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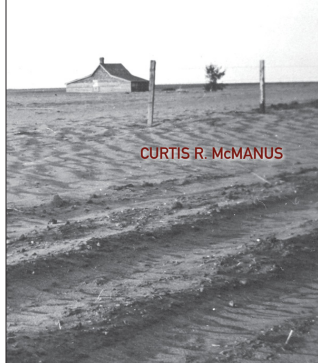
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Happyland

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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“In the Thrill Zone of the Onrushing Calamity”

Futile: (adjective) producing no useful results; pointless. From the Latin *futilis* ‘leaky.’

Barren: (adjective) [of land] too poor to produce vegetation; bleak and lifeless; without. From the Old French *barhaine*.

Desert: (noun) a waterless, desolate area of land with little or no vegetation; a situation or area considered dull or uninteresting. From the Latin *desertum* ‘something left waste’ and *deserere* ‘leave, forsake.’ – *Oxford English Dictionary*.

As the dry regions descended from mediocrity into failure and from thence into relief-addled destitution and land abandonment, there was a brief detour through the lush, green, and pleasing valleys of 1915 and 1916. In a strange and fitting inversion (an inversion that would be repeated in 1928 just before the roof caved in in 1929), the dry regions in these two years out-produced every other crop district in the province. Newly minted Deputy Agriculture Minister Francis Auld was ecstatic: “nature produced with marvelous prodigality and her greatest generosity was shown towards the farmers in districts where the crop in 1914 was practically a failure”¹ (why

he felt it necessary to deploy the adverb “practically” instead of “completely” is a mystery known only to Auld). He even went so far as to produce a list of the twenty-six highest producing farmers in the province (all from the south and west plains) in a carnival-like show-demonstration of the vitality of the region’s soil. Peter Hackenlieb from Leader (formerly Prussia) produced fifty bushels per acre of spring wheat. J.P. Firnquist of the now non-existent Stone district somehow managed to squeeze 3,800 bushels of wheat out of seventy-six acres of land.² In total that year, the drylands averaged thirty-one bushels per acre while the province itself averaged twenty-five. The total production for 1916 was an astonishing 173,723,775 bushels of wheat. These amazing yields were exactly what Saskatchewan’s founding fathers had in mind when they envisioned the future of Saskatchewan: year after year, dizzy with success, wallowing in the bounty of glorious wheat production.

The shine started to rub off in 1917. Yields plummeted to twelve bushels per acre that year, seed relief aid re-appeared in 1918 as the yields bottomed out to catastrophic proportions of four bushels per acre and the Municipalities Relief Act was passed in 1919, expanding the aid responsibilities of the rural municipalities from not only seed, but also flour, fodder, and coal.³ The Frenchman, Mr. Denniel who had come through to the Val Marie district and commented that it looked like a desert in 1910, took a walk up the local creek one day and found that not much had changed. He walked for four miles along the Frenchman River and “found only one small watering hole.”⁴ The river had dried up.

The turnaround from orgy of 1916 was quick and sudden. Debt mediation re-appeared in 1920 “owing to the failure of crops in the southwest and western parts of the province.”⁵ In just a few months of that year, 500 cases of bad debt were mediated. These cases related mostly to items such as lumber, machinery, and real estate mortgages.

1920 and the three years preceding it starkly demonstrated the dangers associated with dryland farming and these failures should have brought the experience of 1914 into proper context. Should have, but they didn’t. While low yields were indeed suffered by many crop districts in Saskatchewan that year, it was only on the south and west plains where failures were absolute, it was only on the south and west plains where relief aid depots were established, it was only ever in the drylands that starvation threatened whole districts and it was only on the south and west plains where the droughts and crop failures were so bad that a Royal Commission of Inquiry had to be called.

The Royal Commission, known to history as the Better Farming Conference, was called in direct response to the escalating crisis in dryland agriculture. The utter futility of dryland farming was nicely captured in, of all things, a weather report filed by staff of Alberta's Department of Agriculture. The south-east area of that province had undergone successive crop failures of a similar scale during the period after 1917 and the following report filed by staff of the weather bureau reads like an S.O.S. from a sinking ship: "crops very poor; farmers going north; many fields are being ploughed under; wheat is a failure."⁶

The Better Farming Conference was set up in Swift Current during July 1920. According to one commentator, "it was evident that only senior levels of government could provide the leadership to develop a system of agriculture" suited to the south plains.⁷ This is a very odd (though very Saskatchewan) observation to make for two reasons. First, in a strange Hegelian way, this statement seems to glorify the state by making the implicit suggestion that it knew more about farming than the settlers. This silly little conceit, no doubt held with sincerity by a number of men in Ottawa, certainly Mr. Oliver, had been proven incorrect a number of times by 1920. In fact, it had been proven incorrect repeatedly and with astonishing regularity. Second, "senior levels of government" were responsible for getting settlers into this mess in the first place.

At any rate, settlers were relieved to see that something was being done to try and figure a way out of this impasse. Tompkins area settler J.H. Veitch noted that "such a conference would have been considered mad" in 1915-16, but it was not such a bad idea in 1920.⁸ Veitch, the secretary treasurer of the Vidora chapter of the Saskatchewan Grain Growers Association, wrote to Saskatchewan Agriculture Minister Charles Hamilton to explain that it had become "painfully evident" that even the best summer-fallow "falls pitifully short of solving the problem [of crop failure]."⁹ Farmer Lewis Harvey added that most Vidora area settlers were "groping, as it were, in the dark for the proper methods." Mr. Harvey warned that "conditions are fast approaching acute and in a short time distress will be general."¹⁰

The Better Farming Commission set up its operations in Swift Current amidst the suffocating drought of 1920. As a first order of business, the commission conducted a road tour through the hard-scrabble south plains in order to gain a ground-level appreciation of what had occurred. The entire area of Vidora-Consul-Senate region and north up toward Maple Creek was written off as "very bad." Belatedly proving the point, forty-six farmers from Senate along with their families (approximating some 120 people)

were evacuated from that region and moved en masse to Tisdale in east-central Saskatchewan in 1923.¹¹

From Maple Creek north to what would prove to be the appropriately named RM of Big Stick, conditions were much the same. The committee noted that there were many instances of soil drift in this region which was naturally accompanied by the ubiquitous presence of funereal misery in whose grip dusty settlers struggled. Indeed, according to the report from the road tour, the settlers were “simply hanging on in the hope that something will turn up to better their conditions.”¹²

At Big Stick, just past the western edge of the Great Sand Hills, the committee’s brief tour of the drylands ended. But this arbitrary end to the tour was a conceptual mistake because the areas devastated by drought and crop failure, and also one of the areas which would suffer worst from land abandonment, stretched north from Big Stick all the way up to Kindersley-Alsask, an area that would lose the majority of its settlers in the 1920s.

The conclusions of the sub-committee merely restated the obvious: “rainfall is not sufficient.” The half-section farmer, despite what Frank Oliver argued in the 1908 Dominion Lands Act, “is very handicapped [and] cannot hope to make a success,” and cattle or mixed farming is “absolutely essential” for any enterprise to be a success.¹³ These conclusions were long known and considered common knowledge, even the point about mixed farming but, as settler Mr. Veitch had pointed out to Premier Charles Dunning in early 1920 “the cry ‘go into cattle’ or ‘go into mixed farming’ ... placed many a man in a more embarrassing position than he might have otherwise suffered.”¹⁴ This is to say that many men, already stretched financially thin from four years of drought, went bankrupt trying to diversify.

The information from the sub-committee’s road tour formed the basic conceptual outline for the much more formal and intensive ‘Better Farming Conference’ in Swift Current. The commission agreed at the start that one recommendation above all others must be pursued: “to find ways and means [of evacuating settlers] to more suitable land.”¹⁵ Two-and-a-half more years would pass before the province would finally relent to this resolution and even then it did so reluctantly, by half-measures and under very great pressure to do something rather than nothing.

The Royal Commission’s report dealt a blow to a number of assumptions that had guided the effort to settle the south plains. Chairman George Spence, for example, was forced to concede that the summer-fallow method was not as safe and efficient as had been previously imagined. Spence and the commission argued that summer-fallow was “forced on us by necessity”

before anyone realized that “it removes from the soil, ingredients necessary to produce a crop.”¹⁶ Spence, on behalf of the Commission, declared, “we are looking for a new system” for farming in the drylands and thus recommended the establishment of an experimental farm at Swift Current.¹⁷ Previous to 1920, the only experimental farm in the drylands was located at Lethbridge, which was established in 1908.

In addition to a formal recognition that summer fallow could not “guarantee results” every year as A.F. Mantle argued it could in 1912, there was also an assessment of the climate. Meteorologist Sir Frederic Stuart explained that the south plains were simply prone to cycles of drought “although variations do occur” such as they did in 1915 and 1916. But he concluded that he “could not imagine any portion of the world where there was less chance of [climatic] change” than in the south.¹⁸ Drought was the rule and not the exception.

Aside from the establishment of an experimental farm at Swift Current, the core recommendation of the committee was the evacuation of settlers. The idea of evacuation was the first resolution passed by the conference in 1920 and its presence as an idea in the final report is unmistakable. Commission Chair George Spence concluded that “to abandon such lands would be the first step towards finding a way to use them.”¹⁹ And while he would not admit that settling the region was a mistake (“I am not prepared to take that ground at the present time”), he did recommend that the Dominion Lands Act be suitably amended to allow homesteaders to leave the region and file on a second homestead elsewhere.²⁰

Conspicuously absent from the Better Farming Commission’s report was any detailed explanation of how settlers might actually farm better. True, the Commission made three recommendations: substitute crops like forage which arrest soil erosion (here it must be noted that soil erosion was a problem that began long before the thirties), community pastures (which was obliquely suggested by the Pope Commission in 1914) and water supplies (dugouts, which became a common feature on the south plains in the 1930s and was the PFRA’s chief and early claim to fame).²¹ But these things did not address how farmers might make a go of it in a dry land with the resources they had at hand.

Arriving at a determination as to what constituted the best methods for agricultural production in the drylands seemed at times to be a bottomless question with no real answer short of the simple one: rain, and since that could not be legislated actual answers to questions about proper farming went unanswered, dangling. This absence of thought on dryland farming

was not a mistake, though, but rather an indication that by 1920, the first cracks had begun to appear in the ludicrous notion that summer-fallow was a guarantee against everything except hail and frost, which meant that, in 1920, neither the province nor the experts knew where or how to proceed.

The uncertainty over agricultural practices was felt by those even at the forefront of agricultural science. University of Saskatchewan agronomist John Bracken published a book in 1921 in which he found himself having to explain the horribly obvious point that “[summer-fallow’s] most intelligent practice does not make crops grow in the absence of rain.”²² He further noted that even those on the cutting edge of agriculture did not have any idea of how to successfully farm in the drylands. Bracken threw up his hands on the dangers of summer-fallow when he said (and the tone of frustration here is obvious): “if the fallow dissipates organic matter and nitrogen – and it does to a serious degree – then we shall have to dissipate organic matter and nitrogen until we find a better way because we must have water in the soil and the fallow is the best way to get it there.”²³ Bracken knew that the practice of summer-fallow did more harm than good, but there were no other options at the time. Indeed, seed drills and direct seeding (a process by which seed is ‘injected’ into the ground thus reducing or eliminating the necessity of tillage), the saviours of south plains agriculture, would not be commercially available for another sixty years.

Bracken’s matter-of-fact statements about the possibilities and limitations of summer-fallow were substantiated by his colleagues in the United States whose experience in the drylands had taught the same hard lessons. United States Department of Agriculture agronomist E.C. Chilcott took aim at men like Motherwell, Mantle, and MacKay and their unreasonable single-minded belief in the possibilities of dryland farming when he noted that the claims of what summer-fallow could actually achieve were “undoubtedly responsible for more false reasoning about dryland agriculture than any other thing.”²⁴ Both Chilcott and Bracken offered the painful observation that summer-fallow is fine, but only if it rains regularly.

