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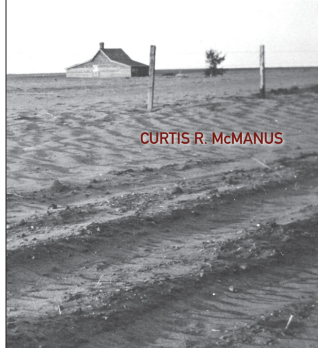
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Happyland

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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The Descent

Tragedy: (noun) an event causing great suffering, destruction and distress. From the Greek *Tragoidia*.

Folly: (noun) foolishness; a foolish act or idea. From the Old French *folie*, ‘madness.’

Mad[ness]: (noun) mentally ill; extremely foolish or ill-advised; showing impulsiveness, confusion or frenzy. From Old English. – *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Between 1914 and 1937, an estimated 70,000 men, women, and children abandoned their farms, homesteads, and communities and fled from the southern and western plains of Saskatchewan. They took trains up north, they loaded their wagons and headed east, and, if they had a car, they hitched it to their horses (thus creating a “Bennett buggy”) and began the long trek into the green valleys of British Columbia where, just as often, they were “sent back to the dried out areas” as happened in the 1930s. Occasionally, the settlers simply “walked out,” leaving behind whatever they couldn’t carry on their backs – this happened repeatedly in the Mantario district east of Kindersley during the 1920s.

Hundreds of millions of dollars were spent on food, clothing, and relief aid during these years. Tens of thousands of men were sent to work on hard labour road gangs. Millions of acres of land were left to rot and blow into

sand. One-room school houses were temporarily shut down and then, in disbelieving exasperation, torn down because there were no more children left. Homes were abandoned. Towns like Hatton first burned and then atrophied. Lives were put on hold; lives were ruined.

In the early years of the crisis, the Saskatchewan government insisted that there was not a problem and even if there was a problem then helping the settlers get out of the south country was certainly not the answer. This was especially true during the 1920s: while Alberta evacuated every south plains settler it could possibly get its hands on in one of the largest government-directed evacuation programs in Canadian history, long-standing and influential members of the Saskatchewan government preferred to chastise settlers for creating their own problems and thus refused to help, hence the observation of one settler in 1923 that he had seen many settlers “walking out” of the drylands.

Such is the raw material of the history of the south and west plains during the dry years.

The single most prominent theme in this “unholy mess,” as historian James Gray termed it, is the capitulation of hope. Ultimately, hope is what the dry years are about. If there was hope in those years, even a thin and slender variant of hope, the people of Hatton, to say nothing of the tens of thousands of others who fled, would have stayed. If there was any reason at all to think that they could make a go of it, they would have remained. If there was hope, then 70,000 people would not have abandoned their home and friends and family and communities between 1914 and 1937. But they didn’t stay because there was no hope. It is not economics, it is not politics, and it is not obscure impersonal historical forces: it is “hope” and its degenerative twin “hopelessness” that are the chief engines of the history of the south and west Saskatchewan plains between 1914 and 1937. Between these years, drought struck at the south plains with punctuated though repeated ferocity. In between the droughts, a fire would ravage a community to keep things moving along.

Drought is qualitatively different from fire in a number of ways, and it is instructive to compare the two. Generally speaking, the wounds that drought inflicts are affective or spiritual, whereas the wounds inflicted by fire are usually and predominantly physical. And while fire destroys in minutes, drought lingers and it suffocates, and only gradually over time, over years, does it extract its due. When thoughtfully considered, land abandonment is the physical manifestation of the wounds that drought inflicts on the human spirit.

Fire can achieve in an hour what it would take drought years to achieve. Fire destroys instantly and thus forces people to make immediate choices. During a drought, though, these choices can be deferred. In a drought, there is always the hope that the next year will be better; there is always the hope that it can't possibly get worse. This is the great deception of drought. Fire does not contain deception. Many Hatton residents did not stick around to rebuild the town after the fire in 1921. They fled. In the four years between 1917 and 1921, corrosive drought had eaten away at hope; the fire merely incinerated the little that remained.

Both fire and drought leave behind physical wreckage, too. Fire leaves ugly scars and burned-out buildings. Drought, by contrast, leaves forlorn detritus of a less obvious, less brutal nature. Much of the land south of Mankota, for example, has been turned back to prairie, but on that prairie one can still see rock piles sitting silently, overgrown with weeds. These are not just rock piles, though, but museums of a sort. They are monuments: to futility it is true, but monuments nonetheless. These rock piles represent the efforts of a settler who had diligently cleared his land of stones in order to farm it. Oftentimes in those early pioneer days the settler did this with little more than a pickaxe and a crowbar. When the rocks were cleared, the settler then set about farming his land until all attempts at doing so proved futile. Futility and hopelessness on the south and west plains of Saskatchewan were achieved after five years, or quite often ten. In some cases, it took many men fifteen or even twenty years to arrive at the end point. This astonishing persistence was predicated on the relentless hope that it could not possibly get worse. But it always did. When the settler recognized the futility of his situation, he took his family and fled, and he did so entirely unaware that the rock pile he left behind was a monument, a lasting and permanent testament to one of the grossest policy miscalculations in Canadian history.

The man responsible for that gross and ultimately inhuman policy error was Mr. Frank Oliver, the Minister of Interior from 1905 to 1911. If there is anything at all to the Great Man Theory of History (and "Great Man" here does not necessarily mean "good man") and the idea that history can be driven forward through the exertions of one individual, then Mr. Oliver provides us with a fine example. It was his 1908 amendment to the Dominion Lands Act that repudiated almost forty years of land use policy for the south plains of Saskatchewan, resulted in the settlement of the drylands, and set the stage for the most agonizing and frustrating period of the lives of thousands upon thousands of men, women, and children.

From the 1870s until 1908, the south plains were administered largely as a cattle-ranching preserve. Swift Current, Maple Creek, and, further east, Moose Jaw served as the dryland's three principal communities in 1908. The rest of the area from the American border up to an east-west line at North Battleford, and from the Alberta border east to Moose Jaw remained, for the most part, empty. Prior to opening the region for settlement, it was observed that outside these communities, Maple Creek and Swift Current especially, the infrastructure of the entire region consisted of "a railway and two roads."¹

This ghastly emptiness was not an accident but was instead the calculated result of the Dominion government's land use policy. Oliver's predecessor in the Department of Interior, Mr. Clifford Sifton, and before him men like lands manager Mr. William Pearce, ensured that the cattle rancher would be favoured with profitable and agreeable grazing leases at the expense of settlement because the region was deemed unfit for agriculture.² The simple but well-founded belief that the area was excessively dry formed the basis for assumptions around which land use policy for the drylands was structured from the mid-1870s to 1908: the rancher was in and the settler was out. Over the longer term, it was thought that settlers would eventually be allowed in, but this settlement would occur slowly and gradually and only after better agricultural practices had developed and advances like irrigation introduced.³

This gradualist approach can be seen in the Conservative government's late-nineteenth-century legislation concerning ranch land on the south plains. In 1886, for example, the "no-settlement" clause was dropped from all newly issued grazing leases and this allowed for small-scale settlement on small patches of land here and there.⁴ In 1892, in a further move that had the potential to allow for limited settlement, the Conservatives announced that all the old "closed" grazing leases would be cancelled in four years, though ranchers were given the option of purchasing these leases for \$1.25 per acre to keep them closed to settlers.⁵ These policies reflect a drive toward a comfortable middle ground in which the government protected the lands used for cattle, while at the same time conceding to demands for land by allowing for and gently encouraging small-scale experimental settlements in the area. This gradualist approach, however, did not mean that the region was open for settlement. For all practical purposes, the south-country remained closed and this was the Dominion government's policy regarding the south plains all the way down to 1908. There was never any doubt that the land was best left to the rancher.⁶ Frank Oliver, though, had other ideas.

Mr. Oliver was the very antithesis of his predecessor, Clifford Sifton. Oliver became Interior Minister upon Mr. Sifton's resignation in 1905 and Oliver had zero-tolerance for the latter's practice of courting and mollycoddling the cattle rancher. Historian Pierre Berton has crafted a revealing portrait of the two men: Sifton was "an Ottawa sophisticate," where Oliver was "cadaverous [and] rough-hewn." Sifton was a "pillar of the Ottawa Hunt," while Oliver, by bland and colourless contrast, was the "President of the Edmonton Bicycle Club." Sifton was emotionally conservative where Oliver was "explosive."⁷ But Oliver also possessed a unique distinction that Sifton did not have: according to the editors of the always-abrasive *Calgary Herald*, Oliver's newspaper, the *Edmonton Bulletin*, was "the meanest paper published by the meanest man in Canada."⁸ It was the meanest man in Canada to whom was given responsibility over the Dominion government's land use policy in western Canada. Fitting, then, that the results should have been so tragic.

