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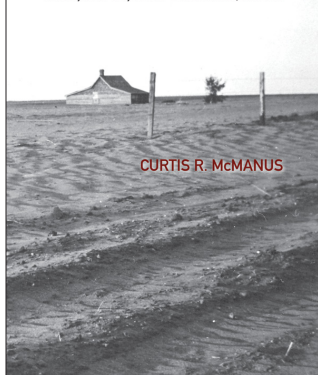
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Happyland

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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5: The Wreck of '37

Disaster: (noun) a sudden accident or a natural catastrophe that causes great damage; an event or fact leading to ruin or failure. From the Italian *disastro*, 'ill-starred event.'

Catastrophe: (noun) an event causing great damage or suffering. From the Greek *catastrophe*, 'over-turning, sudden turn.' – *Oxford English Dictionary*

1937 was a bad year. A total of fifty-two rural municipalities in Alberta and fully 170 rural municipalities and local improvement districts in Saskatchewan became the "special care" of the government and thus the Dominion assumed "the entire cost" of keeping the people in those areas alive.¹ Down to the end of 1936, fully \$110,600,000 had been spent by the Dominion and provincial governments on relief aid for the rural areas; \$47,816,010 would be spent by the provincial and federal governments on relief in 1937 alone.² Drought decimated wheat crops in whole sections of Saskatchewan; whole crop districts grew zero bushels per acre that year.³ The drought of 1937 was so bad down Mankota way that "even Russian thistles had a hard time growing."⁴

1937 was the worst of the bad years. The 1930s generally had administered a vigorous and bracing beating to the settlers of the south and west plains. The settler was like a boxer nearing the end of a fight – he was weak, bloodied, and helpless. The settler was utterly lame, unable to lift his arms

in defence; his eyes were swollen shut from repeated hammerings and he could only throw wild windmill punches, swinging desperately at shadows he could not even see. 1937 was the final round.

The year was a high-water mark in many different and important ways. First and most importantly, it was the last year of the Dirty Thirties as such. After 1937, it was mathematically impossible for the situation to get worse: a farmer cannot grow less than zero bushels per acre. As well, 1937 was the year when the entire grain-growing region of the province keenly felt the painful sting of drought, although no one felt it quite so bad as those down south and west. The heretofore untouched eastern and northern grain-growing regions experienced only a small measure of the drought-induced pain that the south plains had endured for close on to ten years, in some areas more than twenty. RMs like Martin, Sliding Hills, Orkney, and Wallace saw their crop yields dip into critically dangerous territory: eight, seven and a half, five, and six bushels per acre respectively. But still, for as bad as it was, the south plains got it worse. Every RM whose municipal minutes were consulted for the purposes of this work (Mankota, Pinto Creek, White Valley, Reno, Big Stick, Deer Forks, Clinworth, Swift Current, and Maple Creek, representing south-central, south-west, and west-central Saskatchewan) posted yields of zero.⁵ Absolutely nothing grew.

The final spasms of the big evacuations and abandonment also occurred in 1937. Never again would rural train sidings in Saskatchewan be crammed with thousands of settlers desperate to abandon all for which they had worked. Never again in western plains history would Saskatchewan lose so many people in one year.

And 1937 was crucial for another, conceptual, reason: the frontier world that settlers fled, the world of homesteads, horses, oxen, and ploughs, of relief aid, road gangs, and starvation, also came to an end after 1937. The wild and unregulated frontier world (oftentimes referred to with no small amount of truth as the “Mild West”) became tame and regulated. But before all of this occurred, the settlers, the government mandarins, and municipal officials had to grind their way through the desperate and frantic wringer of 1937, and, fittingly, the year started out coloured by delicate little rosebuds of hope.

The Swift Current *Sun* perhaps got a little too carried away with this whole idea of hope (the scribes at most newspapers in most locations in the early settlement years got a little too carried away with just about everything – “boosterism,” it was called), though they had at least some justification for that hope, leavened as it was by intermittent rains, which twiddled

and flitted across the plains through the spring and early summer. Perhaps the editors of the paper were simply trying to shore up the sagging shoulders of the settlers. The writers thoughtfully enthused that “one cannot help but be carried away enthusiastically by the optimism people of this district are exuding.”⁶ The gleeful editors understood that, at the end of 1936 (and presumably every year in the preceding eight and most of the years in the preceding twenty), “people had come to the end of their tether.” But the light spring rains had induced optimism and the editors felt it, or at least claimed to feel it. The gentle rains pattering on the tin roof tops of settler shacks across the south plains was hypnotizing because rain had been such a scarce commodity for nigh on a decade. And the *Sun* editors suggested that “we can have nothing but admiration for them [settlers]” because “they simply won’t be licked.”

The burned-out and bewildered editors of the *Medicine Hat News* turned logic on its head as they rooted and rummaged about for something, anything, to feel good about. The editors desperately latched onto the history of what was then known as Johnson Lake. Johnson Lake was an eleven by sixteen mile lake between Moose Jaw and Swift Current, which had evaporated in the droughts and was “completely dry” in 1937.⁷ Rather than viewing the existence of dried-up lakes as something at which settlers should necessarily be alarmed, or indeed rather than pointing to dried-up lakes as proof that the region “should have been left to the cows,” the editors instead reasoned that this lake had gone dry many times in the nineteenth century and, so the logic went, it had to fill up again; “therefore,” there is reason for hope. The president of the Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties, Mr. John Gair, was bemused by these efforts from certain members of the media. Addressing an AAMDC convention, he said, “it would be amusing, were it not so tragic, to watch our daily press trying to keep up the optimistic spirit.”⁸

The province, too, even Deputy Auld, was feeling those little stabs of optimism, or as close to those feelings as a logician can get. Responding to a south-west farmer who had claimed that the south plains were “useless,” Auld rolled up his sleeves and took his time in responding, pondering. Thoughtfully so. “I do not agree,” he patiently explained, “that south-west Saskatchewan is useless.”⁹ The lush and pleasing rains of spring in whose sanguine beauty harmony bloomed were quite enough to bring out the Shakespeare in Auld. Relating to this burned-out, grizzled, drought-haggard settler on a level he would most assuredly not appreciate, Auld waxed poetic when he wrote that there will be times in every settlers life when

“to sow or not to sow will be the question.” Indeed, Auld persisted, “the farmer will soliloquize” (farmers don’t soliloquize – never have, never will) whether or not it is best to continue the bet in the spring or to save money for the next game. Auld urged the settler to keep his spirits up because, really, there were no other options. The settler had evidently requested some form of assistance to help him and his family flee, but, in keeping with the policy Auld himself had helped establish, Auld informed the hapless pioneer that he would not consider the request because “it is physically impossible to make a wholesale evacuation of many thousands of families” in south-west Saskatchewan. Auld understood that another year of crop failure would “undoubtedly break the morale of many farmers,” but he urged Mr. Robinson to stay put and keep at it. There’s a good chap.

