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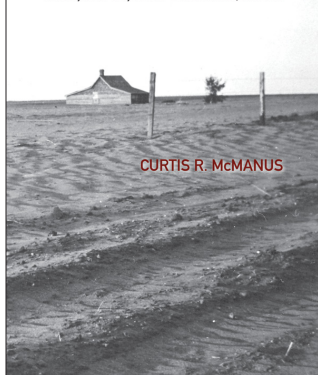
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## Happyland

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



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

by Curtis R. McManus

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# Exodus

*Abandon:* (verb) desert or leave permanently; give up (an action or practice) completely. From the Old French *abandoner*.

*Relinquish:* (verb) willingly cease to keep or claim; give up. From the Latin *relinquere/linquere*, “to leave.”

*Quit:* (verb) leave, especially permanently. From the Latin *quiescere* ‘be still.’

*Desert:* (verb) leave without help or support; abandon; leave (a place) causing it to appear empty. From the Latin *desertare*, “left waste.” – *Oxford English Dictionary*

By the 1930s, hope had fled from many regions of the south plains. Year after year of punishing physical labour on road gangs, year after year of spiritually ruinous dust storms, year after year of starvation and relief aid had come and gone and settlers made up their minds and voted with their feet. Tens of thousands of people fled and left behind whatever they couldn't carry. It is not much of a stretch to say that each rock pile located on pasture land in Saskatchewan, each derelict barn, each worn and weathered yard site can trace its unhappy history back to the 1930s. There is often the complaint in Saskatchewan that we have no ‘real’ history, that unlike Europe or Asia, one must go to museums to see the past. That is just not true.

The mass land abandonment phase began shortly after the start of the drought in 1929. It began as early as 1931 and continued on down to 1938, at which time it slowed and instead of abandonment it became what we politely refer to today as consolidation, or a *general* movement of people away from the farms and into the cities, rather than hyper-speed abandonment. The difference between consolidation and abandonment is merely one of scale and speed. Consolidation is a gradual, scarcely noticeable drift of people away from the land, whereas abandonment, at least within the context of the Thirties, is a harried and frantic mass stampede. The difference between the two is largely a question of degree, of numbers. Consolidation may see a hundred people leave an RM over the course of a decade, but, in the 1930s, hundreds if not thousands fled every month. Abandonment certainly catches one's attention but consolidation (of people, of schools, of towns, of hospitals, of railways, of banks, etc.) remains the Great Theme of Saskatchewan history.<sup>1</sup>

The difference between the abandonment of the 1920s and the 1930s is also striking. Despite the curious absence of records on the land abandonment crisis of the 1920s, for example, we do know that it did not assume its full import until three or four years of failure had hammered away at the spirit of the settlers in the drylands. People fled in droves only at that point when the RMs were unable to provide more relief aid and there was, finally, no other option but to flee. In the 1930s, however, the settler's response time was much quicker and the prolongation of abandonment was much longer.

In the 1920s, the crisis refracted through the prism of the decade's "roaring" nature, a time when prosperity seemed general, contentment was widespread, and thus the difficulties in the drylands, at least in the minds of officials, was only ever a local or a regional problem at best, even though an estimated 30,000 men, women, and children fled. Guided by Deputy Agriculture Minister F.H. Auld, the province simply could not regard evacuation as policy because the south and west plains region would naturally and inevitably collapse. Instead the province rationalized non-action by suggesting that there were no "dry areas" in the province and if there were no dry areas then there was in fact no real problem, and even if there was a problem then the settler likely had something to do with it: this was the poisoned seed bed out of which government policy developed in the 1920s. The 1930s, by contrast, saw almost immediate instances of either evacuation or abandonment, which naturally begs the question.

In the 1930s, the province could not wish or rationalize the problem away. The drought had burst its banks and flooded down fully onto the

south plains. This thunderous rolling drought was accompanied by a disastrous global economic collapse. The world was falling apart and the province had to respond. It helps to view the matter as it stood in 1930: between 1914 and 1930, there were droughts or crop failures of varying degree for all except a few years (1915, 1916, 1926, to note the prominent few). Thus when the third round of drought and failure came knocking in 1930, complete with dust storms, locust invasions and terrible winds, many settlers simply ran out the back door.

At any given time in the thirties, the province had two or three agencies moving settlers, depending on their circumstances. But, as we will see, few if any of these agencies had the welfare of the settler as their primary concern. These removals grew out of larger practical or political issues and so the province's actions in the 1930s actually conform quite nicely to the grudging and reluctant policies of the 1920s. As former Saskatchewan Premier J.G. Gardiner phrased it in 1937 when he was federal Minister of Agriculture, "moving farmers ... is the very thing we are trying to avoid."<sup>2</sup>

The province rarely seemed interested in or indeed even guided by the moral imperative to help. It is true that organizations like the Land Utilization Board (LUB) evacuated settlers, but they did so only because the LUB was charged with the unhappy and horribly belated task of classifying lands as suitable or unsuitable for settlement (they were about twenty-five years late on this) or had already been abandoned. One cannot simply take a settler's land and leave him and his bewildered family standing there: common sense dictated that they be moved somewhere else. It seems that the moral imperative in the 1930s got lost somewhere in the dust and heat.

And so, with or without government aid, settlers fled the south plains by the tens of thousands. Historian Barry Potyondi notes in his brief study of the history of Palliser's Triangle that the south plains "were the last to be settled ... and the first to be forsaken."<sup>3</sup> Forsaken is an excellent choice of word.

Historian Bill Waiser estimates that *in total*, 45,000 people are thought to have fled the drought area for destinations other than the south plains during the Dirty Thirties. He suggests that two-thirds of that number (about 15,000) fled between 1933 and 1934.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Waiser's numbers actually come in pretty light.

