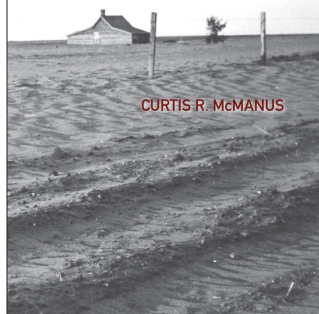


## Happyland

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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## Hard Times

*Dignity*: (noun) the state or quality of being worthy of respect. From the Latin *dignus*, ‘worthy.’

*Indignity*: (noun) treatment or circumstances that cause one to feel shame or lose one’s dignity.

*Agony*: (noun) extreme suffering. From the Greek *agon*, ‘contest.’ – *Oxford English Dictionary*

The Dirty Thirties is what it is because of its gruesome soul-destroying quality. It is this element of the crisis that causes us to remember that decade when it is remembered at all in these modern times. And while Saskatchewan people may no longer have a very strong appreciation of what that period actually meant then or means today, it still forms a basic part of the prairie mind. The descendants of settlers have all heard tales from their grandmothers and grandfathers of what it was like during those years. Often as not, these tales are endured by young prairie kids whose only fault lay in not being quick enough to escape the nimble and remarkably virile clutches of their elders who merely wish to remind the desperate child of the struggles of the early years (in addition to imparting to the youngster the value of a nickel, which in their day could feed a person for a week, or so they said). But even when we re-enter the Dirty Thirties from the safe and comfortable distance of seventy years, we are still struck by the intense levels of frustration, futility, and despair, and it is this affective element of the crisis that defines and characterizes the Dirty Thirties. Bruce Hutchinson

was a journalist who travelled throughout the south plains during the worst years of the Thirties. He characterizes the Dirty Thirties this way: “people lived worse than the poorest peasantry of Europe.”<sup>1</sup>

The Dirty Thirties also contains an element of which most people seem unaware: absurdity. It sidles up slowly and silently between 1914 and 1924, making brief appearances here and there, and then, after 1929, it leaves its impression on virtually everything it touches. So while there are undeniable levels of the sad and tragic, there is also this strange parallel dynamic of the sublimely ridiculous that courses through the entire decade and at which one must either laugh or cry. One so frequently crosses despair and finds oneself surrounded by so much of the sublimely ridiculous that it is hard to believe that it was tolerated for one year, to say nothing of ten years, or twenty-five. Absurdity casts a very long shadow (or, perversely, brightens its battleship-grey colours) over the entire decade.

Principally, though, the 1930s were grim beyond measure. And while there were positive elements in abundance like strength, courage, determination, and persistence (above all, persistence), the primary colours of the decade are negative, and this is the principal reason why we remember the event when we remember it at all, anymore: it was a massive assault on and test of the self-respect, dignity, and pride of the people of Saskatchewan. The Dirty Thirties implicitly asked these questions: how long can a man retain his pride and dignity and walk with his head up when he is compelled to ask the village council to provide him with underwear? How long can a man resist the all-too-human temptation toward contempt for the man who asks to be supplied with underwear? At its most basic level, the Dirty Thirties was a soul-destroyer. It was also ridiculous.

The “unholy mess” of the 1930s was produced by the confluence and convergence of several elements all at once. As historian John Archer puts it, “drought, insect pests, erosion, low prices for produce and high winds occurred simultaneously.”<sup>2</sup> A quick year-by-year sketch of the 1930s supports Archer’s characterization: 1929 to 1931 featured crop failures and “black blizzards” (dust storms); 1932 was not so bad in some areas and a crop of sorts was even grown in some areas of the drylands; 1933 and 1934 were so bad that “for the first time in living memory” summer fairs were cancelled; 1935 moderated; 1936 was “a disaster,” and 1937 was worse than 1936.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the drought of 1937 would prompt the last of the great evacuations and abandonments of that decade. Saskatchewan, according to Mr. James Gray, had the worst of it all: “worst drought, worst grasshoppers, worst rust, worst cutworms and worst hail.”<sup>4</sup> In sum, and speaking of the south and

west plains, Mr. Archer explains that “the weather was bad all of the time and worse sometimes.”<sup>5</sup>

For all the importance of drought on the south plains between 1914 and 1937, however, there is a fairly broad body of thought that places the drought second or even lower on the myriad list of minor and major problems that afflicted Saskatchewan during the 1930s. Historian Bill Waiser, for example, argues that “the real challenge” in the 1930s was “not trying to grow enough wheat but getting a decent price for it.”<sup>6</sup> He notes that the 1932 harvest was the largest crop since 1928 but settlers were only paid thirty-five cents per bushel for it.

In addition to the obvious conceptual problems associated with using a single year as a stand-in for an entire decade, this approach to the Thirties emphasizes the economic problem (“The Great Depression”) at the expense of the drought and all its attendant misery, and thus Dr. Waiser glides by the fact that depending on where a settler lived the principal problem was in fact very different. Indeed, if all sources of information were removed from the sod and paper shacks of south and west plains settlers, they may not have ever even known that in addition to drought they were also caught up in a global economic crisis.

Simply put, there were vast areas in Saskatchewan that were not affected by the drought at all, and thus for them, yes, commodity prices and the economic problems associated with the Great Depression were the principal concerns. The life-sucking drought did not register for these lucky ones and thus Dr. Waiser’s argument applies only to something like half of agricultural Saskatchewan. The rural municipality of Pinto Creek provides a wonderfully challenging example of what did *not* occur in most of Saskatchewan.

Located south-east of Swift Current, settlers in this RM grew five bushels of wheat in 1929, three in 1930, zero in 1931, four in the good year of 1932, one in 1933, one in 1934, eight in 1935, three in 1936, zero in 1937, and six in 1938.<sup>7</sup> When the Prairie Farm Assistance Act was passed in 1939, the federal government settled on what we will call the ‘five bushel benchmark’: if a crop district fell below five bushels per acre, it was a disaster zone requiring aid. Essentially, Pinto Creek was a drought-induced disaster zone for ten years. This same level of failure occurred in RMs throughout the south and west plains. Happyland, 200 kilometres north-west of Pinto Creek, grew an average of six bushels per acre between 1929 and 1938.<sup>8</sup> The same was true in Mankota, Swift Current, Maple Creek, Clinworth, Reno, White Valley, Big Stick, and in all the RMs that surrounded them.

The eastern and northern grain-belts simply had a much different experience during the Dirty Thirties. The RM of Sliding Hills in the Melville district grew an average of fifteen bushels per acre during the 1930s, as did the RMs that surrounded that district. Carrot Valley, the home riding of Prime Minister R.B. Bennett's federal agriculture minister, Robert Weir, grew twenty-three bushels per acre in 1931.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, the RMs of Reno, Pinto Creek, Mankota, Big Stick, Maple Creek, Swift Current, and Deer Forks grew between zero and four bushels per acre in 1931. The eastern RM of Fertile Belt went four years without any rural relief aid and even when it received it in the worst year, 1937, it still only amounted to \$115,165.<sup>10</sup> Mankota and Pinto Creek received just over \$3 million in direct relief and seed grains during the decade.

Saskatchewan's Department of Agriculture divided the province up into nine crop districts and the worst of the drought was limited to just four out of the nine. The land abandonment crisis of the 1920s registered *only* in the south-west and west plains of Saskatchewan, and the drought of the 1930s was essentially an extension of those basic lines. In 1929, the drought spilled its banks as it were and flooded down onto the Regina Plains and into the extreme south-east corner. Crop districts one (Oxbow-Carlyle), two (Weyburn-Radville), three (Moose Jaw-Mossbank), and four (Swift Current-Maple Creek) were struck the hardest in the 1930s. In addition to the drought that periodically hammered away at much of the south-east corner, there was also a continual problem in that region with rust, both of which scourges ruined crops with equal facility.

But north and east of this region, crop districts averaged between eight and fifteen bushels per acre and the yield averages stay well above ten to fifteen for the entire decade when one gets into the northern grain-belt of Preeceville, Star City, Saskatoon, and North Battleford. In 1932, the good year, crop district nine in the North Battleford-St. Walburg area averaged twenty-three bushels per acre while crop district two around Weyburn averaged one.<sup>11</sup> Even in the worst year, 1937, while crop district five in east central Saskatchewan grew a quite respectable fifteen bushels per acre, crop district four in the south-west grew nothing. Literally nothing. In 1933, crop districts three, four, and seven (Kindersley-Leader-Swift Current-Maple Creek) grew just 7 million bushels of wheat in a province that grew 128 million.

So certainly, for some settlers, the problem was in fact pricing. But for those luckless souls on the south and west plains that make up roughly half of agricultural Saskatchewan, there was simply nothing to sell. The wheat

had been burned to a crisp and where in good years a proud and healthy four-foot-high stand of wheat could be seen (even five and six feet, depending on the variety of seed used), in the bad years the crop was a scabby, scrubby, sparse field of failure that would be lucky if it grew six inches. The settlers in the RM of Pinto Creek, whose existence during the thirties was characterized by desperation and starvation, could only dream about having the problems of the RM of Sliding Hills.

The drought was bad enough, but what made it punitively worse were the dust storms. It is this element of the crisis that gives it its grim countenance, its resonance. The dust storms were not the cause of the drought but rather one of its symptoms. Under repeated instructions from the Department of Agriculture, settlers had hammered away at the soil with the summer-fallow method until nothing was left. Yes, it was a wonderful way to conserve moisture, and yes it killed weeds like nothing else could, but it would grind and granulate the dirt and thus in dry years “the pulverized, fibreless topsoil was ready to fly with the first wind.”<sup>12</sup> And that’s exactly what it did. W.R. Motherwell and Angus McKay and the other dryland farming advocates of the early settlement years could only sit back silently, stunned at what their admonitions had wrought.

Dust storms are a very foreign concept today, difficult to grasp, and even harder to appreciate because they are so rooted in a specific time and place. They occurred so very long ago and have not occurred on the same magnitude since. We apprehend dust storms only in books, family legends, and local myth: they are an abstraction. It is a commonly told story that the skies blackened and day seemed as night. Former Hatton resident Laura Phaff affirms that early settlers “often had to light their kerosene lamps in the middle of the day” so that they could see.<sup>13</sup> Dust storms of this size and enormity have not occurred since, and so the idea of one is strange, foreign almost. It is worth quoting at length the words of one observer who witnessed these spectacles:

No one who has not experienced one can possibly imagine the depressing and nerve-wracking effect of a really bad dust blizzard. Something happens to the farmer himself as he sees, year after year, black clouds of dust sweeping over his fields and in some cases carrying away the top soil and with it the seed he has sown or in other cases cutting down and burying beyond recovery the grain that has succeeded in surviving the drought and has begun to give some promise of a possible harvest ...

these storms have often continued for days and while they were in progress they produced living conditions that were almost unendurable, even to the most courageous.<sup>14</sup>

With less finesse, though perhaps with more accuracy, one settler recalled that “the winds came and blew the goddamned country right out from under our feet.”<sup>15</sup>

Kathleen Meyer nee Armson was the daughter of George and Margaret Armson who had come to the south plains from Manitoba in 1910. They settled in Shamrock country just north and west of Mankota. She recalls that “when the skies began to darken” her father would send them into the cellar for safety. She feared the dust storms but even then she never realized their full import: “I didn’t realize the devastation it meant, nor the worry it must have been for our parents.”<sup>16</sup>

The first dust storm in Saskatchewan quite possibly occurred on 24 May 1929. Frank Ulm of the Aneroid area remembers that day well. “A huge ominous black cloud” came rolling across the south plains. “It grew larger and uglier by the minute. I remember my parents looking at each other with worried looks.” Mr. Ulm’s father told his young boy to run as fast as he could and help his neighbour unhitch his team and help get the horses in the barn. After accomplishing this, “we all went to the basement. In a very few minutes the wind was really howling and it became so dark that we lit the old coal oil lantern ... little did we realize that this was the beginning of the Dirty Thirties.”<sup>17</sup> Mr. Ulm is recalling a dust storm that occurred in the early spring of 1929, and this reinforces the point that these black blizzards were a consequence, a continuation, of what had occurred in the 1920s. The soil did not magically become sand in 1929: there was a problem *long* before the Dirty Thirties hit.

Mrs. Marjory Malcolm recalls a dust storm that struck in 1930 and, for three days and nights, the family was holed up inside the house with the windows and doors closed up, the lamps burning, and wet cloth on everybody’s faces so they could breathe. The house was full of dust, so much so that “you could write your name in the table,” which Mrs. Malcolm likely did.<sup>18</sup>

Writing one’s name in the dust that had settled in the house after a dust storm is a unique and novel experience but there were also other ways in which one could enjoy a calamity. Ida and Charlie Fleck’s little boys “enjoyed the fun of playing with dirt on the floor which had blown through the cracks of the house,” although finding fun in playing with dirt does

certainly seem to suggest a certain poverty of choices for other types of fun.<sup>19</sup> Dirt, however, was one of the very few things that settlers had plenty of. (Grasshoppers and wind were the other two.) It has been estimated that farms lost from one hundred to one thousand tons of earth from their lands in dust storms.<sup>20</sup>

It is easy to forget that dust storms, at least in the early years before they became a natural part of the climate of the south plains, actually caused a deep fear and worry. The sense of panic in the memories of the storms is palpable. It is a panic and fear similar to that caused by a tornado or a hurricane. Dust storms were unknown, strange, and violent, and so it is likewise easy to bypass the idea that they were also beautiful. Very nearly every natural occurrence contains within it some sort of beauty or, perhaps better stated, an element that mesmerizes, stuns, and leaves one staring, mouth agape in wonderment. Dust storms were like that. "When you were in one" a settler wrote, "they were terrible; when they were on the horizon, they were beautiful."<sup>21</sup>

These dust storms, a by-product of summer-fallowing, were even news all the way over in England where a certain newspaper columnist by the name of A.G. Street, no doubt taking delight in the convulsions wracking the pained body of the mother country's former colonial possession, argued that the storms were a kind of cosmic fair-play, that they were in some divine way punishment for the settlers' barbaric insensitivity to the earth. He blamed the settlers for the storms, alleging that farmers had "mined the land" taking out all that was good and then put nothing back.<sup>22</sup> It was a fairly harsh and certainly ill-timed criticism (one never needs to be reminded that one is to blame for a disaster while the disaster is occurring), but it was certainly a criticism that contained some merit, at least where his identification of the cause of the dust storms were concerned.