The badly worn and threadbare ideas of province-hood and nation-building that underscored the policy of non-evacuation were ideas widely shared in Saskatchewan, though as one might suspect they were mostly held amongst politicians and opinion-makers. The editors of the Saskatoon *Star-Phoenix* felt that Auld was correct in his approach and argued that “there is no need for such a movement.”¹⁰ The editors based this conclusion on those same light showers that had thinly padded the dust and sand of the south plains that year. These rains were apparently “indications” that “the dry period is coming to an end and a period of normal moisture arriving.” The image of a little boy with his hands firmly clasped over his ears talking loudly to drown out something he wishes not to hear is irresistible.

In 1937, even the *possibility* of rain was frontpage news. The Medicine Hat *News* had the grim duty to report in 1937 that, while Edmonton received five and half inches of rain in July of that year, there was only a trace at the Hat, “although a cloudburst was reported at Elkwater.”¹¹ Slim hopes, cruelly dashed.

But still, the view of Saskatoon’s newspaper was the same as that of Auld and indeed the federal agriculture minister himself. Former Saskatchewan Premier Mr. James Gardiner was in Saskatoon that weekend in 1937 to attend a “drouth conference.” Above all, Mr. Gardiner clung to three basic principles when it came to the crisis of the Thirties: 1) modified farming (i.e., modified summer-fallow) 2) water conservation (dug-outs), and 3) money in the bank to tide farmers over in the bad years.¹² One can readily share Mr. Gardiner’s emphasis on dug-outs and modified ploughing, but the final plank in his platform is a silly little conceit because many settlers had likely entered the 1930s with at least some money in the bank to tide them over through the bad times for one or maybe two years, possibly three,

but how many entered the decade with enough to tide them over for what, in 1937, was eight-years-worth of bad years? Broke or not, Mr. Gardiner, too was on public record, stating “there will be no wholesale movement from the stricken area.”¹³ Mr. Gardiner was unequivocal about this: “moving farmers ... from one part of the province to another [is] the very thing we are endeavouring to avoid.”¹⁴

Mr. Gardiner’s thoughts about the policy of non-evacuation were shared by Mr. J.G. Taggart, the provincial minister of Agriculture. He felt, not without reason, that the problems that would be created by abandonment would necessarily be larger than the problems that would be endured by staying. He suggested that those who went north would be worse off than had they stayed, and, anyway, there was very little useable arable land to which the settlers could flee so they should stay where they were.¹⁵ These were the thoughts of the policy-makers. The movement of the settlers in 1937 would suggest that they held wildly different views on what government policy should have been.

The three parties concerned (the province, the RMs, and the settlers) each had very different ideas about what the crisis meant and what should be done about it and this dynamic created much of the friction between 1914 and 1937. The Dominion government in 1937 explicitly recognized the special contribution made by south plains RM administrators in keeping a sinking ship afloat: as part of a \$17,000 operational grant to 150 RMs harmed by drought in 1937, \$3,570 of that grant money was designated as “a bonus” to 150 RM administrators. This works out to about twenty-three dollars for each administrator, a tidy little sum in those days.¹⁶

There were some justifications for the optimism of the early months of 1937, that the year might be a turning point (it was a turning point – just not *the* turning point). Oklahoma, from whose dusty, drought-riddled lands thousands of Okies had fled in the 1930s, proudly produced a prodigious crop of winter wheat in June of 1937.¹⁷ It was front-page news in the Saskatoon paper. It was “the biggest crop since 1926.” There was such an embarrassment of wheat that “the problem of transportation had become acute.” It was, the reporter excitedly explained, “a harvest equalled few times in history.” And, of course, with the rippling waters of absurdity coursing ’neath our entire 1914 to 1937 period, the very same statement about an unequalled harvest was true of Saskatchewan in 1937 – except in Saskatchewan, of course, it was inverted.

In a provincial total of 37,000,000 bushels of wheat produced in 1937, itself amongst the lowest amount of grain ever grown in Saskatchewan to

that point, the drylands of the south plains produced just 600,000 bushels of wheat in 1937.¹⁸ In the public report of the Department of Agriculture, under the heading “Unsurpassed Crop Failure,” Deputy Auld explained that “1937 will long be remembered by the people of Saskatchewan for the crop failure caused by severe drought. In no previous year in the history of the province have average yields approached the low point of 1937.”¹⁹

Not just individual RMs but whole crop districts covering hundreds of thousands of square miles produced absolutely nothing. Crop districts two, three, four, six, and seven (from Weyburn-Regina to the Alberta border and from the American border to the Macklin region north of Kindersley) produced nothing or the next best thing to nothing. To be accurate, it produced an average of 0.8 bushels per acre. The entire year was an abject and pathetic failure. Mr. Gardiner observed of the isolated and forlorn Mankota-Pinto Creek region that “a broad strip of territory just north of the U.S. boundary has reverted to desert.”²⁰ Settlers in these south RMs were “clamouring for government aid to relieve distress and starvation.”²¹

Like dust storms, it is easy to forget how bad 1937 was. It is difficult to conjure the state in which settlers lived, the climate in which they existed. It sometimes seems as though these people lived on another planet. E.H. Target was from Flaxcombe, a forgotten little town tucked in a little valley just inside the Saskatchewan border on the northern tip of the drylands. Mr. Target went on a tour in 1937 and provided a bird’s eye view of the disaster for the *Medicine Hat News*. At every turn, “I see drought and desolation.”²² He continued: “I see the vitality of our farmers drained to its lowest ebb and the power of fighting back waning.” The drought, he argued was a “national calamity.” Mr. Target describes what it was like:

As I write this letter at 11:30 am on June 28, I see crops of wheat seeded almost two months ago barely above the ground and now flattened and withered. A fifty mile an hour gale is raging and the air is laden with thick particles of dust, so much so that the day is turned to night and I have to light a lamp with which to see. At this time of year I visualize a green countryside whereas in reality, stark desolation sweeps the country.