The lack of knowledge about proper farming was not limited to the experts. Settlers, too, still had no clear idea of the best methods and practices that should be employed. Thinking that the province might know something he did not, Prelate Secretary Treasurer J.J. Keelor implored the Department of Agriculture to do something to educate settlers because “the message [was] not getting through.”²⁵ Mr. Keelor observed in 1921 that settlers’ knowledge of proper agricultural techniques remained limited. In fact, their knowledge had not progressed much beyond the common practice of

simply throwing seed into the ground and hoping something might come of it. "I am afraid" Keelor told Auld, "that some of the farmers have not gotten away from that idea."²⁶ Settler Mr. Carl Albrecht was a chucker. He seeded his land by taking handfuls of wheat and throwing it around the field. A family member recalls that "he was very good at it." He always had the ability to throw it "where he thought it was needed."²⁷

Mr. Keelor reasonably thought that the province ought to be able to do something to remedy this lack of knowledge, "to spread good information." He also fully understood the implications of inaction: unbound by cancellation restrictions and government aid, Keelor observed that "a number of our farmers left last spring [for the United States] and I believe this fall or next spring will find quite a number more pulling out."²⁸

It was not a case of Mr. Keelor throwing up his hands. He and the men in his district desperately wanted to stay and he emphasized this point to Deputy Auld. "This particular part of Saskatchewan," Mr. Keelor explained, "has been too well developed and there has been too much money put into the district to have it go back [to prairie] without at least trying to do what we can to help out."²⁹ But Keelor's request for educational forums was denied by Deputy Auld. The deputy said meetings "will [only] be considered" because he was "simply not sure at the present moment just how definitely any person can speak to the farmers in your district" on proper farming methods.³⁰ Fair enough. But Deputy Auld also took the time to disabuse Keelor of the notion that the problem of the lack of rain was limited to the south plains when he (Auld) said that "sentiment" was true "everywhere."³¹ The Dirty Thirties would finally, and at long last, force Auld to admit that there was a certain area of Saskatchewan prone to drought, but in 1921, he had not got there yet.

One is inclined to give the deputy the benefit of the doubt because he is essentially correct in his position that the province could not hold forums because it did not know any more about farming than the settlers did. But it is instructive to consider what Alberta's UFA government was doing during the same period when Keelor was asking for more information and not getting it. Knowledge or not, Alberta routinely sent out its representatives into the drought-stricken south-lands. James Murray was the Department of Agriculture's representative in the Medicine Hat region. In just six months, between July and December of 1921, he conducted or attended thirty-five meetings and published two circulars distributed to area farmers, all of which dealt with growing fodder crops, for example, which apparently reduced the danger of soil exhaustion.³² Murray felt that it was desirable to

“get first-hand knowledge of [farmer’s] conditions and their problems.” And Murray’s knowledge likely came from the Lethbridge experimental farm, a dryland experimental, something which, at that time, Saskatchewan did not have.

This “first-hand knowledge” was exactly what a Bickleigh area farm group dared the province to get. Angry over the implicit and, in some quarters of the Department of Agriculture, explicit insistence that success or failure was due to good or bad farming, the Bickleigh branch of the Grain Growers Association (Bickleigh sits on the north east edge of Palliser’s Triangle) fired off an angry letter that asked the province to send out an expert to take soil samples. After hail destruction in 1916, drought in 1917, and “drought, wind, frost and hail” in 1918, 1919 had them scratching their heads. The group wrote that they had “followed the best known methods [and] have lost heavily.”³³

The Saskatchewan government, by contrast, went one step further in the wrong direction. The Better Farming Train was cancelled in 1923. This train had been operating since 1914 and its creation was a direct response to the crop failure in the drylands that year. The train stopped at various communities explaining the latest agricultural practices and seed advancements.³⁴ Agriculture Minister Charles Hamilton noted that “they [the trains] were expensive to equip and operate.” In 1920, the cost of the train was \$6,817.73, which included fifty-eight stops throughout the province attended by some 35,000 people;³⁵ in 1922 that cost had escalated to \$12,876.59.³⁶ Hamilton insisted that “this is, we believe, one of things we can get along without.”³⁷ The practical effect of this move was to stop the circulation of what little information had been circulating.

So, bereft of information and technique on how to farm properly, rural municipalities thought, not unreasonably, that drought problems might be legislated away. Guided by the principle that doing something is always better than doing nothing, the RM of Big Stick near Hatton demanded the province help with the ever-present problem of Russian, Sow, and Canada thistle by “enact[ing] such drastic legislation as will compel all weed growers to keep their weeds on their own land.”³⁸ It seemed that settlers, when cultivating their land, would allow their weeds to congeal in rows and these rows of weeds were then carried hither and thither on the wind spreading the weed infestation into neighbouring fields. The proper cultivation and weed control techniques seem obvious today; but in Big Stick, in 1922, it was not.

The RM of Maple Creek threw up its hands on the matter of soil drifting. A certain settler, Mr. A. Bernard, complained to his local council about soil drifting and demanded something be done about it. But the councilmen, conduits for the expression of those noble and heady egalitarian ideals that characterized the intellectual world of the North American west, lamely fell back on the idea that “every man has the right to plow his lands as he sees fit.” It wasn’t that they were insensible to the problem but rather they simply did not know how to deal with it. It was definitely an irritated council that tersely informed Bernard that “up to present we do not know of any way to prevent soil drifting and if you do we would be pleased to hear it.”³⁹ The tension and growing frustration in their words is palpable partly because soil-drift was such a serious problem. Essentially, soil drifting “spread” drought into adjacent fields so that when one settler abandoned his land and allowed the soil to drift, the soil would also drift onto his neighbour’s field thereby making it impossible for that settler to grow a crop. Call it ‘drought-creep.’ It must be noted also that soil-drift is commonly thought to have been a creature of the Thirties. That is not correct.

Abandoned land also resulted in huge swaths of prairie becoming incubation beds for grasshoppers, another problem that plagued settlers on the south plains. In desperate response to this growing problem, the RM of Clinworth embarked on an enforced grasshopper killing campaign. Clinworth paid for the poison to kill the hoppers and salvage at least some of the 1921 crop from the one-two punch of hoppers and drought. Clinworth council, though, overrode the plough-as-you-see-fit Rights-of-Man sentiment in the RM of Maple Creek, and forcefully compelled all settlers to purchase and use the poison; the RM would then recover costs for the campaign in that time-honoured fashion of placing liens against the lands of the settlers.⁴⁰

Progressive-thinking Clinworth even went so far as to take the step of writing to the Department of Interior asking for an investigation into the possibility of irrigating the enormous tract of land from Sceptre west to the Alberta border.⁴¹ Council argued that recent years “have demonstrated that it is with difficulty that farming operations can be successfully prosecuted” in the drylands and that irrigation remained the only way to “bring water to the land.”⁴²

Technically speaking though, there was another way. With the Better Farming Train about to be cancelled, the Department of Agriculture resistant to the idea of educational tours on how to farm better, and the toll from crop failure mounting, Prelate Secretary Treasurer J.J. Keelor took the

further step of asking the province to see about attracting ace rainmaker Charles Hatfield “regardless of what people think.”⁴³ Mr. Keelor was not alone in his desperation. It seems other communities, risking no mild derision, enlisted the help of the famed American rainmaker. He seemed to have actually worked success in the Medicine Hat region. Indeed, when he arrived in that city in 1921, he was “accompanied by a light drizzle.”⁴⁴ The logician Auld, however, would have none of it.

Deputy Auld, though, displayed a very uncharacteristic streak of naïve credulity when he approached the American Department of Agriculture’s weather bureau in Washington, D.C., and asked for its opinion on Mr. Hatfield. The critique of a rainmaker by a man of science was predictable: “The most elementary consideration of physics, chemistry and simple calculations” reasoned bureau chief C.F. Martin, “[are] sufficient to convince scientists that these schemes are wholly impracticable.” Furthermore, “no reputable scientist acquainted with the laws and phenomenon of evaporation and condensation [can believe in the possibility of rainmaking].”⁴⁵ The appearance of Mr. Hatfield in historical records was an expression of the desperation felt by settlers and their willingness to try anything which, again, was based on the principle that doing something is better than doing nothing.

Hatfield’s claims to generate rain were not exceptional for this period in history, at least where logic and rational thinking is concerned. We have noted that wishful thinking, and dreamy desire were common intellectual habits of the day and the early twentieth century, proved to be fertile ground for a number of absurd and exotic intellectual curiosities. Mr. Hatfield’s claims to be able to make rain travelled in the same warm and pleasing intellectual currents as the “rain-follows-the-plough” idea, another one of credulity’s bastard step-children, which developed in nineteenth century America. As the trans-Mississippi region was settled after the Civil War, the slow and steady settlement of the Missouri region was accompanied by an increase in rainfall. This freak and chance occurrence soon morphed into a matter of science.⁴⁶ “Rain-follows-the-plough” became accepted dogma at the University of Nebraska, where Natural Sciences Professor Samuel Aughey taught the idea. According to Dr. Aughey (who, in this quote, is taking a highly ill-advised shot at rainmakers), it was “not by any magic or enchantment, not by incantations or offerings, but instead in the sweat of his face toiling with his hands [by laying rail steel across the plains], that man can persuade the heavens to yield their treasures of dew and rain upon the land.”⁴⁷ Silly American curiosities, perhaps. But, in Canada, such ideas

became an accepted part of the Dominion government's efforts to settle the west. When construction was being done on the CPR mainline through the south plains in the latter third of the nineteenth century, concern was raised about the legendary dryness of the area. This worry was overcome by the strange belief that "with settlement rains will come."⁴⁸ According to experts, the steel of the track will "disrupt" electrical currents "thereby" causing rain.⁴⁹ It is the "thereby" that one finds deeply depressing.

Mr. Hatfield, by the way, didn't make it rain, at least not for the men trapped in the dusty, hothouse furnace of the Schuler district south of Happyland and just inside the Alberta border. The men there agreed to give the rainmaker more money, "providing of course that he leaves the country."⁵⁰ The men and women of the once burgeoning now-dead community of Estuary were just as cynical as the settlers of Schuler. Hatfield charged \$1,000 for five inches (\$7,500 for 12 inches) but, as Historian William Wardill notes, "nobody from Estuary offered him so much as a nickel," although this statement tends to suggest that they did at least discuss it.⁵¹

Against this backdrop of absurdity, life for the settlers in the drylands got worse and worse. RM of Mantario Secretary Treasurer C. Evans Sargeant explained to Deputy Auld in 1921 that "this municipality is faced with the most complete crop failure that has been known since it was settled."⁵² There was no rain, no crop, and no hay and Sargeant added that "unless something can be done, some 1,500 people ... are faced with the prospect of starvation this winter."⁵³ While there is no record of starvation, or of relief provided in response to this specific crisis, 345 farmers abandoned the RM of Mantario #262 between 1917 and 1924: assuming that each man had a wife and child, just over one thousand people fled.

While the threat of starvation may or may not have been accurate, there is some level of corroboration from the local Member of the Legislative Assembly W.H. Harvey. Wheat yields in 1921, Harvey confirmed, ranged from the abysmal figure of zero to the only slightly less abysmal ten bushels per acre, which was a charitable way of saying the failure was absolute in some areas and partial in others. He added that "there are practically no oats" (and here one is reminded of Dr. Samuel Johnson's famous quip that in England oats are fed to horses, but in Scotland oats are fed to people).⁵⁴ Again to ward off the apparent threat of starvation, a concerned Harvey recommended settlers be put to work on road gangs to ameliorate the effects of the disaster.⁵⁵ He explained that settlers "are becoming discouraged with conditions and many of them are broke."⁵⁶

The condition in which these settlers found themselves led to the establishment of local relief charities in the drylands. Thirty miles east of Mantario in Kindersley, for example, the local Grain Growers Association and the local chapter of the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire (IODE) both set up deposit locations for food and clothing and, as winter approached, locations for coal and mittens. The IODE asked “those more favorably situated” to contribute because many settlers in the areas have had “no crops, or only a little, for some years now.”⁵⁷ In one instance, the RM of Clinworth appealed to the Regina Red Cross for aid. It seems a settler in the Clinworth district asked council for “boots and shoes for her children to go to school.” But the RM at that time was on an enforced austerity campaign and so was compelled to ask the Red Cross in Regina for help.⁵⁸ The Red Cross actually conducted a health survey on school kids in Alberta’s half of the dust bowl in September of 1921, the fifth continuous year of crop failure. Health officials found that of the 638 schoolchildren they examined in the Bow Island district, nearly two thirds suffered from malnutrition.⁵⁹

Despite all of this, the province remained resistant to enact the Better Farming Conference’s recommendation to evacuate the area. Auld explained to dryland farmer Pete Harder a full year after the evacuation recommendation was made that the chance to be removed from the drylands and of obtaining a second homestead was “a rather remote possibility.”⁶⁰ Instead, Auld urged the Clinworth district settler to “review very carefully the chances of success [where you are]” and additionally advised Harder that winter rye has been grown to some advantage in his region and that perhaps he should try that.⁶¹

Auld’s admonition to grow rye was not an isolated suggestion but an alternative that had gripped the minds of a number of policy and opinion makers in the drylands, and that with great fever. The editors of the *Medicine Hat News* fairly flung themselves at the rye option. After making the observation that “a different method of farming must be adopted,” they claimed that if settlement on the south plains was to be successful then surely rye must be part of that change. The editors felt confident enough in the rye option that they drew firm conclusions without blinking: “rye is the grain that will solve the farming problem in this part of the country.”⁶² Precisely what this frantic optimism was based on is not clear but one rather suspects that the editors learned over coffee one morning that rye is more resistant to drought and has a shorter growing season and “therefore” it would solve the drought problem. It was a frantic hope at which they flung themselves with all the desperation they could muster. There was even a rye

growing conference in Medicine Hat, which was attended not only by farmers but also by members of the Rotary Club, the Chamber of Commerce, and city councilmen. This conference is interesting for another reason: it points toward the idea that what was essentially a rural problem, drought, did in fact have significant implications in urban centres as well. The urban and rural areas in the early years were joined at the hip – as went rural, so went urban. The unique physical, cultural, and spiritual gulf that separates rural and urban areas today was much less acute in the 1920s and 1930s.