South plains Wood Mountain Member of Parliament T.F. Donnelly was stung by this criticism (that it came from an Englishman likely made the sting worse), and he argued in the House of Commons that "no article could be more misleading."<sup>23</sup> Deploying a fairly simple-minded syllogistic logic, Donnelly argued that if Street's cross-Atlantic criticism were correct, then central Canada would have no crop and the west "would be having crops" because the older parts of Canada "would be mined and would run out first ... but the very opposite is true."<sup>24</sup> One admires Mr. Donnelly's defence of his settler constituents but the point must be grudgingly conceded to Mr. Street on this exchange.



Dust storms, then, represent many things. They were an allegorical expression of the many thousands of lives that came unravelled in the droughts. They were hard and brutal proof of the peculiar nature of the south and west plains ("black blizzards" did not happen anywhere else in Canada). As one settler observed, dust storms were evidence of nature on the loose, of nature gone mad. Dust storms were the practical consequences of poorly thought out, misguided ideas. Dust storms represented in a way nothing else could the absolute and total destruction of the south and west plains wheat economy. And if one were so inclined, as the biblical prophet Jeremiah certainly was, one could see dust storms as divine punishment for placing faith in the sub-marginal ideas of man, ideas from men like Mr. Motherwell, Mr. McKay, and Mr. Oliver. Jeremiah 17:5: "Cursed be the man who trusteth in man for he shall be like the heath in the desert ... and will not see when prosperity comes but will live ... in the wastes, in a salt land, not inhabited."

On the south and west plains, then, the dust storms wreaked their strange and bewildering havoc while in the north and east areas of the province, global commodity price failures stretched the farmers of those regions to the breaking point. Thus it was that Saskatchewan achieved something very few jurisdictions on the planet ever did during those years – as historian John Archer notes, agricultural incomes in Saskatchewan dropped into minus figures, an achievement "unmatched in any civilized country."<sup>25</sup> Saskatchewan was the country's wheat-growing paradise, its pride. The Breadbox of the World claimed the promotional literature. Saskatchewan gambled everything it had on wheat. And as Dr. Waiser writes, Saskatchewan, having staked everything on wheat, was "helpless" – utterly and completely helpless.

Given the high absurdity quotient in the drylands, it is fitting that the crisis of the Dirty Thirties was preceded by one of the most bountiful, successful crop years ever experienced in the history of Saskatchewan. Like the elevator-jamming harvests of 1915/1916, which preceded the crisis of the 1920s when evanescent Hatton became, for a brief time, the largest grain-handling point in the west, 1928 broke wildly loose and stomped all previous records. Deputy Auld was ecstatic: "all records were shattered by the crop of 1928."<sup>26</sup> The province produced an astonishing 312,215,000 bushels of wheat and what's more, all districts contributed. When people on the plains speak of the Roaring Twenties, it is likely something like this they have in mind. These production figures also happily lay to rest some rather extravagant claims by American historians. Mr. Timothy Egan wrote and

fine and compelling history of the American Dust Bowl. But he succumbed to the siren temptations of gross, over-heated hyperbole when he wrote of the sturdy but unexceptional 250 million bushel harvest of 1930: "In all the history of the world, no country had ever tried to grow so much grain."<sup>27</sup> Saskatchewan routinely grew such amounts, even in bad years. So, so much for that.

Naturally, a year in which settlers were 'dizzy with success' led to thoughts of more of the same to come. It is a general rule (one wishes to employ the word 'principle') that a farmer will do one of two things when flush with cash from a good year: he will either buy more equipment or buy more land. Historian Gerald Friesen notes that the expansion of farm holdings in the province during this period implied that farmers were prepared to "take greater risks in their annual bets against soil and climate."<sup>28</sup> 1928 buffeted this expansion and indeed made much of it possible. Expansion was a gamble, true, but the overflowing successes of 1928 made it seem like a safe bet. A south-west Saskatchewan farmer recalled that he bought \$11,000 worth of new equipment in 1929: "thought nothing of it; paid cash for it" recalled Mr. Hearn.<sup>29</sup> After ten years, ten harvests, and ten droughts, the equipment didn't stand up so well anymore. Mr. Hearn ruefully noted in 1937 that his equipment was in such sad shape that he thought he "ought to throw the whole lot of junk out." It is more likely that Mr. Hearn moved the detested equipment into the tree line and allowed ubiquitous and fast-growing Caragana bushes take care of the rest. This is, or was at any rate, a common fate of old and unused machinery in rural Saskatchewan.

The crisis of the 1920s was overshadowed and likely all but forgotten in the whirlwind of the successes of the late 1920s when the province produced an annual average of 350 million bushels of wheat. By comparison, settlers produced an average of just 230 million bushels during the 1930s.<sup>30</sup>

In the late 1920s, farmers were getting an average of a dollar per bushel for wheat. A settler with 320 acres who grew a thirty bushel crop (not unusual, especially up north) meant that he stood to earn, before inputs, almost \$10,000, a small fortune in 1929. That same farmer on that same field, though, who grew a thirty bushel per acre crop in 1932 earned at even the high price of sixty cents per bushel \$952, or an income drop of just over 90 per cent. And if that same farmer grew a wheat crop of five bushels per acre on a quarter-section that was the general rule on the south and west plains, then he would earn forty-eight dollars.

In the worst of the bad years of the 1930s, several rural councils throughout the south plains petitioned both the federal and provincial governments

to establish a minimum price for wheat of “not less than seventy cents per bushel.” This impulse toward minimum pricing was indeed the seed that would ultimately germinate into the Canadian Wheat Board in 1935. But that was yet to come. First the tipping point had to be reached, and the province and the people of Saskatchewan needed to be pushed from the edge of the abyss down into it.

1930 repeated the failure of 1929 and made the bushel-busting harvest of 1928 seem a distant memory. Deputy Auld grudgingly conceded in 1930 that, for the second year in a row, “drought conditions prevailed in much of the south central district.”<sup>31</sup> One-seventh of the provinces municipalities needed relief because of the crop failure and “in the south and south-west, much [of the] crop was blown before it could take root.”<sup>32</sup> But in 1931, with little or no fanfare, though likely with a distasteful tang of umbrage, the deputy finally arrived at his inevitable epiphany: “it is now apparent,” Auld confessed after guiding and shaping Saskatchewan agricultural policy for twenty years, “after more than a quarter of a century of agricultural development in the western and southwest third of the province, that periods of drought may be expected at intervals.”<sup>33</sup> One fights the impulse to stand and applaud. The guarded and very carefully worded admission of Auld, however, did little (in fact, did nothing), to change his actions. Though he walked with the settlers every step of the way, accompanying them on their long dark ride, he never really had any belief or faith in them, though. Not much at all.

The province’s J.T.M. Anderson government moved quickly on the problems created by the drought and the depression. Shortly after his famous promise made in Yorkton in the winter of 1930 that “no one in Saskatchewan will starve” (a promise that many times came near to being unfulfilled, were it not for the generosity of other provinces in confederation) Anderson’s conservative Co-operative Government set up the Saskatchewan Relief Commission (SRC). With the south plains burning and north and east Saskatchewan tangled up in the economic crisis, it was plainly evident that something extraordinary needed to be done and the SRC was the answer, at least for a few years.

Operating under Chairman Henry Black, Anderson established the SRC on 25 August 1931 with the sole purpose of providing relief aid to Saskatchewan’s stricken rural population.<sup>34</sup> Over the three years of its existence, from 1931 to 1934, the committee spent some \$19 million providing aid to rural Saskatchewan settlers.<sup>35</sup>

Under the SRC, the maximum allowance for food allotments per month was ten dollars per family (plus a single ninety-eight-pound bag of flour).<sup>36</sup> Additionally, under the SRC's stringent regulations, "no purchase of fruit of any kind or of vegetables ... were permitted." Though again, one must caution against judging the SRC too severely on this point because no one in 1931 could have ever guessed that the problem was going to drag on implacably for another seven years. In the SRC, regulations were merely another reflection of the desire to keep firm limits on the amount of charity that was distributed.

When the SRC was shut down in 1934 and its responsibilities were farmed out to various other government departments, the monthly food allotment was increased to as much as \$20.20 per month in 1937 and the Bureau of Public Welfare allowed the recipient a choice in whether or not he or she would purchase fruit or vegetables with the aid.<sup>37</sup> Given the refusal of the SRC to finance fruit and vegetables during the dry years, it should not be surprising then that, as was the case during the droughts of the 1920s, medical men reported numerous cases of malnutrition, "especially among children in the drought area."<sup>38</sup> There were fourteen deaths from starvation between 1929 and 1938 and, as we will soon see, many dozens of deaths from rickets, scurvy, pellagra, and beriberi.<sup>39</sup>

But for all the SRC did and tried to do (and again, most reports suggest it holds a very respectable record<sup>40</sup>), it was nowhere near enough, a single drop in an ocean, as it were. The Dominion and provincial governments would ultimately spend \$186,585,898.81, or just under a quarter of a billion dollars on aid for rural Saskatchewan alone.<sup>41</sup> \$10 million would be spent on road work throughout the province, though principally the work occurred in the south. The \$18 million spent by the SRC, then, for all its help to the settlers, seems rather more like a gesture, an indication that something, anything, was being done, when compared to the total sums that were ultimately spent trying to keep rural Saskatchewan alive and breathing.

The establishment of the SRC was also a tacit acknowledgment that RMs could not stand the financial strain of the crisis on their own.<sup>42</sup> The SRC operated within three defined regions. Area A was the hardest hit and had experienced three crop failures in a row.<sup>43</sup> Area A was shaped like a triangle with its principal point just south of Watrous, and the base extending from Lampman in the southeast to Eastend in the south-west. The triangle should only be used as a rough guide though: it was only used for three years and in addition it did not include the RM's in the area of the Great Sand Hills, the core of the desert. Area B included seventy-seven RM's within the

west and east-central regions of the province. Area C, what amounts to the entire area north of Watrous, experienced one year of crop failure.

This is the territory within which the SRC worked, and it roughly, though very imperfectly, corresponds to the drought areas outlined by the Department of Agriculture. The designation of Areas A, B, and C was important for the purposes of distinguishing levels of responsibility. For example, the Dominion government agreed to pay all relief aid for Area A, 50 per cent of relief aid for Area B, and nothing for Area C. In addition, the Dominion government contributed 50 per cent of the costs for relocation programs, of which there were very few.<sup>44</sup> In the first year of the commission's existence, the SRC appointed a relief official to each RM. This official was responsible for taking applications and administering aid. By appointing an outside official to administer aid, the SRC hoped to avoid any "influence of municipal politics or local prejudices."<sup>45</sup>

Avoiding "local prejudices" was very difficult because those prejudices could be rooted in any number of feelings and express themselves in any number of ways. Prior to the establishment of the SRC, for example, Deer Forks council in 1930 agreed to give George Engleman ten dollars in aid per month, but Mr. Engleman thought this a pittance, an insult, and he evidently went about the town of Burstall complaining. Burstall back then (and still today) only had between two and three hundred residents, which means that Mr. Engleman knew the councillors personally and they knew him. Mr. Engleman's complaining did nothing to endear him to council because a visibly irritated councillor Henry Rutz suggested that "if he [Mr. Engleman] continues to complain, this help may be cut down to \$8.00 per month."<sup>46</sup> It was this type of local politics the local SRC appointees worked diligently to avoid. Mr Engleman, by the way, apparently heeded councillor Rutz's warning because, in 1933, council gave the indignant settler shoes and "two pair of underwear."<sup>47</sup>

Relief aid included everything from underwear to seed grain. In total, 14 million bushels of seed grain were distributed to settlers during the 1930s.<sup>48</sup> The mind boggles at this amount: it could well have been used to seed up to 16 or even 18 million acres of land. The seed grain was meant to ensure that a farmer whose crop had failed would have enough seed to plant a crop the following year. The amounts were generally doled out in 100, 200, or 300 bushel allotments, but a settler was not guaranteed seed grain allotments, especially if he was a big farmer, and here again we see local politics at play.

Deer Forks area farmer Leonid Lomow appeared before council in 1933 in the final year of the SRC's mandate and asked for 470 bushels of seed

grain. There is absolutely no reason to think Lomow was unlike all other farmers on the south plains. We can assume that he summer-fallowed and so seeding an estimated 470 acres suggests that he had another 400 acres lying fallow, and in addition, he had land that he maintained for his cattle and horses. Mr. Lomow and his family were by most standards well-established and represent the classic case of immigrant settlers adapting and making good. But council refused to grant him the seed grain he had requested, likely because they felt he was doing well enough without it.<sup>49</sup> Mr. Lomow fled Deer Forks shortly after.

Mr. Lomow was one of fifteen family members who experienced an incredible journey half way across the world only to see that journey come to a pathetic end in a tiny little council room in a tiny little town lost somewhere in the middle of the drought-stricken west plains. The Lomow journey began in Russia where, Leon's brother Alex writes, "a generation caught at the cross roads of history by an emerging nation soon to feel the onslaught of violent revolution" in 1917 had two choices to make: "stay and face certain lifelong turmoil and annihilation" or leave.<sup>50</sup> Leon Lomow and fifteen members of his family left.

Their escape from the bloody pitchfork and machine gun reforms of the Bolsheviks took them from Odessa to the Baltic port of Lebova. After a brief stay there, they alighted to Denmark and from thence to Liverpool. The Atlantic crossing took thirteen days, during which time Leon and his brothers enjoyed themselves: "[we] fought, danced and sang our way across the stormy North Atlantic." With Halifax port iced in, they landed at Philadelphia, where "negroes" threw rocks at them and called them names, though one wonders at the provocation that caused this: there were no "negroes" in Russia and the rustic, provincial Russians may have felt obliged to offer some remarks upon seeing a "negro" for the first time.