Mr. Target quoted estimates that suggested the destruction of ten million acres of wheat in 1937. And, given such circumstances, the days of the wheat-growing industry on the south plains, he felt, were numbered unless

irrigation was developed. “The cry” in western Canada, he wrote, “is for one thing and one thing alone: water.”

Mr. Target uses the phrase “national calamity” about half a dozen times in his article. The press certainly picked up on this basic theme of calamity: newspaper coverage for the drought of 1937 assumed the quality of reports filed from a desperate last stand in some dusty, far-flung corner of the British Empire – Khartoum, say (and from a British perspective, one has to assume that Mankota is as equally as far-flung as Khartoum). On page seven of the August 16 edition of the Saskatoon *Star-Phoenix* of that year, a reader might have thought the world was coming to an end: “Crop Total Loss: Vonda Farmers Desperate”; “Elstow Farmers Securing Relief”; “Families Go East Till Drouth Lifts”; “Gravelling Will Start This Week.”²³ From Dunblane south of Saskatoon: “the farmers are busy cutting Russian thistle for feed. No crop will be harvested; all the young men and farmers have left.”²⁴

Added to this gross mash of misfortune was the Hitchcockian fear that whole swarms of locusts (grasshoppers) were set to flee the ravaged south and descend upon the virgin north. They had been “hatching and swarming” from lands “whose crops are approaching a total loss” and whose farmers “don’t care to do anything about it.”²⁵ Swarms of locusts descended in biblical proportions to use a hoary cliché. There were millions, tens of millions, “and where they decided to stop all at once, then those farmers could just kiss that year’s crop good bye, if he had a crop.”²⁶ It was, a settler recalled, as though “nature [was] on the loose, gone mad.”

The Harry Burton family of Maple Creek certainly recalls the hopper invasion with what had to have been wonder, certainly bafflement. After emigrating from Essex, England, to Ontario in 1911 (Mr. Burton “voyaged to Canada on an orphanage ship” with his two brothers), he came west in 1920 to work on a threshing crew. He married Julia and raised his family.

When the Dirty Thirties hit, the Burtons were one of thousands of families who adapted to the strange requirements and demands that were necessary for life in a dust bowl. Julia would usually put damp cloths on the windows in the house to catch the dust from the dust storms “so they could breathe.”²⁷ One day Julia saw a “black cloud” coming and casually anticipated that it was merely another dust storm, but it turned out to be a hopper invasion. The hoppers stayed for about half an hour and, along with taking the garden and any wheat they could find, they also “ate the paint off the house.”²⁸

Young Joachim Wold left Norway at the turn of the twentieth century and bounced around South America. After spending time at Rio and Panama, where he very likely was employed in the construction of the Panama Canal, Mr. Wold arrived in Canada in 1913, where he learned how to poison grasshoppers. In the 1930s, when the hopper infestation was at its worst, Mr. Wold mixed together poison, sawdust, bran, molasses, and arsenic, placed it into a drum on wheels, and scattered it about his fields. This approach was actually quite common amongst settlers, and it proved “very effective” because, when he went out the next morning to look, “dead grasshoppers lay all over the ground where the poison fell.”²⁹ There was an option to poison in which a large metal roller with a hood extending out over the top was dragged over a crop – when the hoppers jumped, they would be caught by the hood, fall, and then be crushed by the roller (dragging a metal roller through a wheat field would seem to put at risk any wheat that might have been grown, but brutally crushing the source of one’s despair would certainly satisfy one’s anger at nature and thus has its own inherent attractions).

Like dust storms, like drought, like the climate itself, locust swarms were an element of nature over which the settlers had no control. And, like dust storms, even locust swarms were possessed of a certain appeal. One settler who witnessed these hopper invasions was not just struck dumb, revolted by the sight – he also felt that “in its own way, it was beautiful, too.”³⁰

It is not an overstatement, or at least not much of one, to suggest that the world seemed to be coming apart at the seams in 1937. But the sage editors at the Swift Current *Sun* urged calm amidst the panic. The people of the province, they advised, must “face the situation squarely.” Even though “there has been much talk of abandonment,” the editors urged the settlers to persist because 1938 just might be the year everyone had been looking for. The editors were evidently basing their frantic optimism on the desperate premise that it couldn’t *possibly* get much worse and argued that despite all evidence to the contrary, “it can rain in south-west Saskatchewan.”³¹

A Swift Current-region rancher did not wait around for it to rain: after being pummelled year after year with drought and crop failure, a settler by the name of Mr. Aspinall, whose story is included in Barry Broadfoot’s collection of reminiscences about that decade, said to one of his neighbours, finally, “to hell with this Mac. No more.”³² He sold the steers he had left for one cent per pound (he had hoped to get at least five to six cents) and with sixty-three dollars in his pockets fled the south plains for the Okanogan and he never came back and that was probably the good play. Mr. Gardiner, the

federal agriculture minister, estimated that between 200,000 and 300,000 head of cattle would have to be shipped out of the south plains in 1937 because there was no feed. Settlers had actually turned cattle out into the fields so they could feed on whatever the settler managed to grow.³³