In the absence of a formal government-sanctioned evacuation plan of the type operating in Alberta, settlers became involved with Colonization Companies and even there the government set up road-blocks. A group of thirty German settlers from Leader (formerly Prussia), for example, enlisted the help of Western Colonizers Limited in 1926 so they might get help abandoning the drylands. W.C.L. spokesman J.P. Murphy informed Agriculture Minister Charles Hamilton that “these people ... have not had any crop for ten years [and] had no resources to sustain them through the coming year.”⁶³ The group had apparently marshalled together its meagre resources to purchase a block of land “owned by a syndicate” in the Davidson district south of Saskatoon. The province, however, refused Murphy’s request to help the settlers because it feared the “very grave difficulties” that might arise out this sort of commercial movement of settlers.

The threat of “very grave difficulties” was the same reason the province refused assistance to settlers represented by Theodore Herzu. Herzu, a representative of the CPR-owned Canada Colonization Association, asked the province to assist with the removal of an unspecified number of “Baptist families” from the south plains. Herzu urged the province to seriously consider his aid request in view of the fact that the CCA was not making any special deals for services rendered to stricken settlers. But again, Hamilton refused. He insisted that the drylands “will support a population though necessarily less thickly settled than where there is abundant rainfall.”⁶⁴ Reflecting the province’s concern with the de-population, Hamilton noted that his refusal was rooted in the concern he had for those “[who] are anxious to maintain their municipal institutions.”⁶⁵ And this sentiment of Hamilton’s is the key to the whole story: evacuation meant the eventual rot and death of rural Saskatchewan in the south and western plains. The drylands were on life-support and the Saskatchewan government refused to pull the plug unlike their counterparts in Alberta, which not only pulled the plug but virtually emptied the southeast and east central plains of all human life in the 1920s.

Ultimately, it was the human element that makes the prevarications of the Saskatchewan government appear coarse and unfeeling. Settlers whose government was assuring them of the ultimately wondrous possibilities in the drylands could, and did, opt instead for what amounts to little more than indentured servitude.

A large German-speaking Russian family representing a number of people entered into an agreement in 1923 with Cluny-based Western Stock Ranches. President H. Honens asked the province to assist the Konschuhs with the cost of moving their goods. Honens explained that his company would provide the settlers with food, clothing, and shelter. In return, the refugees were to work the company lands at Cluny, Alberta, paying off the debt with the proceeds from their crop.⁶⁶ The historical record on this particular element is thin but common sense suggests that if this happened once, then it happened twice. One does not often hear of such things occurring on the Canadian plains. Indentured servitude, paying off desperation debts with labour, strikes us as something straight out of Old Europe and quite out of place on the egalitarian western plains, but there it is.

Honens used the word “destitute” to describe the Kenschuh clan but even that seemed an understatement. The hardened and leathery sixty-one-year-old Phillip Kenschuh along with his sixty-year-old wife and other members of the family had all fled Russia just ahead of the “pitchfork and machine gun reforms of the Bolsheviks.”⁶⁷ After seven years of farming in the Fox Valley region, however, Kenschuh had amassed over \$1,500 in liens against his land and as of 1922 had not produced more than three bushels per acre in the six years preceding his departure. The year he moved he managed to grow nothing.⁶⁸ Mr. Kenschuh was one of the few lucky ones – the province consented to pay for the removal of the members of the Kenschuh clan.

The Konschuhs had arrived in Canada in 1902 from Saratov, Russia. Phillip was a shoemaker by trade. And although they came from Russia they were Germans, part of the thousands of Germans who had been encouraged to settle in Russia first by the idiosyncratic, westward-looking Europhile Peter the Great, and later by rulers like Catherine the Great. The political and social instability of the dying Russian Empire helped to prompt the Konschuhs to leave and they arrived in Calgary in 1902. Later they migrated to Fox Valley in 1913 just in time for the crop failure of 1914.⁶⁹

Those years of drought and failure were not easy for the Kenschuh clan. In later years, after they had left the south plains behind, Phillip would tell stories “of the many severe storms ... and of evenings spent reading the

bible.”⁷⁰ Phillip’s son Jacob (“Jake”) used his time profitably: he not only homesteaded but also “studied steam engineering.”⁷¹

Neither faith nor science could overcome the drought, though, and the Kenschuh clan left Fox Valley en masse. Opal Kenschuh, the later wife of David, the youngest of the Kenschuhs, and the only member of that branch born in Canada (he was born in Calgary in 1902), wrote that “poor soil combined with drought conditions and the urging of friends who had preceded [the Kenschuh’s] prompted the move to Cluny.”⁷² Ida Kenschuh was six years old in 1923. She distinctly recalls “the train pulling up to the station at Maple Creek and watching them load cattle, horses and all our earthly belongings.”⁷³ Despite the desperate circumstances under which they left and the saddening prospect of entering into a kind of indentured servitude, Ida favourably recalls Mr. Honens. He was a good man, “a well known land lord in the community” who “helped people to buy farms and build homes.”⁷⁴

While the Kenschuhs may have been pleased to leave the drylands, their horses certainly weren’t. A number of their horses escaped from the new home at Cluny and guided by some strange instinct for home no matter how poor, sandy, and desperate it was, tried to make their way back to the drylands. Some were captured near Medicine Hat heading west but most were never found.

For those who had neither access nor money to enlist land or colonization companies to act on their behalf, or for those to whom indentured servitude was just too much, the local priest seemed to have served the role as intermediary. The Reverend H.J. Schmidt of the Maple Creek district wrote the province on behalf of “forty-four Baptist families” who could no longer afford to farm in the drylands and asked the province to help in getting them out. No response was recorded.⁷⁵

The Mutter clan from Odessa, Ukraine, relied on the local school-teacher to help get them out. Ms. Clara Crouse had been teaching at the English school in Hatton for a few years. Her family had settled in southeast Saskatchewan after having come up from a fenced compound in North Dakota (it was fenced because of the Indian Wars). They arrived in the Dakotas from Boston. Prior to Boston, they lived in Nova Scotia, where they had arrived from Germany in 1780 after having received a forty-acre timber land grant from the British crown.⁷⁶ As such, the Crouse family likely formed part of that movement to settle the Maritimes in the aftermath of the sad, tragic and wholly unnecessary expulsion of the Acadians between 1755 and 1763.

Gust Mutter, the son of Gustav the original settler, was born in Hatton and recalled that “Clara’s accounts of better conditions in the Macoun area convinced Dad and a couple of our neighbours to look for greener pastures.”⁷⁷ In 1926, they took the barn apart board by board, straightened out the nails for reuse, and shipped the barn, the nails, and the women to the south-east by train; the men followed in an old Model-T Ford, a journey that took three days.

The above snapshots of mass removal and evacuation between 1921 and 1926 demonstrate a crucial point. Auld and the department could not claim ignorance. They clearly knew what was occurring in the drylands. This is not the question. The problem was that it seems as though the province, guided and influenced by the painfully abstract and highly influential F.H. Auld, was using the lives of the settlers to prop up and sustain rural development in an area that many at the time felt should not have been settled in the first place. As indicated before, there was only one way in which settlement could be “undone” and that was land abandonment. The Dominion government was less opposed to undoing settlement than was the province. But the province called the shots on the south plains and within the province, those shots were called, or at least directed by F.H. Auld: a forty-year veteran of the department, Auld outlasted half a dozen premiers, and a dozen agriculture ministers and almost to the very end persisted in seeing these events as non-exceptional.

Using impeccable logic, for example, Auld (who was raised on Prince Edward Island and so we can legitimately question the level of his understanding about his adopted province) explained to Swift Current area settler Thomas Lannan that merchants do not come begging for assistance when they fail and therefore settlers and farmers should not come begging for assistance either. Indeed, Auld was “unable to see why there should be any distinction raised between various classes in the community.”⁷⁸ Although Auld admitted that the federal government “probably [has] a moral obligation” to help burned-out settlers, he stated that the province did not. Auld told Lannan to go and work on a harvest crew or a road-building gang “for a year or two.”⁷⁹ One doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

Deploying his fearsome logic-chopping abilities, Auld raised an interesting and today still compelling argument. Why *should* farmers come begging for help when no one else does; why should distinctions be drawn between the various classes in the community? Today the matter is more complex but in the 1920s it was still fairly simple. Settlers formed the vanguard of that class of people who would build, develop, and sustain the province

of Saskatchewan. Premier Walter Scott and Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier did not peg their hopes on merchants, cattlemen, industry, or real estate in the development of the west: both governments explicitly stated that *agriculture* would be the basic building block of the province. Settlers would grow and export natural resources and commodities such as wheat; eastern industry would have captive markets. This is the basic theme of Canadian history: the west was the colony of a colony and the settlers were that one single crucial component in nation-building that allowed this province to develop and expand. For their part, the settlers saw agriculture as an opportunity to be free men, freed from their lives as tenant farmers, servants, and stevedores, and in some instances freed from slavery in the United States. Farming offered men freedom; that was true then and it is true today.

The relationship, then, between settler and government was mutually agreeable. Saskatchewan was not built by merchants or speculators or industry: it was built by agricultural pioneers. The province explicitly recognized this. And it is here in this special, nation-building relationship between government and agriculture out of which develops the moral obligation to help and this is precisely why distinctions between the various classes in the community *should* have been made by Auld and the government in the 1920s. But Auld, being from Prince Edward Island, never understood this. Instead of helping with evacuations (the recommendations of two commissions), Auld and the province put the men to work on road gangs to make sure they stayed put. During the crop failure year of 1919, for example, 1,213 men were put to work on road-building gangs on the south plains.⁸⁰

For all of Auld's hair-splitting, reasoning, and prevarication, the province finally did manage to piece together some kind of plan to get the settlers out of the south plains (this was the plan under which the Konschuhs were moved). And it seems as though it was an American settler who helped, at least in part, by drawing attention to conditions about which the province was likely unaware. In 1922, the sixth year of continuous crop failure in the drylands, Anton Huelskamp, his wife Nettie, and their two daughters Katherine and Polly were all living (perhaps a better word is existing) in the starvation-threatened RM of Mantario. In the dry summer of 1921 (the same year in which half of Hatton and all of its hope would burn to the ground), and giving credence to the suggestion that the people were starving for want of oats, the Huelskamp's were obliged to feed upon "porcupine stew." But even in starvation there can be humour. With a lightness of heart, little Polly recalled years later that one evening in the dry years, a John Deere collection agent appeared at their home. A visitation by a collection agent

is never a good thing but the Huelskamp's offered him a seat at their dinner table and fed him a bowl of this stew on which he apparently gagged.⁸¹

In 1922, Huelskamp penned a four-page letter of distress to Premier Charles Dunning outlining his predicament and that of his neighbours and his RM. "We have been six years without a crop," he wrote, "and near as long without rain" and he raised the compelling philosophical query "is it fair or is it right" that the province should not aid its settlers in relocating to better lands under these circumstances.⁸²

Huelskamp estimated that "hundreds" of settlers had already fled the region by 1922, and those with no money left were seen simply "walking out." According to his estimation, loan companies owned two-thirds of the homesteads and pre-emptions in the district. The four-quarter farm he had built up had been advertised for sale for some time in both Canadian and American newspapers but he could not sell it. Huelskamp stated the simple and obvious truth: "I could rent any number of good safe farms if I could get my stock and machinery out of here."⁸³ But he was unable to do that, and that was the problem.