Fresh from their introduction to the United States, they headed for the straight-laced and staid atmosphere of Toronto, across the Canadian Shield to swamp-dwelling Winnipeg and from there they took the train to Canada's windiest city, Lethbridge, to inquire in badly broken English about land. The family got a tip on a region that had a heavy Russian immigrant population and so finally ended up in Burstall via Maple Creek. The road out would be much easier.

The Lomows ran a very successful farm. Flush with cash from the grand harvest of 1915, they bought seventy-five head of horses for later re-sale. They even raised cattle but "drought quickly finished them off." During the 1920s "the exodus of the Lomow's began" when two brothers left. Alex

recalls that “we stayed on the farm for a while in the early thirties but every year kept getting worse,” and so they, like many thousands of others, moved to eastern Saskatchewan: the Russian Lomows, unfortunately one must think, chose the heavily Ukrainian settlement of Kamsack.

There is a tinge of bitterness in Alex’s story. Deer Forks council rejected his brother’s aid application in 1933 and the Lomow’s left soon after. One cannot but assume that the two incidents are related. Leon had been ready and willing to go into debt on more than four hundred bushels of seed grain, but council would not approve the request perhaps because of the fact that the Lomows had been, to that point, very successful. Envy often colours the perceptions of farmers.

Alex understands that they were merely one of thousands who fled. “Many” he writes, “gave up and never returned.” The Lomow’s visited Burstall a few times over the remainder of the 1930s where they retained some lands. Alex writes that they wanted to “view this awesome spectacle” of a world falling apart and he adds that they always returned to Kamsack “broken hearted.” Their homestead was torn down in 1942.

The Lomow’s were not the only ones subject to “local prejudices.” The administration of relief aid in Saskatchewan reached deep down into the tiniest parochial corners of envy, and dislike. The nature of farming, for example, was in the process of changing during the 1920s and 1930s. Oftentimes, one might have seen a tractor being used in a field next to a neighbour who was still working with horse and plough. It is widely recognized that farmers are *terribly* sensitive creatures when it comes to the equipment used by their neighbours. The harmless though ostentatious displays farmers today make of their equipment likely had some sort of rough equivalent in the 1930s. A successful settler might perhaps park his mechanized equipment – his “tractor” – near the access road for all his neighbours to see. Sensitivity to these displays, not too very far removed from envy, likely caused Deer Forks council to restrict aid to these modern farmers. Deer Forks councilmen vowed that “no gasoline whatsoever” would be advanced to what they called “tractor farmers” and the sense that an irritated council deployed this phrase as a pejorative is palpable.<sup>51</sup>

Thus it was that the crisis of the Thirties refracted through the tiny little prejudices, emotions, and idiosyncrasies of rural Saskatchewan. “Tractor farmers” and successful hard-working Russians provide just two examples of the target of “local prejudices” that the SRC tried to avoid or mitigate. But despite council’s reluctance to provide aid to “tractor farmers,” it was a reality that could not be avoided for very long. Grease, oil, gas, and repairs



became staples of relief aid in the 1930s. “Tractor farmers” in White Valley, for example, received a fulsome 615 pounds of grease for their tractors in 1935.<sup>52</sup>

When councils weren’t wrapped up in aid disputes, they were often trying to keep their settlers warm. Coal was a crucial part of life in Saskatchewan. The prospect of spending a winter in a homestead shack on the open plains while impoverished, penniless, and relying on food from friends and neighbours is a hellish and frightening vision if one adds to that the simple absence of heat to stay warm. Historian Pierre Berton once observed that the CPR learned one crucial and important lesson from building a rail line across the country: a man can tolerate a great deal of discomfort and misery if his belly is full. That tolerance is proportionately though greatly reduced if a person is not only starving but also cold.

Much of the heating coal used in the Thirties came from the coal fields of Estevan and Lethbridge. There were alternatives to coal: Deer Forks council asked and later received the then necessary approval for settlers to trek the twenty to thirty miles to the sand hills or the river to cut and pick what wood they could find.<sup>53</sup> But coal was primary and because it was primary, settlers went to great lengths to ensure they had it. And “great lengths” in the Dirty Thirties actually meant great lengths – no italics are necessary here.

It seems that the SRC wanted to keep a tight reign on relief costs and so advised the settlers in Mankota to use their own nearby coal fields to access heating supplies rather than having it shipped in from other areas. With winter’s chill in the air, the night cold, settlers trekked out of tiny Mankota under the sad, grey skies of October to the distant coal mines, which were in the coulees of what is today a Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA) pasture. By moonlight they made their way through the hills and draws of one of the most desolate regions of the south plains to wait “many times overnight with no shelter or accommodation” to get their coal allotment.<sup>54</sup> Council begged the SRC ship in coal from Estevan and restrict the use of the local mines to “those living within eight miles” so as to save the settlers from this thirty-mile moonlight trek in which the pioneers would find shelter in a shallow draw or a ditch and sleeplessly wait to get their ration of second- or third-rate coal with which to heat their shacks for the coming winter. It was people like the Mankota settlers that historian James Gray had in mind when he wrote that “their clothes had worn thin, their stoves and heaters were wearing out, they were short of bedding and as half the people lived in flimsy sub-marginal housing [farming sub-marginal



land], the business of keeping warm occupied most of their waking hours” during the winters.<sup>55</sup>

The Konshuch family provides a good example of what Mr. Gray meant. After fleeing the drylands, the Konschuhs found life almost as tough as what it was for those down Mankota way. Adam, the son of patriarch Phillip, would routinely get up around four o’clock in the morning in the winters and “start out on those bitterly cold mornings for the [coal] mine and return about 5pm.” According to Adam’s daughter, the horses had as tough a time as Adam – even though her father would frequently walk behind them in order to stay warm, the horses arrived bedraggled and frozen “with icicles hanging from their nostrils.”<sup>56</sup> Thus Mr. Kenschuh, as part of his winter routine, spent thirteen hours on cold winter days gathering coal to keep his family warm.

There was, then, no money for coal. There was no money for gasoline, oil, or food. Neither was there money for clothing; thus, it seems normal, almost natural, that the problem of relief fraud developed.

According to one commentator writing about the rural Saskatchewan merchant and the once ubiquitous but now non-existent general store (the last of these stores were torn down or moved into museums in the 1980s and 1990s), the attitude that “most strongly characterized” his business was “the belief in individual initiative” and in the owner’s qualities of “natural leadership.”<sup>57</sup> There was also, apparently, the sense within the rural business community that anything that might “undermine the economic position of the businessman” was considered a “threat to society.”<sup>58</sup> These observations give us slight bearing on how relief fraud developed amongst rural Saskatchewan merchants.

As with any system that lacks proper checks and balances and has also been hastily assembled and is unwieldy, the relief system was abused. Clothiers and general store merchants would sometimes charge if not extortionate prices then at least prices that were inflated because the government was footing the bill. And this abuse appeared quite early on in the crisis. Pinto Creek council was quite disturbed by this development and agreed that “relief orders will not be issued to such merchants” who inflate prices.<sup>59</sup>

This problem of inflated prices appeared up the road from Kincaid, which was the seat of the RM of Pinto Creek, in the now non-extant village of Ferland, where Mr. Joseph Morin had been overcharging for his wares if they were purchased with relief aid. But likely because there were very few merchants in the area who could provide such items, Mankota council backtracked on its previous censure of Mr. Morin and moved that he be

“reinstated [as a] dispenser of relief food and clothing” because whatever he had done in the past had been apparently put right and, given the absence of other vendors in the region, council found that he was a man who now was a “conducting a straightforward business.”<sup>60</sup>

The province, as a way of shoring up local business during the decade, required all relief clothing to be purchased locally, as opposed to, say, mail order or from communities nearby or even one of the cities. And merchants actively courted those families brought to their knees by the crisis. There was no shying away from it either: destitution was out in the open and a natural part of life in the dry years and something about which one need not have felt too embarrassed. C.W. Baker was one of Kindersley’s first dry-goods merchants and he stumped shamelessly for relief business. He placed a half-page ad in the Kindersley *Clarion* in the terrible year of 1937 in which he observed that many people will be receiving relief, “some of you for the first time,” he helpfully noted. And when these relief orders came in, it was Mr. Baker’s earnest wish that “we hope you will decide on our store.”<sup>61</sup> He urged mothers to bring their children because there was something for everyone.

Merchants, like settlers, did what they had to do because, like the incomprehensible drop in farm income, the merchant too saw a precipitous drop in his revenues. In Saskatchewan, merchants’ revenues fell from \$265 million in 1928 to \$104 million in 1933 and stayed there until the end of the Second World War.<sup>62</sup> So it may appear unseemly to stump for government relief orders or to fraudulently overcharge, but, survival being what it is, it was simply one way in which costs could be made up without hurting anyone but the government. With life re-ordered to a basic and very low-level form of existence, defrauding the government was likely viewed as a victimless crime.

The development of relief fraud also points us toward an element of the Dirty Thirties that has never been explored: the collapse or corrosion of the moral code of the day. This code, one’s sense of right and wrong, went through some profound changes during the drought but, as mentioned, it is an issue on which there has been very little study and research. There has been none, in fact.

Isabel Winterstein was one contemporary who noticed the changes and in 1937 she briefly reflected on what she had seen during those years as part of her address to a gathering of the United Farmers of Canada.<sup>63</sup> Winterstein claimed to have observed in the years prior to 1937 a collapse of moral values especially amongst young people. She claimed that they had “come to

regard ordinary moral standards with impunity” and this produced what she called “fatal results.”

Part of the reason why those morals changed was the role, better yet, the non-role that the church played during the crises of the dry years. For centuries, the church has stood as that mediator between good and evil, right and wrong. It has guided people towards what it felt was appropriate behaviour. But during the crisis of the 1930s, the church ceased to play the prominent role it had played prior to the droughts and desperation. Most clerics during the 1930s spent the majority of their time dispensing relief aid or caring for the sick and the poor rather than conducting services. The Reverend Mr. Gawthorp in Pinto Creek, for example, spent the early years of the drought not ministering to his flock but instead undertaking a survey of family needs in the district and distributing clothing in advance of the winter of 1929/30. He also assisted with dispensing a \$5,000 “relief grant” for road work.<sup>64</sup>

A post-drought survey from 1938 found that more than 50 per cent of 425 ministers polled stated that participation in Sunday service and general church activities “decreased considerably” during the 1930s. The reasons cited were mixed: some indicated they had no money for the collection plate; others suggested that they had no means to get to church, while a few contrite souls cited “a lack of suitable clothing.”<sup>65</sup> Clerics then were busy handing out food, settlers were occupied with getting coal, or failing at farming, still others felt embarrassed at appearing in church with clothing patched up and shot through with holes. Under these circumstances, it is natural, normal almost, that questions of right and wrong become less important.

The matter of clothing on which the survey respondents touched was actually a very perplexing one for many settlers. It was called the most “aggravating feature” of the drought because in the first instance, there was no money for clothes and, second, the clothes that one owned had to be continually patched up. As one farmer indicated to two reporters from a Saskatoon newspaper in 1934, he had to put patches over areas already patched “only to find that the garment had given away somewhere else.”<sup>66</sup>

Since there was no money to buy clothes, expedients had to be found. Sean Kelly was a little fourteen-year-old Irish kid from Player, and he was so short of clothing that he wrote Prime Minister Bennett in 1932 to ask for a suit. After duly noting his size (“chest 34, waste 32, size 7 shoes”) he told the Prime Minister that needed the suit because “we are going to play at a picnic.”<sup>67</sup>

Mrs. Clarice Glascock of Shamrock received parcels of clothing from her aunt in Ontario, but rather than using the clothes for herself, she would cut up the materials and makes clothes for the kids. Mrs. Glascock is universally remembered in the Shamrock district as a kind and giving woman.<sup>68</sup>

One of the legendary tales of the Thirties is that children wore potato sacks during the dry years. And while dust bowl kids went about in potato sacks, women sometimes opted for flour sacks. Robert Hammond came up to the south plains from Sandusky, Ohio, and settled near Swift Current. He claims that a woman who had cut and bleached a one-hundred-pound flour bag evidently didn't use enough bleach because the words "Pride of the West" appeared on the backside.<sup>69</sup> One winter, Eunice Hayward recalls the trainload of clothes arriving and she was desperately hoping for toques and mittens to stay warm. But what she and the other settlers got was "high button boots, whale bone corsets, satin and crepe dresses." All of this in addition to receiving "fancy hats."<sup>70</sup>

There was actually a kind of black market system set up for clothing in south plains communities that directly bordered or were very near to America, places like Coronach, Mankota, Orkney, and Climax. Mrs. Hayward, from down around Hart Butte near Coronach, recalls that since fancy hats were not appropriate, "any new clothes were often smuggled." Americans and Canadians along the border would frequently meet by the Goose Creek in the summer for Sports Days and the Yanks would bring clothes and cloth because they were much cheaper than Canadian materials. Mrs Hayward recalls that "many a parcel changed hands behind the scenes at Sunday picnics."<sup>71</sup>

Settlers engaged in black-market smuggling, merchants over-charged for dry-goods and thus it was that a tiny corner of the moral code of the day was corroded, warped. We can see further evidence of this warping when we turn to the matter of relief aid.

It was commonly suggested back then (as it still is today) that farmers should look after themselves. In the 1930s (but less so today), aid was considered "repugnant" to "self-respecting men" and thus the sense that they should provide for themselves was extremely strong. Journalist Mr. Bruce Hutchinson tells the story of a settler called Mr. Hearn who farmed south and west of Regina. In the worst of the bad years, Mr Hearn did not have a whole lot about which he could have felt proud: the house was stripped of paint, the barn sagged "as if the wind had been too much for it," and a family of chickens wandered about hopefully in what had once been a garden casting nervous glances skyward. It was, as Mr. Hearn observed,

“not as bad as most.” Mr. Hutchinson noted that “nearly all the farmers in this district were on relief” and Mr. Hearn validated that point when he said “You see them houses up the road? Everyone of them is on relief.”<sup>72</sup> Mr. Hearn went on to insist that he had never been on relief and he was “mighty proud of that.”<sup>73</sup>

There is here a sharp and pointed moral distinction being drawn here by Mr. Hearn. He took pains to point out that he had never been on relief while all around him his neighbours were and in this he took a great deal of pride. Not accepting relief was, for Mr. Hearn (or just “Hearn” as Mr. Hutchinson refers to him) an issue of pride, of ethics, of moral fibre. Mr. Hearn’s story may be doubtful, but it certainly illustrates the interesting idea that those who took relief were frequently considered to be somehow wanting in fortitude, wanting in strength, wanting in toughness. Relief at that time was considered “repugnant” and something to be rejected at all costs by men who had any degree of self-respect and this perspective is at its core incredibly, irredeemably moral and it withered in the droughts.

