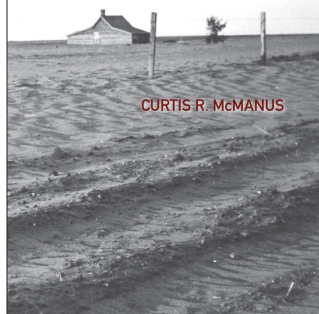


## Happyland

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



**HAPPYLAND:  
A HISTORY OF THE "DIRTY THIRTIES"  
IN SASKATCHEWAN, 1914-1937**  
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# Conclusion: Oblivion (redux)

Historians are like deaf people who go on answering questions that no one asked them. – *Leo Tolstoy*

The principal reason for this work has been to examine and explain the nature, origin, and course of the Dirty Thirties and to do so without making reference to the Great Depression. In doing this, the entire crisis of the dry years between 1914 and 1937 is finally allowed room to breathe, whereas previously it had been shut up in a dark room all but eclipsed by the much grander tale of the global economic collapse. We must remember that in the most recent and updated history of Saskatchewan, Dr. W.A. Waiser told us that “the real challenge” in the Thirties “was not growing enough grain but getting a decent price for it.” Obviously, Dr. Waiser cannot and does not ignore the droughts, but his emphasis on economics as the principal problem acts as a shield that keeps the dry years from view.

By prying apart the drought from the economic collapse, we are able to see a separate, clear, and distinct history take shape. We are able to see the development of new and exciting patterns of history in which relief aid, road gangs, and land abandonment form the basic nature and trajectory of life on the south plains between 1914 and 1937. We are able to see that the Dirty Thirties has its very own peculiar history, its own trajectory, its own nature, origin, and course, which is entirely separate from the Great Depression, that the thirties were not, in fact, exceptional. They were indeed hard and severe, but, in function and character, they were little different from the

years that preceded them. We are also able to see that there was not just one period of western settlement that stretched in a continuous unbroken line from Clifford Sifton in the late nineteenth century through Frank Oliver in the twentieth, but rather there are two entirely separate and distinct periods of settlement, during which two distinctly and uniquely different areas of the province were settled: the first settlement phase was successful, the second, less so.

The mildly shocking absence of understanding about the history of the many droughts in Saskatchewan, their continuity, their *connectedness* has helped to create and give form to the idea that the Dirty Thirties were exceptional years: they were not. They were merely a part of a continual cycle of drought that stretches back for as long as anyone can remember and even beyond that. Dr. Sauchyn's studies reveal that droughts on the south and west plains are absolutely unexceptional and stretch back hundreds of years. Some of these droughts, he notes, have lasted fifty years and more.

The history of the Dirty Thirties, as we have seen, can be told without reference to the Great Depression. The droughts and the relief aid and the work crews and the tax sales, and the evacuations and land abandonment: these are all special and unique creatures of the drought, not the depression. The drought created its own problems, has its own history, and ran its own course with remarkable continuity for twenty-three years from 1914 down to 1937. Indeed, the argument for continuity between these years can in some ways be entirely supported by the presence or absence of the road-gangs in rural Saskatchewan: when there was drought, road-gangs sprang up all over the plains. Road-gangs were entirely unique to the droughts of the south plains. Rain was to wheat what drought was to road-gangs.

Measuring the enormity of the crisis is a difficult task and one that cannot be fully addressed in any conclusion. It can be considered or summed up in any number of ways: the amount of human suffering, the acres of land sold at tax sales, the number of people who fled, the volume of relief allotments, the number of illegitimate children, the number of people who killed themselves, the amount of cod fish consumed, the number of children who died from malnutrition, or any combination thereof.

The Rowell-Sirois Commission studied the economics of the droughts in detail and this is what they came up with: \$738,188 was spent by the provincial and Dominion governments in relief expenditures in 1929; \$3,031,957 in 1930; \$20,682,744 in 1931; \$13,249,178 in 1932; \$12,705,455 in 1933; \$21,747,248 in 1934; \$19,617,989 in 1935; \$18,784,879 in 1936. It is probably fortunate that they put together this report in the early spring of 1937 before

the failure became evident because the \$47,816,010 spent on relief that year might have skewed their averages and their view of things.<sup>1</sup>

In keeping with our economic theme, we can also view the dry years using conditional subsidies as our frame of reference. Conditional subsidies were grants given by the Dominion government on the condition that the province perform a stipulated action, which quite often took the form of spending a certain amount of money in a specific area. Apparently, “leading examples” of the programs funded by this kind of conditional grant included “a grant in support of the treatment of venereal diseases” during the Roaring Twenties.<sup>2</sup>

At any rate, the records of conditional subsidies made to the province stretch all the way back to 1912, and these subsidies exactly parallel the arc of drought: there was, for example, a \$27,000 grant made in 1913, but a \$61,000 grant in 1914. The 1915 grant was \$34,000, but the 1919 grant was \$167,000. Grants provided during the drought years of the 1920s stay over \$1.1 million until 1926, when they fell back to \$124,000.<sup>3</sup> And when the Thirties hit in 1929, those subsidies instantly breach the \$2 million mark and remain there for much of the decade.