Premier Dunning's blithe response to Huelskamp was characteristic of so much of what occurred during the dryland crisis. Dunning, apparently taking his cue from Auld, was "pleased to be able to state" that the conditions Huelskamp described affected "only a small area."⁸⁴ Dunning pointed out that the province was already providing aid to stricken settlers, a statement which was not, strictly speaking, very accurate. As per their responsibility, the RMs were obliged to borrow money for relief aid for the settlers who would then pay back the relief loan with the proceeds from the following year's crop. Since they couldn't grow anything, they couldn't repay the loans to say nothing of paying taxes. It was the RMs who borrowed money for relief from the banks and the RMs that took land as security, and the RMs that were responsible for debt collection, though the province acted as a guarantor. Huelskamp was pleading for evacuation and that only the province could arrange.

Dunning answered Huelskamp's philosophical query of the rightness and fairness of the province's actions by saying that it was not the province's problem: "we have not been able to see our way clear to assume a responsibility which, properly speaking, belongs to the federal government in connection with opening up unsuitable lands for settlement."⁸⁵ Dunning, however, agreed to send out an investigator from the province's field crops division to establish the veracity of Huelskamp's claims. Apart from the breezy road tour of the sub-committee of the Better Farming Commission,

the late summer of 1922 appears to have been one of the first times that the province undertook a ground-level investigation of any district in the western area of the drybelt.

The speedy and efficient J.M. Smith arrived on the scene later that summer. He spent three days with the Huelskamps, toured the RM, asked questions, probed, investigated, and tried to determine the extent of the devastation. His report was essentially a recapitulation of Huelskamp's letter to the premier. Smith agreed Huelskamp was in trouble: "his land is a tough proposition."⁸⁶ The RM, Smith noted, was overrun with Russian thistle and the average wheat yield in the past six years was between five and eight bushels per acre, though, in an appropriate absurdity, Smith noted "[this district] probably gets more rain than other RMs" in the area.

Smith went on at length about the district and its suitability for farming. The land itself was excessively sandy, with too many rocks and too much alkali.⁸⁷ "Community effort," like hope down Hatton way, "[was] not very apparent." He finished by saying the Municipality overall "is a poor one." As for hope, that precious and mysterious commodity that underpinned the migrations of most people into the Last Best West, there was none left in the Huelskamp household, and Smith duly noted "[Anton's] wife, by the way, is the more emphatic of the two on this point."⁸⁸

During the course of his fact-finding mission, though, Smith was cornered by a number of farmers in the district who asked him an awkward question. It seemed that it was not just Huelskamp but many others in the region who had heard that Alberta was evacuating its settlers out of its drylands. Huelskamp's neighbours wanted to know what Saskatchewan was doing in this regard. The very question betrayed the fact that settlers were not aware that evacuation and second homesteads were the essential recommendations of the 1920 Better Farming Conference. All that Smith could tell them was that he "knew [of] no such assistance" and characteristically added "the dominion government had control of such matters."⁸⁹ Smith wrapped up his investigation shortly after.

Time passed and Huelskamp heard nothing more from the province. On a chill, late October day, he borrowed money from a neighbour, packed what he could into a horse-drawn cart and abandoned Masonville, leaving behind most of the machinery, the land, the house, and six years labour.⁹⁰ Huelskamp later explained to Dunning in 1923 that "there was no feed to keep the stock through the winter" so they were compelled to leave because arrangements had at last been made in Brock, where he would rent land located about a hundred miles east of where they had homesteaded.⁹¹ He

asked the province to reimburse him for the move in the hope that he could be pay back his neighbour. But he also wrote for a more important reason: he had heard that many of his old neighbours had “secur[ed] transportation out” at provincial expense.

It seems that in the six months between the departure of Smith and Huleskamp’s departure for Brock the province had finally agreed to sign onto an existing removal plan developed by the Alberta government in 1922. Other farmers who had left the Alsask district had also requested to be reimbursed. But Auld refused Huelskamp. If Huelskamp was given aid, Auld carefully reasoned, then everyone who left prior to the agreement would be entitled, and Auld felt “it was better not to establish a precedent of this kind.”⁹² This mass rejection of aid helps explain, in part, how it came to be that the Department of Agriculture could claim that the land abandonment was only ever a minor problem at best. According to the department’s own statistics, just 187 people received evacuation aid in 1923.⁹³

Huelskamp received his letter of refusal in late spring 1923. Upon reading the contents of the letter, he turned the paper over and scrawled on the reverse side a brief message pregnant with meaning and promptly mailed it back to the provincial Department of Agriculture: “this letter might be marked as, ‘One of the principal reasons why so many of our settlers are going south.’”⁹⁴ The man who seemed to have played a role in prompting the province to accept at least some of the responsibilities recommended by the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Farming Conditions was himself denied aid.

Developing a removal plan was not an easy task, particularly for a government that quailed and backed away from anything that even resembled responsibility. This reluctance was exacerbated by the other pressing question of what to do with the evacuated settlers. Where do they go? It was one thing to evacuate people, still another to find a place for them to settle so that they might become productive once again.

Alongside the idea that depopulation interfered with the fate of Saskatchewan as an agricultural powerhouse, the second largest difficulty with which the provincial administration struggled was that of responsibility: solving the crisis was not their problem. The Department of Interior explained to Saskatchewan’s Department of Agriculture that in order to effect the evacuation, Saskatchewan would necessarily be responsible for the details of the plan. This included investigating and adjudicating claims for either a simple evacuation or a request for evacuation and a second home-
stead. These responsibilities included the typically more mundane aspects of

removal, which included partial costs, organization, and staff. But an internal Department of Agriculture memo demonstrates precisely how far away the province was from accepting these propositions. The unsigned memo indicates that the province had no staff, no investigative capacities, and “should not be required to incur the expense of providing for such a staff.”⁹⁵ The unidentified writer of the memo argues that the Interior Department’s position unfairly placed on the Saskatchewan government “the onus for rectifying mistakes for which the province had no responsibility.”⁹⁶ Burned-out and bankrupt settlers were “brought here by the federal government” and any provincial involvement in righting that particular wrong “seems as unreasonable as it is unwarranted.”⁹⁷

Clearly, the province was not overly disposed to participate in any plan for evacuating the settlers. But, for as much as it resisted satisfying the portion of its responsibilities contained in the Royal Commission, Saskatchewan was eventually compelled due to either sheer weight of pressure or the nagging sense that they were not entirely without responsibility to at least make an attempt at solving what in 1923 was a problem entering its seventh year. The worst of the Dirty Thirties, we must recall, lasted between eight and nine years.

The Alberta government had already laid the groundwork for evacuations in early 1922 when it developed and organized a plan for settler removal.⁹⁸ Essentially, the participating province, the Department of Interior, and either the CNR or CPR would each pay a third of the costs associated with transporting the belongings of the settlers out of the dry areas to a maximum of two freight cars per family. The families would place all their belongings into these cars, including cattle and machinery. Phrased rather indelicately by the highly abstract CPR freight agent G.H. Smith, settlers were evacuated by a plan “similar to that under which feed oats were moved” in 1922.⁹⁹

A first level of difficulty developed, however, when it became apparent that the rail companies would contribute their third only if the settlers did not change rail service. Neither the CNR nor the CPR would participate in the plan if it turned out that they would be required to move a settler to an area in which the other company was operating. Auld, showing an uncharacteristic streak of softness, requested that “some arrangement” might be developed whereby the settlers would “not be penalized for changing railway allegiances.”¹⁰⁰ But he received a quick and terse reply in a letter whose only words were: “we do not reduce our rates on settler’s effects moving them from a point on the CP line to a point on the CN line.”¹⁰¹ Auld had also

asked about free transportation for settlers and was rebuffed here too when A.E. Hatley replied that “no consideration has been given to transportation of settlers at reduced rates.”¹⁰² Curiously, a year later, in 1924, the Alberta government negotiated the free removal of not just the settler’s belongings but the settlers themselves.¹⁰³

The plan for allowing drought-stricken settlers to file on a second homestead was also not simple. And while the province and Ottawa eventually did come to an agreement on this, like the recommendation to move settlers out, it was accepted by the government of Saskatchewan only grudgingly and after a continuous back-and-forth of letters and imprecation.

By the early 1920s, William Cory, the Deputy Minister of the Interior was a man bent on putting things back the way they were before 1908. Mr. Cory, we will recall, was optimistic in those early years about the possibilities of the south plains, but, by the 1920s, he wasn’t. By this time, “he’d had his fill of tearful tillers from the area.”¹⁰⁴ Instead, the dryland farmer in the words of one department underling became “a liability” and added that “the sooner it is realized he is a failure and cannot continue, the better the country will be.”¹⁰⁵ So, in a roundabout and backhanded way, the Department of Interior was on the side of the settler but only because it had grown weary and tired of hearing how bad things were in the drylands thus being reminded of how wrong their decision had been to open the south and west plains with little or no consideration of practical realities.

Deputy Cory, then, adopted the role of fiscal libertine. Mr. Cory argued that, since he could not understand “what can possibly be gained by paying part of the removal expenses of the settlers and give them fresh grants of land if they are making their fresh start under a load of debt,” he euphemistically urged the province to encourage its settlers to “wind up their affairs.”¹⁰⁶ Deputy Auld did not like this. The Deputy didn’t like this at all. His feelings on the matter were not unusual, though, considering that in 1914 the Deputy had grumbled about the lack of sound accounting principles employed by settlers. The “class of people” he steamed, who would use bankruptcy to apply for a second homestead were “of no particular value as settlers” and he would not countenance the idea to encourage settlers to declare bankruptcy.¹⁰⁷

The province feared that the use of bankruptcy to “wipe the slate clean” would result in “an exodus of people from large areas,” which Auld argued would be “not a little embarrassing.”¹⁰⁸ The erudite Agriculture Minister Charles Hamilton agreed when he said that “a whole lot” of settlers could

apply for a second homestead using the bankruptcy claim and therefore the whole of the south lands could be emptied.

Despite the parochial bleatings of the province, the Department of Interior remained wedded to the bankruptcy notion and even went one step further when it also supported the relaxation of settlement duties and the reduction of the pre-emption fees for the second homestead.¹⁰⁹ There was enough libertinage in this suggestion to make Auld's hair stand on end. But Auld and even Hamilton would have none of it: "I am of the opinion," the latter wrote, "that it is not desirable that settlement duties should be made too easy." Mr. Hamilton informed the Department of Interior that the province would not encourage bankruptcy, it would not support a relaxation of settlement duties, and it would not agree to lower the pre-emption fee and all for the same reason: the province feared a massive out-migration.¹¹⁰

The Department of Interior, though, was obliquely supported in its profligate approach to the problem by its brother-department, the Ministry of Immigration and Colonization. Deputy Minister R. Black suggested that, while up to this point his department had not been targeted for blame by settlers who "became unfortunately located," he insisted that "the time has come when something definite must be done."¹¹¹ After much wrestling with the issue and exploring its many sides and possibilities, the province and Ottawa agreed to shut down the south plains to further settlement and allowed settlers to file on a second homestead.¹¹²

By 1923, three full years after the recommendations of the Royal Commission, the province and the Department of Interior finally had in place the rules governing all elements of the drybelt evacuation, though to call it an evacuation is a bit of a stretch. The province certainly approached the problem with tepid enthusiasm: "The prolonged drought of the last five years," intoned the Department's annual report, "raised doubts in the minds of many farmers as to whether their districts are suitable for successful agriculture." These measured and carefully used words suggest the government still thought that the settlers were wrong and this helps to account for the fact that in 1922, just sixty-two farmers and their families were removed, and just 127 applications were received for second homesteads.¹¹³ The province simply never believed there was a real problem.