Mr. E.W. Stapleford was an adviser to the federal government and he wrote a summary of the Dirty Thirties in 1938 for the House of Commons. He noticed a quite peculiar though basically human development where relief aid was concerned. Over time, settlers stricken by drought developed a sense of *entitlement* to relief aid. Stapleford found that this dependence developed in three stages: the first stage was characterized by reluctance, the second featured grudging acceptance, and the third was expectation. If we are to believe Mr. Hutchinson, then Mr. Hearn successfully resisted moving past the first stage.

Stapleford’s observation may wound the pride of some because it is antagonistic to the image we have of the Proud Settler doing all in his power to carry the load by himself. While Mr. Stapleford’s observation is indeed an unattractive one, that does not make it any less true. In fact, the crumbling of the moral code of the day may have started precisely at this point, the point at which relief was sought and readily accepted. This moral corrosion started in the family and radiated outwards: the crop failed, relief was accepted, pride was wounded, excuses were proffered, rationalizations formed, comforting lies told, moral and spiritual weights increased, weakened spirits collapsed, corrosion followed. The man’s family watched the corrosion. The community watched the family.

Both Stapleford and Winterstein are suggesting that the personal moral code of settlers was ruptured in the droughts of the Thirties. The ready acceptance of relief aid, and as we will see in due course the even more

enthusiastic willingness to disregard the repayment of that debt, is just one way in which this corrosion expressed itself – relief fraud and black market smuggling were other ways.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence to support the idea of a moral rupture can be found in the matter of sex. Mrs. Winterstein suggested in 1937 that the “moral code” of young people had been abandoned and that people had “come to regard ordinary moral standards with impunity” with “fatal results.”<sup>74</sup> For his part, Mr. Stapleford toured the south and west plains and came to the sad realization that the poverty induced by year after monotonous year of drought produced serious consequences for young people. They were “thwarted in the normal desire to marry [which] create[d] a serious social problem.”<sup>75</sup>

Neither Winterstein nor Stapleford explicitly state or name the issue to which they referred, believing instead that their readers would be at once familiar with the context and content of the comments. This suggests that the problem was widespread and well recognized. In all likelihood, it had something to do with the enormous surge in premarital sex, illegitimate births, and unwed mothers.

The number of illegitimate children (as they were tenderly called in those days) shot through the roof during the Dirty Thirties. Between 1914 and 1918, about 100 to 150 illegitimate children were being born each year in Saskatchewan.<sup>76</sup> But by the end of 1921, one of the worst droughts of the 1920s, the number leaps to 225 and never again does it retreat below that 200 level: there were only more and more illegitimate children produced each year, most of them, as we will see, were produced in the rural areas by the Germans.

A total of 344 illegitimate children were born in Saskatchewan in 1924.<sup>77</sup> There were 551 born in 1929, the first year of the drought. At the close of 1932, some 680 illegitimate children had been born in the previous twelve months. The peak was hit in 1934, when 746 illegitimate children were born in Saskatchewan.<sup>78</sup> Thereafter, the levels retreat and the number of illegitimate children falls to 665 in 1938, the lowest number in almost ten years.<sup>79</sup>

Rural municipalities were apparently hotbeds of sex of both the illicit and premarital variety and this was especially true amongst the German settlements (many of the rural German settlement blocs were on land located exclusively on the south and west plains of Saskatchewan; think here of the Schuler-Hatton-Leader [Prussia] corridor along the west side of Saskatchewan). In the 1920s, the Department of Public Health began keeping statistics on which areas of the province were producing the most

illegitimate children. Of the 551 produced in 1929, for example, 250 or just under half were born in rural municipalities. Just 128 children were born out of wedlock in the cities.<sup>80</sup>

The age and racial origin of the young mothers was catalogued upon the birth of all illegitimate children: the mothers were always young, frequently German, and they usually lived in remote rural areas. In 1929, three girls under fifteen years of age (two Ukrainians and a Pole) had illegitimate children. But 227 were born of young girls between the ages of fifteen and nineteen, the age group from amongst which the highest number of illegitimate children were born that year, indeed in most years.<sup>81</sup> Approximately fifty of these mothers were young German girls, which made them the ethnic group with the highest rate of unwed motherhood that year.<sup>82</sup> The next closest ethnic group was the Scots, who produced thirty illegitimate children in 1929, although those children were born from amongst women in the twenty- to twenty-four-year-old age group, a demographic that produced 204 illegitimate children that year.

The total numbers of illegitimate children born to young mothers in Saskatchewan is staggering. Between 1914 and 1920, 1,044 illegitimate children were born; between 1921 and 1930, 4,856 were born. And in the Dirty Thirties proper, 5,508 children were born to young mothers out of wedlock. Thus 11,408 illegitimate children were born between 1914 and 1938. Fully half of those children were born in rural areas in the 1930s.

As suggested above, unwed mothers likely took their moral cues and sexual behaviours from their parents, whose lives were then in the process of crumbling in response to pressures like the drought. Divorces that cite adultery as the cause increase at a shocking rate (shocking because of the modern conceit that assumes that people who lived in the decades prior to the thoroughgoing full-on social and sexual revolutions of the 1960s did not have illicit sex – this conceit is *vastly* inflated when the subject of study is the sex lives of pioneers because the word “pioneer” itself is so irredeemably and inextricably linked to our grandparents) and these numbers also feature a very surprising twist: more women than men were committing adultery.

In 1921, just three husbands who divorced their wives cited adultery as the cause, as compared to forty-nine women. There is a comforting familiarity here. This was the usual way of things: the men strayed and the women left. When divorcing, men and women could choose from amongst several reasons but adultery was usually the most frequent. There was: “adultery,” “adultery and cruelty,” “adultery and desertion,” “adultery with cruelty *and* desertion,” “impotence.”<sup>83</sup> In 1921, of a total of seventy-nine divorces, fully



fifty-two cited just plain old adultery (there was only one claim for impotence and nine for adultery and cruelty). This 1921 level remains essentially unchanged for the next few years: there is a rough average of five to seven men who cite adultery as the cause for divorce, and roughly thirty-five to forty women each year who do the same. But then the Dirty Thirties arrive.

At the end of the first excruciating year of crop failure in 1929, twenty-nine men cite adultery as the cause of their divorce as compared to thirty-four women, out of a total of seventy divorces.<sup>84</sup> The number of men filing for divorce because of adultery in 1932 reaches thirty-three as compared to twenty-six women, and this trajectory continues on in this way until the end of 1938 when fully *seventy-seven* men that year file for divorce from their wives because of adultery as compared to just *forty-one* women.<sup>85</sup>

There was clearly not only a corrosion of the moral code but also a deep and wide rupture in the intimately related matter of sexual mores: in just ten years, the instances of illegitimate children very nearly quadrupled from 227 in 1923 to 746 in 1934, an almost four-fold increase in just ten years. The number of women having illicit affairs as cited in divorce records increased from four in 1921 to thirty in 1929 and all the way on up to seventy-seven in 1938. Indeed, the total number of divorces went from a low of twenty-seven in 1924 to 120 in 1938.<sup>86</sup>

Mr. Stapleford, then, is more than a little correct when he suggested that there was something in the soul of the settlers that was altered, or twisted, or disturbed by the drought and we ought to treat his observations as basically unexceptional. After all, need we be surprised, he asked, “that with year after year of such experiences, human endurance sometimes reaches its limit and something snaps?”<sup>87</sup> Settler Albert Stahl grew up at Hatton. He still has family buried in the English cemetery (the German cemetery is a mile away on what would have then been the other side of town), and he definitely recalls the stresses and pressures of the dry years. Mr. Stahl wrote that living in such a “hostile atmosphere can do strange things to a man.”<sup>88</sup> Chastity, sexual mores, and modesty, the church, moral codes, and proper behaviour: all quite pointless in a starving, dry, dusty land.

A settler named W.H. March certainly felt that his south and west plains peers lacked moral fibre. March argued that many of the drought problems could have been resolved if the stricken settlers simply provided for their own needs by growing gardens. “It can be done” he argued, but the problem was that “so many people in this south part never even try.”<sup>89</sup> March’s assertion tends to support Stapleford’s idea that “apathy” was one of the side-effects or by-products of the drought. But starvation usually trumps



apathy, and so the argument that the absence of gardens can be attributed to laziness, lethargy, or apathy is probably not the best view of things.

The growth of even a small garden in the drylands was as equally as difficult as growing a crop. Explaining that the yields in the Swift Current region have been “ranging from nil to five bushels an acre” for some years, council observed that the drought of 1933 also had another practical result: “all garden stuff has been destroyed by grasshoppers.” Thus it was that council petitioned the SRC for more aid because settlers “were unable to provide” for their families and the RM itself was “unable to give any assistance.”<sup>90</sup>

In the village of Bateman, the administrator informed the Department of Municipal Affairs about the “decided lack of vegetables” in the village.<sup>91</sup> And in 1933, Pinto Creek had to remind the SRC, which was at that time considering a food allotment reduction, that there has been “no crop or gardens in this municipality for five years” and would it please reconsider the reduction.<sup>92</sup> In the end, it is not entirely fair to say that settlers should have just “grown a garden.” One is reasonably sure that the starving settlers of Mankota or Pinto Creek at least gave it some thought.

Mrs. Eunice Hayward’s family had a garden, although their experience demonstrates that it was not an easy proposition. The Haywards grew a garden every year in the Thirties, with the notable exception of 1937. The success of the garden was not easy though and was achieved only as a result of “carrying pails and pails of water” to and from a nearby stream.<sup>93</sup> But on the south plains, there were many thousands of settlers who did not have access to water. Many thousands in fact lived right next to rivers and smaller lakes that had simply dried up. The Haywards were also doubly fortunate to have had hogs, which they would spend all day and half the night killing and processing into food before finally going to bed tired, exhausted “with the smell of rendered lard hanging over all.”

Young Madeline Glascock was a school girl during the droughts in Shamrock just north of Pinto Creek, and she recalls the daily life of a starving school kid without garden stuffs. Children would often walk to school barefoot and without food. Those who did have lunches were perhaps worse off than those who did not because those lunches often took strange and exotic forms like “lard sandwiches” and in other instances, for variety, “salted lard sandwiches.”<sup>94</sup>

It was not just an absence of garden vegetables that Mrs. Glascock recalls but in particular the absence of fruit: “we never saw a piece of fruit for many years. It was a very special treat when, at Christmas, each of the children in our family received an orange.”<sup>95</sup> Receiving fruit in one’s Christmas

stocking is still very much a tradition in many south and west plains families and this peculiar rite might just trace itself back to the hungry years of the Dirty Thirties when once-ubiquitous fruit was then the most precious of gifts. Fruit indeed became a kind of currency in the RM of Shamrock: a quarter section of land was once traded for a box of apples at a local store.<sup>96</sup>

There is the old frequently told tale that youngsters in the drylands grew up in the Thirties never having seen a piece of fruit or a vegetable. Tales like these are listened to today with no small measure of post-modern disbelief: the mind balks at the silliness of the idea. But on the ravaged banks of Pinto Creek or on the hot plains at Shamrock, when lakes and rivers dried up, when hoppers ravaged every bit of food and drought ravaged every bit of hope, it very well could have been true – children were dying in the dozens because of nutritive deficiencies.

Beriberi, scurvy, rickets, and pellagra: all of these diseases develop as a result of vitamin and nutrition deficiencies. Rickets, for example, is caused by a lack of calcium and vitamin D. It results in the softening of the bones, which itself leads to easy bone fractures and painful physical deformities. Between 1929 and 1938, seventy-eight people, mostly children, died from rickets. An additional six perished from scurvy, two from pellagra, and one from beriberi, of all things.<sup>97</sup> The children who were dying from these diseases were generally under fifteen years old.

The highest instances of death from rickets came in the first two years of the drought, 1929 and 1930, when fifteen and twelve children died respectively. The eight deaths the following year correspond to the establishment of the SRC and the numbers drop to two in 1934, the year it was disbanded. Thereafter the numbers climb, peaking at ten in 1936 (although twelve children died that year – the other two died from scurvy – and all were under fifteen years old).<sup>98</sup> Thus eighty-seven people died from nutritive deficiencies in the thirties at least as noted in the records of the hospitals: the number of children who died outside the sight of a public official was likely much higher than eighty-seven and this is to say nothing of the thousands who suffered, but did not die from, nutritive diseases. So yes, children likely did go for weeks, months, perhaps years at a time, without ever having seen fruit.

The dearth of both fruit and vegetables was mitigated by the by-the-ton donations of food funnelled into the drought area of Saskatchewan by railcar in the 1930s, although in the early going, making a donation wasn't as important as making money. In 1931, the Deputy Minister of Agriculture in Nova Scotia (with a back-slapping familiarity entirely out of place

considering the context), wrote informally to “my dear Hedley” (Deputy Auld) and laughingly noted that “judging by press reports, you people in Saskatchewan are likely to starve this winter.”<sup>99</sup> He informed the Deputy that Nova Scotia had apparently lost out on a contract to supply potatoes to pre-Castro Cuba because of tariff increases. Thus it was that Auld’s Nova Scotia counterpart came knocking with a smile on Saskatchewan’s front door trying to solicit the sale of between 50,000 and 60,000 barrels of potatoes – this to a bankrupt province whose children were dying from malnutrition and in some instances starvation.