The council for the RM of Swift Current was laughing the laughter of the damned. They threw up their hands in disbelieving frustration that the problem actually did get worse and asked the government to take over all relief, hospital debts, medical aid, and dental care: it declared the drought problem “a national one.” (Swift Current was one of the 150 RMs that became the “special care” of the government during the crisis.) Council didn’t even bother with chasing down delinquent debtors: “We [will] dispense with filing tax liens this year,” as indeed happened right across the south plains in 1937.³⁴ The Dominion and provincial governments heard the desperate, frustrated cries of the rural regions and did what they could to alleviate the situation. An act was passed in that year in which all unpaid seed grain indebtedness prior to December 1934 was forgiven in addition to all fodder and feed grain loans up to March of 1935.³⁵

That the problem was in fact a national one was the substance of a very eloquent plea for aid from the Dominion government made by Humboldt MP H.R. Fleming. Fleming’s speech was a difficult one to make because, when he arose in the House of Commons in early 1938, hundreds of irritated and impatient eyes settled on him, knowing that he was going to ask for one thing: money. He knew this; they knew this. By that time in 1938, Saskatchewan had a terrible reputation within confederation – it was “the dog with a bad name.” It was “forever camped at the national treasury begging for help.” Saskatchewan, as Mr. James Gray put it, was “a rat hole down which millions of dollars taken from eastern taxpayers were dumped.”³⁶

The prejudice an easterner can feel for a flatlander is markedly different in quality than the prejudice a westerner holds for an easterner: in the east, the prejudice is rooted in paternal contempt, whereas in the west, the prejudice is rooted in anger and impatience at eastern feelings of contempt. Manitoba’s Duff Roblin was correct in the deepest way possible when he referred to western Canada as “outer Canada.” And so Mr. Fleming did a brave day’s work when he reminded the house of its role and responsibilities to Saskatchewan: “She comes not as a stranger in quest of charity but as an integral part of that great Canadian family. She stands upon her unquestioned right claiming the consideration which is due her. She stands upon her unquestioned right to temporary shelter within that home which she, by her pioneering spirit, has helped to rear.”³⁷

Not all easterners had grown impatient with Saskatchewan. The Ontario-born journalist Mr. Bruce Hutchinson, for example, harboured hot, deep, steaming ideas about the people of Saskatchewan. Mr. Hutchinson toured the drylands in the 1930s and recalls offering a cigarette to a dust bowl settler who (obviously) took it. But then the over-heated and emotional eastern-born journalist decided to give the man the whole pack of smokes “feeling swinish and mean to own anything when these people, better people than I, the people who had made Canada, were destitute.”³⁸ The smokes were likely appreciated; the Rousseauian condescension less so.

To be fair, there was a great deal of support from every province in confederation for the settlers stricken by drought. When the problem first registered in the minds of Canadians in 1931 and they were told that starvation threatened the plucky pioneers of the south and west plains of Saskatchewan, “a great wave of sympathy broke over the entire country” and 250 carloads of fruit, vegetables, and clothes were sent into the province from points all across Canada.³⁹

By 1937, her people had been reduced to beggary. In that year, the entire rural population of Kindersley (about 1,331 people) and 75 per cent of its urban population (likewise about 1,300 at that time) were on relief. Trainload after trainload of vegetables and fruit pulled into Kindersley town loaded with apples, turnips, cabbage, and carrots.⁴⁰ In Big Stick, the biggest tally of the thirties flooded the office looking not for relief work or relief seed but food. Six hundred starving people applied for food in early 1937.⁴¹ Christof Adams and his family of ten, for example, got twenty-eight dollars worth of groceries, while the bachelor Ed Brewin, got \$5.75 worth. A total of 550 train cars of potatoes were sent into south and west Saskatchewan in 1937.⁴² The Rowell-Sirois report calculated that 782 rail cars of food had been shipped into the drylands in the seven years preceding 1937.

The distribution of emergency food shipped into Saskatchewan by train was a matter that required some consideration. With life reordered to its lowest form, and Saskatchewan’s people “worse off than the poorest peasants of Europe,” one had to take care when handing out carrots or cod from the trains. Historian Fred Wilkes observed that one of the problems was being fair: families knew what other families received because apparently their kids at school talked about how much food they received, how many potatoes they got.⁴³ And so care and consideration had to go into how many apples were distributed to this or that settler. It seems apparent that, being good and proper Canadians, there were no food riots, but officials did try to

keep an eye on the fair distribution of relief food and they did this to avoid conflict.

But food only took care of the immediate problem of starvation. There was still the matter of what to do after one's belly was full. Several dozen Shaunovan settlers, members of the United Farmers of Canada, petitioned for a \$3,000 grant per family to relocate to suitable lands in the northern grain belt or to east central Saskatchewan. This request is almost certain to have made Deputy Auld's hair stand on end.⁴⁴

Swift Current council dreamed up an idea to dam the Swift Current Creek to provide irrigation to 35,000 acres of dry land and, more importantly, give relief work to the beaten settlers who remained. It was a desperate Hail-Mary pass because council knew of no other thing it could do, but they reasoned that something must be done "if we are to continue to live in this area."⁴⁵

As horrific as 1937 got, though, Clinworth council did not back away from its pledge to offer a gopher tail bounty in 1937. First place was ten dollars, and place got five dollars, and third place received two and a half dollars. And council reminded the young gun-toting prairie lads who featured largely in these competitions that gopher tails "must be tied in bunches of 100."⁴⁶

And so the trains rolled into the south plains and brought carload after carload of food into rural Saskatchewan. Just as often, the trains rolled in the opposite direction, with carload after carload of people fleeing the drylands. 1937 was a very busy year for re-settlement. There are two black untitled ledger books in Regina that detail the number of settlers who, with government assistance, fled that horrible year. The ledger contains their names, what they took with them, where they were coming from, where they were going, and why. Mr. A.J. Reimer, for example, fled Wymark south of Swift Current for Manitoba; he left with two horses and six cows. He chose Manitoba because it was basking in the warm and pleasing glow of a quite successful crop year. A reporter from Saskatchewan, incredulous over hearing that there were in fact whole regions in western Canada that had *not* been knee-capped by drought, visited Manitoba and found to his great envy that "binders were humming and golden stooks dot the landscape."⁴⁷

The reasons that the settlers gave for leaving the south plains for points elsewhere read as a laundry list of destitution and hopelessness: "Abandoned," "abandoning," "giving it up," "foreclosed," "sold to mortgage company," "leaving idle." One settler, in what may be the best example of restraint during the crisis, told the agent he was "no longer interested." And

one man who can have felt no love for his progeny explained to the agent taking the information that he “may rent to his son.”