In 1924, Interior Minister Charles Stewart defined the evacuation area as the region south of township 31 (just north of Alsask) and extending in a south-east line from that point toward the American border and including the present-day Grasslands National Park.¹¹⁴ The Interior Department,

perhaps at the request of Saskatchewan, also restricted second homesteads to those who had lost a patented or “proved up” homestead.¹¹⁵

Lands boss Charles Stewart was wholly supportive of the second homestead plan because he recognized both the utility and importance of such a plan. “The granting of a fresh homestead entry,” he argued, “is the only thing that will keep these farmers in Canada.”¹¹⁶ And echoing his deputy’s sentiments, Stewart once again tried to interest the province in lighter homestead requirements because “it strikes me that it would be good business sense” to lower the pre-emption fee or reduce interest rates on settlement fees.¹¹⁷ Premier Dunning this time did not respond to Stewart’s suggestions. Instead Deputy Auld took a month working himself into a lather before responding that those who have lost their lands “are the least competent of our settlers [and] are not entitled to further assistance.”¹¹⁸ For Auld, the issue wasn’t about a natural disaster, it was about competence. While he tempered these comments with the observation that many settlers are bankrupt due to “circumstances beyond their control,” Auld would simply not go that extra mile for the settlers.

Certainly nature did nothing to ease the burden. The average yields for the drylands in the mid- to late 1920s are similar, very nearly the same, to the worst of the years between 1917 and 1937: five bushels per acre was grown in some districts in 1924, nine in 1925 and between eight and twelve in 1926.¹¹⁹ Despite the removal plans and the possibility of second homesteads, the settlers remained hopelessly stuck between the hammer and the anvil. Even though the second homestead option existed and there was a half-hearted removal plan of sorts, and even though “hundreds of settlers would take advantage of this,” many more thousands did not.¹²⁰ The Konschuhs were one of the lucky families and they got a ticket out. The Huelskamps were one of the unlucky families, one of the hundreds in his district who simply “walked out.” Officially, the province assisted with the removal of 200 farmers between 1917 and 1924. Between 1917 and 1924, however, the west and south plains lost 10,469 farmers and if we not unreasonably assume that each farmer had a wife and child (the Konschuhs were over a dozen in number, the Huelskamps four; thus, two farmers represents sixteen people), then we arrive at a figure well over 30,000 people.

It is one of the stranger occurrences of the crisis of the 1920s that the land abandonment disaster that was occurring did not really register in official public government documents of the time. We can see how the province toyed with the reality of the situation when we reconsider the Huelskamp example. Anxious, you will recall, not to “set a precedent of this kind,” the

province refused to assist in the evacuation of untold dozens, likely hundreds of settlers in the Mantario region. They simply and quietly “walked out,” as Huelskamp put it, and there are precious few sources that highlight and explore this loss. There are no newspapers from the region that survive to tell the story, no pictures, no editorials.

This failure of the crisis to register in the public mind was not by accident but rather by design. Debt mediation was reintroduced in 1920 and was explicitly designed to deal with the crop failures in the south and western parts of the province; debt mediation was actually a bit of a sop, a concession, because there had been calls for a debt moratorium. Historian David Jones explains that the Saskatchewan government went to great lengths to keep quiet about all the talk of a moratorium on debt and of the growing crisis on the south and west plains. The province made a deliberate point of keeping meetings about the issue out of the press.¹²¹ As Dr. Jones observes, “the collapse of the dry country made such liars out of so many of them that reports of it were hardly appreciated,” and, as a consequence, there are very few references to this story in the press. Stories frequently bubble up in local community histories (the Huelskamps and the Konschuhs, for example) and the crisis scars virtually every page of municipal minutes from those years. But in the press, and so in the public mind, there is only silence. The long-time editor of *The Farm and Ranch Review*, C.W. Peterson, observed in 1921 that “a fight is being waged in some of these dry areas in Alberta and Saskatchewan that the general public knows little about.”¹²² Little was known about the crisis at the time and so it becomes easier to understand how it was dumped into the dustbin of history and forgotten about.

Auld never referred to the larger exodus of which the Huelskamp family was a part, and he minimized the smaller “official” one when he noted that “it would have been remarkable if some of those who took up land had not decided that their choice was unsatisfactory.”¹²³ In 1925, he actually blamed the settlers for the problems they were in when he said that lands were homesteaded “without due consideration of the quality,” unwilling to acknowledge that most settlers trusted that the government would not deliberately settle unfit lands, and that the promotional material for the south Saskatchewan region was not a lie, that the area was in fact “a land blessed of the Gods – a land over which bending nature ever smiles and into whose cradle she emptied her golden horn.”¹²⁴ The settlers sincerely believed that summer-fallow was a guarantee against all elements of nature – recall what the Bickleigh area farmers said about following the best practices and

still losing heavily. There was a not-insubstantial amount of implicit trust between the settlers and the governments and that trust was often abused.

Furthermore, Auld denied the existence of an area prone to drought and crop failure when, deploying a kind of pre-‘post-modern’ reductive logic, he said that “such lands” occur in every province and in Saskatchewan “are not confined to the ... southwest.”¹²⁵ From start to finish, from 1917 to 1924, Auld and the province retreated from either practical or moral responsibility; they downplayed the crisis and even went so far as to hide the problem from the media and the public as it mushroomed to greater and greater proportions. Auld’s refusal to admit to the existence of a dry area would survive all the way down to the 1930s when that belief was finally and with much sweat and tears, bludgeoned out of him.

The province feared depopulation and refused to countenance any suggestion that evacuation would solve the dryland crisis and in fairness one must at least try to understand the province’s impulse rooted as it was in the goal of building a grain-growing Eden. The life of a very large area of the province was at stake and the province did not, like Alberta, pull the plug. But the idea that life in these regions must be sustained *at all costs* necessarily resulted in a striking disregard for the existence of the settlers in the drylands (the whole “go work on a road-building gang” sentiment seems preposterous). This disregard is all the more striking when one considers that Alberta had, by 1924, long since committed to removing its settlers from the drylands. But then again, Alberta and Saskatchewan handled the crisis differently.

Unlike Alberta, the fate of Saskatchewan was tied exclusively to wheat production. The belief that wheat farming was the only formula for success in Saskatchewan was a belief that hindered the response of the province to the crisis. That same belief also resulted in deep self-inflicted wounds for the settler who persisted in growing wheat to the exclusion of everything else. Vidora-district farmer David Stonehouse was one of those settlers who suffered in the crisis and he spoke very deep truth when he explained to Auld that “it is not possible to make things what they ought to be unless one sees clearly what they are.”¹²⁶ Thomas Lannan down Ingebrit way argued that “any man of ordinary intelligence who has been on the job here since 1917 knows what this country is and knows that it will never do for farming.”¹²⁷ The province simply would not acknowledge this truth.

While the government fiddled and the settlers burned, the province’s rural municipalities did not fare much better. Long before the days of handsome, neon-lit federal aid packages, settlers in trouble were expected to go

the local RM office for relief. The same was true in Alberta. Carl Anderson settled in the Carlstadt (later Alderson) district in 1910 and he recalls that there was no government assistance, no bonuses or acreage payments, no drought assistance: “if a school was built, it was up to the people living there” to get it done.¹²⁸

In both Alberta and Saskatchewan, there was a steady flow of people into and out of RM offices. It was here that settlers could obtain flour, fodder, coal, seed grains, and other necessities of life. The RM office, then as now, was a crucial and highly important element of life in rural Saskatchewan. RMs were the basic building block of rural Saskatchewan. In the early frontier years, and indeed down to today, all roads led to or through the reeves and councilmen of these tiny political units.

One of Saskatchewan Premier Walter Scott’s first tasks was the establishment of “territorial units” (RMs) to be comprised of nine townships (1,298 quarter sections) in rural Saskatchewan.¹²⁹ By 1914, 295 RMs were established and functioning as local administrative and political units, a testament to the rapid growth of the province.¹³⁰ These local political units were responsible at the ground level for executing Scott’s vision for a rural, wheat-growing Eden. The municipalities were responsible for a number of mundane yet vitally important elements in the development of rural Saskatchewan: local road and bridge construction, local telephone service, financing their own existence based on tax collections from settlers, and, sadly as it would prove, “granting aid or relief to a needy person.”¹³¹

The editors of Saskatchewan’s first guide to municipal bylaws assured the local administrators and councillors that they were engaged in a noble calling: “The man who gives his time and energy to the work of improving the government and institutions of his home municipality is engaged in one of the noblest employments open to subjects of a free nation.”¹³² This grand sentiment is echoed by that profound and thoughtful nineteenth-century French historian/thinker/aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville. He felt that “[municipal government] is the only association so well rooted in nature that wherever men assemble it forms itself.”¹³³ De Tocqueville added that “man creates Kingdoms and Republics but townships [RMs] seem to spring directly from the Hand of God.”¹³⁴ De Toqueville’s famous work *Democracy in America*, from which these quotes are derived, was likely available in rural Saskatchewan in the 1920s in those handsome red faux-leather editions and no doubt the men of the RMs stopped and reflected upon those ennobling words in the 1920s. By the 1930s, the councillors, reeves, administrators (and the local debt collectors) could only stand staring in disbelief,

bewildered, and struck dumb by the tempest barrelling down on them like a freight train and whose effects they were required by law to mitigate.

That RMs in 1918 were about to embark on a difficult course of action was not lost on the Department of Municipal Affairs. Deputy Minister J.N. Bayne noted that “under normal conditions, councils are wary of indulging in seed grain distribution owing to the difficulties so often experienced in securing repayment.”¹³⁵ Bayne girded the RMs for what was to come with a wonderfully Churchillian rhapsody when he said that “while we have seen sunshine and shadow [those RMs] will be stronger and self-sufficient whose fate it was to struggle.”¹³⁶ And struggle they did.

In 1921, the problem had already gone from bad to worse and from thence into abysmal. The federal government had advanced Saskatchewan farmers over half a million dollars just in relief seed between 1918 and 1920; relief aid amounted to \$340,000 in just a couple dozen RMs south of the river during the same time.¹³⁷ Thus it is painfully clear that the RMs were simply much too small to handle the crisis on their own. Bayne noted that the drought “has adversely affected the financial standing” of many municipalities and this fate was “especially true of the municipalities ... in the southwest.”¹³⁸ Bayne sadly observed that banks in 1920 began limiting credit for RMs, as they would do in the 1930s. There was also little and in some instances no money for schools or telephone service. The problem was similar in Alberta. Throughout the 1920s, “feed for both man and beast” was necessary. As in Saskatchewan, debt collection from drought-addled settlers became something of an art, though it was an art to whose peculiar dynamics municipal officials only cryptically refer. Speaking of the collection efforts in Alberta municipalities, one local official offered the slight observation that “active collection of the accounts followed.”¹³⁹ Local taxes, in both Saskatchewan and Alberta, “took a severe beating”¹⁴⁰

Under the Municipal Relief Act, councils were empowered to pass by-laws that allowed them to borrow money from lending institutions. Settlers would receive the relief purchased with this money by means of a promissory note “due on demand.” As security, statutory liens were placed against the lands and property owned by the borrower of the relief.¹⁴¹ Tenant farmers, those who rented land, were required to put up some other form of collateral. As for repayment, the example of the RM of White Valley stands for all: “council shall in each year levy on all the assessable property ... such sum as shall be required to meet the interest on the money borrowed” until settlers were able to pay back the principal.¹⁴²

The RMs, in gallant frontier fashion, faced the crisis with a sense of optimism. RM of Clinworth Councilor Thomas Armstrong believed that the 1919 relief debt could “with every prospect, if the crops are normal this year, be entirely paid.”¹⁴³ That certainly was not the case. By 1920, with relief aid mounting, council passed another by-law, which approved a request for an additional \$15,000 for “needy farmers.”¹⁴⁴ Admirable, noble Clinworth had assumed a relief-debt load of at least \$45,000 in under twenty-four months. During these early years, annual operating budgets could run between \$15,000 and \$25,000; thus, RMs were advancing in relief aid an amount twice as large as their annual operating budgets.

The province also contributed to relief aid but the level at which this occurred remains fairly obscure due to a dearth of records. Unlike the 1930s when aid became an extension of policy, in fact *became* policy, assessing provincial involvement in aid relief during the 1920s is difficult because the records are incomplete and fragmentary. The province, for example, shipped some \$25,450 worth of flour and coal to an unnamed south-west Local Improvement District in 1920.¹⁴⁵ Additionally, government officials attended some two dozen meetings held throughout communities in the drylands (Maple Creek, Mortlach, Leader, and Sceptre), but the ultimate purpose and the outcome of these meetings is lost.