There are other estimates that hint at hundreds of thousands. Renowned Canadian historian Gerald Friesen argues that fully one quarter of a million people left the prairies between 1931 and 1941.<sup>5</sup> But, in the same way that one must deploy caution as guard against the myths that arose in this

period, like little kids being scared by rain, or of children not seeing vegetables until maturity, one must be careful with the numbers and statistics of those who fled or were removed because those numbers can easily tip over, like the crisis itself, into absurdity.

Friesen's use of the figure of a quarter million is a catch-all number that certainly lends a sense of high drama to the period, but in the end it explains nothing and says nothing: it is too big, too abstract. It is too much. Additionally, many of the people included in that number might have left the prairies as a result of the war that began in 1939 or into cities to work in urban industry as a result of the conflict, or may have been urban dwellers that drifted across Canada on rail cars and for whom the plains were never really home at all.

Further muddying these waters was the effort to settle the more northern reaches of the province over whose land and resources Saskatchewan gained control in 1930. This "back-to-the-land" movement, as it was called, resulted in the shipment of some 35,000 to 45,000 people to the northern areas.<sup>6</sup> Historian James Gray calls this ill-considered and impractical movement "one of the wildest brainstormings of the depression."<sup>7</sup> Most of the people involved in this movement were from urban centres, like the forty-two Saskatoon families who went to Loon Lake to farm in 1931.<sup>8</sup> In this vast movement, there were undoubtedly south plains settlers but this program remained essentially an urban program created to deal principally with the problems associated with the Depression and not the Drought as such, and so one cannot comfortably include them in the total number of those who fled the south plains. Most of the dryland evacuations were hastily set up and quickly carried out, whereas by comparison the "back-to-the-land" movement had, as one of its principal goals, the colonization of the north, marking for the first time that "internal colonization became active within the borders of the province."<sup>9</sup>

For all the lessons of history that should have been learned by 1930s, it is depressingly astonishing to see what occurred in this effort to colonize the northern part of a former "colony of a colony." As though taking a page from the play book of discredited lands boss Frank Oliver, the Saskatchewan government established basic rules and regulations for settlement up north: a person had to have five years residence in Saskatchewan and their own capital and equipment to make a go of it. But there was a land rush of sorts and the government "did not take the time" to do soil, climate, and topography tests, thus resulting in the absurd situation in which "many pioneers

were allowed to settle on marginal lands.”<sup>10</sup> The gross and costly failure of the 1908 amendment received an encore up north.

Determining the number of settlers who fled the south plains of Saskatchewan because of the drought, then, can only ever be responsible guesswork. The best and most responsible guess, though, should be based on information provided by people who were directly and intimately acquainted with rural Saskatchewan. The most accurate source to use is the records of the Department of Municipal Affairs (DMA). The DMA was the agency responsible for administering the acts under which rural municipalities operated. RMs and the DMA were (and still are) joined at the hip. Each year, municipal government officials sent into the department estimates of the population of the RMs based on tax rolls. It must be noted that the figures quoted herein do not include cities, towns, villages, or hamlets: they represent *only* rural Saskatchewan. Using the best estimates of the local administrators, we arrive at a figure of 39,995 settlers who fled the rural areas of the south and west plains between 1929 and 1939. If we add the estimated thirty thousand who fled during the crisis of the 1920s, we arrive at a figure approaching seventy thousand just for the south and west plains. So, we now know with acceptable precision how many people fled the drought area – but determining how they left is another entirely frustrating matter.

There is a cargo manifest in the archives building in Regina that details the numbers of settlers the Department of Agriculture had grudgingly agreed to move between 1930 and 1932 under an unnamed program. The manifest is thirty-eight pages long with roughly thirty names per page and it shows that, at least in the early years, most of the people who were shipped out of the drylands fled to east-central and north-east Saskatchewan. The settlers went to towns, villages, hamlets, and sometimes places loosely described as “settlements,” which, generously defined, were likely nothing more than a collection of huts by a railway siding somewhere. The settlers went to strange and exotic places: Dumble, Dummer, Dilke, Neeb, Pelly, Togo, Gronlid, Prongua, Crutwell, and Lurgan. All of these communities are located outside the drought area in the northern and eastern regions of the province. One can only assume that Mr. A. Perron of Sedley got on the wrong train because the records show he was “evacuated” to Fox Valley in the RM of Enterprise, a neighbour of Big Stick and Clinworth in the very middle of the worst areas of the drought, right next door to the RM of Happyland.<sup>11</sup>

This particular record shows the movement of 1,140 men. Assuming they took their families, which may have constituted a wife and a child, one

can reasonably suggest that Auld's Department helped evacuate over three thousand people in the early years of the drought between 1930 and 1932, though under what program or for what reason, the manifest does not say. In 1933, Deputy Auld noted that the chief "relief activity" of his department had been "the transfer of settlers who had decided to move from drought affected districts." The railways, he observed, helped with "special low rates," but there are no details on how many people they moved or where they were coming from or going to.<sup>12</sup>

The fragmentation of the record is everywhere. In the files of the Department of Agriculture, for example, officials record the assistance given to seven men and their families from the RM of Mankota between October 1934 and September 1935 at a cost of \$693.<sup>13</sup> Oftentimes, the only record that settlers were removed is a leftover list indicating the number of rail cars used to move personal effects and this too only suggests or hints at the number of people who followed. Between 1930 and 1935, for example, 3,880 carloads of settlers' effects were shipped out of the dust bowl. If we use the two-railcar-per-family minimum, which was standard procedure in the 1920s, then it is possible that 1,940 were shipped out, which translates (husband, wife, child) into 5,820 people. This same record shows that a further 200 applications for shipment of effects were, for obscure and un-stated reasons, rejected.<sup>14</sup> In 1931, a year when crop districts two, three, and four (Weyburn to the Alberta border south of Moose Jaw and north from the U.S border to a point just south of Kindersley) averaged three and a half bushels per acre, Auld noted that the evacuation of settlers "was resumed." The Department of Agriculture shipped north 1,089 people who "went into residence on crown lands."