In a preamble to the ledger books, there is a very short, unsigned and undated essay that attempts to bring some sort of form to the formless and order to the chaos. While the writer does not give exact numbers of evacuees for 1937, he writes that many settlers, unable to get assistance, simply “piled their belongings in a hay-rack and moved.” The writer concludes that, between 1936 and 1941, the population in Saskatchewan dropped by 51,000 people. And in addition to the ledger, which records the movement of 1,200 families approximating some 6,000 people assisted under an unnamed program in 1937, the Unemployment and Agricultural Assistance Act also records the removal, at a cost of half a million dollars, of another 3,018 families approximating some 10,000 people.⁴⁸ Thus, as many as 16,000 people fled in 1937 alone. So, of a total 70,000 settlers who fled the south and west plains between 1914 and 1938, 23 per cent left in 1937.

Families like the Brotens of Coronach provide us with an average example of the settler who fled. Halvar and Laura had come to the south plains from Norway in the summer of 1910, just a few years after their country achieved independence from the much-reduced and anaemic Swedish Empire in 1905. In 1937, they left for Yorkton, where there were trees and lakes, and where it rained with alarming regularity. Most of the household supplies were shipped by train, but Gudrun’s father and brothers took much of their belongings by wagon, and that included eight horses and the Brotens’ machinery. The journey from Coronach to Yorkton took six days.⁴⁹

Historian James Gray has crafted a memorable portrait of abandonment:

[Abandonment] went on without rhyme or reason. They moved in single families, in pairs or in groups. They moved in one, two or five wagon outfits. They moved in dire necessity or with some of the comforts of home. They moved almost cheerfully with signs like “Meadow Lake or Bust” and “Melfort or Bust” crudely painted on the sides of the wagons. Or they moved quietly, almost in the hope that no one would see them pass.⁵⁰

It seems that the desire to paint one’s wagon with a cheerful, spirit-leavening slogan was something of a universal impulse if one happened to be on the sharp end of drought. A slogan was something at which one might grimly smile whilst one’s world fell apart. Call it ‘Prairie Irony.’ Like our south

plains settlers, Kansas settlers were famous for their slogan of the 1930s: "In God we trusted, in Kansas we busted."⁵¹ Even from a distance of seventy years, it still has the charming pathos and rhythmically pleasing power to make one smile and that smile suggests that, for all that was bad, there remained in many settlers a quiet sense of humour, even though at the end of 1937 two in three people in rural Saskatchewan were destitute.⁵²

In the middle of this evacuation, the editors of the Swift Current *Sun* chased after the departing trains and shouted glad tidings. Writing in the entirely inappropriate past tense while the event was still unfolding, the editors, as though narrating a Greek tragedy for the benefit of an audience while the play was still being performed, wrote that many settlers "could see no hope for the future" and so "a number of them pulled up stakes" for greener fields but, in September 1937, they insisted that "there was a gradual return of confidence."⁵³ Cue the train full of settlers rolling slowly past.

The editors apparently chose not to see what was happening. It was not only the settlers in the rural areas who were leaving but "the small towns were being emptied as the people began to desert them."⁵⁴ Those who remained did not have an easy go of it: they "shivered or sweltered in shack houses with paper thin walls ... comatosely holding to a fading hope that next year would be better and for seven years each next year had been worse than the one before."⁵⁵

Settling on the south plains was never supposed to be easy. No one ever in their wildest imaginings could have guessed how hard it actually was. Had Mankota settlers ever thought that, penniless and starving, they would have to march across thirty miles of open prairie under the grim, unhappy skies of a cold and unforgiving October and sleep in a ditch near the mouth of a third-rate coal mine to get fuel with which to heat their shacks during the winter, many probably would have thought twice about the promise of the Last Best West and return to the Dakotas and their jobs as teachers and bank clerks.

The bad year of 1937, though, was also the last year. After fumbling and bumbling and failing for close on to twenty-five years, 1937 was the watershed point. There was only one direction the situation could go and that was up; it could not possibly get worse. Even though our federal agriculture minister donned the colourful robes of braggadocio with talk of "tilting a triple-tipped lance at drought," salvation was somewhat more dull and benign and therefore more pleasingly Canadian.⁵⁶ It came in the form of a curious mixture of settlers, scientists, "professors of soils," and government men assembled into a group and this organization, the Prairie Farm

Rehabilitation Administration, is known to history by its cheerless, awe-deflating initials: the PFRA.

The PFRA was officially formed in 1935 and became a permanent body after 1937. The very existence of the organization represented something far greater than at first might be thought. The creation of the PFRA was not only a step toward developing practical solutions for dryland agriculture; it also represented a fundamental change in thinking, in perception. Borrowed money, loaned money and guaranteed loans would no longer be thrown out the window in the terrifyingly ridiculous cycle of crop-failure/relief-aid/crop-failure/relief-aid. Money that might have gone to aid relief instead was spent on fixing the problem because, by 1937, quite a few people had figured out not only how not to farm but also how to farm in a dry land.⁵⁷

The PFRA was a proactive organization, not reactive, and as such it represented an enormous step forward in the mentality surrounding south-plains agriculture: this is why it is such an important part of western Canadian history. There would never again be the same sense of dreamy theatricality associated with agriculture as one finds in the words of the government official who, upon observing the crop failure of 1914, said, if in one year a crop failed, “[summer-fallow ensured] the next years results may be safely relied upon.” It was an intellectual revolution.