Oliver had long believed in settler's rights. "Unrestricted settlement" was one of the messages that blared forth from the pages of the *Edmonton Bulletin*. But underneath that sentiment lay a rattlesnake's nest of thoughts and assumptions about farmers, ranchers, and cattlemen, and it was out of this turgid intellectual swamp that the 1908 amendment to the Dominion Lands Act developed.

Simply put, Mr. Oliver did not like cattlemen. This dislike (though perhaps distaste is a better word) was mostly political not personal. The way Oliver saw it, ranchers were "a landed and reactionary establishment" with too-strong ties to the Conservative party and in many ways Oliver's ideas were actually more in step with the mood of the country at that time.⁹ Settlers had long been viewed as "the emblem of democracy and progress" – they were the underdog battling the wealthy cattle baron.¹⁰ These halcyon ideas conform nicely to the even-broader body of thought current in North America at that time that cleaved to the idea that the Yeoman Farmer somehow embodied man's essential goodness. This highly unsound body of ideas about the intrinsic dignity and goodness of the farmer specifically and of agriculture generally (remnants of which are still apparent in public discourse today) was a creature of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Jeffersonian America.¹¹ And in Canada, Oliver adopted, or rather co-opted, these dreamy ideals for his own purposes.

Oliver supported settler's rights for political reasons, but he justified and rationalized that support using this mystique that was attached to the farmer, that noble and honest tiller of the soil. In Oliver's hands, these

ideals were a political expedient that he wielded in large part because of his political antipathy toward cattlemen. Oliver's delicate, lifelong liberal sensibilities were no doubt offended by the close, amicable ties shared between the ranchers and the Conservative party.¹² Historian Lewis G. Thomas explains that it was not the ranchers but the settlers who "appealed to a morality that was much more in step with the buoyant enthusiasm of nation building."¹³ Oliver entered the Dominion Lands office in 1905 soaked through with this intellectual baggage.

When Oliver arrived at his new office in Ottawa, he faced the prospect that very soon, there would be very little land left to settle, and the fear was that prospective immigrants would settle elsewhere if new lands were not made available ("elsewhere" should be read as "the United States").¹⁴ Lands boss Clifford Sifton had succeeded beyond all expectations in settling those parts of Saskatchewan that it was deemed appropriate to settle between 1896 and 1905. Thousands of immigrants had responded to the Dominion government's efforts to attract people. These were the years of Mr. Sifton's famous "settlers in sheepskin coats." But Oliver had neither the temperament nor the inclination to be upstaged or to quietly exit the pages of history, and so he began seeking out new lands for development in addition to his yet unspoken plots and schemes to settle the south plains.

The more sensible of these extra-curricular efforts at finding more land came in 1907, when Oliver dispatched adventurer Frank Crean to the north country of Saskatchewan and Alberta. Crean, a terrible alcoholic, was sent to scout for additional agricultural land north of the North Saskatchewan River. While his efforts ultimately were successful, and indeed many luckless burned-out settlers would flee to these lands in the 1930s, Crean's ventures in the north were remarkable for another reason unrelated to south plains settlement: he was the last man in a long and distinguished line of agricultural explorers who had cleaved, grunted, hacked, and sweated their way through the wild and unsettled parts of Canada (British North America as it was called back then). Crean can be readily and easily included amongst those legendary figures of the Canadian west – men like the dashing Captain John Palliser and the adventurer Henry Youle Hind.

Despite the good sense shown by scouting for agriculture lands further north, it should not come as a surprise that a man like Oliver had less sensible ideas about where he could find more land. In 1907, he began taking back reserve lands granted to Indians. Oliver bought or removed from Indian reserves thousands of acres of land, making already small reservations smaller and their people less inclined to pursue an agricultural

existence.¹⁵ These land surrenders were not insignificant. The Cowessess and Kahkewistahaw bands in Saskatchewan, for example, gave up 53,985 acres of land under the land surrender policy of Oliver who, unfortunately one imagines, was also the superintendent of Indian Affairs.¹⁶ This particular land surrender amounted to 337 quarter sections of land. Reserve lands, he argued, retarded settlement because Indians “make no practical use” of the land and thus it should be taken away, settled, and farmed.¹⁷ Fittingly, Oliver even flirted with the idea of settling the lands without the consent of the reserve population.¹⁸

Despite these efforts to locate new arable lands and take back lands already committed to Indians, Oliver’s monomaniac mind remained focused on the vast expanses of the south plains. For Oliver it was frustratingly obvious: the land was flat, barren, and clean and according to the logic of the day *therefore* suitable for agriculture. He ignored the reasons why it had remained empty for so long and instead concentrated his mind on the second great phase of Canadian settlement.

It is often said that one man’s tragedy can be another man’s blessing. This is exactly what happened during the winter of 1906–07 – a tragedy for the cattlemen turned into opportunity for Mr. Oliver. Of course later, that opportunity would morph into an even greater tragedy than that which had given birth to the opportunity in the first place: fate on the south and west plains operates, much like the weather, in unforgivingly cruel and ironic cycles.

The brutal winter of 1906/07 wiped out south plains cattle herds almost down to the last cow. The winter and its death toll are legendary in Saskatchewan. Historian Barry Potyondi suggests that there were some 40,000–50,000 head of cattle in the south-west that died over the course of that winter.¹⁹ Ferocious blizzards and terrible snowfalls lasted long into March of that year. When the weather finally cleared, historian Bill Waiser notes, “the dead were everywhere, bloated and rotting in small groups.”²⁰ Famed Saskatchewan-raised novelist Wallace Stegner, who grew up in the Cypress Hills, writes that the winter was nothing but “unrelieved hardship, failure, death, and gloom.”²¹

In southeast Alberta, the winter decimated herds with equal facility. Mr. Gene Johnson recalls one rancher who started the winter with 200 head and entered the spring with seven. The P.K. Ranch started the winter with 3,500, and ended with 300. There were ranchers who survived but they were very few. Mr. Johnson tells the story of H.G. “Happy Jack” Jackson.²² “Happy Jack” was born in Georgia, wandered Kansas, rode through Oklahoma, and

sweated out Texas before finally settling down in Mexico where he shot snakes with his .45 calibre pistol and brought down majestic hawks with his shotgun: “his stories were legion about his part in the Texas sheep-cattle wars.”

Happy Jack came up to the Alberta drylands in 1903, but when the devastating winter hit, Mr. Johnson records, Happy Jack “had the skills to get nearly all their cattle through [that] fierce and cruel” winter. The tag “Happy Jack” by the way was a bit of an ironic misnomer because apparently Happy Jack rarely laughed.

For all of that winter’s misery, the practical result was that it cleared the drylands of the cattle rancher in a way that legislation could never do. Thousands upon thousands of cows froze and starved to death (“a liquidation,” as Waiser calls it) and that had one single and important effect: it emptied the south plains of the cattlemen. Many of these ranchers sold their leases and some lit out for the hard-scrabble dirt of south Texas, leaving the plains behind for some other luckless soul.

The killing winter of 1906–07 shares many important similarities with the legendary drought of 1937, which we shall cover in due course. Both events are conceptually important because of their parallel similarities: in the same way that the winter decimated cattle herds and thus emptied a great deal of southern Saskatchewan of both people and cattle, the drought of 1937 decimated the crops of Saskatchewan and also resulted in the emptying of a good portion of the south plains (1937 featured the highest levels of land abandonment in the dry years).

In addition, each disaster acts as a bookend for the catastrophic years of drought and land abandonment: settlement started in the year following the devastating winter, while the Dirty Thirties ended in the year following one of the worst droughts on record up to that point. But in 1908, the future was, as the future always is, gently bursting with hope and promise. The settler was eagerly awaiting his chance to farm, Oliver was eagerly awaiting the opportunity to give the settler his chance, and the south and west plains were eager for the chance to teach the settler something about unrelieved hardship, failure, and gloom.

In 1908, Mr. Oliver amended the Dominion Lands Act and thus opened to settlement the entire tract of land between Moose Jaw and Calgary south of North Battleford. This legislation enabled settlers to file on 160 acres of land after paying a small ten-dollar fee. After satisfying the settlement obligations, which included residence on the land for six months in each of six years, settlers could then “pre-empt” or have first-right-of-purchase on

an adjoining or nearby quarter-section to be sold for three dollars per acre: this was the famous “free homestead.” Settlers were also obliged to construct a house of not less than \$300 assessed value. Thus in one fell swoop, what Oliver called “the retardation” of Canada was ended, all lands would be filled, and a source of money would be created that would provide the funds necessary to construct a railway to port at Hudson Bay.²³ Oliver solved a lot of problems with the amendment. He created just as many.