If the files of the Department of Agriculture are a haphazard hit-and-miss affair, the records of the Northern Saskatchewan Resettlement Board are happily less so. The NSRB was one of a handful of acronyms involved in settler relocation and it was governed by Richard Matte. He claimed in a mid-winter radio address in 1939 that the North Battleford-Prince Albert-Melfort districts increased in population by 20 per cent between 1935 and 1939.<sup>15</sup> And, tellingly, going back to the crisis of the 1920s, he said that, between 1921 and 1936, the population of the northern grain belt had increased "no less than 50%." There were fourteen RMs in the North Battleford district that grew by 25,000 people in the 1930s.

Matte explained that, in his experience, most men and women who abandoned their lands "had reached a stage approaching hopelessness and despair."<sup>16</sup> Matte, a sage old drought-hand by this time, claimed he had seen



all types pass through the NSRB. There was the poor and destitute settler all the way up to the wealthy one “who had seen his hundreds of acres ... turned overnight into a drifting sea of sand.”

Matte suggested that the NSRB had moved 5,200 families between 1935 and 1938 at a cost of just over \$1 million, which, if one family unit contained husband-wife-child, would mean a figure closing in on 16,000 people, and it was a figure achieved in little bits and pieces from all over the south plains. There were, for example, eight late-1934 relocations that cost \$9,000.<sup>17</sup> The NSRB was set up in 1935 to bring some form and organization to the messy business of relocating thousands of families to the northern areas of the province, to gather up “the human debris that was scattered about by the violence of the storm,” as James Gray observed.<sup>18</sup> So of our total of 40,000 people who fled the rural areas of the south and west plains in the 1930s, an estimated 16,000 were removed by the NSRB.

This impulse to remove settlers to the north country was not an idea that was universally supported. Alberta’s Peace River Member of Parliament R.A. Pelletier likened the movement to a short-term band-aid solution to which no real thought had been applied. He felt the settlers were simply “being taken out of the dried out areas and dumped somewhere in the northern bush” with little or no knowledge of how to get along in this vastly different region.<sup>19</sup> And while Pelletier’s opinion was not shared by K.C. MacDonald, the Minister of Agriculture for British Columbia, who actively explored the idea of getting the refugees up in B.C.’s side of the Peace country “where they can get returns on their labours,” Pelletier’s feelings about northern settlement did, in the end, prove to be far more prescient.<sup>20</sup>

The province and the University of Saskatchewan worked closely during the crisis. Quite often, academics were sent out into the field to gain first-hand information on how the settlers were doing, not only in the drylands, but up north as well. There was a “professor of soils” who was dispatched to the north to report on how the settlers were doing in their new forested environment. Professor J. Mitchell, though, had some sad news. It seems the drylanders did not often take very well to the woodlands. The professor had to explain to Deputy Auld that, upon relocating to the north, the hapless burned-out settlers set about cutting down every tree they could get their hands on. Professor Mitchell noted that one farm “was as absent of trees as it would have been anywhere on the prairies.”<sup>21</sup> In fact, the only growth left standing on this farm was “a low willow scrub near some sloughs.”

Mitchell pleaded with Auld to relay the information to the bewildered settlers that trees do in fact contain value for agriculture and that a field

need not necessarily be flat as a pancake and as clear as a billiards table as was the case on the south and west plains (humour about the absence of trees is common – “turn south [north/east/west] at the tree” or, “and when you get to the tree turn ...” are both still very common forms of direction offered). In the years before it was understood by the settlers that trees can prevent wind erosion (“shelter belts,” as they are today called), Mitchell had to ask Auld to explain this to settlers. He also pointed out that, in addition to soil-drift prevention, shelter, and firewood, trees also provide a “natural beauty,” but it was a beauty to which the flatlanders, who had grown accustomed to seeing their dog run away for three days were not especially attuned. Even the Dairy Commissioner weighed in. Ed Ridley, too, admitted that many settlers were “over-zealous” in their practical application of boreal husbandry.<sup>22</sup>

Even though the province had organizations like the NSRB assisting in evacuation, we must remember that evacuation was not the preferred option, nor was it even considered a good option. Like the 1920s, when the province gave tepid approval for an evacuation plan only after some years of being badgered for it, the province approached settler evacuations with the same brand of enthusiasm in the 1930s. It remained staunchly and wholeheartedly wedded to the idea that evacuation would not become general.

There was a time limit on when settlers could obtain evacuation assistance. It seems that administrators and secretaries from a number of rural municipalities had been nipping at the heels of the government for information on its evacuation and re-settlement plans. Deputy Auld, in an open letter to all RMs, dated 1935, dampened their enthusiasm for removals by explaining that “there is no general movement of settlers now and there will be none.”<sup>23</sup> Auld called the evacuations that had occurred to this time a “limited movement,” and, in order to make sure the councils understood him on this point, he reminded them that May 15 was the deadline for applications for evacuation and that after that date “*new cases cannot be considered.*”<sup>24</sup> May 15 was likely chosen as a cut-off date because it was the start of seeding: anyone who had not committed to leaving by then would have likely had little choice but to “farm” for another year.