That the PFRA represented a revolution of the mind is the south plains equivalent of an idea developed by historian and critic Mr. Paul Fussell. In his work, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Fussell suggested that nineteenth-century Victorian sentiments such as heroic honour, courage, and bravery did not survive the trenches of World War I. The cataclysm of war destroyed those grand Victorian ideals; the war made heroism, valour, and honour seem absurd, ridiculous. These lofty Victorian ideals were often expressed using what Fussell calls “High Diction,” that grand, over-blown, over-heated poetry one finds, for example, in Rupert Brooke; High Diction too, also died in the trenches. The war was such a savage experience that it made those sentiments ridiculous, out of date, moronic. Something similar occurred on the south plains during the 1930s.

Consider the sentiment that accompanied settlement: the south plains were judged flat, treeless, open, and “therefore” a region uniformly fit for agriculture.⁵⁸ It was mentioned earlier that the government of Canada used this kind of logic in suggesting that the steel of the rail tracks will disrupt electrical currents “thereby” causing rain. Other examples of this kind of thinking abound: crop failures were “due entirely to good or bad farming”;

if there was a failure in one year, summer-fallow would ensure that the results of the following year “can be safely relied upon”; “honest labour can overcome drought and poor crop conditions.” The 1930s represented the death of this kind of silly, hopeless logic.

All of these ideas were rooted in a sense of blind optimism, a propensity for wishful thinking, a kind of misplaced and unquestioned faith in the ability of man to overcome nature. Historian David Jones wrote about this creed and its “overweening faith in the power of man.” The modern or rather “post-modern” mind has difficulty following in the mental tracks laid down by those who came before us because their way of thinking is so very foreign. Our own mind is, regrettably, in many ways, permanently tuned to irony and cynicism. We have difficulty conjuring a mental world in which “therefore” was wielded with such ridiculous aplomb as it was throughout the dry years. This mental habit did not survive the Dirty Thirties. Nuance and subtlety replaced ill-considered, ill-thought generalizations, wishful, hopeful thinking. In the Great War, just as in the Dirty Thirties, a great cataclysm wrought tremendous intellectual change.

These new revolutionary transformations and the associated technical skills that grew out of them were cumulative, coming as they did after a twenty-five-year struggle against the desert. They were ideas that had been incubating and struggling to find their proper place and time. As James Gray observes, by the time 1937 rolled around, more knowledge about dry-land farming had been gained than “mankind had acquired in twenty centuries.”⁵⁹ 1914 had been dismissed as a freak; 1917–24 created an increasing concern in many quarters and prompted a number of men to seriously question and challenge the old worn-out orthodoxies of W.R. Motherwell and Angus McKay; the 1930s lit a fire under all concerned and results, finally, were achieved.

The first steps toward rational farming on the south plains were simple (so simple in fact that it leaves one asking why they were not developed long before). The matter of dugouts, for example, provides an illustration of a simple solution that would have gone a great distance toward solving the problem of stock-watering during a drought. Oftentimes, cattle were shipped north to greener pastures so that they might feed. And while many settlers did in fact have dugouts, the idea was not a common one. Either for want of information or communication, the idea was not, in fact, general. Designed as a water reservoir that would trap spring run-off and thus provide water for stock, gardens, and household use, dugouts were not common on the plains until the PFRA men got the idea out and circulating and provided the

funds for their development. In 1935 there were only a very few dugouts, but by 1936 there were 1,014. In addition there were 668 stock watering dams and 141 irrigation schemes either developed or in development.⁶⁰

The biggest advancements made by the PFRA, though, came where it was needed most and that was in the area of ploughing. For thousands of years prior to the entrance of the settler onto the south plains, short-grass prairie regions up and down the length of North America had thrived and survived even in seasons of drought. These regions provided a comfortable home for the buffalo and then later for cattle. As long as the short-grass was stitched to the land, these regions flourished.⁶¹ The short-grass was “the perfect fit” for the sandy loam of the drylands because it could hold moisture a foot or more below the surface.⁶² But when the settler arrived and tore out the sod, the land was left exposed, “empty, dead and transient.” The roots of the grass were gone, the soil became unbound, and it was in this scenario that the settlers arrived with their equipment and the injunction to plough deep and hard to conserve moisture and never mind pulverizing and granulating the soil.

When one sees pictures of soil drifting like snow against a south-plains fence line, it was merely the practical result of this process of summer-fallowing. Settlers, as the Englishman A.G. Street correctly observed, attacked the land, ripped up the grass, unbound the soil, and then beat it with a plough. In dry years, the disintegration of the soil was exacerbated by the heat and so we are faced with the sad and inevitable conclusion drawn by Mr. Gray: “it was those who followed the best scientific methods ... who were the chief fashioners of the disaster.” Another of the unnamed settlers in Broadfoot’s collection of stories on the 1930s agreed: “you mistreat the land, take away its essential goodness, and this [soil drift/soil exhaustion] will happen.”⁶³

There was a creeping sense of discomfort with summer-fallow in the 1920s, but since there were no other alternatives, its use remained openly advocated even though such an approach was “as wrong for that area as [it] possibly could have been.” And when the dry years came and the wind blew (there is the old joke in Saskatchewan that “if the wind ever stopped blowing we’d all fall over” – the wind blows *all* the time), it took the soil with it, cutting off the life blood of the wheat at the root. The problem grew worse when the settler decided to leave.

The settlers, as has been observed, did not wait around for advancements in agricultural methods but instead “found their own solution in the manner farmers have solved their problems since history began” and simply

walked away. They likely didn't know that by leaving they were in fact contributing to the problem.⁶⁴ When settlers walked away, the land lay there unused. It is one thing to own land, quite another to care for the land, and thus the soil was allowed to continue drifting and weeds were allowed to keep growing, and this usually meant that the neighbour's field would soon be covered with weeds and drift from the adjacent land.

Alberta had long been an active practitioner of penalizing farmers who allowed their soil to drift and Pinto Creek council tried to follow suit. In an action replicated by RMs across the south plains during the entire 1914 to 1937 period, council passed a motion that levied "penalties where, because of poor farming and neglect, soil is allowed to drift."⁶⁵ During the entire 1914–37 period, municipal councils even dispatched roving gangs of school kids to act as weed spotters and, even in the 1930s, they were paid the handsome sum of fifty cents for reporting the location of heretofore unknown patches of Russian, Canada, and Sow thistle.⁶⁶ The drought, like a creeping fungus, slowly slithered across the hills and valleys of the plains, turning the soil into a putrescent heap of lifeless dirt. And since no one was legally obliged to do anything, no one did.⁶⁷ Over two million acres of land had been abandoned by 1936.