We know that the province asked rural municipalities to submit detailed information on the amount of relief they might need and for how many people and the RM administrators duly submitted this information, sometimes written on borrowed scraps of papers or even table napkins. Municipal official Mr. A.W. Murray, for example, scribbled out a request and informed the province that there were 365 farmers in the RM of Auvergne near Swift Current who cultivated some 56,000 acres of land, and that, all told, the RM would need some \$37,500 in relief aid. No record is available that records relief aid payments to this RM.

Despite the vague and oblique involvement of the province in what was turning out to be a much bigger problem than first thought, relief debt quickly spiralled out of control. This shockingly quick slide prompted Clinworth to tighten up its rules governing relief distribution. Mr. W. L. Lawton moved a motion in 1920 that limited relief to “extreme cases” and settlers would receive it “only after being interviewed and questioned before council.”¹⁴⁶ This officious approach to granting relief aid was perhaps an automatic response for Councillor Lawton because he had served in the Yukon detachment of the North West Mounted Police for some number of

years before marrying the improbably named Bella DeCow and finally settling in Sceptre, Saskatchewan, right on the edge of the Great Sand Hills.¹⁴⁷

These new regulations produced the expected results in Clinworth. In January 1922, just twenty-five settlers received aid after being “interview and questioned” by council.¹⁴⁸ In large measure, Clinworth enacted these restrictions because mounting relief debt played havoc with the RMs ability to function. Two months after that special aid meeting in January, for example, Clinworth came to the sad realization that the local bank was avoiding the RM because councillors had received no response to their request for an operating loan, despite “repeated protests, interviews, telegrams and phone calls.”¹⁴⁹ Clinworth need not have felt bad about being ignored by their banker. South of Hanna, Alberta, the problem had got so bad that the banks stopped lending money for feed or seed.¹⁵⁰ Still, one necessarily appreciates being informed that one’s credit has been cancelled.

The experiences of Clinworth were shared by most other dryland RMs. In early 1922, the RM of White Valley was carrying heavy debt made up by a \$27,500 operating loan that had been taken out because “in the opinion of council, taxes [owed] cannot be collected this year.”¹⁵¹ The relief debt was similar next door in the troubled RM of Reno. Working under a heavy load of debt, council borrowed an additional \$8,380.45 for flour and fodder in 1923.¹⁵² This borrowing continued apace in 1924 and 1925, when some \$13,000 was borrowed for flour, coal, and fodder.¹⁵³

In some instances, exact relief amounts are not provided in the records, but we can still gauge the level of relief that was administered by examining the number of instances in which an RM registered a lien against property. In 1920 alone, for example, the RM of Big Stick registered liens against 152 parcels of land.¹⁵⁴

Relief, unsurprisingly, followed a very basic human pattern: no one wanted to be the first to take it, but once the first settler took relief, the others followed. The RM of White Valley, for example, formulated its first relief loan request for 1920 at its regular meeting in January and at the same time approved aid for just six people totalling \$256.90.¹⁵⁵ One month later, ninety-four families applied for aid, totalling \$16,490.75 in seed and fodder.¹⁵⁶ And as January made its slow and bitter way into February, council approved another seventy-nine applications for coal, flour, and fodder, totalling \$14,265.25.¹⁵⁷ At that same meeting, thirty-three settlers were provided with \$7,992.50 in seed.¹⁵⁸ Thus in just two months, the RM of White Valley assumed a relief debt of \$38,747. This was another good example of why Clinworth slammed the door on aid because, once one person took it, it

seems everyone did. The enormity of the crisis was reflected in the amount of municipal aid distributed across the province during 1920. In this year, just under half a million dollars worth of seed grain was distributed.¹⁵⁹

Certainly it can be pointed out that these figures of hundreds of thousands of dollars seem small and insignificant next to the tens of millions spent on aid during the 1930s, but that critique, of course, misses the point. The Dirty Thirties were different *only* by degree, not by kind. The essential nature and direction are the same: drought, relief aid, bankruptcy, and either land abandonment or evacuation. The province during the 1930s was simply, and finally, much more willing (willing only because there was, finally, no other choice – pictures of settlers dying of starvation would not look good in the promotional material) to spend money on relief aid up to and including paying for the very limited evacuation and resettlement of settlers. The province could no longer escape its responsibilities because the problem seemed to have grown – in fact, did grow – and was also at that time framed against the back-drop of the greater global crisis of the Great Depression.

The financial quick-sand in which the RMs helplessly floundered was the underlying reason why the province undertook the “Pay Your Taxes” newspaper campaign of 1922. Agriculture and Municipal Affairs Minister Charles Hamilton declared that “local institutions should be the first to be considered when deciding whom to pay.”¹⁶⁰ The rather large and handy ad that accompanied the story explained to “financially embarrassed” south and west plains settlers that taxes “provide the lifeblood of your community” and that without taxes “your schools would close, road work would cease [and] all community life would come to a standstill.”¹⁶¹ The ad was accurate on only one of three points: instances of school closure, either temporary or permanent, were characteristic of the crisis. Road work did not cease but instead grew by leaps and bounds. There was never a period in Saskatchewan history when so many roads were built. Saskatchewan between 1914 and 1937 was a road-builders paradise. And instead of a standstill, there was an active movement out of the drylands.

The settlers, however, were not terribly concerned about the financial conditions of the RMs, still less did they care about the message of the “Pay Your Taxes” campaign (“sooner or later all taxes have to be paid, so why not pay yours now”).¹⁶² Most settlers were concerned with survival, or, at the very least, mere existence. As such, rules were broken, which further complicated an already desperate problem.

Merchants, like municipalities, were generally low on the priority list when considering who to pay. Business being what it is in a dry land, merchants were often compelled from sheer necessity to accept promissory notes which, more often than not, were not paid in full as the note required.¹⁶³ The merchants wanted the ability to register liens against crops and they had fairly legitimate justifications for this. Merchants reasoned that since bankers could apply liens against future crops for things such as twine, or wages, then merchants should be able to as well. The merchants felt that summer food supplies advanced against future crop yields were just as legitimate a charge as any other, but it didn't go their way. When a crop was grown, an Alberta shopkeeper recalls, "the banker, the lumberman or implement man grab[bed] it all up by threatening suits or court action."¹⁶⁴ The merchant finished last.

And while the merchants were generally last in line, they can take comfort from the fact that the RM was never that far behind. Instead of handing over, for example, that portion of their crop against which the RMs (or the banker, or the lumber man, or the implement man, *ad nauseam*) had registered liens for security, settlers often sold their grain to whomever would buy it before anyone else could get at it. This abuse of the relief system prompted the RM of White Valley to issue a proclamation, posted at various points within the district, which "demand[ed] payment [for taxes and relief] and point[ed] out the penalty for disposing of a crop while owing for such."¹⁶⁵

Settlers like widower Ms. Catherine Slovak provide a fine example of the problems associated with the disposal of a crop while owing for such. She was conditionally given \$485 in aid relief from the RM "subject to advice from [her] mortgage company that they are prepared to forestay foreclosure proceedings."¹⁶⁶ The loan company granted its assurance to the RM that it would not foreclose and the RM distributed the aid only to find out later in the year that she had sold her oat stacks to Mr. J.M. MacDonald. These stacks were subsequently seized.¹⁶⁷ Council pursued the matter briefly, but, understanding her position and inclining toward leniency, the case was dropped and the stacks remained with Mr. MacDonald. The Slovak case, though, illustrates the point that settlers looked after themselves first and the RM usually came a distant second. Had Slovak resided in the appropriately named RM of Big Stick, however, her fate might have been different.

Big Stick is a heavily German region not too far distant from Hatton, north and west about forty miles. This particular RM was much more aggressive in temperament than its counterparts in White Valley, Clinworth, or Reno. Big Stick embraced debt collection like no other RM did. Perhaps

Big Stick was the very RM that J.N. Bayne had in mind when he informed the Department of Municipal Affairs that “many councils ... are putting forth special efforts to improve the financial standing of their rural municipalities.”¹⁶⁸

Big Stick first approved a by-law that attempted to pursue tax collection on land that had already been lost or signed over to creditors.¹⁶⁹ Council tried inducements in 1922 during the “Pay Your Taxes” campaign when it pledged to exempt from seizure “not more than 25 percent” of any crop planted with relief seed.¹⁷⁰ With Big Stick carrying heavy relief debt, council passed a motion to the effect that the “[municipal] collector be instructed to seize and sell anything on [a] farm” whose owner owed taxes or relief debt.¹⁷¹ Council preceded this motion with a warning posted in the district addressed to “all parties who have received seed grain relief” and demanding “settlement within two weeks.”¹⁷² But still, Big Stick councillors felt they were working with one hand tied behind their backs and so they challenged a provincial statute that prohibited the seizure of agricultural equipment between April and September: Big Stick wanted to be enabled “to seize [property] at any time.”¹⁷³

At the same time as councilmen were wrestling with the debt collection from their neighbours, they were also apparently having difficulty keeping track of the number of people leaving the area. Councillor Begley thus moved a motion to bring some order to the chaos by declaring it “the duty of every councilor to report ... the name of any settler leaving the district.”¹⁷⁴ This frenzy of debt collection and settler-tracking in which Big Stick council was helplessly mired was capped off when it turned its gun sights on horses. Council ordered the shooting of two wild horses that were “trespassing” on nearby land and apparently making a “public nuisance” of themselves. For good measure, the high-strung council agreed to “shoot the two horses” owned by the RM as well.¹⁷⁵

In fairness, Big Stick was not the only RM to show its frustration over a problem with no real solution and which RMs were simply not structurally designed to handle. White Valley, for example, embarked on an aggressive collection campaign as well and agreed to “seize [any] implements or buildings on skids” from farms that looked abandoned.¹⁷⁶ Maple Creek similarly voted to “take any necessary action” to collect tax and relief debt.¹⁷⁷ At the peak of the crisis in 1922, Maple Creek councillor E. Suval argued in favour of exerting “the full force of the law” in debt collection and added “no one shall be exempt.”¹⁷⁸

Alberta dryland municipalities were struck by the same problem between 1917 and 1924. Desperate to collect on the bills incurred by purchasing and distributing “feed, seed, coal and groceries,” an unnamed municipal official, with an understated minimalism that would have made Ernest Hemingway proud, remarked that “farm properties were seized for tax arrears and so forth.”¹⁷⁹ The RM of Clinworth also undertook aggressive collection because it was broke and councillor Thomas Armstrong pointed out that “this municipality cannot carry them [farmers] any longer.”¹⁸⁰

It was not just RMs but the province itself that could no longer carry settlers struck by drought. Premier Martin held a meeting in 1921 with a select group of organizations (which included the young Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities, SARM) to inform them that the province would not be supporting calls for a moratorium on debt: mediation yes, moratorium no. For Premier Martin, embracing the moratorium would be akin to saying the province is bankrupt.¹⁸¹ And in 1921, that was not very far off the mark. The Farm Loans Board was “stretched to the snapping point.” It received 1,500 applications that it could not fill. By 1922, the board had spent \$8.5 million.¹⁸² It was not just the RMs that could not carry farmers any longer; neither could the province.

Unlike Big Stick, however, neither Clinworth nor any of the other RMs sought to challenge the tax statute that limited times of property seizure. Councillors backed away from this approach because, as Clinworth’s W.R. Ducie explained, “given the circumstances, this [was] not an opportune time to make seizures” except when it was plainly evident that a farm had been abandoned, or, to use the RMs archaic phrase, when a farmer had “absconded.”¹⁸³ This reluctance to pursue hyper-aggressive collection measures did not prevent Clinworth, however, from taking “immediate action ... to protect the interests of the municipalities.”¹⁸⁴ It was a fine line between the desire for self-preservation and the desire to help.