And if time restrictions were not enough to sour settlers on the idea of government-assisted evacuation, there was another substantial hurdle over which exhausted settlers were required to fling themselves. The province, according to Auld, would not pay for the inter-provincial shipment of settlers “until we have in our possession permission from the province to which he is going.”<sup>25</sup> If the settler was unfortunate enough to choose Manitoba as

the location to which he intended to flee, then he would require the permission of the Manitoba Relief Commission; if Alberta, then the permission of the Deputy Minister of Agriculture himself.

Trapped in his mind in the 1920s, Auld informed the RMs that there were only “some small portions” of land where there is soil drift and drought and that “in a few instances” abandonment may in fact be the preferred option. But, as in the 1920s, he would not allow evacuation to become the principal plan and thus would only assist settlers at the recommendation of the rural councils and only when there was some measure of success that could be expected from that abandonment. “The public funds,” Auld argued, were wasted when evacuation assistance was offered with no guarantee of success down the road. And since “the public funds” ought not to be wasted, he urged the RMs to “use the utmost care in the consideration of such cases and in the recommendations that you make not only in the interests of the applicants but in the interests of the province as a whole.”<sup>26</sup> Auld continued: “I am sure that you will have this in mind when making your recommendations.” Auld then retired to his office and jealously fondled his public funds.

Small rural councils in Saskatchewan were repeatedly placed in the very uncomfortable position of always having to make some kind of moral or ethical choice – of choosing between what they knew to be right (get the settlers out) and what they were being urged to do (do everything possible to retain the settlers). For their part, the settlers usually just wanted a train ticket out. This triangular conflict between the settler, the RM, and the province colours the entire period of the crises between 1914 and 1937. There is a constant conflict amongst the province, which was focussed on the ideals of nation and province-building, the RMs, which had as their goal fiscal prudence and financial stability, and the settler, who wanted answers as to how best to respond to starvation-farming. The government pushed one way, the settlers pushed in the opposite direction, and the rural councilmen were stuck in the middle. Much to their credit, the RMs did what they could to help.

Clinworth council gave Jacob Bentz twenty-five dollars to “defray the costs” of taking up land in the northern grain belt.<sup>27</sup> Big Stick sent out the offer, whose tone was delightfully at odds with the province’s stated direction that it would offer conditional assistance “to any resident who wishes to move out.”<sup>28</sup> Mankota likewise approved a number of applications from settlers “seeking new locations” anywhere but there.<sup>29</sup> And Pinto Creek gave A.J. Wichens money to get to Tisdale, a frequent destination of choice in both the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>30</sup>

Sadly, though, and much to the consternation of Deputy Auld, “the public funds” were abused during the 1930s. Some settlers used evacuation assistance as a free ticket out of Saskatchewan, something Auld was likely aware of and something that may have blunted any softer sentiments for the noble settler toward which he may have otherwise been inclined. There was a settler named C.H. Tonks who had taken assistance to move north, but apparently he did not make good on any promises he made to either work the land or work off the aid debt because the Dominion government came looking him. They couldn’t find him and eventually wrote the NSRB seeking “a refund of the amount contributed by the Dominion government to railway fares incurred on behalf of settler #203, C.H. Tonks.”<sup>31</sup>

Not everyone preferred the less droughty climes of the northern grain belt with its trees and water. After desperately hacking away at trees for a year or two building “pioneer roads,” some felt life was better spent on a road gang laying asphalt in a straight line across the plains and these settlers formed an apparent small-scale return exodus. Swift Current council wrote the province asking in typically Canadian fashion which level of government was responsible to “[provide] relief of those parties who have returned from the north.”<sup>32</sup>

If a settler was naturally turned off of a life of hard labour on the south plains, the verdant valleys of the lower mainland of British Columbia might figure large in his night-time fantasies of where he might take his family if he could ever get out. Many hundreds, perhaps thousands, did just that, and they created just as many relief problems on the coast as they did on the plains.

Between 1935 and 1938, Lower Mainland Member of Parliament H.J. Barber said, “a considerable number of families from the dried out areas of Saskatchewan” had been settling in his riding.<sup>33</sup> This was a problem because the settlers went from a world mired in drought-induced relief aid to a world of relief aid created by an economic crisis. One wonders if the settlers had the naïve and simple hope that the economic crisis might be better than the soul-killing drought they had known on the plains. Once in the valleys of the lower mainland, though, they began appealing to the municipal offices for aid and, struck down by the depression, the municipalities on the coast were in no better shape to provide aid than were their south plains counterparts. Barber estimated that there were some 1,745 of “these people” in his area and that some municipalities were looking after groups consisting of upwards of 400 people: the flatlanders apparently congregated in groups just like their Okie cousins to the south did in California.

Barber was not taking negative issue with the south-plains refugees. Indeed, he said that “ninety percent of them would make good citizens if given the chance,” but there was simply no money to get them established.<sup>34</sup> And that was his plea in the House of Commons: that relief aid follow the recipient. But it was not to be. There was no happy ending for the refugees; quite the opposite, in fact. Having no relief aid to supply to the settlers, many municipalities could only come up with one solution that has a dark tinge of the cruel and the ridiculous: Barber grimly noted “[municipalities] have been compelled to buy transportation for them and ship them back to the dried out areas.”<sup>35</sup>

Barber, however, neatly sidestepped an issue that apparently caused some degree of trouble between the locals and the refugee flatlanders who had fled to the Fraser Valley. It seems that Saskatchewan refugees who washed up on the verdant shores of the lower mainland didn’t care who they hurt in pursuit of gainful employment to feed their starving families. One local oldtimer recalled in Barry Broadfoot’s collection of stories about the 1930s that if you had a job and there was a refugee from Saskatchewan nearby, “you had better watch out.” According to this unnamed fellow, a refugee might come looking for a glass of water or some gas and “sometimes before you knew it, that fellow had your job, and his wife and kids was moving into your house.”<sup>36</sup> While the teller of this tale may be stretching things just a little bit, it is not a stretch to suggest that these refugees would have worked for less money than the locals, and if that was the case then perhaps it becomes easier to understand why the Fraser Valley councils so speedily shipped the refugees back to the south plains.

