre the quality of life and the strength of social ties, long ascribed to rural and village life, have not been destroyed completely. Rural life was no longer synonymous with traditional ways of doing things.



image not available

*View of the Belgian Horse Ranch, Springbank, AB, 1920s. (Glenbow NA-3350)
Belgians viewed ranching as an elitist occupation.*

image not available

*Dygart's Percheron and Belgian horses, Edmonton, AB, 1914. (Glenbow NC-6-4237)
Imported Belgian horses were prized for farming and urban delivery
throughout the Western provinces.*