Oliver was not insensible to the potential problems that settlers faced in farming the drylands of the south plains, but he quite reasonably claimed that his amendment took account of those dangers. Through the pre-emption provision, the amendment essentially expanded the usual size of homesteads from 160 acres to 320 acres. Oliver offered the fatuous explanation that “if a man can only farm one half of his land each year (the other half laying fallow, ‘collecting moisture’ as the argument went) then he must have twice as much land.”²⁴ In 1920, though, just twelve years after Oliver made these statements, Saskatchewan’s Better Farming Commission pointed out that repeated crop failures proved beyond doubt that a half-section farm in the arid districts was a useless, hopeless, ridiculous proposition. Indeed, long before Oliver amended the act, settlers in Nebraska had already discovered the pitfalls of half-section farms. Owing to gross homestead failure rates, the Kincaid Act of 1904 enlarged homesteads to 640 acres of land.²⁵

Oliver justified his optimism (which, it should be pointed out, wasn’t in fact ‘optimism’ but instead more of a blind, ill-informed belief) in the strength of the 320-acre farm by pointing to the famed dry land farming scientists. According to these experts, “inflated like blimps with their own self-importance” as historian David Jones gently observes, the science of farming would render dryness irrelevant.²⁶ Such faith was quite misguided and, quips Dr. Jones, “somewhere deep in the Universe, the blaring of these blowhards of the settlement era still reverberate[s].”²⁷ Chief amongst these “false prophets” of the new faith was Angus MacKay, the superintendent of the Dominion’s first western experimental farm at Indian Head.

MacKay explained, reasonably enough, that the purpose of summer-fallow was “to store up moisture against a possible dry season.”²⁸ Settlers were encouraged to plough deep and conduct mid-season surface tillage. This method, according to MacKay’s contemporary W.R. Motherwell, would “put the necessary non-conducting soil mulch on the top to ... prevent loss of soil moisture by evaporation.”²⁹ If this approach was diligently followed, Motherwell explained, the growth of “at least two successive crops is secured even though drought should occur.” He did not mention what would happen

if ten years of drought should occur, or twenty years of drought spread out over twenty-five years.

Motherwell later amplified his point. During the height of the drought in 1921 he argued (whilst “in a snit” as Dr. Jones notes), that agricultural success “is chiefly, if not entirely, due to straight good or bad farming.”³⁰ This observation was wildly wrong on so many different levels that it boggles the mind, but the settlers would have to survive the terrific beatings administered by decades of drought before the wrongness of it could be demonstrably proven so in the 1930s.

Both Motherwell and MacKay and many others at that time sincerely believed that the science of farming could overcome drought. These beliefs even trickled down and poisoned and befogged the minds of the staff of Saskatchewan’s Department of Agriculture. Saskatchewan’s Deputy Agriculture Minister A.F. Mantle, for example, could scarcely contain himself in 1912 when he extolled the virtues of summer-fallow: “the result is a guarantee for the next season against everything but hail and frost. What progress it reveals!”³¹

In the spirit of fairness, though, it must be noted that both McKay and Motherwell did in fact recognize that summer-fallow created problems of its own. Summer-fallow, MacKay noted, had two distinct disadvantages: it contributed to soil drift and it caused the “partial exhaustion” of the soil.³² Motherwell too admitted that summer-fallow “restores nothing to the soil.”³³ While these not insubstantial side-effects were duly noted, both men went on to vaguely suggest that somehow these deficiencies could be easily overcome. MacKay suggested that when soil drifting is corrected (and he did not say how this would be achieved), soil exhaustion “will disappear.”³⁴ This unfortunate and pronounced tendency toward wishful thinking was a unique characteristic of that era in Saskatchewan and it even affected our province’s first premier. Mr. Walter Scott believed that “honest labor could overcome even poor soil and weather conditions.”³⁵

Backstopped, then, by either an unrealistic optimism or misplaced faith in science, anxious to end the political power of the ranchers and unable or unwilling to admit that there was no good land left to settle, Oliver amended the Dominion Lands Act and threw the drylands open to settlement on 1 September 1908.³⁶ That Oliver may have been overstepping his bounds by single-handedly orchestrating the amendment to the Dominion Lands Act was not lost on other members of the House of Commons. Running as an undercurrent beneath the debates on the amendment itself was a secondary antagonism over the concentration of land-policy power in

Oliver's hands. Qu'Appelle Member of Parliament R.S. Lake called Oliver an "absentee landlord [with] practically despotic powers" who had more power than any constitutional monarch.³⁷ Future Interior Minister W.J. Roche agreed. Roche called it "dangerous" to vest in one portfolio power over immigration policy and blanket administration of public lands that included swamp lands, timber rights, grazing rights, pre-emption prices, and mineral control.³⁸

Oliver, however, remained quiet during this energetic discussion and rarely spoke to the charges of despotic power though he no doubt gritted his teeth as he endured the final onslaught launched by excitable North York M.P. George Foster. Foster called Oliver a "despot" and argued that Oliver's power contained within it the seeds for "infinite devilry." He drew what in 1908 was the fairly accurate conclusion that Oliver was "the boss of all of us."³⁹ Flattering though Foster's assertion may have been to Mr. Oliver's no doubt substantial ego, this frontal assault on his power did little to move the man who had long believed in "unrestricted settlement." He ended debate on the amendment by boldly declaring that "we are not closing anything to settlement."⁴⁰ And so it was.

Fittingly, just as the ink on the amendment was drying in September, drought was laying waste to the crop of 1908 in the south and west plains. It seems that the small number of farmers who had settled the region had tried but failed to grow a crop that year. A provincial spokesman observed that the south and west areas of the province showed significantly smaller yields than the eastern and central regions: settlers in the Kindersley area grew ten bushels per acre, while settlers down Swift Current way grew an average of nine.⁴¹ The provincial average approached twenty bushels per acre. "Doubtless" the official suggested with beneficent tolerance, "there was not stored in the soil sufficient moisture to withstand the hot winds."⁴² He added that "proper cultivation methods" would have no doubt increased yields.⁴³ In Alberta, of seventeen crop districts, only the Medicine Hat region in the south-east fell below fifteen bushels per acre. The Dominion government spent just under \$1 million providing seed relief to the newly arrived settlers.⁴⁴

The otherwise reasonable and sensible Interior Deputy Minister W.W. Cory displayed an uncharacteristic streak of irrationalism when he claimed that the failure was "momentary" and that the \$800,000 worth of seed aid distributed by the department that year would prove the exception not the rule. Like so many others after him, Mr. Cory succumbed to the easy temptations of blind optimism and wishful thinking when he claimed that

the crop failure “demonstrated beyond doubt that if the expectations of one season are not realized, those of the next year may be safely relied upon.”⁴⁵ Logic, too, suffers rigorous abuse during the dry years.

Despite the ominous start to a plan that undid almost forty years of land policy, the effects of the amendment were immediate and actually quite breathtaking. In some regions, like the Alsask district, as Mr. J.R. “Bud” Thompson observes, “virtually every quarter or half section was taken up and homestead shacks sprouted like grain on the prairies.”⁴⁶ Thousands of people converged on the region between Moose Jaw and Calgary to try their luck in the Last Great Land Rush of Modern Times. These were people who, according to the provinces chief statistician, had heretofore been only able to “look with longing eyes” at the opportunity passing them by in this soft gentle Eden of the south plains.⁴⁷ This poetic ejaculation was delivered by transplanted Prince Edward Islander Francis Hedley Auld, a logician who got his start in the Department of Agriculture’s statistics branch. Mr. Auld would later become Deputy Minister of Agriculture and his thoughts and policy direction between 1914 and 1937 run like a terrible jagged scar across the entire period.

The Dominion Lands offices were not prepared for the massive onrush of humanity that accompanied the amendment. The Department of Interior had only one land office in the south at Moose Jaw with which to handle the thousands of homestead applications that poured in during the second half of 1908. The harried and overworked James Rutherford claimed that 1908 was “the most successful ever experienced” for homestead applications and he added that the “greatest stampede for land” showed no signs of slowing.⁴⁸ Of the 21,154 homestead entries filed in Saskatchewan in 1908, Rutherford processed 8,710. By comparison, the next busiest land office at North Battleford processed just 3,385. The remainder were scattered throughout the province.