David Foss was one of those refugees from the south plains who fled to the coast in 1936. Mr. Foss and his family left his farm to the care of “Humphrey and Hazill Gorrill” while his family took off to Creston, B.C., “to find a new way of life.”<sup>37</sup> Presumably, it was not a happy train ride for the older boys who “rode along ... and cared for the stock on the trip.” After being stuck in a steaming, odorous cattle car for a few days, the Foss’s stepped out into another world and “it was quite a change to us; everything was so green”<sup>38</sup> And while some members of the family found their way back to the south plains, Mrs. Foss stayed in Creston to the end of her days.

Mr. Barber was one of many parliamentarians in the House of Commons who addressed the myriad problems associated with the drought. Mr. Victor Qulech, an Alberta MP, farmer, and former soldier in the Canadian Army, spoke of the drought and his words drip with exasperation. “Year after year,” he informed the house, “reports consistently warned against the

danger of these dry areas being opened for settlement ... report after report by government engineers and surveyors classified these areas as unsuitable for grain farming,” and thus, like Senator Rae, Quelch no doubt too felt that the region “should have been left for the cows.” It is interesting to note that the impulse to imbue one’s words with the heavy weight of history was a common one for many MPs during the 1930s. Many who rose to address the drought issue in the house frequently made use of the history of the region and of Captain John Palliser’s assessment of it.

Some people did not just want to quit Saskatchewan; they wanted to quit the country altogether. Mankota council begged the province to pay for the transportation of two families back to England.<sup>39</sup> It seems John Woodcock and the ill-named (certainly ill-named for the rough south plains) Percy Breeze were destitute and their only hope and thought was to get enough money to go back to the Old Country. Council felt it was “the duty and responsibility” of both levels of government to see this through and added that they were “very desirous” that Woodcock and Breeze be moved out “at as early a date as possible,” probably because it meant fewer relief aid cases. It was a common refrain on the western plains (common for dour, iron-hard Scotsmen like the present writer’s great grandfather, at any rate) that Englishmen made the poorest settlers.

Breeze and Woodcock and Tonks and Perrin and the thousands of others who fled in this direction need not have felt guilty about their choice. Abandonment is another one of the terrible scars that runs across the history of the south plains and indeed stretches back in time to the nineteenth century. At that time, a Regina newspaper man recalled seeing a similar exodus of people to the northern grain belt. They were fleeing from the drought-stricken east Assiniboia region in 1890.<sup>40</sup>

It helps to instil in the reader a sense of what it was exactly that the settlers were fleeing. They were running away from drought, crop failures, relief aid, and failure, true. But understanding or *appreciating* what these things mean is another thing. It could have meant this:

The land was as lifeless as ashes and for miles there was scarcely a growing thing to be seen. Where a scanty herbage had struggled up through the dust, flights of grasshoppers had apparently completed the destruction and then despairing of further sustenance, had flown to other fields.... Gaunt cattle and horses with little save their skins to cover their bones, stalked the denuded acres weakly seeking to crop the French

weed, which with malign persistence, seemed to be maintaining some kind of sickly growth ... the few people in evidence in the little towns appeared haggard and hopeless. For fully fifty miles of the region ... there did not appear to be one single field that will produce a bushel of grain or a load of fodder ... and as for the people themselves, God only knows what their extremity must be.<sup>41</sup>

This is a Saskatchewan we will never see, never know – a Saskatchewan many oldtimers just wanted to forget about.

From hamlets and villages and isolated homesteads, then, the people fled. They gambled on British Columbia, caught a train to Ontario, thumbed rides into Manitoba, begged for money for passage back to England. Some wandered west, or south, or anywhere. It was a formless shapeless movement of people from many different backgrounds, ethnicities, races, religions, and countries. They really had only one thing in common: by their thousands, they left their lands, homes, and whatever possessions they couldn't carry and fled.

The Canada census records the population haemorrhage in some fairly compelling numbers and statistics. Saskatchewan had eighteen census divisions. The census records 5,183 abandoned farms in Saskatchewan in 1931.<sup>42</sup> The regions with the highest number of abandoned farms were divisions seven, eight, twelve, and thirteen or the Swift Current-Rosetown-Kindersley-Leader area. But what is more compelling is the amount of abandoned land. There were 1,024,211 acres of land that lay abandoned in 1931 and fully 40 per cent of that land lay in just six of the eighteen census divisions and this sharply drawn regional picture would only get worse as the Thirties progressed.

By 1936, the south plains were exclusively out-performing the rest of the province in the numbers of abandoned farms and abandoned land. In 1936, there were 11,222 abandoned farms in Saskatchewan.<sup>43</sup> 5,804 of these farms, rather more than 50 per cent, were located in the area bordered by Weyburn, Maple Creek, and Kindersley. Swift Current had the worst rate with 1,488 abandoned farms; Melville, in east central Saskatchewan, had just 181.

Abandoned acreage increased as well. By 1936, 2,486,253 acres of land in Saskatchewan had been abandoned and 1,408,249 or about 60 per cent of those lands lay in the drylands. Swift Current fought a pitched battle with those lonely luckless souls in the extreme southeast corner of the province



near the RM of Argyle for the records of highest abandoned acres: the Swift Current region had 347,868, while the south-east had 300,988.