The tragedy is that summer-fallow methods were used by settlers with great success in regions where there was adequate rainfall. Summer-fallow was perfectly acceptable in the northern grain-belt but not on the south plains: it was the wrong tool for the wrong job in the wrong place at the wrong time – everything about it was wrong. Using summer-fallow in a region notorious for drought is like using a sledgehammer to pound in a nail. Dryland farming required the settler then and the farmer today to finese the land, not bludgeon it. All of this talk about a settler's responsibility for the land is not meant to downplay the drought for that was the chief ingredient that made all of the other elements active. Without drought, as 1915, 1916, and 1928 proved, there was no problem. With drought came miseries untold.

The principal problem, then, lay in how to work the land. The Noble Blade, as James Gray observes, was one of the more successful creatures of the PFRA efforts. Originally used as an implement on fruit farms in California, C.S. Noble adapted the blade for use on the arid south plains. The chief selling feature was its light touch. It did not plough deep, as farmers had been instructed to do for decades; it tilled the soil lightly and it cut more than it ploughed.

And then there was “trash-farming.” Most farmers then (and today) bristle at the thought of leaving weeds on their land. “Indian summer-fallow” is the pejorative term to describe a field left to weeds. Just as settlers up north chopped down every tree they could get their calloused hands on, settlers also seemed to think that that land must be clear of all weeds before seeding. But Asael “Ace” Palmer had other ideas.

Palmer advocated a method in which light surface tilling left weeds and stubble on the surface and this replicated the natural conditions of the soil in the region before the settler came. While not “stitched to the land” as such, the weeds and stubble provided a sort of covering net for the soil and this net held the soil in place and arrested, reduced, or eliminated soil drift. Palmer spoke so often and so fondly of this method that his convivial office mates stopped calling him “Ace” Palmer and instead took to calling him “Trash-Cover” Palmer.⁶⁸

Solving soil-drift was important. It was one of the elements of the crisis years between 1914 and 1937 that contributed in no small measure to the larger problems created by drought, and by addressing it the men of the PFRA actually chopped off at the root one of the biggest problems that had plagued agriculture in the drylands for decades. It was recognized as a problem by Angus McKay and others as far back as 1908, but, in keeping with the simple beliefs of the day, McKay argued that soil drift, eventually, “will disappear” though he never explained exactly how.

For all these advancements though, there were still those who wanted to commit the south and west plains to the junk heap. Canada’s barrel-chested prime minister Mackenzie King (“Rex” as his friends called him) was one of them. After seeing the wreckage of the plains and the detritus of broken lives that littered it in the form of abandoned farms and abandoned towns, he confided thusly in his journal: “I don’t think it [Palliser’s Triangle] will be of any real use again.”⁶⁹ And so Agriculture Minister James Gardiner deserves some extra praise for prying from King’s reluctant fingers the \$5 million necessary to develop the PFRA.

Some of the beleaguered RMs, whacked stupid by the “unholy mess” of the drought, were babbling incoherent nonsense in 1937. Some of them put up a misguided fight to resist plans of the PFRA. The PFRA ordered the municipalities to sign over title to all land they had received at tax sales and land which had been declared unusable for agriculture. But they resisted because they felt that the more land they signed over, the smaller their tax base would be. When a disbelieving provincial agriculture minister, J.G. Taggart, reminded them that in most cases they hadn’t seen a cent of tax

money off these lands in some cases for twenty-five years, the stupefied municipalities fell in step.⁷⁰ (Rural municipalities in Saskatchewan have a profound and deeply rooted resistance to the imperative – if they are told to do something, they will not. If they are given an option, then they will do it, but only to the extent that they see fit. Alberta by distinct contrast favours the imperative and uses it quite regularly. One can see evidence of this in weed control legislation. In Alberta, rural municipalities *must* deal with weeds: it is required by law. In Saskatchewan, it is only suggested that rural municipalities *may* want to deal with weeds: it is not required by law).⁷¹

These lands signed over by the RMs were to be used as community grazing pastures. The PFRA included this operational element to its mandate in 1937, also the same year in which it was made a permanent organization. At the end of that year, there were sixteen pastures that had been emptied of settlers, fenced off, and re-grassed. By the end of 1938, there were twenty-eight pastures covering 380,000 acres.⁷² And by 1940, 837,940 acres of land had been turned back to prairie and of those acres, 700,000 were on the south and west plains. An additional 411,200 acres were re-grassed the following year.⁷³ Thus, over one million acres of land were taken out of production in just two or three years following the catastrophe of 1937.

For all of the destructiveness of 1937, the year came to a close dragging behind it some small successes. Land was re-grassed, some settlers were removed, and the first positive steps toward rational agriculture had been taken. As 1937 finished and made way for 1938, hope once again fought aside despair and its handmaidens and made its way back onto the south and west Saskatchewan plains. And this time there was some justification because 1938 was a better year than many had seen in a long, long time, and it proved the scribes of the Swift Current *Sun* right: it did rain in south-west Saskatchewan. And the rain was not just a “frustrating dribble,” as Pierre Berton called it, but a real and genuine downpour, and at the right time, too.⁷⁴ Deputy Auld said the crop outlook of 1938 was “very encouraging in most districts” and that, on balance, “the outlook of the province was bright.”⁷⁵ In 1939, Saskatchewan experienced a harvest that was called “one of the best in history” (although \$7,500,000 in aid relief was distributed to settlers on the south and west plains).⁷⁶

It is not that things all of a sudden stopped being bad after 1937, but rather the continual and frantic downward spiral in which settlers were helplessly trapped from 1914 onward came to a thudding stop in 1937 – mostly because it was simply impossible for the problem to get worse. In the truest sense of the phrase, there was nowhere left to go but up and that,

ultimately, is what 1937 represents: the utter and absolute nadir of south and west plains agriculture during the dry years.