In right and proper fairness to Nova Scotia’s deputy, he likely had no idea how bad it really was. Mr. James Gray has pointed out that even at the time of the national Red Cross appeal for relief in 1931 (the same year in which Nova Scotia’s deputy was soliciting business in Saskatchewan), “nobody outside the Palliser’s Triangle was told much or knew about what was going on inside.”<sup>100</sup> The people of Canada knew it was dry, they knew the settlers were hungry, they knew there had been a crop failure of some kind, but no one really knew how far and how deep the rot had spread. Thus the Nova Scotia deputy likely did not know that two children died from pellagra in 1931. He did not know that thirty-five children had died from rickets in the first three years of the drought. He did not know that between 1929 and 1931, 298 men, women, boys, and girls killed themselves.<sup>101</sup>

There was one foodstuff shipped from the east coast which was universally reviled. But the stature of this commodity in Saskatchewan history has reached the status of genuine legend: every regrettable metric ton of it. One is compelled to stop and linger on this matter of cod for wherever it was distributed it provoked strong almost emotional reactions.

Mr. Harry Forkert landed in the drylands in the early 1920s. He came from the Saxony region of Germany and he had served in the Kaiser’s army during “The Great War.” He recalls food being shipped into Saskatchewan from points all over Canada. “One can still remember” he wrote, “the rail cars loaded with apples from B.C., the vegetables and baled hay from Manitoba, the big round cheddar cheeses from Ontario.” These are not idle reminiscences: by November of 1936, fully 782 carloads of food had been shipped into south and west Saskatchewan from all across Canada and these cars included fruits, vegetables, beans, cheese, and “dried fish.”<sup>102</sup> And it is this “dried fish,” the cod, that Mr. Forkert distinctly recalls and in his remembrance one can still see the grimace of distaste: “those awful dried cod fish from the Maritimes.”<sup>103</sup> Mr. Edward Keck shares this distaste. He was appreciative of everything Saskatchewan received from the rest of Canada

“but the fish, they were something else!!!”<sup>104</sup> Mr. Carl Albrecht recalls nailing the cod to the barn door and letting the cows have at it as a salt-lick.<sup>105</sup>

Much of the distaste with cod surrounded the flatlander’s basic confusion of what to do with it. Mrs. Eunice Hayward’s family came up to Coronach country from South Dakota in the early years and she too says that “the Cod was not welcome.”<sup>106</sup> And even though her mother Lena eventually learned to prepare delicious meals with it, “hundreds of pounds were thrown out by other people.”<sup>107</sup> There is the old joke in south and west Saskatchewan that settlers put the cod on a board, cooked it, threw away the cod and ate the board.

While the cod seems to be universally though affectionately condemned as “awful,” it certainly had some competition, and here one can see Newfies squirm in their seats. Some settlers apparently took to eating gophers but in all fairness this is not as tragic and stomach-turning as it might seem (and here one must certainly guard against making the suggestion that settlers preferred fried gopher over dried cod). Gophers could be, and evidently were, prepared in a number of ways: there was “stewed gopher, canned gopher, gopher pie, smoked gopher, and pickled gopher” in addition to the bachelor-friendly “fried gopher.”

Gophers, according to James Gray, were “used not infrequently for food.”<sup>108</sup> But the resistance to eating these particular rodents is a deeply rooted impulse in Saskatchewan. While those who ate gophers were “in a very decided minority,” they were eaten. But since, as Mr. Gray notes, “the people of the prairies are almost pathologically squeamish to esoteria in food,” the gopher was allowed to live free and plunder wheat fields, at least for so long as the kids at Shamrock Primary School didn’t get a hold of them. Mrs. Barbara Chai’s family landed in Shamrock from the green hills of England in the 1920s. Her schoolyard was overrun with gophers “so at lunch time and at recess we drowned or clubbed gophers.”<sup>109</sup> Not just at lunch time. But at recess, too.

It seems that much of the fun to be had by youngsters in those years revolved around gophers. There were annual gopher hunts in which young lads would be rewarded for their efforts with one penny per tail. In one instance, Mr. Orville Lien recalls that there was even a provincial contest in which a pony was offered as a prize for the destruction of the most gophers. Young Mr. Lien set about the undertaking those basic tasks that will be instantly familiar to any young prairie lad who has hunted gophers. He installed gopher traps, laced poison with wheat, made binder twine loops, and poured water down the holes to drown them or flush them out. But for

all his work and effort, Mr. Lien did not win. And of all the things about which a man might feel bitter it is the indignity of not winning the pony that he most remembers:

By fall, I had over a thousand gopher tails. [I got] \$10.00 in new quarters but no Shetland pony. I don't know who won but what I do know is that I had more gopher tails than anyone in Aneroid. If the first prize had been restricted to our town alone I would have won the pony. There is no doubt about that because for a long time there were no gophers on our land, not until the following year anyway.<sup>110</sup>

Mr. Lien's family survived ten years in the drylands before fleeing.

It was not just gophers on which settlers focussed, but rabbits too. Rabbit culls were frequent and acted as both a pest eradication event and social event all in one: thus did culture develop in Saskatchewan. Mr. Reinhard Marks recalls these drives (he calls them "social occasions") in which pioneers would meet at an infested area. They would then spread out in a line and rattle rocks in cans to scare the rabbits who would then be corralled into a pre-fabricated fenced-in area where "the grisly job of killing the rabbits was undertaken."<sup>111</sup> He does not provide details, but in the Coronach history book, there are four pictures that accompany this story and the last picture shows a smiling man armed with what appears to be an axe handle.

The Felix and Lawrence Warken brothers somehow managed to kill 1,500 rabbits over the course of three days and they were paid three cents a hide by Art Friedman. Mr. Marks recalls that winter was the best time to hunt rabbits because "the crunch of the snow seemed to bring the rabbits out in the best way."<sup>112</sup>

While the fact that settlers were reduced to eating gophers and "lard sandwiches" (salted or otherwise) may lead some to question the efficiency of the SRC, its record remains impressive, despite the fact that it was shut down in 1934. It was disbanded by Jimmy Gardiner's Liberals. Long a personal bugbear for Gardiner, he felt the SRC was a political tool wielded with enviable success by the Anderson conservatives and so thenceforth there would be no relief commission and instead those duties would be farmed out to various government departments.

In 1935, William Patterson assumed power and he continued the policy direction set down by Gardiner. The Patterson government was known then and is known to history as "the do-nothing" government.<sup>113</sup> Patterson was

cheerlessly renowned for being “conscientious and fiscally prudent” and for “[maintaining] government credit in the face of adversity.” This was the man who oversaw the second half of the greatest crisis in Saskatchewan history.

RM councils across the south plains were shocked when they found out in 1934 that they were, once again, to be responsible for aid distribution and in fact “would share equally” in aid costs beyond federal relief grants.<sup>114</sup> Exactly how the RMs were supposed to “share equally” was very likely never fully comprehended by municipal administrators, reeves, and councilmen. The crisis of the 1920s very nearly bankrupted many RMs in the drylands and here both levels of government were steering course back to that system against which Big Stick had so ardently railed in 1924. But this was the course and the RMs pushed forward through the dense thickets of desperation that had enveloped their lives and, although they may have been groping blindly through these thickets, the settlers in the RMs still managed to scrape together something that roughly approximated life.

The Dexter Clan down Coronach way has some fond memories of the Thirties and their efforts to enjoy life. Don Dexter, for example, “was a violinist and played for country dances ... we also had card parties in homes and visited our neighbours as often as possible.”<sup>115</sup> The local barber shop (shops that used to appear in every Saskatchewan town right up until the 1980s but then, like pool halls, disappeared – “salons” took their place) often served as a cheap form of entertainment. There were two in Aneroid in one of which an apparently popular fellow by the name of Leo Olmstead “often held court,” recalls a family member of Laughlin McKinnon.<sup>116</sup> And there were of course local billiard halls that could provide some entertainment, but, as Fred Maier’s experience in Hatton demonstrates, these places were frequently viewed with heavy social disfavour. The Aneroid pool hall solved the prejudice toward pool halls by establishing “a library” in the front of the pool hall and thus people, especially young lads, were able to enter “with impunity.”

But sometimes, no matter what the fun, food was always primary. Sports Days were a common feature of plains life, which, like pool halls and barber shops and general stores, persisted right up until the 1980s when they too fell out of fashion. Mr. Murray Powell recalls the dances that were held in the evening after Sports Days and the fact that women would always bring their own lunches to these events “so you would always try to pick yourself a partner for a supper waltz and hope she had brought a good lunch.”<sup>117</sup> It is quite possible, then, that love in the Dirty Thirties began over a “salted lard sandwich.”

Still there was no getting around the dire situation that faced RMs. Swift Current council, for example, borrowed \$75,000 in the spring of 1935 for seed grain to ensure that farmers would have the resources to plant a crop that year.<sup>118</sup> This was an enormous amount of money in 1935 and some historians have downplayed the role played by the RMs. H. Blair Neatby comes very close to dismissing the efforts of the RMs when he says that, yes, “it is true” that RMs had to “assume some financial obligations” to provide aid, but he is insistent on reminding us that the majority came from the federal or provincial governments.<sup>119</sup>

With the depressing writing on the wall, RM begged for a continuance of the commission’s mandate. Mankota’s councilmen pleaded for “all allotments [to] be made out of Regina.” Deer Fork’s Abe Yacower suggested that the problem was “not nearly over” and urged the SRC to continue its efforts. But it was a political decision, not a practical one and thus Gardiner disbanded the SRC and William “Do-Nothing” Patterson frog-marched the RMs back to the front lines where they simply did not belong. For all their worrying, though, and for all that the RM’s had gone through, there still remained the sense in 1934 that the councillors of the many small rural councils that steered the south plains through the crisis of the 1930s were “made of pretty good stuff.” Two Saskatoon newspaper reporters took a tour of the south plains, spoke with the councillors and administrators west of Mankota, and concluded that “The leaders appear prepared to make a dollar go as far as it can be stretched.”<sup>120</sup>

The disbandment of the SRC meant that councils once again became responsible “for all distribution and collection” of relief aid and loans and that the matter of relief became primarily a local responsibility.<sup>121</sup> Each councillor was responsible for the distribution of relief in his division.<sup>122</sup> The SRC had always feared that a less uniform and less equitable relief system would result from placing all these matters in the hands of local council and that is just what happened. Councils spent “many weary hours” dealing with related problems and deciding who was deserving of relief allotments.<sup>123</sup> We have seen such in the case of Mr. Engelman and the threats to reduce his aid if he didn’t stop complaining. Added to this was the fact that many councillors might be on relief themselves; it was thus feared that they might become either “extravagant or even unfair.”<sup>124</sup>

There was one “Mrs. Peel” in the Mankota district who had applied for aid but, for various reasons (pride or fear likely chief amongst them), she refused to disclose her monthly income. She was refused aid and then went about complaining to people in the community about the councilmen. She



did this to such an extent that council was moved to suggest, almost dare her, to come in and fill out the proper forms and “if she really needs aid then we will grant same.”<sup>125</sup> R.S Thompson in Swift Current was graciously granted a double order of groceries in May of 1936 but it was solely on one condition: “that no further relief be granted either him or his family.”<sup>126</sup> One can only guess at the conflict that lay beneath those words.

The councillors of the RM of Shamrock kept a sharp eye on who was getting relief aid. Over time and quite naturally, they became a little intolerant of “the indigents who didn’t work and wanted to sponge off the municipality.”<sup>127</sup> These indigents could have been those men who were passing through on their way to somewhere else. Mr. Al Forsythe was one such man. He stopped at the Robinson farm in the Shamrock district looking for work and food. Obviously they couldn’t pay Mr. Forsythe because, as the Rowell-Sirois Commission would later find, Saskatchewan suffered a greater income decline than any other jurisdiction in the world during the 1930s. But the family offered to let him stay and work in return for food. This was an instance in which everything worked out well – Mr. Forsythe remained with the Robinson’s for fourteen years “with adjustments in salary of course.”<sup>128</sup>

Local Shamrock lads Otto and Adolph Arnold were two of the many who took to the rails in the Thirties, but their experience proved that it wasn’t as dramatic and exciting as it might sound. They shuffled over to the Wymarck area looking for work and were offered “the fantastic sum” of five cents per acre for stoking oats: they caught the next train home.<sup>129</sup>

While the Arnold boys shuffled round the south plains looking for work, local councils sunk deeper and deeper into debt, and there was a growing reaction to the responsibilities that RMs had to assume. The RM of Big Stick had long been a critic and active petitioner against what it felt was an unfair aid system. This was the case in the 1920s and councilmen raised their battle standard once again in 1936 when they protested against the “unfair aid system” for exactly the same reasons it had petitioned in 1924. After somewhat disingenuously pointing out that the council alone had been providing aid for five years, Big Stick councillors suggested that it is “absolutely necessary to change the system [because] problems of this kind,” councilmen wrote, “we consider a national responsibility and should be treated as such.”<sup>130</sup> And really it is hard to take issue with that statement and the allegations of unfairness. Shortly after the cancellation of the SRC mandate in October 1934, the federal and provincial governments each provided \$23,000 in aid and Big Stick coughed up its share by taking out



another loan of \$20,000.<sup>131</sup> All told, Big Stick received \$308,531 in aid during the crisis and paid back just \$9,531. The government cancelled \$226,040.<sup>132</sup>

To get a clear and defined picture of the role RMs played, it helps to consider the month by month expenses incurred. Clinworth, for example, spent \$1,800 on relief and “agricultural re-establishment” in January 1935; \$5,000 in June; \$3,500 in May; \$3,000 in July; \$3,000 in September, and \$1,800 in December. In the year of the big failure in 1937, Clinworth spent fully \$28,551.05. Thus very nearly \$50,000 was spent on aid and resettlement by just one RM. In addition, Clinworth received \$551,972 in relief “advances” and paid back \$26,245, and the province was moved to finally cancel \$302,307.<sup>133</sup>

The total bill spent by the provincial and federal governments to keep rural Saskatchewan alive and breathing during the crisis of the 1930s was \$186,585,808.81.<sup>134</sup> 1937, the worst of the bad years, cost the federal and provincial governments \$47,800,000. As further evidence of the intensely regional nature of the drought, the drylands proper (not including the Weyburn-Regina district and south-east area of the province), received the majority of the aid, almost fully half. Crop districts three, four, and seven from present-day Grasslands National Park north and west to Macklin and from Moose Jaw west the Alberta border received \$80,037,211.23; this figure does not include the millions collectively spent by the many rural councils of the south and west plains.<sup>135</sup> And since all of this money was in principle an “advance,” it was always and throughout the crisis a question of how to get the money back, but it was a question with no easy answer.