In all of Alberta, only 13,771 homestead applications were filed in 1908, though the Medicine Hat land office was conspicuously busy. Land agent J. W. Martin noted that in the month of September alone, “more quarter sections were disposed of than in any month since the land throughout the west became available for settlement,” which, in other words, meant since the nineteenth century.⁴⁹

American farmers made up the largest single group of settlers homesteading in the drylands in the early years after 1908.⁵⁰ It seems, unlike Europeans who likely didn’t have a clue what to make of a country with no trees or hills or water or lakes, Americans preferred (or had long since

adjusted themselves to accepting) the vast, empty stretches of open prairie.⁵¹ During 1909, 41,568 people filed a homestead claim in the pre-emption area.⁵² Of this number, 13,566 were American, mostly from the states that bordered or were near to the international boundary itself. They came from the Dakotas, Minnesota, and Nebraska. The tiny southern community of Mankota in southern Saskatchewan, whose story will feature in this work quite heavily, received many of its settlers from Manitoba and the Dakotas, hence Mankota. There were even six people from Alabama who made the trek to the drylands as did one lonely and adventurous self-flagellating puritan soul from Delaware.⁵³

The high rate of American emigration was rooted, in part, by the vast and strange differences between the west's of Canada and the United States. Alongside the fact that lands in the American west had all been settled, it seems many thousands of Americans in the middle-western states existed in a state of apparently permanent tenant farming and were unable to own their own land.⁵⁴ Land had been purchased by companies and combines and no room had been left for the individual farmer. But whatever the circumstances, Interior Deputy Minister W.W. Cory was enthusiastic with the on-rush of Yankees who, he felt, were a "highly desirable class of people [that] require no instruction."⁵⁵

The stream of Americans into the drylands continued at a vigorous pace in those early years and Saskatchewan played host to most. Of the 39,000 settlers who filed a homestead claim in 1911, 10,978 were from America (though none came from Alabama or Delaware that year).⁵⁶ And of those 39,000, 20,484 were absorbed into Saskatchewan compared to 15,184 for Alberta.⁵⁷ Saskatchewan, not Alberta, was once the destination of choice for those coming to the western plains. The young province absorbed the majority of the new arrivals in each year: 17,556 in 1912 and 14,504 in 1913, compared to Alberta's 12,942 and 12,208 in the same years respectively.⁵⁸

Mr. Carl Anderson was one of those Americans who came up to the drylands of Alberta in 1910. The government-issue literature encouraging settlement had "persuaded him to come and see what it was all about" and so he settled in the Alderson district south of Medicine Hat. Perhaps he should have stayed in Minnesota. Paraphrasing an already indelicate observation, Mr. Anderson noted that by 1940, all the original settlers in the district had fled or were dead.

At any rate, Mr. Anderson filed on his claim in Medicine Hat and he recalls the heady, exuberant excitement of those years: "there were people from all walks of life and from almost every country in Europe clamoring

to get free homesteads.”⁵⁹ It was amidst this astonishing level of growth telescoped into a few years that Deputy Cory had the pleasure to report by 1912 that all across the south and west plains, “contentment, optimism and progress prevail.”⁶⁰

The very geography of Saskatchewan changed upon being swamped by these incoming thousands. Prior to the introduction of the amendment to the Dominion Lands Act in 1907, there were only 1,677 farms in south-west and west-central Saskatchewan and just 106,900 acres of land were under cultivation.⁶¹ In 1908, the number of farms exploded to 5,294 with 516,577 acres under cultivation.⁶² The year after that saw 5,860 farms and 503,172 acres under cultivation.⁶³ The success of the amendment was immediately, deceptively clear.

Mr. Tom Simpson came out west from Ontario in 1910 and he was one of the first arrivals in the Aneroid district in the southwest and he must have felt that he had landed on the far side of the moon. Mr. Simpson was one of thousands of people who came out west from back east because Saskatchewan, unlike Ontario, was one of the few places in the country that had plenty of available land. Mr. Simpson was in fact one of the first men on the ground in the south. He distinctly recalls that “only about three shacks could be seen for many miles in any direction and not ten acres of land had been broken.”⁶⁴

By most measures, Aneroid even today is still pretty isolated, far removed from the rest of the province. The isolation faced by Mr. Simpson, then, was of another magnitude altogether, one that is difficult to fathom. Isolation and loneliness were the constant companions of the early settlers and this spiritual challenge is one that is easy to forget because it is affective or emotional rather than physical – but it was everywhere and it was real. It was “especially true” of the early pioneers, suggests historian Fred Wilkes, that homesickness was common and that a heavy sense of loneliness “harassed” settlers in the early years.⁶⁵ Thus it was that work became the prairie cure-all for affective disorders and spiritual distempers.

While each settler wrestled in his or her own way with the intense isolation and loneliness that necessarily came with breaking new land in a remote area of a barren, treeless country, they gallantly held those feelings at bay with work and this included the necessary business of building a home. “Bud” Thompson has been around Alsask for decades and he recalls talking with the old timers about the early settlement years. Mr. Thompson recalls the tale of one man who arrived in the Alsask district from Ontario shortly after 1908 and found, like Mr. Simpson did, “a few tents” and not much else.

The man arrived in early spring and so felt reasonably safe enough to sleep under his wagon – only to wake up shivering in six inches of fresh snow.⁶⁶ The patriarch of the Mutter clan experienced something similar. Arriving in Winnipeg from Odessa, Ukraine, in 1905 (and on the west plains shortly thereafter), Gustav Mutter, whose family had owned a substantial brickworks factory in addition to land in the old country, settled down for the pioneer life near Hatton. His grandson, Mr. Ralph Mutter, recalls his grandfather “sleeping out in the pasture to be on the land” to demonstrate that the land was rightfully his.⁶⁷ Housing, then, was usually quite high on the priority list. The fabled ‘sod-house’ of prairie legend was the first choice for many pioneers because it was free, all the materials were right at hand, and by all accounts they were very warm and accommodating.

Mr. Leonard Gackle remembers that there were certain tricks, subtleties and nuances to building a Soddy as they were known not without affection. The Gackles were Germans who had fled Russia in 1911. Andrew’s second oldest son David had served, as the law required, in the army of Czar Nicolas II for three years. This was an “unbelievably bad” experience. Mr. Gackle “wish[ed] to spare his third son the anguish of such an experience” and so the family fled to Canada and freedom and they quickly became expert at making something out of nothing.

Leonard recalls that if the sod “wasn’t right” it would soon crumble and so one had to take care to choose sod that was “well-rooted.”⁶⁸ This well-rooted sod would be then “cut about three to four inches thick in depth” and then “built up like bricks.” It would then be patched with mud, windows carved out, and a doorway put in. They were, Mr. Gackle recalls, “fantastically warm.”⁶⁹

Sod was the material of choice but there were other related materials at hand. Mr. Charles Geller’s parents, Martin and Kristina, came from “Bocowina,” a region in the Northwest Carpathians, which at that time belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire but these days is jointly controlled by Ukraine and Romania. The Gellers arrived to freedom in 1908 and Charles well remembers the house: “[It was] a mud house with a sod roof. In our mud house we just had a mud floor and every Saturday, Mother would coat it with new mud.”⁷⁰ Martin the patriarch was also something of a neighbourhood barber and would occasionally cut hair in the mud house and this, Charles ruefully recalls, “did not do much for Mother’s clean mud floor.”

The Holbrooks of England opted for a hybrid soddy-wood shack. Howard and Ada arrived in 1909 and built their first home out of wood

and sod and they lived in this house for ten years.⁷¹ One must assume that their spirits grew tired of living in wood-earthen structures because they moved to a new location in 1919 “and the house there was built from cement.” Soddies were usually only temporary accommodation, though temporary could often mean between five and ten years. The Gackles, for example, lived in theirs for several years, at which time they got rid of it without ceremony by “dragg[ing] it into a hole in the field.” It was replaced by a “wooden structure” that had been cannibalized from the vanishing community of Hatton.

After the business of building a home was done, the even harder work of making a living became the primary concern. One blanches at the awesome challenges faced and incredible fortitude shown by some of the early pioneers. Their days, it seems, were made up of a scarcely credible routine of hard labour followed by work. Mr. Henry Marks, for example, had no money and no equipment when he arrived from Germany, but he had to clear his land somehow, and so he chose the only option which was available: he dug stones and cleared his land with a pickaxe and a crowbar. He did this until he could afford to buy oxen and a plough and when he finally got that plough, he ploughed in the morning, picked stones in the afternoon, and then ploughed again in the evening.⁷²

The lives lived by the pioneers can sometimes strain the limits of what many people today think is possible of one individual. Mr. Hans Mattson left his home and family in Denmark, travelled half way around the world and settled in the Richmond district near Hatton. He built and lived in a sod house for years, cleared rocks, ploughed land, worked two off-farm jobs so he could buy horses and machinery, enlisted in the Army in 1916 and was wounded twice in the Great War before being honourably discharged. In 1918, he lay down his sword, returned the Richmond district and once again picked up his plough and carried on with farming. He was just in time for almost two unbroken decades of drought.⁷³ It was a hard life, lived by men and women whose capacity seems to have always been stretched to the breaking point or somewhere very close to it. When Mr. Henry Mark’s wife passed away, for example, her family tenderly wrote that “she finally got the long rest for which she so ardently prayed.”⁷⁴

But it would be a mistake to paint things as merely grim for those who arrived on the south plains in the early years. Annie Pain and Alf Corbin’s father George Corbin arrived with his children in 1905 and they all remember good times in those early years. The school house (also built of sod) was the site of literary societies, debates, spelling bees, match-box

socials, music and singing: Alf recalls that “people came from miles around to attend these functions.”⁷⁵