Such measured and tempered action, admittedly, also appeared in the RM of Big Stick. Unable to browbeat bankrupt settlers into paying tax and relief debt (and limited in the number of horses RM officials could cathartically shoot), Big Stick instead expanded its earlier 25 per cent seed-relief-crop seizure exemption to 50 per cent. This was an exemption that applied to all exhausted settlers “whose land is under application for title by the municipality.”¹⁸⁵ Big Stick also, in a touching motion during the dying days of such chivalric ideas, declared that debts on all lands owned and worked by widows like Catherine Slovak were cancelled.¹⁸⁶

Municipalities were not the only entities seizing land and property. Third party creditors and loan companies were busy taking land on debt. In some instances, land was free of debt but was simply handed back to the Crown as useless: such was likely the case for Anton Huelskamp of Masonville. As a consequence of these varied threads of bankruptcy, Big Stick urged the province to cancel all non-municipal liens against seized land in 1924 because “a great many quarter sections ... are becoming the property of the municipality” and could not be sold at the ubiquitous November tax sale until all encumbrances were cleared.¹⁸⁷

The crisis of the drylands struck at the very heart of municipal life in innumerable ways. White Valley councillors found themselves so “financially embarrassed” that, “owing to present conditions,” they voted to eliminate their pay. They opted instead to be paid only transportation costs to and from meetings, which in 1922 were held at different locations throughout the RM each month.¹⁸⁸ Up north at Clinworth, owing to the condition of “things in general,” council declined to send anyone to the annual SARM convention.¹⁸⁹ Council also temporarily cancelled all road work because the RM, at that point, was “cut off from any funds at the bank.”¹⁹⁰ North of Clinworth, in the RM of Oakdale (which would lose 250 settlers between 1920 and 1927), the manager of the bank at Coleville boarded the windows, locked the door, and left town in 1922, another sure sign that “things in general” were not good.¹⁹¹

Apparently the bank’s head office felt there was a lack of local business, a reason that the local Grain Growers Association rejected. The GGA, at the same time as it began a search for a new bank, “proteste[ed] against this inefficient system.”¹⁹² Likewise the manager of the Union Bank in Lemsford, just south of Clinworth, also fled. Clinworth councillor W.L. Lawton urged council to undertake efforts at attracting another bank because, in a fit of unreasonable optimism, he proclaimed that “municipal accounts alone would make it a success.”¹⁹³

The most prevalent and universal way in which municipalities were affected by the crisis, and also a fine barometer of the overall general financial health of the RMs, was the matter of schools. At one time or another during the crisis, RMs were required to close schools either temporarily or permanently, and they also reduce or even suspended teacher salaries. RMs and their school boards also frequently amalgamated school districts because of declining population. These problems occurred in the Alberta portion of the drylands as well.¹⁹⁴

Financing schools in a region prone to crop failure was a chronic problem. The RM of Reno explains: “the ability of the Municipality to advance the required yearly school payments depend[s] entirely upon its collection of taxes.”¹⁹⁵ Schools simply could not operate if the settlers could not pay their taxes and taxes could not be paid if the crop failures and abandonment continued. RM of Reno Secretary Treasurer Lewis Harvey pointed out that it cost roughly \$1,000 annually to operate a school and asked how it is possible, given the circumstances, to continue funding local education in this way.¹⁹⁶ Indeed, by 1922, the annual reports of schools in the Alberta drybelt were so saturated with notes regarding the financial failure of this or that school or school district that, as historian David Jones notes, these reports came more to resemble “economic resumes than pedagogical essays.”¹⁹⁷

Reno set out to solve some of the difficulties associated with financing education by various means. School appropriations were reduced in 1920, which lowered the monthly costs from levels that Harvey believed were “excessive,” though no details are given.¹⁹⁸ Long-suffering one-room schoolhouse teachers in Reno were next to feel the effects of abandonment and crop failure as their salaries were reduced because “the opinion of council seemed to be that there was the possibility of further savings under this item.”¹⁹⁹ Reno also took steps to amalgamate its school districts because the population losses had resulted in the presence of school districts without any children.

The beleaguered town of Hatton experienced the same pressures to alter school district boundaries. Having lost about half its population in the 1921 fire and more since that time, the town fathers in 1924 extended the boundaries of the town’s school district further and further into the rural areas, trying to replace the children whose parents had fled with the children of settlers who would eventually leave.²⁰⁰ Dr. Jones notes that many school districts in Alberta engaged in this practice too “aggressively coveting and invading adjoining territory” to widen their tax base.²⁰¹ Sadly for communities like Hatton, which tried this very thing, it only brought “a brief rush of euphoria” because the drought was stronger than the will to stay. The kids left before long.

As they did with relief, most municipalities were obliged to take out lines of credit to keep schools open. Big Stick took out a \$16,000 loan so it could get money to the schools “as soon as the funds [were] available” during the parched year of 1921.²⁰² Securing the loan had actually been the result of an earlier failed effort at collecting overdue taxes in late winter 1921. By 1926, even though abandonment was slowing, Big Stick council

demanded that the province “enact legislation as will place responsibility for financing the schools on the province as a whole” because, as council tersely indicated, it was “impossible to keep schools open owing to repeated crop failures.”²⁰³

The RM of Maple Creek was forced temporarily to shut down all of its schools during the crisis. Councillor G.H. Hoffman explained that, since “the borrowing powers [of the RM] are absolutely exhausted” and, furthermore, since council “is at sea as to how to finance [education] until something definite can be ascertained in regards to credit,” all schools in the district were shut down in 1922. From November of that year until April 1923, and much to the likely delight of young wheat-chewing gun-toting prairie lads, all schools were shut down.²⁰⁴

Maple Creek financed nine schools and this was not an inexpensive proposition. The Haycreek School, for example, cost \$1,000 per year, Somerset cost \$770 and Aylesford was a little more reasonable at \$374.48.²⁰⁵ But for an RM that had to cancel gopher-hunting bounties, these costs were another fiscal mountain council simply did not have the strength to climb. So the RM furnished the school districts with a list of ratepayers whose taxes were in arrears (and again here we must note the re-appearance of the teacher/councillor/friend-turned-debt-collector dynamic) and urged them to do what they could to collect.²⁰⁶ Clinworth followed suit in 1924, shutting down all schools in the district from January to March “in view of the adverse conditions and the probable shortage of funds.”²⁰⁷ Maple Creek also turned over collection of school taxes to the teacher and the local school board and this action too was apparently common practice throughout the drylands. Dr. Jones relates the story of the Crocus Plains school board, which wrote a letter reminding one particular resident that the school cannot function without funds. Then the board members laid it on the line: “If [the tax bill] is not paid by [October] your children will be expelled.”²⁰⁸ Such was education in a dry and dusty land.

The hard-hit RM of Clinworth experienced similar challenges as those faced by other dryland RMs, though in one instance, absurdity bounded into the room but to the delight of no one. The Holborn school district petitioned both council and the provincial Department of Education for a new school and council had very real difficulty restraining its impatience with the request which, fittingly, was approved by the Department of Education. Councillors unanimously rejected the idea, noting the proposed school was to be located “on such poor and sandy lands [that there would be] no prospect of ever collecting any taxes.”²⁰⁹ One can hear the stunned incredulity in

the voices of the councillors. The councilmen regarded the request merely as “another financial burden when the load should be lightened.”

Clinworth also rejected a later request from another school district, which wanted to establish a new school at a new site. Council patiently informed those who had made the request that “the district [was] being depleted of its residents” and they added that “soon there will be no children left.”²¹⁰ The RM of Reno, whacked stupid by drought, wrote to ask the province “whether it [was] necessary to pay school taxes to a district where no school [was] in operation.”²¹¹ In this latter case, settlers had moved on and, once again, there were simply no children left.

The schools crisis was just as bad if not worse across the border in Alberta. The newly elected UFA Premier Herbert Greenfield in 1921 poured money into reopening many of the schools, which, like their counterparts in Saskatchewan, had been closed because the drought had impaired the settlers ability to pay taxes and fund schools.²¹² Premier Greenfield also pledged to assist “farmer sufferers” in planting fall rye seed.

Premier Greenfield’s valiant and noble effort, though, is what is commonly known as ‘throwing good money after bad.’ In the first place, educational infrastructure was in terrible shape. The toilets in a Sunnynook school were so stinking and wretched from lack of care that “the children are unable to use them and are using a barn instead.”²¹³ The barn in a nearby school was in worse shape than the Sunnynook toilets. The barn housed fifteen horses five days a week but for eight months they hadn’t been cleaned and, as a consequence, the kids left their horses tied up outside “rather than wade into the manure.”²¹⁴

In addition to pens and pencils, one dryland teacher in Wardlow, Alberta, also requested a coal pail, a fire shovel, a water pail, a wash basin, a dust pan, a broom, “an axe or an axe handle,” three panes of glass, door knobs, a fence, and, of course, repairs to the barn and other buildings.²¹⁵

The crisis in the schools, the too-heavy burden of debt, and the structure of the relief system: all of these elements contributed to a sense of desperation and, finally, near capitulation and surrender. On average, it seems to have taken between three and four years, from 1919 to 1923, for RMs to be pushed to the breaking point and for dissolution to be openly discussed. Big Stick stands as representative of the thought amongst councillors in the drylands when it drafted a 1922 resolution that reads, in part:

Whereas land in this and other municipalities in south west Saskatchewan is very poor and unsuited to farming;

and whereas occupants of these lands are unable to make an existence on said lands. Therefore be it resolved (that council petition government) to enter into some arrangement with dominion authorities whereby said people be given a chance to locate elsewhere.²¹⁶

Big Stick's resolution was simply restating what the province had been told several times. In 1914, it was the Pope Commission; in 1920, it was the Better Farming Conference; and, in 1921, an internal memo was handed to Premier William Martin that reminded him of the three principal conclusion of the BFC: a soil classification survey, community pastures, and "removal of settlers."²¹⁷ These three points, it is worth nothing here, were the basic founding principles of the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration, which was formally set up in the later 1930s.

This resolution from Big Stick was the result of five years of drought, failure, and the pressures created by providing relief. By 1922, in the words of Big Stick council, the failing settlers had in fact become "a burden to the municipality" and, like Clinworth, council decided it could not carry them anymore.²¹⁸ Clinworth actually sent Mr. Thomas Armstrong and Mr. F.R. Shortreed to a meeting in Regina in 1921 to see about removing settlers "located on too sandy and rocky lands." Big Stick council said unanimously that they were "strongly opposed to the injustice of the [relief] system."²¹⁹ The substance of that resolution would sit undisturbed until 1935, when the always vocal Big Stick would again protest against the relief system, this time under conditions even worse than councillors ever thought possible.

This state of affairs led to calls for dissolution, a move that would have stripped the RMs of all of their responsibilities and autonomy and would have ultimately been the first step toward undoing settlement in the south and west Saskatchewan plains. The town of Hatton, for example, voted itself out of existence when its population dwindled to only a handful in 1934. Big Stick councillors, though, backed away from the idea because they believed "it would not be in the interests of the ratepayers to take a vote against self-government on such short notice."²²⁰

The RM of Reno provides a similar glimpse of what occurred in the drylands at the height of the crisis. Floundering under heavy debt, angry ratepayers in the RM of Reno converged on a one-room schoolhouse on the heat-ravaged plains of Vidora in mid-summer 1921. The group, whose spokesman was Neils Neilson, passed a motion to the effect that they had "no confidence in the officers of RM 51 [and] call upon the reeve and council

of the municipality to resign.”²²¹ This letter was presented to council but was never discussed, at least in an open forum. The RM survived this minor drought-induced revolt long enough to inform the province that council “will not be able to finance applications for relief during the winter” and asked the government to assume the burden.²²² If the intent of Neilson and the others was to force the RM to suspend relief due to fears of bankruptcy and dissolution, thereby compelling the government to assume the burden, then it was a petition that appeared to have been successful.

Support for dissolution grew quite strong in the RM of White Valley. In September 1921, with the RM staggering under relief debt, council agreed to hold a meeting to discuss dissolution because, as they put it, “the expense of self-government can no longer be justified.”²²³ Since council “cannot be asked to pay bills when funds are not available,” it decided that “all applications for relief be denied.” Council passed a resolution at that meeting that asked the province “to immediately disorganize this unit as a municipality or in some way arrange that [the debt load] be minimized.”²²⁴ While the latter half of this resolution obviously held out the hope that the problem could be remedied, the substance reflects the growing and very real desperation in which the municipalities were mired because they had taken on responsibilities too large for their slender shoulders.

Alberta dryland municipalities shared with Saskatchewan exactly the same pressures for dissolution. One of the hardest hit regions of the drylands, the Lomond area in the Municipal District (MD) of Clifton, is a good example: “conditions were hopeless. People were moving away. Taxes and seed grain and relief liens were not being paid and land forfeited for taxes.”²²⁵ After some years of this, it became clearly evident that “special attention to this area was needed” and so finally, in 1937, Clifton was disorganized and put into Special Area Number Four, where it remained until 1951 when a portion of that MD was incorporated into the newly formed County of Vulcan.²²⁶ The very term Special Areas speaks volumes.