The basic and guiding principle that compelled governments to spend nearly one quarter of a billion dollars in rural relief aid was actually quite simple and echoes all the way back to the crop failure of 1914, a year that cost fully \$8 million in relief aid.<sup>136</sup> Government officials were building a province and the millions in aid were meant to ensure that no one abandoned their land and left the province, because that would have put at risk the very life of the south and west plains of rural Saskatchewan. The government in the 1920s, and then again in the 1930s, veered wildly away from formal evacuation policy plans as such, although there were special programs in place and settlers were relocated but they were relocated only as a *consequence* of a policy that never had as its primary aim the removal of settlers. It was the reclamation of land that was primary; the removal of settlers was incidental. Mr. J.G. Gardiner, the federal Agriculture Minister in the 1930s, would say even in the hardest year of 1937 that it is not the purpose or goal of the province to remove settlers from the drylands.

The very logistics of an evacuation policy were “mind-boggling.” There were an estimated 30,000 families straddling the drybelt on the western side of the province, and a further 100,000 families living in the south plains of Palliser’s Triangle proper. Helping remove 130,000 families (which could amount to well past 300,000 people) was obviously not a can of worms the province willingly rushed to open.<sup>137</sup> And while one senator felt that the whole region “should have been left to the cows,” A.D. Rae also understood the rock-and-a-hard-place position in which everyone found themselves. Evacuating settlers and returning the land to the cattleman, he felt, “would solve nothing.”<sup>138</sup>

The relief system then served much the same purpose as a respirator does for a comatose hospital patient: it kept the dying body breathing. Historian John Archer notes that as the drought and economic conditions worsened “policy choices were eliminated.” Relief became policy and thus government’s role became a simple if still difficult matter of “preventing the collapse” of large areas of rural Saskatchewan.<sup>139</sup> It was thus that the provincial government essentially became a distribution agency for federal assistance.<sup>140</sup>

While the relief aid kept the body Saskatchewan alive, it did not arrive in time to save the spirit of Saskatchewan. Mr. Archer is keen to suggest that the crisis of the Thirties “ennobled” rural Saskatchewan, that “the privations shared in common re-awakened the older spirit of co-operation” that had marked the early years of settlement. Historian Bill Waiser comes closer to the truth when he writes that “the once vibrant rural society buckled under these conditions.”<sup>141</sup>

Surviving the crisis was the principal thought on the minds of most people. From the lowliest settler through the local RM councils and on up to the Minister of Agriculture and the Premier, each participant did what he or she thought was necessary to survive it. These actions included land, grain, and property seizures, fraud, and lies told to get relief. When Big Stick council wrote settler Archie Murray and informed him that “unless he settles up with the RM we will have to repossess [his] land,” there wasn’t any spirit of co-operation in their words: the RM was trying to survive by seizing land and Mr. Murray was trying to survive by not paying his bills.<sup>142</sup>

Perhaps, though, this spirit of co-operation did exist but maybe it did so in a way that reflected the wider moral confusions and corrosions of the time. During the 1920s, the settlers were often held in contempt by those charged with providing aid. The RM of Clinworth spent themselves broke helping the settlers before proclaiming that they “would not carry them any

longer.” Big Stick council suggested that settlers were a “burden to the municipality.” These statements point toward an animosity that was created and generated by having to care for helpless settlers who, through no real fault of their own, were unable to provide for themselves. But during the 1930s, there was very little if any of that contempt expressed by the councils and rural municipalities. So, in a way, the spirit of cooperation that Archer is keen to suggest guided Saskatchewan through these stormy waters may in fact have actually manifested itself in a restraint or even a reluctance to berate settlers because those who would do the berating were themselves receiving aid. The drought was a great equalizer.

The existence of a widespread spirit of co-operation is a difficult proposition to accept for another well-documented reason: debt collection. Debt collection and notions of cooperation cannot and will not stand in the same room with one another. The animating spirit of both is completely antagonistic toward the other.

Debt collection was the ultimate fact of life on the south plains and the Dirty Thirties produced some fantastically Saskatchewan ways of debt collection, and it is in this that residents may choose to take a kind of perverse pride. In the 1920s, RMs were ready to “seize any buildings on skids” or any farm equipment they could get their hands on; collection agents were busy chasing after the grain stocks of the widow Catherine Slovak; Big Stick councillors, suffering from a curious miasma, were “shooting horses” on the grounds they were a “public nuisance;” the Huelskamps fed porcupine stew to the John Deere collection agent who visited their farm and, to the likely amusement of the Huelskamp household it was a concoction on which he apparently gagged. All these elements and stories of debt collection have a very frontier Saskatchewan feel and stories of this type continued into the 1930s.

In the Thirties, local elevator agents were placed on the front lines of debt collection. In addition to their regular duties of adjudicating the quality of wheat, they also assumed the tertiary duty of collection agent for the RM and were charged with the task of seizing grain grown with seed relief.<sup>143</sup> The agents were issued collection books, which detailed the name of settlers in any given RM who had grown a crop with relief seed and how much of that crop was payable to the RM. In principle, a settler was allowed to keep a maximum of a hundred dollars of any crop grown with relief seed and, at least according to myth, if farmers could not cover the lien with what they grew (and who could when the average wheat yield in the drylands was often zero bushels per acre, or one, or two) then, at least according to

historian H. Blair Neatby, “an extension was readily granted.”<sup>144</sup> But one must wonder how accurate Mr. Neatby’s statement is.

Prefacing its intentions to seize grain at the elevator, Clinworth officials noted that, in principle, they “favour blanket compulsory seizures.” It was thus that council resolved to seize any grains delivered to an elevator whose grower owed money to the RM either in the form of back taxes or relief: “all elevator agents” Clinworth council advised, “have lists and authority to issue cash tickets to the RM.”<sup>145</sup> It requires little effort to imagine the conflicts produced by these efforts at collection. After all, the same man who seized a settler’s grain (and hope) in the morning would be the same man across from whom the settler would sit at coffee row in the afternoon.

Clinworth didn’t stop at empowering elevator agents to seize grain. In 1935, it planned a major Seizure Offensive. A list of 260 ratepayers was drawn up opposite the amount of money they owed and “distress warrants” were issued and the collection agent was ordered to “seize the goods, chattels and growing crops” of those who owed money in the form of taxes or relief.<sup>146</sup> One is only faintly surprised to learn that Clinworth churned through at least three collection agents during the first half of the crisis, between 1929 and 1934.

Collection agents were paid handsomely for their efforts. Councils likely understood that such distasteful work needed to be rewarded somehow. Clinworth’s first agent was hired during late autumn, 1929. The man worked strictly on a commission of 8 per cent and was charged with collecting on “all unpaid relief seed accounts and unpaid taxes.”<sup>147</sup> He lasted until 1933, when council hired R.A. Young. He received a commission plus “10 cents per mile necessarily travelled” to collect and seize.<sup>148</sup> Mr. Young went straight to work trying to collect on \$2,000 owed by six different men. James Howes was into the RM for \$488 in back taxes and Louis Tumbach owed \$9.70 for coal. Mr. Young lasted just two years when council hired on Vernon Ross as collection agent at fifty dollars per month and, a sign of the times, just a 2 per cent commission.<sup>149</sup>

The secretary treasurer of the RM often did double-duty as community collection agent and this almost prompted open revolt in the RM of Deer Forks. In the cold miserable dead of a 1931 winter, in a hall full of people assembled for the purposes of relief aid, a resume for the position of secretary treasurer was handed to Councillor Gus Angerman. The councillor read through the application, considered it, and immediately understood its implications. He dared those settlers assembled in the room: “if anyone [has] anything against the present secretary let him speak up now.” The

matter was dropped when Angerman saw that “no one had any charges to make.”<sup>150</sup> The RMs who hired collectors from outside the district likely did not run into the conflicts associated with having the local secretary-treasurer (which is to say a neighbour or friend) seize the “goods, chattels, and growing crops” of settlers.

The unnamed secretary treasurer defended by Mr. Angerman was, in addition to being paid \$120 per month, also being paid a 6 per cent commission on all he collected and was authorized by council to “distrain and make seizures whenever he thinks necessary.”<sup>151</sup> That is a considerable level of arbitrary power granted to an unelected man and it would have had the smell of illegitimate authority to the settlers whose lives and property he was seizing and “distraining.” Certainly it would have seemed that way to David Riehl who had 300 bushels of grain stored away but which were seized by the agent and, according to Councillor Ira Robbins, “totally applied to his relief account.”<sup>152</sup> Thus Mr. Riehl had to stand by and watch a man who may have been his neighbour seize the very little grain he had been able to grow in one of the worst droughts of the century. Indeed, Riehl was at risk of being struck off the relief rolls for storing grain. “Secret hoards of grain” were one of the four principal reasons why a settler would be removed from the relief rolls; alcohol use, non-disclosure of income, and refusal to accept work (likely road work) were the other three.<sup>153</sup>

As philosopher/historian Isaiah Berlin pointed out, any solution to any problem creates its own unique set of problems, and it can be said that the relief system of the 1930s continually generated problems equal to or greater than those it solved. Nothing demonstrates the cyclical absurdity of the relief system like the circumstances surrounding the unfortunately named Mr. Peter Lose.

Mr. Lose appeared before council in late 1932 to ask them to refund a portion of the value of the property and grains the RM had earlier seized and which had left him penniless. The debt to the RM had been settled but in solving that problem it created another one: it left the settler broke, thus requiring more relief aid. Mr. Lose was likely a little shocked when “after due consideration council refused.”<sup>154</sup> Lose claimed he had nothing left and was likely being at least somewhat honest for he would not let the matter drop. He re-appeared a month later to again plead his case in November. Council again refused. But finally, on the eve of the Christmas season, serendipity smiled and, due to “hard circumstances,” council agreed to grant an eighty-five-dollar refund of the amount that had been seized by the

collection agent, though it was a narrow vote as two councillors, unmoved by the spirit of the Christmas season, voted against Mr. Lose's request.

Property and grain seizure was such an omnipresent fact of life that Saskatchewan's Attorney General was obliged to spell out in a formal pamphlet who could seize what and at what times could the seizing be done. T.C. Davis explained that, yes, RMs "can seize for taxes without notice" and can seize for relief aid with advance notice (think here of the distress warrants issued by Clinworth).<sup>155</sup> The document also reflects the debt moratoriums that had been introduced in Saskatchewan as Mr. Davis issues a call for restraint and encourages creditors to give settlers time to pay and room to breathe. This is precisely the approach that the Saskatchewan government refused to take in the 1920s because of the possibility that investors might be scared away. Davis noted that "the government will refrain from pressing for payment of debt" and, indeed, he fires a shot across the over-zealous bow of rural collection agents by politely noting that "I am sure municipalities ... will co-operate ... in trying to reach this end."<sup>156</sup> Some of them did.

Pinto Creek hired a collection agent in 1932 but, given the fact that they lived in a disaster zone and would continue to do so for another seven years, they agreed to restrain the agent and would let him loose to seize "only under instructions from council," which is a distinct, and for the settlers welcome, departure from those RMs that favoured the "whenever the collection agent deems it necessary" approach.<sup>157</sup> Swift Current went through both phases of this general arc. It hired M.J. Knapp in 1932 as a collector for arrears of taxes and relief, but, opting for the style adopted by Deer Forks and others, certainly Big Stick in the 1920s, they granted Mr. Knapp "the power to make seizures when it is considered necessary."<sup>158</sup> Deer Forks considered it necessary to continue with its approach right up until the end of the crisis when, after granting \$200 in aid to fifteen people, council again moved to make seizures "in any case where the circumstances warrant it."<sup>159</sup>

No matter how much debt was collected, it was never enough for the dozens of one-room schoolhouses in the rural areas. Like settlers, the schools in each RM often subsisted on government grants and relief aid. In 1930, it cost about \$16,000 to operate a school for one year, but, by 1935, that amount had fallen to \$8,600.<sup>160</sup> Teachers' salaries had fallen to an average of less than \$600 per year and, by 1938, unpaid teachers' salaries had climbed to \$1,303,004.<sup>161</sup> As was the case in the 1920s, it took no time at all for schools to be steamrolled by the drought of the Thirties. In 1931, the government determined that it would need an immediate grant of \$30,000 just

to keep rural schools open and would need a further \$1.5 million to keep them in operation until the end of that year 1932.<sup>162</sup>

In Swift Current in 1930, for example, it cost the RM \$3,200 for the Wymark school district; in 1932, the cost was down to \$985.60, such was the trimming of services, the lowering of wages, and the absence of school children. In the disaster zone of Pinto Creek, the Dixie School District cost \$1,850 in 1929 and \$1,350 in 1931.<sup>163</sup> Desperate to maintain some control, Big Stick urged its school districts “to keep their bank borrowing to a minimum.”<sup>164</sup> And as the crisis slowly wound its way past the half-way mark in 1936, Clinworth, despite all its productive efforts, found that it was twenty-one months in arrears to its schools and dejectedly stated there were “no prospects of collecting taxes” that year.<sup>165</sup> Provincial cuts to school grants began early on in the 1930s. Fully one third of the education grant was cut in 1932. But as the crisis dragged on and on, the cuts went deeper and deeper. In 1921, a rural one-room schoolhouse teacher made \$1,388 per year; by 1936, that salary had fallen to \$407.<sup>166</sup> As of December 1936, the total unpaid salaries of one-room school teachers was \$937,594.11.<sup>167</sup> Rural school teachers, a Dominion government adviser correctly observed in 1938, “[bore] the full impact of the distress.”

Mrs. Ethel Schmidt made a career out of working in the drylands through the worst years in the history of this province. She began as a teacher in the tiny community of Liebethal, which is just down the road from Leader (formerly Prussia) and although there are still a few (literally a few) people in this hamlet, the school, the store and the post office in Liebethal were finally shut down in the 1980s.