The number of bachelors and single men who attended these events was likely quite high because, in those early days, there was a frustrating absence of women on the frontier. One night, a newly arrived settler and his family saw fifteen buggies frantically wheeling into their yard, all driven by grimy, sod-busting men lonely and desperate for female company and eager for a date with the settler’s daughter. The father was aghast, the mother bemused, the daughter likely hidden in the cellar. All bottled-up and lacking any and all outlets for their natural and urgent desires for female company, it is not surprising then that the story of fifteen hard-working ham-fisted settlers seeking the companionship of one woman does not have a sweet and happy ending: the old-timer recalling this story remembers that “there were broken harnesses, broken wheels, and black eyes.”⁷⁶

Single sod-busting men, by the way, were at a distinct disadvantage where matters of sex were concerned when compared to their urban counterparts. Men of the cities in the early settlement years had pleasing and convenient access to the copious brothels that had sprung up all across the prairies: houses of ill-repute fairly lined the streets in Regina, Saskatoon, Calgary, and Edmonton. Even little Drumheller had a bawdy house.⁷⁷

In many cases, the men who peopled the early western Canadian cities were young men and these young men were, by and large, labourers who dug ditches, built railroads, constructed buildings, paved streets, and worked with stone: “Here in short,” writes James Gray, “was a male population in the prime of life, glowing with the virility of youth and in the superb physical condition which a steady diet of hard work produced.”⁷⁸ And at the end of a day, when they put their tools down, they would clean up and head straight for Regina’s River Street to “sample the delights awaiting them in their favorite bordellos.” This was a diversion unavailable to the young men of Aneroid. Perhaps the absence of opportunity for sexual release on the frontier accounts, at least in part, for the jaw-dropping ubiquity of sex in rural Saskatchewan during the Dirty Thirties. But before that development occurred, the frontier substitute for sex was broken harnesses, broken wheels, and black eyes.

Mr. Edward Keck’s family came from Russia in 1910 and lived in a wood shack just west of the Sand Hills, and he relishes the memory of the early years: “we skated – minus skates – on Herringer’s slough.” There were Christmas concerts on plank stages with white bed sheets for curtains, there were pine trees with “real candles” and Sports Days in the summer.⁷⁹

Mr. Harry Holbrook fondly remembers the trips to Scobey Montana for supplies, the winter sleigh-rides for groceries and the itinerant peddlers who naturally followed the settlement of western Canada and who brought with them materials for dresses, combs, caps, overalls, and sewing kits.⁸⁰ Mr. Harry Keeble's daughter Ethel recalls her favourite pony "Nigger" and the three days it took to go to town ("one to go, one to shop, and one to return"). Mrs. Gladys Hollopeter was six years old in 1910 when she came up the Big Stick Trail to Richmond. She recalls a Saskatchewan most of us have never experienced, a wild Saskatchewan that can no longer be accessed, which is forever gone. She recalls the absence of people, the barrenness, the tame prairie chickens, the bumpy and rickety buffalo trails, the bleached and dried buffalo bones, the enormous herds of wild antelope that were everywhere.⁸¹ Mr. Ralph Mutter recalls his grandmother reminiscing about this very thing. She said that there was "still the odd buffalo around, and natives coming by for food and water in the early years."⁸² Thus it was that the Mutters, Germans from Odessa, Ukraine, arrived on the dry western plains just in time to witness the final death throes of a Saskatchewan that was lost forever after settlement.

Those were also the days of wild prairie fires that swept across the plains with alarming frequency. Mr. Simpson from Ontario was at first alarmed by these fires but then grew to accept them as a normal part of life just as settlers would learn to adjust in the 1930s to the violent, preternatural dust storms that were a constant companion to life on the south and west plains. Indeed, it seems that life in the drylands seemed to have been largely a matter of constantly adjusting oneself to a bewildering variety of natural disasters (drought, prairie fires, locust invasions, "black blizzards", dried cod fish). At any rate, Mr. Simpson not only adjusted himself to prairie fires but also to the odd and curious sight of singed, partially burned rabbits running past his farm. These smoky, unhappy little rodents were indicators that a fire was nearby and, remembers Mr. Simpson, "it was considered the duty of everyone to go to a prairie fire."⁸³

Thus it was that Saskatchewan and western Canada was settled. People trickled in on wagon, on rail, on foot, or on horseback. They came from all corners of the globe, though principally they came from the United States, Canada, and Europe. But wherever they came from they all shared a common bond: the long, hard at times desperate process of fashioning a life from little more than dirt.

The rush of life onto the drylands created a not-insignificant amount of revenue for the Department of Interior. A total of \$530,589 was generated by

homestead and pre-emption fees in 1908, which helped push total revenues to \$3,200,000, well above the department's previous record of \$2,700,000 in 1906–07. "The net revenue," gushed Interior Deputy Cory, "is the largest in the history of the Department."⁸⁴ It is illuminating, though, to put that figure in the perspective of later events: \$3 million would be spent between 1929 and 1937 sustaining life in the two south central rural municipalities of Mankota and Pinto Creek.

The drylands, however, demonstrated its Janus nature with the crop of 1909. As if to prove William Cory's wishful estimate that "the next year can be safely relied upon," Saskatchewan's arid regions posted the highest yields in the province that year. At twenty-nine bushels per acre, the southwest and west-central areas outperformed Saskatchewan's eight other crop districts, which averaged twenty-two bushels per acre of spring wheat.⁸⁵ Deputy Agriculture Minister A.F. Mantle approved of the "splendid showing" of the dry regions when he noted that "when sufficient moisture is available ... this land can grow crops unsurpassed."⁸⁶

The glowing circumstance of 1909 was similar just a few miles across the border in south-east Alberta, where spring wheat yields reached twenty-three bushels per acre.⁸⁷ Echoing Mantle's and Auld's estimation of the wonders of summer-fallow, Alberta Agriculture Minister George Harcourt, in a delusional fit of over-excited optimism, suggested that since the principles of dry land farming "are so sound and so applicable to all districts ... a strong and persistent effort is being made to change the name."⁸⁸ Indeed.

The rate of settlement onto the south plains rose and fell in proportion to what actually happened on the ground. Of 19,139 homestead applications filed in Saskatchewan's nine Dominion Land's offices in 1909, 9,573 were filed at the Moose Jaw office.⁸⁹ So in two years almost 20,000 homestead entries had been recorded in the drylands. This continued rush of the "Mossback" or "Sodbuster" into the dry lands continued to upset and anger the region's dwindling but dogged cattle ranchers.⁹⁰ Deputy Minister Mantle noted in his annual report for the year that there were a high number of complaints being registered with the department from the ignored but far-seeing ranchers who felt that "a long tried industry" was being forsaken and destroyed "for the sake of a precarious one."⁹¹ 1910 reinforced the cattlemen's point.

In 1910, four Frenchmen arrived in Saskatchewan to take up farming in the Val Marie area. Jean Marie Trotter was from Lac Pelletier and he acted as a guide as he took the four of them over the dried out barren south plains. Mr. Denniel was amongst the group of four Frenchmen and he found this

region in that year “something of a desert.” With charming continental irony, he recalls that the monotony of the land was broken up every now and then “by a gopher standing up on its hind legs.”⁹²

As the four Frenchmen arrived in 1910, the first exodus from the south plains began, though caution must be used in calling it an exodus because those who were leaving had not stayed long enough to establish themselves in any meaningful way. This movement out was perhaps formed in large part by those adventurers and “world-rovers” who flitted in and out of the prairie west’s of both Canada and the United States who would try their hand at farming, throw some seed at the ground, grow a crop or two, make a few bucks, and then move on (“suit-case farmers” as they were called in the American West). But they were still justified in their departure: in 1910, not much of anything was grown on the south and west plains.

Crop district number six, the west-central region, was hardest hit in the failure of 1910. The average yield was seven bushels per acre, while district three in the southwest posted yields of just ten. To provide an idea of the scale of the failure, both federal and provincial levels of government at the end of the 1930s settled on using the five bushel per acre benchmark to determine whether or not a region was a disaster area requiring relief aid. That year the provincial spring wheat average was a respectable twenty bushels per acre.⁹³ But for the south plains, the news was grim: there was an almost inconceivable drop in the amount of actual grain produced in district three from 3,400,000 bushels in 1909 to 170,644 in 1910.⁹⁴

Southeast Alberta suffered a similar fate. Crop district six in that province registered yields on spring wheat of just seven bushels per acre.⁹⁵ And, as in Saskatchewan, there was a quick effort to denounce the poor showing as the result of bad farming. Minister George Harcourt believed the crop failure was caused by “a lack of intelligent methods.”⁹⁶ Mr. Harcourt, in a comic twist on his efforts at removing the word “dry” from “dry land farming” also resisted using the word “drought” opting instead for the much less judgmental “droughty.” Alberta dispatched its publicity commissioner on a damage control tour that year. The excitable and enthusiastic Mr. Charles Hotchkiss arrived in Portal, North Dakota, on a hot summer afternoon because of an apparent “returning exodus” of American settlers.⁹⁷ All who listened to his street-corner bombast were informed that any rumours of drought and failure were just that, rumours, which were “exaggerated and untruthful.”⁹⁸

The perception problems of the Departments of Agriculture in both Alberta and Saskatchewan were shared by Dominion land agents. E.B.R.