Simply cancelling relief aid was obviously the easiest way to solve the problem and Clinworth took steps to that effect in 1921. Earlier in the crisis, in 1920, when it had become clear that the problem did not lessen but in fact grew each year, Clinworth tightened up rules governing aid. Any settler who was approved for aid was granted relief only after being interviewed and questioned by council. By 1921, council moved a motion stopping all relief with the caveat that “only cases of absolute necessity will be considered.”²²⁷ Council member John Buck posted notices to this effect throughout communities within the RM. Big Stick was similarly unable to

continue providing relief aid. Indeed, of the RMs financing road and bridge building, councillors felt the province ought to “do road work themselves and allow the ratepayers to work on road [gangs] to enable them to pay their taxes.”²²⁸

Closed schools, lost and absconding settlers, debt-collection, failure – all of these elements point toward a worsening crisis, but nothing speaks to the issue of chronic land abandonment in the drylands like tax sale registers. These records do not flinch. Literally thousands of parcels of land were seized by municipalities during the course of the crisis because thousands of settlers owed too much money to the RMs. Most of the liens against the lands were registered by the RMs who sought to recover relief costs and tax debt because of crop failure. Tax sales were one of the essential elements in the dryland crisis. The seized land most often represented either a failed settler or one who has fled. The revenue generated by the sale of the lands represented one small way that the still-young municipalities could keep themselves solvent and functioning. In many instances, abandoned land was sold for a mere fifty dollars in back taxes. In fact, F.H. Auld made the confidential suggestion to a member of the Alberta Survey Board that the crisis had the added benefit of “mak[ing] it easier for those who remain to establish themselves.”²²⁹ And, in a way, he was right. Historian Chester Martin noted in 1939 that the size of the average farm in Saskatchewan’s pre-emption districts (the drylands) doubled during the 1920s. That growth likely began at the ubiquitous November tax sale.

Bearing in mind that much of the tax sale information is incomplete, the records that do remain provide a tantalizing glimpse of economic life and explain, in the most basic way possible, what was actually occurring in the drylands during the 1920s. The records for the RM of Reno, for example, show that between 1921 and 1925, 419 parcels of land were seized and sold by the municipality.²³⁰ This tax seizure/sale figure means that, conceivably, 210 settlers abandoned their lands during this time period (each settler likely had a minimum of 320 acres). This obscure picture is enhanced and complemented by the incomplete collection files of the Department of Municipal Affairs, which include relief collection cases for the Vidora district, which was located within the RM of Reno.

E.E. Erikson fled to the south-east corner of Saskatchewan, near Kennedy, just about as far away from the drylands as one can get in Saskatchewan and still farm. He rented the land he left behind to a neighbour. Erikson had \$1,500 in various liens registered against his land and the province tracked him down, demanded payment, and threatened legal

proceedings if the debt was not cleared.²³¹ Erikson explained to the province that he could not afford to repay relief aid because of crop failure, though he promised to give the Department a payment when he could. The Erikson case demonstrates the nub of the problem. He had suffered “five years in succession without a crop,” which was another way of saying he had made no money off the land since he began farming it in 1916.²³² The correspondence stops with an empty and futile promise to pay. In 1926, with the tenant farmer now gone and the land going back to prairie, the file closes with one word: “abandoned.”

The list of the province’s collection agent goes on and it retains a certain ghostly quality: Paul Thack of Vidora, section 9-3-36-3, “back to the United States”; Wilson James of Govenlock, 21-2-29-3, “abandoned”; section 22-2-39-3, “abandoned”; section 27-2-29-3, “crop failure”; section 1-3-29-3, “no answer to my letter”; section 35-2-29-3, “this man is gone.”²³³ A widow who hung on scraping a desperate existence off her farm near the non-existent town of Lonesome Butte found her life “very hard” according to the province’s oddly sympathetic collection agent. He added, “there will be no payment on this [debt] at all this year; perhaps not at any time.”²³⁴

Hugh MacDonald was likewise chased by the province’s collection agents but informed them he could not pay because, like Erikson, he “hasn’t received a cent off that land since 1916.”²³⁵ The file on section 20-3-26-3 closes out four years later in 1926: “land abandoned; should be forfeited.”

Just east of Vidora, in the tiny community of Senate, entire groups of people fled en masse from the dry lands. E.H. Lloyd led the effort to remove forty-six of his fellow Welshman and their families from the Senate region because of drought and failure. They were removed, with government aid, to an area north of Tisdale, where they either rented or purchased land. According to the CNR land agent, “they seem to be well satisfied with the country and the people.”²³⁶

Tax seizures/sales closely followed the arc of drought and crop failure. In the town of Maple Creek, for example, just six lots were sold at the November tax sale in 1915–16, whereas sixty-seven were sold in 1914/15.²³⁷ 1914 was the year the first total crop failure hit the south and west plains. In 1920, the sale figure climbs back up to forty-five. The number of lots sold climbed to fifty-five in 1923, and spiked at 103 in 1924.²³⁸ It is of interest to consider the names of the purchasers of lands at these tax sales. G. Blythman, the owner of the still-extant and flourishing local real estate firm in Maple Creek, was a prominent buyer of these lands, as were some members of the RM council itself. The tax sale records also corroborate the

population losses estimated by the Department of Municipal Affairs: between 1920 and 1926, the town of Maple Creek lost 520 people.²³⁹

In some cases, the tax sale registry is unavailable or non-existent. In this instance it is helpful to consider the number of tax cancellations mentioned in the Minutes of the RM meetings and which, like tax sales, indicate that a property has been abandoned or forfeited in some fashion and thus taxes had been cancelled.

The RM of White Valley cancelled taxes on 140 parcels of land between 1920 and 1924, noting beside some entries that the land had been “abandoned.”²⁴⁰ Big Stick council minutes also reveal what would be found in the tax sale registries if they were available. In one week in 1926, council approved the sale of ten parcels of land seized earlier by the RM. On another arbitrary date, April 1927, nine parcels were sold.²⁴¹ Big Stick, like all other dryland RM’s, obtained this land through seizure.

The long-dissolved RM of Royal Canadian in the Eatonia district seized and sold 426 parcels of land between 1924 and 1927.²⁴² In many instances, the land was simply signed over or “purchased” by the municipality. Oftentimes, the land was bought by prominent members of the community. The name of the physician for Eatonia shows up frequently at the RM’s tax sales. But it was not always the usual suspects purchasing land. At fifty dollars per quarter section, or about thirty cents per acre, the tax sales were, in their own way, very democratic. Low-wage earners such as Mantario teacher Vera Turner, Eatonia Nurse Miss K. Crimp, and Ferryman William Cleghorn all purchased land at these sales.²⁴³ Mr. Cleghorn worked the ferry at Estuary, a town that nestled the banks of the South Saskatchewan River west of Leader. Between 1920 and 1927, that small community lost 302 people.²⁴⁴ Today, aside from a few houses and a cement-encased bank vault, nothing of the town remains. In some instances, entire houses were purchased for a pittance at these sales. G. Schneider bought a house in Clinworth for \$175 on the quarter located at 4-19-24-3.²⁴⁵

For many people, the sales offered a chance to increase land holdings, whatever the cost. Bessarabian immigrant Gottlieb Anhorn (the man whom Hatton council ordered to fill in the cellars in the town properties that he owned because they were a “public nuisance”), had a wife and five children and, being a German from south-Russia, had few places to go when the crisis hit Hatton. So, in true pioneer spirit, Anhorn made the best of a bad situation and “in the year 1925, when neighboring farmers began to move away owing to poor crop conditions, Mr. Anhorn bought and leased additional land.”²⁴⁶

Using tax sales as a barometer still has limits for it does not take into account all of the land seized. Recall the RM of Big Stick trying to wrest a tax debt out of a parcel of land against which liens had been filed by the Beaver Lumber Company. Clinworth councillors were trying to sell land that had been seized or let back to the Department of Interior. Council wrote to the Department of Interior in 1924 and asked that liens be removed against fourteen parcels of land because the encumbrances were blocking the RMs attempts to sell this land.²⁴⁷ Unable to resist a parting shot, councillor James Wardell kindly pointed out the Department had an obligation to cancel the liens because “in the first instance [these lands] should have never been settled.”²⁴⁸

In 1926, Deputy Auld tried to make sense of the crisis that had just passed. Auld had apparently examined the homestead entry records of Montana, records that included the previous occupations of its settlers and, in a radio address delivered that winter, drew parallels with the Saskatchewan experience. In Auld’s view, Montana was settled by people who should not have been farming in the first place: along with the doctors, lawyers, and clerks who tried to farm, the previous occupations of settlers also included “two deep sea divers,” “one world rover,” and “two wrestlers.”²⁴⁹ Making breathtaking leaps of logic, then, Auld concluded that “under these conditions, need we be surprised if there have been some failures [in Saskatchewan].”²⁵⁰

But what he failed to consider is that while drifters, adventurers, and “wrestlers,” certainly made up a not-insignificant part of the *early* settlement years immediately after opening up the drylands in 1908, many of those who abandoned their homesteads during the 1920s were made up of people who had either initially settled the region in the early days or who had come up in the years after 1914. Mr. Anton Huelskamp of the RM of Mantario or Mr. Phillip Kenschuh should be taken as average examples: both farmed in the drylands for about six years before being beaten-to-staggering by the heat in 1923.

It might be argued that the abandonment was caused, in part, by the tendency of settlers to “stake all on one crop,” and this certainly contains more than a little truth. Auld certainly believed that farming for the mere pursuit of cash through the growth of wheat crops was one of the problems that perpetuated the abandonment because “when that crop failed the year’s operations were a total loss.”²⁵¹ Auld had always fervently supported diversification: cows, poultry, hogs, “even some bees.” “Our slogan,” he wistfully told a radio audience in the winter of 1926, “might well be ‘a sideline on every farm.’”²⁵² True enough and indeed there is much to commend Auld’s

assertion that it was neither wise nor good farming to grow wheat to the exclusion of all else.

Auld did not acknowledge, however, the results of a Department of Agriculture report from 1925, which pointed out the excessive costs of diversification. The committee listed six hopelessly obvious reasons to diversify, such as “increased income,” but it found eleven formidable reasons that would prevent diversification. These reasons included the high costs associated with purchasing cattle or chickens, the money required to adapt existing infrastructure, and the high cost of the equipment associated with diversification.²⁵³ For settlers whose average yield per bushel between 1917 and 1927 lay in the five to ten bushels per acre range, for settlers who were busy working on road gangs to feed their families and pay off relief debt, diversification sounded good but repeated monotonous crop failure always kept it just out of reach.

Auld would change his mind when the greatest calamity of all would descend a few short years hence. In 1934, with relief aid spinning out of control into millions, Auld admitted that much of the crisis of the 1930s could have been avoided “by land settlement policy which would have prevented occupancy of sub-marginal lands.”²⁵⁴ With the repeated crises on the south plains, Auld said “we must, finally, judge a locality on its ability to sustain life” and the drylands were insistent on proving they would not.²⁵⁵ But Auld’s epiphany was still a few years in the distance and even then it was provisional, contingent.

At the end of the crisis of the 1920s, ensconced in the pleasing glow of progress and brief prosperity, a persistent and telling sense of disquiet evidently nagged at Auld for he took the unusual step of writing Stanford University in California asking their thoughts and opinions on the south and west plains. Professor C.P. Wright admitted to some confusion. He said the presence of prosperous farmers located next to thousands of abandoned farms “pretty nearly leads one to confess ignorance on the whole situation there.”²⁵⁶ Why should some settlers succeed where thousands of others fail? That remained, for Auld, a question to which there seemed to be no mathematical, structured, logical answer.

And so the 1920s roared. In the late 1920s, the future once again held all of the possible. Deputy Auld, his fellow mandarins, the burned-out settlers, and the beleaguered rural municipalities would be given a few short years respite, a few years of warm and pleasing comfort in which to bask, contented. Ragged and tattered hope would nervously reappear in 1928 (as it did in 1915–16), when pioneers grew one of the biggest crops in the history

of Saskatchewan. But then the exception would exit and make place for the rule. Hope would then exit the south plains for very nearly a full decade, making room, as it did in 1917, for “hardship, misery ... and gloom.” The rehearsals were over. The roof caved in. The wolf finally arrived at the door. The bill had finally come due.