Mrs. Schmidt’s pupils ranged in age from six to sixteen and the highest grade was six. Given the very hit and miss nature of education in those days, having sixteen-year-olds in a grade six class is not surprising. Mr. Frank Ulm, down south at Aneroid, recalls that, in those early days, some kids were reaching nine and ten years old without ever having set foot in a school.<sup>168</sup> And further reflecting this trend of education being inconsistent and highly uneven even at the best of times, there was the story in Alberta about the young fellow who “spent the happiest four years of his life in grade six, was given a farm by his father on his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday whereupon he forthwith married the teacher.”<sup>169</sup>

Mrs. Schmidt taught a total of thirty students but what really disturbed her was the fact that fully twenty of her charges could only speak German.<sup>170</sup> This language barrier caused the young Mrs. Schmidt no end of distress: “I was really in a dither,” she recalled and “didn’t think I could stand it.” She



was lonesome and homesick and stuck in a one-room school full of young Germans and she was “sure they were talking about me.”<sup>171</sup> As a first-time teacher, however, it is quite possible that Mrs. Schmidt’s biggest problem was her classroom management skills. Mr. Carl Albrecht was a German who came from Romania as a boy and settled on the Krupp Flats, north of Maple Creek and his English was terrible. In the yard of the school he attended, there was a large boulder and “at recess and noon hour we kids that couldn’t speak English would run behind this rock and talk German until the bell rang.”<sup>172</sup> This suggests that Mr. Albrecht had a teacher who refused to allow German to be spoken in the classroom.

In the end, though, Mrs. Schmidt didn’t stand it. Even though she met some people at local barn dances, she “got discouraged” and she “couldn’t hack it any longer,” in part, at least, because “there was no library worth a hoot” and finally felt that she had to quit. Mrs. Schmidt was actually correct in her assessment of the school library. The Rowell-Sirois Commission found that most libraries in the drought area “suffered severely” during the dry years because there was simply no money for books. One must conclude that the intellectual life of most drylanders suffered as much as the physical, economic, and spiritual side of their lives. But Mrs. Schmidt did not quit teaching, nor did she quit the drylands. She taught at a few schools in the region before finally leaving for Saskatoon in the 1940s. Where her salary was concerned, she recalls that sometimes she had to “wait a year or two” to get paid.

Even hospital bills had to be covered by government grants. Since “the crop in this municipality [Clinworth] is a total failure” (it was zero bushels per acre in 1937), council asked the province to foot the medical bills for the district.<sup>173</sup> Pinto Creek, which had throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s made concerted efforts to attract a physician to the district, found it couldn’t pay him once he arrived. Council pleaded for the ratepayers to “pay at least a few dollars” on their 1933 tax bill or the doctor would leave.<sup>174</sup>

For all its antagonistic but effective nature, debt collection still had its limits. After all, how does a settler pay if he hasn’t grown anything that he can sell? But when collection failed, some RMs had no choice but to start writing off bad debt. Clinworth, for example, cancelled \$14,059.59 in unpaid taxes on twenty parcels of land in 1933, likely because the land had been abandoned and no collection could be achieved.<sup>175</sup> Before reaching that point, however, councils tried the carrot-and-stick approach.

Swift Current felt it “necessary to grant a compromise” and thus cancelled all penalties on the 1931 tax arrears if they were paid by a certain



date.<sup>176</sup> In Mankota, hundreds if not thousands of dollars in relief loans and back taxes were lost when council, adjusting itself to the peculiarities of life in a dust bowl, stopped pursuing that to which it was legally entitled and instead adjusted itself to the infinitely broader and roomier idea of pursuing what it could reasonably expect to get. Mr. J.H. McCleary had gone through six years of crop failure in a row and owed the RM \$800, but council agreed to accept \$600 and thus cleared the slate. Mr. Armand Masse owed \$412, but council accepted \$340 as full payment. Mr. Charles Lagarre owed \$2,040, but council cleared his bill after he paid \$1,595.<sup>177</sup>

The Saskatchewan government was certainly not insensible to the plight of its municipalities. Debt and credit always was and continues to be the motor that drives agricultural Saskatchewan. Credit is necessary to farm: that was true then and it is true today. Saskatchewan had always borrowed money. Settlers borrowed to farm and merchants borrowed to stock their stores; thus credit was Saskatchewan's backbone: "the depression broke that backbone."<sup>178</sup>

The province made every effort to soften the hammer blows of the drought in the south and the depression in the north. The Anderson government, for example, introduced a two-pronged effort for tax consolidation and debt adjustment early on in the Thirties. This 1931 Act allowed municipalities to cancel annual tax sales, and it allowed indebted rate-payers the opportunity to stretch out the repayment of those debts to the RMs over the course of five years between 1933 and 1938.<sup>179</sup> This plan was optional for each RM and it was a short-sighted measure because it was "predicated upon a quick return to prosperity." There was always the assumption that it couldn't get any worse, that it had to get better.

The tax sale, as we have seen, played a huge role in the crisis of the 1920s and it was a not-insignificant factor in allowing settlers to expand their holdings. The tax sale also allowed the RMs to recoup some of the massive losses they had incurred through non-payment of taxes and relief loans. To give an example of its potential importance, Pinto Creek had annual expenditures in its operating budget of just \$23,932 in 1933, but its tax arrears as of 1934 were \$135,967 and that is not counting money owed for aid and relief seed. The possibility of making money off land sales to satisfy municipal debt was one of the operative principles of the tax sale, even though in the 1930s such sales often could be justifiably viewed with some anger as a settler watched his land being purchased by a neighbour. But still the tax sale became a problem. Even though "a great many taxpayers are forced to allow their lands to go through the tax sale ... owing to drought

conditions,” Big Stick council, in the early years of the crisis of 1931, decided not purchase these lands.<sup>180</sup> And indeed council finally stopped holding the sales in 1935 because there were not any buyers attending, the RM could not get a decent price anyways, and selling abandoned land laden with liens posed a myriad of problems.<sup>181</sup> Under these conditions, the Anderson government’s cancellation of the tax sale as a protective measure for settlers has all the appearance of a grandiose bow to an empty theatre.

Clinworth stopped holding its tax sale in 1932 with the apparent purpose of mollifying the growing resentment in the community and instead agreed to “make an earnest appeal to all ratepayers to pay at least one year’s taxes.”<sup>182</sup> Swift Current was among the earliest to abandon the sale of seized or abandoned lands when in 1931 it asked the Department of Municipal Affairs for the authority “not to hold a tax sale.”<sup>183</sup> Pinto Creek, always gentle when it came time to apply the rough and hard hand of collections, granted land seizure postponements to eight settlers in June of 1932 and another six in July.<sup>184</sup> But still, councils assumed title to land whether they wanted to or not because in the developed/developing west of the 1930s, someone had to own the land; it simply cannot lie ownerless. So, Big Stick in the winter of 1937 assumed title to an unspecified number of parcels of land “which, in the opinion of council, are sub-marginal or unfitted for agriculture or which have been abandoned.”<sup>185</sup>

Big Stick was always a little different from the other RMs in the drylands. It was far more aggressive in its collection efforts during the 1920s, and it was also far more strident and willing to express its opinion on the state of agriculture, its views on settlement policy, and how it felt about the relief aid system generally. It was one of the few RMs to be consistently and actively vocal about the broader issues connected with local crises. It may have in fact been councils like Big Stick that the world-weary scribes of the Swift Current *Sun* had in mind when they poked fun at RMs who passed wordy, obfuscatory resolutions which, for all their depth, had no practical effect. “In Germany” wrote the editors of the *Sun*, “the people say ‘Heil Hitler!’ in Italy its Hosannas for Il Duce; over here it’s ‘therefore be it resolved’”<sup>186</sup> Still, Big Stick was not afraid to leap into the fray and give voice to its opinions.

In 1935, Big Stick council gave the province a bit of a history lesson (albeit using the clunky and unappealing format of a municipal resolution to get their point across – there are in these resolutions, as the *Sun* scribes suggested, lots of “whereas” and “therefore be it resolved”). RMs, councilmen explained, could not provide the services expected by the ratepayers because

the ratepayers were not paying any money for taxes or relief. Council could not collect taxes because no one was growing anything. The banks were insisting that the interest on previous loans be paid by the money from future loans and, furthermore, were only lending 50 per cent of what RMs were allowed to borrow. It had been this way during the crisis of the 1920s and was so again in the 1930s. All of this was a preface to asking the province to “assume the ultimate loss of relief loans.”<sup>187</sup>

The resolution touches a number of important points that it is profitable here to reconsider and summarize: the RMs could not function because no one could pay taxes. Settlers could not pay taxes because they weren’t growing anything. RMs were seizing what the settlers had grown, thus necessitating more relief. The province spent a good majority of its relief money for rural Saskatchewan on seed grain implicitly insisting that the settlers grow something. When nothing grew and no taxes could be collected, the RMs were compelled to employ collection agents to collect on the useless seed relief loans, but there was no money to collect because nothing grew. When something did grow the RMs seized it to satisfy tax arrears, once again necessitating more relief. The government introduced a moratorium on contracted (bank) debt but yet insisted that payments be made to itself.<sup>188</sup> The Anderson government allowed settlers five years to pay off their municipal debts, which drove the RMs further into penury, thus increasing the demands on the settlers to pay something, but they couldn’t because they were growing nothing in a land where the government kept insisting they try again.

This ridiculous circus is profoundly, deeply astonishing. That it dragged on for ten years, and, in some jurisdictions, twenty to twenty-five years, saddens one very nearly to the point of laughter. In all of Canadian history, there is nothing quite like it. At no time have Canadians engaged futility and absurdity with such devotedness, sincerity, and enthusiastic earnestness. The decade is tragic, yes, but it cannot fail to bring a kind of grim laughter.

Nothing quite captures the ridiculous essence of the Dirty Thirties in the same way as road-gangs. Rural road-gangs in the Thirties became institutionalized. They became a part of the Saskatchewan landscape. Road-gangs and road-work relief camps played an important role during both the depression and the drought, but to this point far more scholarly attention has focused on the camps for the urban unemployed. The urban camps usually employed young single men and are remembered mostly for the fear they induced in governments who thought that unsavoury (read:

communist) political machinations were occurring within their confines. Precious little attention, no attention in fact, has ever been paid to the rural settler road gangs, which were a ubiquitous presence on the plains between 1914 and 1937 but particularly so after 1929.

It is the slight but very real suggestion of the penal-punitive nature of road-gang work that makes these camps compelling. It sometimes seems as though all that is missing is leg irons. Here we have the spectre of desperate, impoverished men with starving families unceremoniously put to on heavy-labour work details to pay for seed grains with which to fail at farming. The futility of the existence is awesome. But still the men went to the road-gangs and what's more they did it willingly, or that is to say, they viewed the labour as an opportunity to work instead of asking for relief and thus road-gangs also explain much about what it meant to be a man on the south plains at the close of the frontier in western Canada.

Saskatchewan-raised novelist Wallace Stegner grew up in Eastend, not too very far from Mankota, in the early years of dryland settlement between 1914 and 1920. His world as a boy in those years mirrors the world of the settlers of the 1920s and 1930s. And even though, when Stegner identifies what he admires in the men of the south plains he is speaking of the cattle ranchers and cowboys whom he encountered, his reminiscences still suit our purposes admirably because they point us in the general direction of the kind of man who would lose his crop ten years in a row or fifteen out of twenty, would have the spirit to stay, and, what's more, would go to work on heavy-labour road-gangs.

Stegner says he and his friends admired "good shots, good riders, tough fighters, dirty stories," but, even more than that, they admired "stoical endurers of pain."<sup>189</sup> Endurance is what counted on the south plains – blissfully, "feelings" did not matter. No one ever asked settlers how they *felt* about the problem – the question was how settlers would *deal* with the problem, a quite marked contrast to the culture of our own age.

A failed settler working on a road-gang, then, was nothing if not a stoical endurer of pain. Being a sickly child, Stegner grew up "hating [his] weakness" and thus found some measure of comfort in this principle of stoical endurance, what he later termed an "inhumane and limited code."<sup>190</sup> As we have seen earlier, at no time were settlers very much respected amongst the cattle ranchers and cowboys of the region ("moss-back" and "sob-buster" were not terms of affection), but, still, there were some basic philosophical similarities between ranchers and settlers: the life of both revolved around individual freedom. The cowboy found freedom riding a horse in the

middle of nowhere while the settler found freedom from the servitude of Old Europe, or freedom from the tenant farming endemic to the American west. Settlers and cowboys were what D.H. Lawrence famously called “masterless men.” This much they shared in common.

At bottom and despite all he despised about the frontier world (“the prejudice, the callousness, the destructive practical jokes”), Stegner admired the ranch hands and cowboys who lived and judged life by what he called “the same raw standard.” These men honoured “courage, competence, and self-reliance,” and Stegner adds that “it was their absence not their presence which was cause for remark.”<sup>191</sup> This point needs to be emphasized: it was the *absence* of courage and self-reliance, of stoical endurance, that caused remark and thus it was naturally assumed by most people, the settler included, that if his crop failed then he *should* go to work on a road-gang. That was just one of the enormous expectations placed on men of that day and if a settler refused (and there were likely a good many who did), then that meant a settler lacked those very qualities that were held in such high esteem in the frontier days of early Saskatchewan, qualities like courage, honour, and self-reliance.

Stegners thoughts on being a man find an echo in remarks made by the head of the Northern Saskatchewan Resettlement Branch (NSRB), a government agency hastily established in 1935 and which helped to evacuate settlers from the drylands. Its chief, Richard Matte, was explaining to a radio audience in 1938 what it was the NSRB had done and was doing. And he noted that their efforts at removing settlers were designed to get him and his family off of relief because, in Matte’s words, “we all agree that relief is the most repugnant form of assistance to the self-respecting man.”<sup>192</sup> Absolutely nothing of the sort could be said today, at least publicly anyway. Western culture is engaged in a full-on retreat from anything that even resembles a strong moral judgment despite the fact that most people, deep somewhere in their heart of hearts, still agree with Matte’s words.