Pragnell was the agent at the newly opened land office in Swift Current. Pragnell, too, was unable to correctly see the nature and magnitude of the problem with which the south-west and west-central areas were faced. In words which would have made George “Droughty” Harcourt proud, Pragnell dismissed the 1910 failure as due to “momentary ... excessive dryness.” He also added the hopelessly obvious observation that “if conditions tend to favor the farmer this year, the crop should be abundant.”⁹⁹ Moose Jaw land agent James Rutherford was in step with Pragnell’s estimation of the nature of the problem though he noted that business transacted in 1910 was quite light compared to that first harried year of the rush.¹⁰⁰ But despite the wishful thinking of all levels of government and their agencies, the numbers of people cancelling their homesteads is really the most reliable indicator of how successful south plains settlement was in those early years.

Starting in 1911, the year after the second crop failure in four years, the numbers of settlers in the south plains declined dramatically, in some instances by as much as half and this was complemented by highly worrying levels of homestead cancellations. Moose Jaw land agent G.K. Smith noted that between 1909 and 1910 the number of settlers filing on land in south-west Saskatchewan dropped from 10,921 to 5,503, skidding to 4,087 in 1911. He explained this by saying that “land suitable for farming is fast becoming scarce.”¹⁰¹ Fair enough. But that only tells half the story.

In 1908/09, homestead cancellations at Moose Jaw were at an agreeable figure of roughly 30 per cent, a figure shared by most other land offices.¹⁰² That figure, however, climbed to 60 per cent in 1910 and lodged itself at 80 per cent between 1911 and 1913, again this was a figure *not* shared by other land offices. Of 4,087 homestead applications at Moose Jaw in 1911, for example, 3,419 people registered cancellations. Smith failed to give the cancellation numbers for 1912 but 1913 saw just 2,000 homestead entries next to 1,749 cancellations, or a cancellation rate approaching 90 per cent.¹⁰³ Cancellations demonstrate one vital theme in dry land settlement: the number of settlers pouring into this region was almost always equal to the number of people leaving shortly thereafter.

The Swift Current land office opened for business in 1910. The office did not include any cancellation rates until Frank Forster took control in 1913 when the rate was recorded at almost 80 per cent. Of the 2,039 applications filed that year, 1,468 people filed cancellations.¹⁰⁴ Forster noticed that, despite the seeming bounty of the crop that year, an unusually high number of people left the region. He vaguely explained the exodus as the first “process of elimination” that saw “many undesirables, as well as many desirables

... migrating again.” He minimized the problem when he explained that the cancellations really represented nothing more than settlers “restlessly moving, as they always will,” though he hinted at what was actually happening when he said he respected those who “pulled through.”¹⁰⁵

The situation was similar in the Maple Creek land office, which did not open until 1912. The 2,771 homestead applications received that year were counter-balanced by the 1,696 cancellations filed at the office, which is roughly a cancellation rate of 80 per cent.¹⁰⁶ By comparison, the land office at Humboldt in east-central Saskatchewan saw a cancellation rate of between 25 to 35 per cent in 1910 and 1911. There were 1,762 entries in 1910 alongside just 481 cancellations, and in 1911, of 1,739 entries, just 656 people cancelled their homesteads.¹⁰⁷

The early years after the amendment to the Dominion Lands Act were deceptive, deception of course being one of the characteristics of the south plains. A sturdy and healthy crop might be grown as in 1909, but then there was an inevitable fall back into mediocrity and this was just as frequently followed by a stumble straight into drought and absolute failure: this is exactly what happened in 1914.

1914 was a return to the rule not the exception. Deputy Agriculture Minister A.F. Mantle was forced to concede total crop failure “in those districts that have recently been settled.”¹⁰⁸ In a year that Mantle characterized as “slow and backward,” crops in south and west Saskatchewan averaged between absolute failure of two bushels per acre and the only slightly less worrying partial failure of ten bushels per acre. The other seven crop districts in the province averaged sixteen bushels per acre and above.¹⁰⁹ Of the seventy-four million bushels of wheat harvested that year, just seven million came from the west and south plains, and of that only 857,000 from district three, the area surrounding Swift Current-Maple Creek.¹¹⁰ Mantle reported that “the land in the south-west district was said to be drier than it had been within the memory of the oldest settler.” Crops were ploughed under, creeks in the district dried up. As evidence of the lifeless nature of the region, it was remarked on by many settlers that they didn’t hear birds singing in 1914. There were no birds in the drylands that year – they were all dead.¹¹¹

Chief Statistician F.H. Auld held firm to his faith in the practice of summer-fallowing. He noted that 1914 was “a trying one for many new settlers whose land had not been properly brought under cultivation.”¹¹² But future Big Stick rural municipality councillor Mr. R.L. Carefoot recalls it somewhat differently. He notes that the crops that year started

out beautifully, but because there was no rainfall that year until September “the crop just disappeared.”¹¹³ Jake Bassendowski also remembers the disappearing crop of 1914. Mr. Bassendowski recalls that the wheat crop that year was so short the binder could not make bundles out of it. So, with typical prairie ingenuity, the Bassendowski’s, who were German-speaking Russians like many in their district, removed the bundle carriers, replaced the carrier with a box and when the box was full they would empty it onto the ground. They would later rake the smaller piles into one big pile. It was thus that the Bassendowski’s harvested 800 bushels of wheat on 160 acres or about five bushels per acre.¹¹⁴ Mr. George Murray arrived in the area in 1908 and he recalls “[being] told by the people of the area that the land was no good for farming.”¹¹⁵ 1914 would seem to have supported that argument.

There was some nervous posturing as the drought slowly revealed itself. In the Kindersley district, for example, the local newspaper chose to highlight not the drought but the apparently splendid crop grown by a Mr. J.R. Froom, which, the paper explained in late June of 1914, has “not been bothered by any elements detrimental to the progress of grain.”¹¹⁶ And while there was a “good soaking” of rain in July, it simply wasn’t enough. The crop was an utter failure.

The same situation was evident across the border in south-east Alberta. During the course of the summer, the manager of Ogilvie Milling, Mr. W.A. Black, toured the region and according to the scribes at the *Medicine Hat News*, he “did not consider the situation as encouraging at all.”¹¹⁷ But despite the fact that the heat and dry weather had brought ruin and little else, the scribes insisted that Mr. Black and the company he represented have “faith” in the grain-producing power of the district. For all the salutary and healing effects that faith can have on the spirit, it can’t feed the body, and so in 1914 the provincial governments in both provinces had to take steps to alleviate the problems that faith could not.

In 1914 the province orchestrated various relief programs, a development that would become a mainstay of policy, in fact would *become* policy for the south and west plains until the end of the 1930s. The first line of defence was to dispatch settlers whose crops had failed to road-gangs or threshing crews around the province. The government and the CPR (in an always rare show of generosity) approved a program in which settlers would pay a rate of one cent and they would then be shipped around the province to get to work on these crews.¹¹⁸

It was one of the more shameful elements of the 1914 failure that men lied about their status as failed farmers to get relief work on these crews.

The province realized that there were some men who “misrepresented themselves,” apparently claiming destitution because of the crop failure in order to get work on road gangs. Once this bit of skullduggery was sniffed out, the government withheld the cheques from men “not really in need” and gave the money to a failed settler who had been “unjustly deprived of it.”¹¹⁹ And when the full extent of the crop failure became clear after weeding through faulty relief applications, the province decided to increase the amount it had earlier budgeted to spend on “road construction” from \$500,000 to \$750,000. In total, there were one hundred and fifty hard labour road crews of about twenty-five men each working throughout the south-west and west-central areas of the province pre-figuring the thousands of men sent to work on the road gangs in the 1920s and the tens of thousands of men who would follow in the 1930s.

The Alberta government was doing much the same thing as Saskatchewan. After a spring and summer of news in which hope was splashed on the front pages of the *Medicine Hat News* in the form of positive weather reports (“Heavy rain fell all around the city”; “conditions reported good – summer following [*sic*] will increase yields”¹²⁰), the realities of drought soon became apparent. Prefacing its intention to use burned-out settlers as harvest help, the provincial government indicated that it “did not think it would be necessary to import any labor from the eastern provinces this year” and thus went about dispatching its settlers to regions of the west where there was no drought.¹²¹

Settlers in Alberta received the same kind of reduced fares as those in Saskatchewan. In early August, the *Medicine Hat News* recorded the departure of between sixty and seventy men in a single day.¹²² In addition to the harvest work, there were also plans, as one might expect, for road work. The Public Works Minister and the local MLA took a tour of the city “with the object of undertaking as much work as possible on the roads for the homesteaders.”¹²³

It was always a case in the early years of getting something in return for aid, even if it was only the promise or hope that settlers would be able to do their own heavy lifting in the future. The impulse toward blind and unquestioned charity (“subsidies” as they are called today) was always a little more blunted and stumpy on the south plains in the early years and this reflects a general set of cultural ideas that favoured a man pulling himself up by his boot straps.