The contrast between the south plains and the central-northern grain belts is striking: in the northern and eastern areas of the grain belt, the Hafford region had 43,919 abandoned acres, Humboldt had 45,455, Canora 57,197, and the Wynyard area, in central Saskatchewan, had just 23,793, or about forty-three sections of lands. There were 255,394 abandoned acres of farmland in the Mankota-Pinto Creek region and 171,918 in Big Stick-Clinworth, or 300 sections. There were more abandoned lands and abandoned farms in the six census districts of the drylands than all the others combined.

These census figures paint an intensely regional picture of the drought and are supported by regional production and aid figures for each rural municipality. The RM of Wallace south of Canora only once fell below seven bushels per acre and that was in 1937. It received just over 100,000 in aid for the entire decade.<sup>44</sup> The RM of Orkney, north of Yorkton, even went four of the ten years without aid and only twice fell below seven bushels per acre.<sup>45</sup> Argyle, in the south-east corner, fell below five bushels per acre and thus into disaster zone levels of subsistence farming seven times in ten years and received over \$250,000 in aid.<sup>46</sup> Pinto Creek, as stated earlier, stayed at or below seven bushels per acre for the entire decade.

In rough terms, the northern grain belt was, for the most part, free the extreme drought-induced deprivations visited upon the settlers of the south plains. First and always, the settlers of the south and west plains were burned and brutalized to a far greater degree and more frequently than any other region of the province. There was more aid, more road work, more abandoned land, and more abandoned farms; more privation, more perdition. Part of the problem was caused, as Deputy Auld admitted, by the “periods of drought which may occur at unexpected intervals.” Part of the problem was the land itself.

The province only slowly awakened to the regional nature of land quality and that quite late in the day, considering that land abandonment had been a chronic problem on the south plains stretching all the way back to 1890. Still, belated or not, the province dispatched a number of university professors to the south plains to assess the land. E.C. Hope, a “professor of soils” at the University of Saskatchewan, was a part of this effort. Hope’s findings capture in miniature all of the dramatic elements of the crises, including the literal insanity of farming in the drylands. All of this was a



part of an effort to study this “unholy mess” and the ultimate aim was to reorganize the agricultural economy “on a scientific basis.”<sup>47</sup>

One of Hope’s first stops was the RM of Chaplin, located midway between Swift Current and Moose Jaw. Figures from the Department of Municipal Affairs indicate that Chaplin lost 145 “resident farmers” in the 1920s (approximating some 435 people) in addition to losing about a hundred people during the thirties. Hope undertook interviews individually or in groups with 116 farmers, which in 1935 accounted for three quarters of all farmers in that RM. His first conclusion was that the RM was quite land rich. Council had seized and taken possession of about a hundred parcels of land, though in some cases, “arrears are so great that they would exceed the proceeds from the sale.”<sup>48</sup> In fact, the liens on the land, Hope noted, extended all the way back to the 1914 drought and ranged from between \$100 to \$1,400 per quarter. The Konschuhs in nearby Fox Valley had worked up about \$1,500 in liens in just a few years.

Hope classed the land he saw into two broad categories. The first type had been settled in 1913, was abandoned between 1918 and 1922, “and [has] never been occupied for farming since.” The second type had been settled earlier, in 1910, and this land “has changed hands two or three times.” He adds that, “until quite recently, a succession of operators have tried to farm these lands and failed. Here again, the mortgage companies have only kept the best of the poor sandy quarters; some of these ... are wind-blown sand dunes and pits swept out by the wind.”

Of the 116 farmers Hope visited, “not more than twenty” were making a success of things and he attributed this to three causes: 1) good farming methods and management, 2) large initial capital, and 3) outside sources of income. These points are not that much different than what separates good and bad farmers today. But the line between success and failure in the 1930s was excruciatingly sharp and those who fell on the one side were often quickly dragged down into bankruptcy and destitution, and that is the principal difference between then and now: in the 1930s there was absolutely zero margin for error.

Hope also allows us to see the inner workings and thoughts of the RM councils away from their formal meetings. Councilmen and their interlocutor met and discussed the problem and the councillors confided that they “do not really relish” the idea of selling the land to which they held title through seizure because it will just become another relief problem. So council, like so many others, had cancelled its tax sale. And Chaplin councillors

had enough problems because there was the belief amongst the councillors that the RM “was bankrupt with no hope of ever pulling out.”

After quitting Chaplin, Hope travelled down to the RM of Wood River, next door to Mankota and Pinto Creek.<sup>49</sup> This is what Hope found: “[settlers] hanging onto sand piles ... waiting for an opportunity to leave.” Wood River was as bad as or worse than Chaplin. There were 227 quarters of land settlers had been trying to farm but it was made up almost entirely of “sandy loam,” which means the dirt had more sand than soil. 128 of these quarters were occupied and ninety-nine had been abandoned. Tellingly, and like Chaplin, the majority of the abandoned lands, two-thirds in fact, had been abandoned in the 1920s and just thirty-two were quit between 1930 and 1934, which means that the seven years of drought in the 1920s had wrought more damage in Wood River than the first six years of the crisis of the 1930s. Of the 128 quarters still being farmed, one-third to one-half were owned by loan companies, and, despite a value of between \$1,000 and \$3,300, “they all appear[ed] quite hopeless.”