There was, then, a heavy emphasis in the early settlement years on being a man of courage, resilience, strength, and persistence. On a cultural level, these sentiments would not survive the 1960s and were instead deposited into a moral junk-heap at the earliest opportunity in favour of self-esteem and the expression of one’s rights and “feelings” and entitlements. Indeed, today, when words like courage or strength are deployed, they are often accompanied by quotation marks indicating that, at least at the level of public discourse, we no longer share those ideals and indeed are somewhat embarrassed by them, though perhaps embarrassment is the wrong word. Perhaps

men today know that they do not quite measure up to the men of the early settlement years and we escape this knowledge by taking refuge in sophisticated cynicism and irony and the distant comfort provided by quotation marks and inverted commas. Honour, courage, self-reliance: quaint, archaic thoughts that withered and died in the moral corrosion of the 1960s.

There were huge expectations of men in the frontier world and they were expected to perform abhorrent tasks without complaint and do so gladly or if not gladly, then, as Stegner notes, without complaint. And by and large it would seem they did so, although, since people are generally the same in all times and at all places and since the expressions of desperation and despair do not really change over time, we can assume that, at least once or twice when a settler's head was bowed down over his shovel whilst plying his grim and futile trade, a tear or two fell into the dust and hot asphalt.

Road-building in Saskatchewan has always been an important element of rural life. How else is one to get to his field if not for roads? Deer Forks council held a special meeting in the sunny, happy spring of 1914 to "discover ways and means" of building roads.<sup>193</sup> One smiles at the earnestness with which they considered this problem because it would be solved for them through no effort of their own that very year. Indeed, drought would be practically the only thing that would ensure an adequate supply of money and labourers to get the work done. If you have ever wondered why it is that Saskatchewan has the most roads of any province in confederation, you might trace the answer to that question to the dry years on the south and west plains and a certain Colonel H.R. Matthews.

The Colonel was selected by the province (his title probably gives a good indication of why he was chosen for this line of work) to oversee and administer the road-gang camp system, which was similar in nature to the famed urban relief camps that were established across Canada during the Great Depression. Very little is known about the Colonel – he is one of those shadowy figures who drifts into the pages of history and then exits upon completion of his assignment. At any rate, the Colonel's camps were set up not just in the drylands but right around the province, though as one may suspect, most of the work was done on the south plains, and, of that work, the largest amount occurred in the Kincaid-Mankota-Gravelbourg-Assiniboia districts.

The Colonel worked out a wage scale for those who would do the work. The foreman for each camp got six dollars per day; labourers got four dollars (minus one dollar for meals) and "the straw boss" received five dollars.<sup>194</sup> Men were expected to bring their own plates, forks, and spoons, much to

the likely displeasure of their wives because it raised the prospect of lost cookware and cutlery. The settlers were able to work up to \$100 in earned wages, after which point they were ordered to step aside and make room for the next man. So, at four dollars per day they could conceivably have work for about four or five weeks.

Rural municipalities operated on a somewhat different system than the Colonel. They would make application for a project (and the minutes of the RM meetings show a *constant* application for “road-work relief”), the Department of Highways would review it, and if the project was suitable, the money for the work would be granted.<sup>195</sup> This system was different from the Colonel’s set-up in that there were no camps for the settlers. RM projects were by and large local day work “so as to make it possible for the farmers employed on the work to return home at night.”<sup>196</sup> Mr. Frederick Hartman was a German who had come to the south plains from Russia in 1911 and he regularly did road work for the RM in the Richmond district. His reasons for it are pretty simple: “anything to earn a dollar to clothe and feed a family of nine and pay the taxes.”<sup>197</sup>

Letting loose thousands of starving, impoverished, and destitute settlers to build the highways and byways of a new province is not exactly what the founding fathers of Saskatchewan had in mind when the province was born in 1905, so a crew of road inspectors was hired to oversee the work being done by the settlers on the RM jobs. These inspectors did not bother with the road camps: evidently, the Colonel was his own authority.

The inspectors checked to make sure “the men come to work when required” and that the quality of their work was acceptable. They also handled all complaints of “discrimination” or even the “improper use being made of relief moneys.” There were forty-two camps in 1930, the first year of the program, which continued for much of the decade, and a total of \$1,131,090 was spent in that first year on both camp and RM projects. Road work in 1931 employed some 9,000 men.<sup>198</sup> Over the course of the 1930s, \$10 million was spent on relief road work, which employed roughly 40,000 men.

In the early years of the 1930s, before it became an institutionalized government-directed affair, relief road work was a simple and straightforward proposition. A.W. McLaren of Swift Current worked off \$98.70 in relief “in lieu of construction of a road to Bode school.”<sup>199</sup> It was a simple problem with a simple solution. John Hardy in Mankota received twenty dollars worth of groceries early in the crisis and thus also received “\$20.00 worth of road work” with which he “repaid” his loan.<sup>200</sup> But the problem grew more complex as the thirties worsened.



The payment or non-payment of wages for work on the day jobs, for example, was often at the discretion of council. After decreeing in the summer of 1930 that “no cash be paid for road work where the parties owe for taxes,” Big Stick council softened its stance and, in the fall of that year, decided that only 50 per cent of wages needed to be “turned in on municipal debt.”<sup>201</sup> Big Stick, like many other RMs, was not paying a princely sum in wages: it couldn’t. A road-work labourer was given forty cents an hour and over an eight-hour day that works out to \$3.20, about eighty cents less than a worker would receive on the Colonel’s road-gangs. Pinto Creek councillor George Stribell even managed to win a vote in which the wages that council was (at least morally) obliged to pay the settlers were withheld until such time as settlers could clear either their relief or their tax account. When that didn’t happen, those settlers lost their wages, which were “applied to 1933 municipal taxes, relief interest, or hospital and medical aid as the case may warrant.”<sup>202</sup> This, of course, necessitated more relief.

Alberta municipalities were likewise in the same bind as their counterparts in Saskatchewan. The President of Alberta’s provincial municipal association, Mr. John Gair, told his organization’s membership in the early years of the drought that, when councillors had been elected to office, their primary consideration had been the construction and maintenance of roads. But by the 1930s, Mr. Gair noted, there was much that had changed: “you now all realize that the financial condition of your municipality is your first duty and road building is more or less a secondary consideration which, in many cases, is now carried on only as a relief measure.”<sup>203</sup> For municipalities in both Alberta and Saskatchewan, then and today, placing road work second on *any* kind of priority list was a fundamental inversion of and offence to a very basic and natural order. Roads come first in rural Saskatchewan and Alberta; everything else is second.

What makes the road-work element of the crises intriguing is that the men volunteered willingly to the point that there were always backlogs and more applicants than there was work. Swift Current council had a hundred applications for road work even before there was provincial approval for either a road relief grant or one of the Colonel’s camps: council “strongly urged” the province to set up a camp near Highway 4.<sup>204</sup>

Given the very few people who have travelled the highway between Kincaid and Mankota, even fewer would be aware of the troubled history of that forty-kilometre stretch of highway that detours into the town itself and stops there because there is nothing below Mankota except rock piles, snakes, and emptiness. The town is a last exit from Saskatchewan.

Pinto Creek had petitioned the government for a road camp to be set up on the number 19 in the late summer of 1930. But there was a bit of a problem because of the camp's location. The camp was closer to Mankota than it was to Kincaid, and, when the Kincaid men, armed with their shovels and picks and their wives treasured plates and spoons, arrived for work, the camp had been overtaken by Mankota men. The Colonel had sent "at least 150" men from Kincaid to the camp but upon their arrival they found ninety men in the camp already, with apparently another forty on the waiting list. The Kincaid men were "refused work and sent home."<sup>205</sup> There is no record of conflict between the two groups but men under intense pressure who are suddenly and capriciously batted about by fate do not simply "return home" without at first expressing their thoughts and views about the situation. The squabbling over scraps of highly valued heavy-labour relief work is a distinct possibility. Pinto Creek councillors even pledged to provide their own cook and bunkhouse if it meant the Kincaid men could get to work on the Nineteen. Didn't happen, though.

This potentially explosive situation was a natural outcome of the Colonel's rules. Actuated by some impulse toward arbitrary fairness and chance, the Colonel decreed that work camps were not for any single municipality but instead were meant for the men of three or four adjoining or nearby RMs.<sup>206</sup> It was simply the hard luck, in a land full of hard luck, that the Kincaid men showed up late, or rather not early enough.

It is not often that one is able to hear the voices of the men who worked in these camps. Reminiscences frequently concern the urban instead of the rural camps. But there was a man by the name of Mr. Pax Crowley who gives us a valuable if ever so slight glimpse into what it was like. Mr. Crowley worked on Highway 10. And in writing about the days he spent working in the camps, one finds that it wasn't all bad or rather there was at least a touch of light that brightened the dark edges. Between fifty and sixty men worked in this camp. Mr. Crowley recalled that the men would sing while working. In particular he remembers working out the ditty "Spring Time in the Rockies."<sup>207</sup> One might also assume that "Someone's in the Kitchen with Dina" was also given extensive treatment, popular as it was in that day and age.

There were also other forms of entertainment too. There were socials, dances, and "whist drives" organized with the help of local community clubs. And on the final night before the camp was shut down with the completion of the job, Mr. Crowley recalls that there was a dance at which an oldtimer known only as 'Old Blue' played the piano. No one knew his real

name, Mr. Crowley remembers, or where he had come from, only that he was called 'Old Blue' and that he played all night.<sup>208</sup>

Highway 21 runs north-south, connecting Maple Creek to Leader, and it too was a relief project or at least its development, paving, and maintenance was (and anyone who has driven the 21 from Leader north to Eatonia will have no trouble believing that the last improvements made to that highway were done by settlers during the 1930s). But in 1935 with "total crop failure" looming (two bushels per acre in 1934, four in 1935, and one in 1930), Big Stick council asked that twenty-five miles of the Twenty One be resurfaced and that "settlers be given a chance to work."<sup>209</sup> If you ever find yourself in Golden Prairie, the seat of the RM of Big Stick, which sits at the halfway point between Leader and Maple Creek, please do not call Highway 21 "Highway 21." According to local historian and Irishman A.L. O'Farrell, "if you call it that, you will be marked as an outsider."<sup>210</sup> It's "The Big Stick Trail," he cautions, and it has been such for a hundred years.

Of course, and quite understandably at least from a modern perspective, not all men were willing to go to work on heavy-labour road crews, but there was the continual threat that one would be stricken off of the relief rolls if one refused. Settlers had several anvils hanging over their head at any given time during the crisis. For RMs it was always a matter of dollars and cents: the settlers owed money and the RM needed either money or work in kind and thus road relief solved that problem. But for the men involved, it was more a matter of the affective elements of life: of pride, of dignity, or even of laziness. The practical elements of life were at constant war with the affective. Swift Current council felt that settlers ought to be "allowed" to work off 50 per cent of relief or taxes and that, if they refused, "without a valid reason," they would be "cut off relief."<sup>211</sup>

As mentioned, an RM set its own rates and rules for road work. As part of a \$2,000 road-work project granted in Mankota in the good year of 1932 (three bushels per acre that year) council limited the number of days worked to three, after which the "recipient" of the "aid" would step aside for the next man.<sup>212</sup> On a 1934 project, seventy men worked and were paid twelve to fifteen dollars and this project was one of the few times the name of a woman showed up out there working on the road-gangs. A "Mrs. George Jones" was amongst those working on the project.

The wages that were paid were necessarily a pittance, and one wonders how useful the "relief work" actually was. On provincial jobs, the wage rate was fixed at five dollars per day (less a dollar for meals) and on an eight-hour day that works out to about sixty cents an hour. But RMs, perhaps wishing

to help more settlers by paying less in wages (or for even less appetizing reasons – recall the inspectors ensuring the proper use of relief money), paid their labourers quite a bit less. Mankota paid forty cents an hour as did Deer Forks and Big Stick, and it seems this was the top end of the wage scale on municipal projects. The poorest-paying RMs were Pinto Creek and Clinworth. Pinto Creek paid its men twenty cents an hour (later thirty-five cents) or about two to three dollars per day. Clinworth paid its men twenty cents an hour in 1934 for the spiritually destructive task of “burying weeds” in ditches. Swift Current started out at \$2.50 per day (about thirty-five cents per hour) but dropped its wages to two dollars per day in 1931.<sup>213</sup>

All told, the province spent \$10 million on road-work relief between 1929 and 1939, and 40,946 men received work on these various provincial and municipal projects. In the worst of the bad years, 1937, the province estimated road-work costs at \$750,000 in addition to the \$180,500, which to that point had not been completed from the projects of 1936.<sup>214</sup>

There was no escaping road work. If you lived in Saskatchewan during the Dirty Thirties, you or someone you knew was likely a member of a road-work gang. And that includes the northern grain belt where road work followed the settlers who had been evacuated and where “the building of pioneer roads” occurred.<sup>215</sup> It seems that road work up north was a tad more punitive than on the plains. Instead of the often-used benchmark of 50 per cent, settlers were obliged to hand over two thirds of their income to satisfy relief debt. “In this way,” historian Mr. Blair Neatby thoughtfully explains, “the cost of re-establishing settlers was considerably reduced.”<sup>216</sup> Good news.

The pay for settlers up north was less discretionary than it was on the south and west plains. The foremen were given lists of men and “[these lists] specified amounts each should be permitted to earn” and these earnings were not paid in cash but in “orders for supplies.”<sup>217</sup> Thus it was that settlers stumbled through the trees and brush of the north country in the middle of winter, cursing the Last Best West while delivering firewood to train stations, which was another way in which relief debt/relocation debt could be satisfied. One wonders when settlers actually had time to fail at growing wheat.

It is profitable here to summarize. Settlers were put to work on road crews to work off relief debts. At twenty cents an hour, it would have taken two weeks to work off a debt of fifteen dollars. And since the money for which they worked was already spoken for, they would again need either direct relief for food or seed relief with which to fail at growing wheat in the

following crop year, thereby necessitating more road work. But since there was such a clamour for road work, which reduced the amount of money a settler could earn, the relief debt and back taxes piled up quicker than one earned the money to satisfy the debt. Relocation to the north would result in relief work to pay back the cost of relocation and since in the north it could and did take between one and three years to get a piece of land productive, the settler would again be required to go on relief work while the bills piled up. In the end, for tens of thousands of settlers, the question was not “how can I pay my bills?”; the question was “how can I get out of here?” Thousands upon thousands settlers found what we must assume was an easy answer to that question.