The editors at the *Hat News* felt that the best way to help settlers was to give them a one-time gift of steers and dairy cows. They argued that this was

a “better arrangement” because it neatly avoided “giving them [the settlers] money or buying provisions for charity.”¹²⁴ The editors also made the not entirely unreasonable suggestion that allocating cows to settlers would afford them a plentiful supply of fertilizer. The *Hat News* editors did not know, indeed could not know, that when drought became decadal instead of seasonal, as it did in the 1920s and 1930s, both cattle and man starved and that settler would finally turn his herds loose into the withered and stumpy fields because there was neither feed nor money to maintain their herds. The crops failed and what little crop was grown was fed to the cows and this reflects a basic recognition of the grim truth that man has the mental and emotional resources to endure starvation while animals do not. But that was some years in the future. Amidst the optimism and cacophonous boom of the early settlement years, the editors cannot be expected to have known all of the bestial dynamics associated with starvation farming on the south plains; the editors could not have known that the surface water around the Hatton area was poisoned and that, as Mr. Ralph Mutter observes, “the cattle would not drink the water because of the sour gas” seeping up through the ground and ruining the water.¹²⁵ In 1914, a cow for every man seemed a perfectly rational and logical solution.

If a man couldn't have cows, then he should at least have the proper seed-grain and Marquis Wheat held substantial promise. Although it was developed by Mr. Charles Saunders in the 1890s, Marquis Wheat, the saviour of west plains agriculture, was not commercially available until 1911. And where there were no authorized seed dealers, then the local priest seems to have done the trick.

The Reverend Walker, for example, came to south plains in the early years. His son Edward recalls that his father “chose to go into areas where there was no Ministry” like the jungles of Africa. The Reverend Walker settled on Aneroid, a tiny little frontier settlement in the south-west whose strange name recalls a lost barometer and not anti-inflammatory ointments. The Reverend Walker arrived in Aneroid in 1913 and, according to his son, “his main mission in life was to bring the gospel message.”¹²⁶ His second mission was to sell Marquis Wheat. Farmers heard of this and came from miles around to buy the reverend's seed. Given the propensity for naïve and wishful thinking in those years, one cannot avoid drawing the conclusion that some pioneers felt that seed sold by a Man of God must be special seed indeed. It wasn't though.

Debt mediation made its entrance in 1914 and would remain a staple policy for both Saskatchewan and Alberta governments fighting

drought-induced crop failure. Debt mediation (discussions between debtor and creditor to resolve a debt) was only ever one step away from debt moratorium (in which the collection of a debt would be temporarily stayed). In 1914, the province began a two and a half decade long debate with itself over whether to choose mediation or moratorium because of crop failures in the drylands.

According to the Department of Agriculture, “unbridled credit at high rates of interest” had placed many debtors in a very difficult position, a position in which they were threatened with “financial extinction.”¹²⁷ The drought brought that extinction very close to reality. Debt mediation was handled for the province by the fast-rising logician Mr. Francis Hedley (F.H.) Auld, who could scarcely contain his contempt for the average settlers’ near complete lack of knowledge about sound accounting principles. In just three months in 1914, Mr. Auld handled 7,000 requests for mediation.

After some investigation, Mr. Auld found “in quite a few instances, a deplorable lack of the application of business principles to their affairs.”¹²⁸ Auld warmed to his theme: “Every farmer,” he grumbled, “should have at least some knowledge of bookkeeping” and he added that “many farmers lack a real grasp of the business end of their operations.”

It helps to remember that, in many instances, the settlers Mr. Auld was endeavouring to assist had poor English or none; perhaps they had little education or none; they had little familiarity with English poor laws, or none; little conception of property law or none; little knowledge of finance, accounting, mortgages, or how real property law worked or none. It was with a noticeable tinge of affection that Mr. Auld spoke of the “highly efficient collection agencies.”

Understanding that thousands of settlers could not pay their bills because of the crop failure, Saskatchewan Premier Walter Scott attempted to secure a lid on the fast-boiling pot in an open letter published in dryland community newspapers. He explained to the settlers what the government was doing in addition to mediating between debtor and creditor. The province pledged to get settlers to work on road-building and threshing crews and also announced that lower feed rates for cattle would be introduced.¹²⁹ Premier Scott also tried to allay the fears and encourage resiliency. Scott understood that the bright hopes of spring had been “replaced by a condition bordering on total failure” but despite that he admonished burned-out settlers to “accept the buffetings of fortune in the spirit of true pioneers.”¹³⁰ The editors at the *Maple Creek News* agreed with Scott and issued their own guilt-tinged entreaty: “The men and women who settle new countries

are called pioneers and we have always been led to believe that pioneers are plucky, energetic, resourceful people. This is a year that calls for those traits of character and the people of Maple Creek district will rise to the occasion.”¹³¹ The plucky Oscar Anhorn of Golden Prairie, about thirty miles north of the Creek, accepted the buffetings of fortune (which, for the settler, generally meant starvation) by hunting rabbits. He remembers that “things were awfully poor [in 1914]. I can remember going out rabbit hunting so we could have meat to eat.”¹³²

The premier, though, likely stunned his readership when he highlighted those things that were good about the crop failure. Mr. Scott believed that “a gratifying feature” of the 1914 crop failure is that “good returns can be obtained from properly summer fallowed land.”¹³³ How he arrived at this conclusion he does not say. Instead, he rambles further and further afield, rambunctiously turning logic and common sense on its head when he attempts to argue the point that “our faith in the excellence of our soil ... is only strengthened by the experience of this year.”

One is inclined to understand that Scott was merely trying to bolster the sagging shoulders of the settlers by trying to find the good in the bad. (As a life-long manic depressive, Mr. Scott likely had experience with this). He simply went about it the wrong way. The editors of the *Maple Creek News* exercised a more carefully articulated brand of hope when they tried to find the good in the bad. Noting that “90%” of crops between Maple Creek and MacLeod are “burnt up,” they decreed it good news “if in the end it drives home to the farmers the necessity of good tillage.”¹³⁴

Mr. Scott, like many men in those days, was a bit of a dreamer. Unlike the Mr. Oliver, though, Premier Scott had deep and genuinely held philosophical ideas about what it meant to farm and to be a farmer. For as poor as his logic appears at times, Mr. Scott sincerely believed in all of those Jeffersonian ideals surrounding agriculture which, for Mr. Oliver, were merely a cynical expedient. The premier commonly referred to agriculture as “the foundation of civilization” and he additionally argued that without farmers the country would be useless because agricultural commodities were the real basis of all business and commerce.¹³⁵ Given these feelings and beliefs, it is not surprising, then, that Mr. Scott steered away from accentuating the problems of the crisis or addressing the uncomfortable questions it raised. After all, for Scott, “the dignity of agriculture” could surmount any difficulty.¹³⁶

Premier Scott believed that the fate of the province of Saskatchewan was intertwined with wheat-based agriculture. This was an idea developed and

ceaselessly perpetuated by the collective mind of the Scott government.¹³⁷ For Scott, the crop failure of 1914 was a threat to that intertwined fate. He clearly understood that land abandonment would be the logical implication of crop failure. Mr. Scott's appreciation of the implications of the crisis of 1914 was shared by his successors, most notably Premier Charles Dunning, and those views would create similar intellectual roadblocks during the droughts of the 1920s and persist well into the 1930s.

So, while the Scott government busied itself extolling the excellent philosophical virtues of crop failure, the federal government got busy applying a tourniquet to a very bad, deep, and bloody wound. Correctly fearing an exodus, the Borden administration instantly moved to prohibit the cancellation of any homestead applications until after seeding in 1915.¹³⁸ Settlers were made aware of this restriction via newspaper ads. Land office boss G.G. Blackstock informed Kindersley area settlers that "no application for cancellation [of] existing entries are to be accepted until further notice."¹³⁹

The Dominion government established relief depots at Swift Current, Maple Creek, Medicine Hat, and Lethbridge, which were (and are) the principal cities of the drylands. These depots provided fodder, flour, and coal so that "there will be no hardship or suffering and no sacrificing of stock and implements necessary for work on next year's crop."¹⁴⁰ The Dominion government also shared in the cost of reducing ticket rates to transport the stricken settlers to threshing crews. This was one of the last times these two levels of government would operate with shared purpose regarding the drylands. The land abandonment crisis of the 1920s would see the development of opposing and very antagonistic views over what should be done with the settlers of the south plains. But in 1914, there was a unity of purpose. The total cost of the Dominion government's one year relief aid package for the south plains came in at a mind-boggling \$8,892,517, which is almost exactly half of the estimated \$18 million that the Saskatchewan Relief Commission would spend in the first three years of the droughts of the 1930s.¹⁴¹ And the Dominion government contributed this mammoth sum because "it recognized its responsibility" in settling this region.¹⁴²