The situation got better but only incrementally, over time, gradually. The eleven RMs whose municipal minutes form the structural foundation of the present work, for example, had tax arrears totalling \$1.1 million at the start of 1937 in addition to having roughly \$250,000 in tax sale holdings. By the start of 1939, though, tax arrears had fallen to just \$500,000 and tax sale holdings had plummeted to levels that had not been seen in the drylands since before the 1920s: \$66,740.31. Tax sale holdings in the seventeen years between 1922 and 1939 had *never* been that low. (The records for tax sale holdings only go as far back as the early 1920s.) The tax sale holdings figure for these eleven RMs peaked at almost \$250,000 in the twenties; it dropped to \$100,000 in 1928 before spiking to just under \$300,000 in the 1930s. But by the time 1939 rolled around, the tax sale holdings figure had fallen to levels that many administrators, reeves, and councillors had never seen before. Indeed, it was at a level that they probably thought was not even possible.

1939 allowed everyone some time to stretch. The drought lifted and made room for time to complete what the droughts did not. The depopulation of the south plains would continue over time but that would occur slowly, gradually, and with less of the tragic brutality of the dry years; it continues down to today.

The reprieve, though, would be brief. In 1946, the province again had to come to the aid of the south plains because it seemed that, despite improvements in agricultural methods, if the rain didn't fall the crop wouldn't grow. 1947 was as bad as 1937 for Zygmunt Burnat, who had settled at Iddelsleigh, in the Alberta portion of the drylands. 1947 was so dry that the family's crop yield from a half section of land, 320 acres, was less than 400 bushels – that works out to 1.25 bushels per acre. The daughter of Mr. Burnat recalls “gathering dandelions to supplement our food supply.” This may have the appearance of grim desperation but she wistfully recalls that “they made a tasty salad.”⁷⁷

As the droughts of 1946 and 1947 suggest, there were worse droughts than 1937. The droughts of 1961 and 2002 were comparable in scope and severity to the drought of 1914, and indeed these droughts are reckoned as some of the worst droughts of the twentieth century, worse even than 1937.⁷⁸ The droughts between 1986 and 1988 wiped out and bankrupted thousands of south and west plains farmers. It was not unusual in those years to hear stories on the nightly news about farmers lying dead in their half-tons next to a shotgun. Professor E.C. Hope had not exaggerated: suicide was

a not-infrequent response to drought (and statistics show a marked preference for firearms in the execution of the act). And west plains pride was further humbled in 2001–2002 when cattlemen in the drylands were forced to rely on hay shipments from their eastern Canadian counterparts in what was called the Hay West Campaign, a moniker that has a touch of the gallant to it.

Dr. David Sauchyn is a pioneer in the study of the drought and climate on the western plains and he skips the Prairie Adaptation Research Collaborative. He observes that the big difference between the droughts of the thirties and those of later years is that prairie people have learned to adapt to living and farming in a dry land.⁷⁹ The PFRA played a leading role in that agricultural adaptation. Government too came to recognize that a repeat of the shambolic and chaotic social and economic disasters of the Dirty Thirties was not desirable and so it passed the Prairie Farm Assistance Act in 1939. This act guaranteed settlers a certain level of income when their crops failed and, most importantly, repayment was not necessary. This not only ensured a basic (though still meagre) standard of living for settlers on the south and west plains, but in one fell swoop the PFAA abruptly ended municipal indebtedness brought on by the necessity of local governments providing relief aid; hard labour road-gangs likewise disappeared and so too did absurdity. These elements are entirely absent from later droughts: no one worked on road gangs to feed their families in the devastating drought of 1961 because the state assumed some of the responsibility in the event of a crop failure. Indeed, a Department of Agriculture mandarin noted that direct relief in Saskatchewan all but disappeared in 1939 because of the PFAA and thus so too did all of those elements that characterized life on the south and west plains during the droughts between 1914 and 1937.⁸⁰

Science continually reveals more (or rather reaffirms in better detail what has long been known) about the region in which these settlers were trapped. Dr. Sauchyn observes that the prairies have the most variable climate in Canada, adding, somewhat sardonically, that the south and west plains in particular are the only areas in the country that are defined by the amount of rain they do not get, by their dryness. Sauchyn observes that “we don’t get average years on the prairies” but instead we waffle between wet years or dry years with little moderation in between. Of the Medicine Hat region, in particular, and the extreme wet-dry cycle of weather by which it is characterized, Dr. Sauchyn notes that “few places on earth have this kind of variability.”⁸¹

So, there is no end to the story; it only changes. If farmers today want to sell their land and move away to Victoria, they can do so, unlike their forbearers in 1914 who were told they would not be able to cancel their homesteads. The trip to Victoria can now be accomplished in a few hours and comes complete with a comfortable and scenic ferry ride. One no longer has to ride in a stinking cattle car for a week taking care of stock to get to the green valleys of British Columbia.

Road gangs have been replaced by the somehow less dignified cash subsidy programs. Farmers no longer go to the local RM office or the local rail siding for by-the-pound handouts of apples, potatoes or cod, nor is a quarter section of land traded for a box of apples, nor do farmers apply to the local RM administrator for relief aid. Rural councillors no longer have to accept relief aid applications from their rate payers. Starvation today usually happens only in the Third World, and one is reasonably sure that it has been some years since anyone in the Mantario district has eaten porcupine stew. Local rural councils no longer “clamour for aid” to prevent starvation; they clamour for government infrastructure programs to save their roads from disintegration, a direct consequence of rail and elevator consolidation.

Absurdity has been replaced with sophisticated apathy. Naiveté has been replaced with irony, credulity with cynicism. The split between rural and urban has grown wider to the point where it is very easy and in fact common for someone in Saskatoon to completely forget that he or she lives in Saskatchewan.

It has been many years since someone has had to light a lamp at noon so as to be able to see. It has been many years since a mother has had to place wet cloths over the faces of her children “so that they might be able to breathe,” and it has likewise been many years since a teacher has had to wait “a year or two” to get paid.

But the droughts haven't stopped.

They never will.