Hope relays the story of one luckless settler. Mr. Knight had been farming in the area for almost twenty-five years, from 1909 to 1934. And as he figures it, for all the toil and work and labour that Mr. Knight put into his sandy loam, he had only seen a return of about eight and a half bushels per acre on average in those twenty-five years. Hope concluded that Knight’s story “would be typical” of this area, as soil drift also was. There are many who believe that soil drift was a creature of the 1930s, but Hope found that the problem reached back all the way to 1918. Hope also discovered an element to dryland farming that had likely been whispered about by the locals but just as quickly swept under the proverbial carpet: it seems that an inordinate number of settlers in this RM had “either committed suicide or gone insane.” Suicide in Saskatchewan was endemic in the thirties: fully 922 people committed suicide between 1929 and 1938. The worst year was 1930 when 127 killed themselves.<sup>50</sup>

The land owned by Mr. Knight was just across the border from Montana, and, though it is a different country, the land itself is the same as that seen by Professor Hope. Hope’s counterpart at the University of Montana, Professor Wilson, explained that his country too was “in the throes of the worst drought Montana has ever witnessed” and that settlers were being supplied with relief from the federal government and the Red Cross. Like Wood River, Pinto Creek, Mankota, Chaplin, Clinworth, Big Stick, and Maple Creek, the professor observed that “wheat is a failure.”<sup>51</sup> In fact, just as Professor Wilson was writing these words, the entire wheat-growing area

of Montana, like its counterpart on the south plains in Saskatchewan, was experiencing an end-of-the-world-type thoroughgoing collapse. People were fleeing, and most of the towns were “folding” as a result of the drought: “the northern plains homestead experiment,” writes Timothy Egan, “was a bust.”<sup>52</sup> 1935 was certainly an opportune time to adjudge the quality of lands in the south plains because “generally speaking, the area adjacent to the Alberta boundary and in many sections of the southwest, crops was reported poor to practically complete failures.” While the province grew 135,000,000 bushels of wheat, crop districts three and four grew just ten million.<sup>53</sup>

Professor Hope’s investigative trip into the south plains was connected to the work of the provincial Land Utilization Board (LUB), which was formally established in 1937, a couple years after Hope went south. The board was composed of a representative of municipal government, a farm management professor, a “professor of soils,” Deputy Auld, and others.<sup>54</sup> According to LUB boss, Mr. R.W. Neely, the organization had three principal goals: 1) to classify unsuitable lands, 2) to turn that land back to pasture, and 3) to move the settler somewhere else.<sup>55</sup> Please note the position of the settler on the priority list. The goals and purpose of the LUB reflect the spirit and substance of the recommendations of the Pope Commission of 1914, the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Farming Conditions of 1920, and the general tilt of south plains land-use policy for several decades prior to 1908. That substance and spirit was captured in the words of Senator A.D. Rae, who caustically observed that the whole region “should have been left to the cows.”

The LUB worked in conjunction with the PFRA. At either the request of an RM or by provincial directive, the LUB fanned out across the south and west plains to investigate areas whose land was considered unsuitable. If the board agreed an area was in fact little more than a wasteland that was impossible to farm, and if the wasteland contained “not less than twenty five sections” of land, then the board would assume title to the land and cancel most of the arrears associated with it and establish a community pasture on it.<sup>56</sup> If there were still settlers living on that land, arrangements were then made to get them out in order to “get the use of their holdings.”<sup>57</sup> LUB secretary Mr. E. E. Eisenhower described the work of obtaining title to these blocks of land as “tedious,” but it did pay off: in the first year of the board’s operation, 185,160 acres of land were seized and sixteen community pastures were constructed.<sup>58</sup>

After the land had been seized and “reclaimed,” the question for the LUB remained: what do we do with the settler? ‘Anywhere but here’ was the operative principle. The LUB moved eighty-seven families to “points in Saskatchewan not classified as northern.”<sup>59</sup> F.D. Cameron and C. Becker of Mankota were moved, for example, to McClean and Balgonie respectively at a total cost of \$140. It appears that many of the families aided under this scheme came from the south-west around Ponteix, Eastend, Ravenscrag, and Aneroid. They went to places like Pinkie, Oakshella, and Tuguske. 361 families were moved by the LUB to “Northern areas.”<sup>60</sup> A.M. Rust fled Fox Valley for Freemont at a cost of \$148; M. Bedard quit Ponteix for Doyle at a cost to the province of \$61.70.

But most of the settlers who received the help of the LUB fled the province entirely. The LUB, having obtained the proper approval of the provincial governments to which these settlers were being shipped, then moved 827 families to “points outside Saskatchewan.”<sup>61</sup> Most of them chose Ontario or Manitoba. R.M. Humphrey, for example, went from Smiley to Galt, Ontario. Smiley is about fifty miles north of Happyland.

In total, the LUB moved some 1,275 families approximating some 4,000 people. When this number is added to the totals from, say, the NSRB and the early removals of the Department of Agriculture, our figure reaches about 25,000. We can surmise that the majority of the remaining 15,000 who fled did so on their own.

The RMs worked closely with the LUB in this land-classification effort. In 1937, Clinworth judged eighty-six parcels of land as sub-marginal.<sup>62</sup> Swift Current classed seventy-five parcels of land as such.<sup>63</sup> And Big Stick, true to its bold form – as constant as the stars on the PRC flag – not only classified land as unsuitable but indeed wanted to chop off something like half of the RM entirely. It should not come as a surprise that Big Stick was way out in front of the LUB. In 1935, Big Stick councilmen passed a resolution that stated that, since divisions one and three of the RM did not “fit in well with the rest of the municipality,” this region of the RM would be “allowed to secede.” Secession suggests that there is an element within a region desirous of cutting itself off from the main body, which, in 1935, could hardly have been the case, but “secession” likely sounded better than calling the district what it actually was – an albatross.<sup>64</sup> Big Stick later retracted its motion and instead suggested that the land be offered as pasture and “the settlers living therein be given assistance to move to a better country.”<sup>65</sup> The LUB would eventually do that very thing and thus save the RM from the pains of secession. Current Big Stick administrator Mr. Quinton Jacksteit was rather

surprised to hear about all this talk of secession in his RM during the 1930s. He assured the author that divisions one and three did not secede but are still attached to the RM right where they should be, on its eastern edge, and on the RM map they are coloured in a gentle pink, which harmlessly designates a community pasture.