All of these measures, the feed, the fodder, the relief depots, the labour gangs, and the penny train tickets were designed to do one thing and one thing only: prevent the settler from abandoning his land. The Conservative government's press agency emphasized what it was doing to help and reminded people that the aid program was "*in keeping with the avowed policy of the government to protect and assist its new settlers.*"¹⁴³ Leaving no stone

unturned, the Dominion government also pledged that all of the horses required for the Royal North West Mounted Police would be purchased only from stock breeders in the drought-stricken area.¹⁴⁴

Despite the fact that millions of dollars were spent in relief aid, settlers still got the short end of the stick. In 1914, seven hundred men from the Maple Creek area signed up for road-work. The editors of the town's newspaper had agitated for road work on behalf of the men, although one wonders if the labourers were as pleased with the efforts of the newspaper as the editors seemed to be. The editors argued that the government often employed out-of-province men (usually from Ontario) to do road work. But the failure of 1914 offered a perfect opportunity to change that. And as an inducement for the government to change its hiring practices, the *Maple Creek News* argued that "the work could be done cheaper now than ... when normal conditions prevail."¹⁴⁵ So, with thousands of acres of land lying in ruins, the editors obliquely encouraged the province to pay settlers less than that which was normally paid for the work in order to complete the work. It is not recorded whether or not the province seized on the idea of getting bargain basement labour costs at the expense of desperate, hungry men but one is inclined to give the province the benefit of the doubt, at least on this. As it was, a married settler/road-worker would be allowed to work until he had been paid \$115; single men were given work until they had made \$75. These men were "forwarded" around the province because, given the total crop failure of that year, there was apparently "plans for a lot of road work."¹⁴⁶

For as much as the thought of being under-paid would have soured and curdled the enthusiasm of the men who came to Saskatchewan to farm but who were instead put to work on heavy labour details after their crop failed, both Borden and Scott appreciated that they had met the crisis squarely and won. There was no exodus. Mostly this was because the federal government had made it illegal for people to cancel their homestead applications: but still, it worked. The Borden administration played up its success: "this prompt and effective action by the government has successfully met a serious situation which threatened the depopulation of a large area in the west and has protected settlers in that area from financial ruin and great hardship."¹⁴⁷ Despite all the grim and ominous portents of that year, the editors of the *Maple Creek News* blithely suggested to a very willing and responsive readership that 1914 was "an exceptional year and its like may never be experienced again."¹⁴⁸ This statement was just plain wrong; they could not have been more wrong even if they had tried.

The crop disaster of 1914 would have been an opportune time to re-evaluate the wisdom of settlement in the dry regions and that re-evaluation almost happened, but to the dismay of history it did not. *The Ranching and Grazing Investigation Commission* (the Pope Commission, as it was known) was established in 1912 at the request of Mr. W.J. Roche, the Conservative member who replaced Frank Oliver as head of the Department of Interior after Oliver, and the Liberals were finally thrown out of office in the famed Reciprocity Election of 1911. The commission consisted of three men led by George Pope, after whom the commission was named. Their purpose was simple: under orders from the Department of Interior, they were to re-evaluate settlement on the south plains and arrive at some conclusions regarding further agricultural settlement in the region. They were also under orders to try and find some ways of improving the lot of the region's long-suffering cattle industry.

The commission travelled throughout the south plains in late 1912 and held a dozen meetings at key locations in Swift Current, Maple Creek, and Medicine Hat. Like the brief and summary 1908 amendment to the Dominion Lands Act, the slender 1913–14 Pope Commission report represents far more than might be suggested by looking at its meagre physical contents. It recommended, for the second time in six years, a near-complete reversal of land use policy for the drylands.

As of 1914, only six years had elapsed since Oliver had allowed the first settlers to homestead on the south plains, and it took only that long for the pattern of crop-failure and relief aid to establish itself. Mr. Roche and the members of the Pope Commission were not insensible to what had been allowed to happen and they understood the enormous folly of settlement in the south and west plains, but their hands were tied because the amendment, much to the delight of Mr. Oliver, had been wildly successful. The region had been settled, municipal institutions had been established, and crazed rail-line construction had begun (the fight over retaining all those main lines, branch lines and sidings is a fight that continues down to today and is led by the Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities).

The very act of establishing the Pope Commission meant that the Department of Interior was flirting perilously close to asking the unappetizing question: "How can we undo settlement?" That question would be asked again and again in the 1920s and in the 1930s, but it was an impossible question, a question to which there was no answer, or rather the only answer was land clearances and that was not feasible, at least in Saskatchewan it wasn't. By the time the 1920s rolled around, the Alberta

government began evacuating every settler it could find and essentially emptied the region of almost all human life. And where it could not buy the settlers out with a train ticket, the government forced the settlers off the land, as happened in Byngville and Brutus, two dryland communities that were appropriated by the federal government (with little or no resistance from the Alberta government) and handed over, lock, stock and barrel, to the British Army as a training ground.¹⁴⁹ But, like the 1906/07 winter and the drought of 1937, nature would ultimately achieve what legislators in Saskatchewan would not.

Commission chair George Pope did not mince words: “there are considerable areas of land ... which are altogether unfit for settlement” in the south and western plains.¹⁵⁰ Pope added that the public meetings he and the other members had attended produced the “emphatic and unanimous” opinion that an estimated four million acres of land should be withdrawn from settlement because it was “a matter of common knowledge” that these lands could not successfully be farmed over the long term.¹⁵¹ The entire region that had been opened to settlement was about twenty-eight million acres, roughly half of which lay in Saskatchewan, and so the Pope Commission urged the immediate abandonment or closure to settlement of almost 40 per cent of that land. It was not simply the lack of moisture that made agriculture in this region difficult, it was that wide swaths of land had soil “altogether unfit for homesteading” and these regions, the committee warned, must be closed off to prevent “disastrous consequences.”¹⁵²

The commission was actually attempting to steer land use policy back to what it had been in the years before Frank Oliver. In an effort to atone for Mr. Oliver’s gross policy error, the commission endorsed recommendations that nurtured and developed the cattle industry, which had been knocked stupid from the sudden and all-consuming rush of settlers onto the drylands, to say nothing of the devastating winter of 1906–07. The commission recommended enlarged grazing leases where available land made that possible and they asked for extended grazing leases on lands currently used for such purposes.¹⁵³

It’s not that the recommendations were overtly antagonistic to the settler but they certainly favoured the cattlemen, and in spirit the recommendations very closely resembled the land use policy of the 1880s. Indeed, in these recommendations, one can see the seeds of the ideas that would guide the actions of the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA) in the 1930s when that organization would actually remove sub-marginal land from production and dump the settlers somewhere up north.

Time, circumstances, and the logic of the day, however, ensured that the primary recommendation would be ignored: the four-million-acre tract of land in south-west and west-central Saskatchewan would remain open to settlement and it was from precisely this region that settlers would flee by their thousands in the 1920s and, for those who remained, later in the 1930s.

Settlers played a not-insignificant role in keeping the region open. They were unnerved by the suggestion to clear off and shut down millions of acres of land to settlement. Such a move threatened to isolate and then strangle the life out of the budding agricultural industry in the area. Like the legislators of that era, the settlers clung to their own beliefs and faiths and had their own reasons for persisting in their beliefs about farming an area that no one thought should have ever been settled. And so settlers petitioned the Department of Interior and the province to reject the land-closure option of the Pope Commission.¹⁵⁴ The province, buoyed by the spirit of optimism and supported by a third year of consistent agricultural mediocrity in the dry lands, supported the effort to keep the region open.

Just after the outbreak in August 1914 of that pointless, gruesome, and bloody industrial slaughter which is known to history as “The Great War,” agricultural production in Europe was devastated and the Dominion government encouraged a wheat-production program whose like had never been seen before in Canada. Between 1914 and 1918, 12,000,000 acres of land was put to the plough and this included millions of acres in the south plains.¹⁵⁵ Any sense of caution that might have developed during the 1914 crop failure was easily brushed aside at the prospect of vast markets desperate for wheat. Had someone but stepped in and urged caution in expanding agriculture on the south plains, had someone more forcefully advocated that the government adopt the recommendations of the Pope Commission, had there simply been less of an impulse to ‘go all in’, the extent of the disasters to follow in the 1920s and 1930s might have been mitigated in some way. But everyone involved at that time was in it up to their necks and the only direction possible was forward on a gamble and with blind faith that the land would produce.

The failure of 1914 was deemed momentary. It was a blip, an exception, something out of the ordinary whose like would never be seen again. And in a world where it was sincerely believed with little or no irony that hard labour and sweat was enough to overcome anything, there were no cautious backward glances. On a quiet February day in 1914, ignoring forty years of land policy and the recommendations of a federal commission, the federal government passed an Order-in-Council that

approved the recommendations of the Pope Commission as it related to the redevelopment of the cattle industry. But the federal government did not support the recommendation, which argued for the closure of the dry lands to settlement. The Order-in-Council was passed just six months before the first total crop failure hit the drylands.