As might be expected, the province had very definite ideas about the results it wanted to achieve with this land-classification and pasture-establishment scheme. Deputy Auld discussed these matters at length with Mr. C. Evans Sargeant. It is one of those serendipitous happenings of history that Sargeant, the former Mantario secretary reappears in the historical record in 1935 as the secretary for the RM of Royal Canadian. The reader will recall that Sargeant was the man who sounded the alarm about the threats of starvation in Mantario in the 1920s, though one must wonder whether Mr. Sargeant was cursed with bad karma because the RM of Royal Canadian no longer exists: it was bled white by population losses during the 1920s and 1930s.

At any rate, Deputy Auld informed Mr. Sargeant that each council is to determine, as did Clinworth, Big Stick, Swift Current, and others, what lands it chooses to designate as unsuitable for farming.<sup>66</sup> Never missing a chance to fondle his “public funds,” Auld informed Sargeant that this classification should have as its goal, not just the creation of a pasture, but also the guarantee that any farmer who wilfully remains and continues to farm such lands will no longer receive aid. Auld writes: “the definite responsibility [will be] placed upon the owners to provide any agricultural assistance ... because of its continued use for grain production.” Here, Auld takes absurdity to the highest heights it reached between 1914 and 1937 – absurdity never knew it could soar so high. Essentially (and the writer is respecting the substance and meaning of the original text), Auld was suggesting that anyone who knowingly farms sub-marginal land will in the future have to provide themselves with relief aid: a kind of backward, inverted, self-cannibalism.

Auld emphasized his point. Repeatedly. “Unless and until those problems associated with the occupancy of land of low agricultural value become through crop failure a matter of municipal or provincial importance, no reasons exists for developing public policy in connection therewith.” Once again, one must wonder how much Auld understood his adopted province over whose agricultural policy he held so much control for so many years.

Auld explained that each RM should classify the land, remove the settlers, and reorganize infrastructure. This meant that schools would have to be shuttered, the children (if there were any left) would have to

be redistributed, telephone lines would have to be taken down, and roads hopefully constructed by the early settlers would have to be ploughed up.<sup>67</sup> Creating a community pasture was not a simple task.

Sometimes, though, as in the case of Big Stick, it seemed some RMs were one or two steps ahead of the province. The secretary for the RM of Kindersley, Mr. W.H. Howse, explained to Auld that he and his council had developed a plan in 1935 for the rationalization of the land in their district. Howse and the councillors proposed two separate pastures, a small one of 3,200 acres and a somewhat larger one of 10,720 acres. Of these lands, the RM held title through tax sale to twenty-eight parcels. The men proposed exactly what Auld had suggested: classify, reorganize, depopulate. But they also went further and planned the fencing, gating of the pasture complete with the installation of “underground crossings,” and, much to the likely pleasure of Auld, had written up a financial plan to make it work.

Howse explained that history had demonstrated one very sad thing about south plains settlement: it had always been “in the nature of an experiment.” By 1935, though, the long process of settlement had come full circle and Howse’s efforts, like those in Big Stick, and Swift Current, and elsewhere merely represent the first steps toward the consolidation of that settlement.

The RM understood the enormous drag on resources that many settlers represented, and indeed Howse happily greeted the removal of these relief-hobbled settlers existing on sub-marginal lands because “it will reduce materially the cost of carrying on the municipality.” Apparently, some of the families that the RM had to move were squatters of a sort. Howse explained to Auld that there were fifteen families living on the poor lands but that there had been no grain production on that land for some twenty years and that, until the RM could remove these families and others like them, “we do not see how we shall ever entirely eliminate our relief problem.”

Auld was supportive of Howse’s idea for the removal of the settlers so long as it didn’t cost anything and that they were assured of some measure of success in the location to which they were removed. Reservations about “the public funds” aside, Auld was ebullient about Kindersley’s proposal. He “didn’t know of any other municipality which was dealing so effectively with its land utilization problems” and offered the sobriquet that council is to be “very highly commended for its enterprize [*sic*].”<sup>68</sup>

The movement toward the reclassification of land was, as Howes’ comments suggest, the logical endpoint of settlement policies that had only ever been experimental, carelessly experimental at that. There was a mass

of humanity that was thrown at the wall, as it were, and there were many thousands who did not stick and they paid a terrible price. The settlement of the south and west plains, writes historian Chester Martin, “presents a truly appalling list of casualties.” The entire province, notes historian John Archer, had to pay for development that was “too rapid and too random.”<sup>69</sup> “Nature,” Archer observed, “would demand the rationalization of agricultural methods if man would not ... and Saskatchewan paid the price.” Part of that rationalization, perhaps the biggest part, was the formation of the PFRA in 1935, which was made a permanent body after the *annus horribilis* of 1937. But the PFRA, while certainly useful beyond measure, could not stop the crisis of the 1930s from advancing; the drought could not be legislated out of existence; it could not be controlled, it continued on its reckless, rambling, destructive course. While community pastures, land classification, and dugouts provided some measure of relief from the crisis, some small oasis of hope in a desert of futility, the worst was yet to come. For anyone in 1936 who was still “hanging onto their sand piles,” 1937 arrived and blew them into oblivion.