The frustrating war fought by rural municipalities over relief aid and tax arrears was also highlighted in the Rowell-Sirois Report, and, again, the record of RM borrowing exactly parallels the years of drought. As an effort to offset the decline in revenues by the non-payment of taxes, RMs took \$432,000 in general bank loans in 1916, but, by 1921, RMs had taken out general loans in the amount of \$3.7 million.<sup>4</sup> This figure drops to \$366,000 in 1926 and then rockets to \$4.5 million in 1931.

Relief bank loans are also included in the summary of spending by RMs. There was no relief supplied by RMs in 1916, but \$1.2 million by 1921; there was only \$302,000 in relief aid distributed by RMs in 1926, but again when the dry years hit that figure spikes to \$4.8 million in 1931, dropping slightly to \$4.5 million in 1935. These figures, too, exactly parallel the droughts and crop failures between 1914 and 1937.<sup>5</sup>

There are also other barometers by which the size and enormity of the cost of drought can be measured, like debt adjustment, mediation, and moratoriums. Debt mediation was introduced in 1914 because of the crop failures in south and west Saskatchewan. Saskatchewan’s Agriculture Minister Mr. Hamilton visited the drylands of southern Alberta in August 1922 and examined the workings of its Drought Area Relief Act (which later evolved into the Debt Adjustment Act). Mr. Hamilton returned home and promptly installed a similar program in Saskatchewan. By the end of

that year, some six thousand cases had been handled by the board.<sup>6</sup> Closely aligned to the Debt Adjustment Act was the Farm Loans Board, which, by 1922, had doled out \$8 million.<sup>7</sup> The RMs were likewise bent over the proverbial barrel: by 1920, the province had guaranteed just under \$3 million in relief loans taken by RMs to provide aid to their settlers.<sup>8</sup>

Between 1928 and 1938, the Debt Adjustment Board “adjusted,” that is to say reduced or mediated, \$82 million in debt, and this included relief aid and tax arrears.<sup>9</sup> The Farm Creditors Arrangement Act operated on similar principles. The committee that oversaw implementation of this act would make mutually agreeable arrangements for repayment between a debtor and a creditor. In some typical examples, a debt of \$21,000 was rationalized downward to \$7,714; one of \$29,293 was finally paid out at \$11,290.<sup>10</sup> Recall that the same kind of thing happened in Mankota when rural councils stopped trying to get what they were owed and instead adjusted themselves to taking what they could reasonably expect to get. The FCAA board handled cases totalling \$43 million and reduced a total of \$14 million in debt. There was also a moratorium on debt in the 1930s.

So here, then, is a kind of rough balance sheet: just under a quarter *billion* dollars in relief aid was supplied to rural Saskatchewan in the 1930s by the Dominion and provincial governments. Millions of dollars in additional relief aid were also spent by rural municipalities.

A total of \$10 million was spent on relief road work in the 1930s, during which time forty thousand men went to work on these road crews, primarily in the drought area. During a single year in the 1920s, just under two thousand men laboured on road-gangs, *only* in the drought area. In the crop failure of 1914, seven hundred men from the Maple Creek area alone volunteered for work on road-gangs, on which work the province spent \$750,000.

As of 1936, 782 rail car loads of food had been shipped into Saskatchewan. Another 550 followed in 1937.

Hundreds of rail cars full of clothing and fancy hats were sent into Saskatchewan through Red Cross appeals and other relief agencies throughout the dry years.

Just under \$3 million in relief loans had been guaranteed by the province in south-west and west-central Saskatchewan RMs between 1918 and 1920.

\$8 million in aid was dumped into the drylands in 1914.

Between 1914 and 1937, an estimated 70,000 men, women, and children fled the south and west plains with their lives and spiritual state temporarily

in tatters, giving rise to historian Chester Martin's observation that the settlement of the south plains "came at a terrible cost in human suffering."

Oliver's 1908 amendment to the Dominion Lands Act was not an inexpensive proposition.

This is the economic balance sheet, but, mercifully, and contrary to what many university professors will tell their students, there is more to history than economics. Mr. Martin's observation about the terrible cost of human suffering leads us to a question that has not yet been explored in the fullness that it deserves and which was only touched on briefly earlier in this work: what effect did the droughts have on the people who settled the south and west plains?

Saskatchewan people are all very familiar with the well-worn idea that the Dirty Thirties resulted in the people of Saskatchewan drifting toward the heavy state interventions of Mr. Tommy Douglas and the CCF/NDP. After the droughts, settlers sought security in stronger government as a protection and a guarantee against future repetitions of the utter and absolute poverty, devastation, and hurt of the Dirty Thirties: this well-worn track of Saskatchewan historiography. It might be better called a rut because there is more to the Dirty Thirties than just political economy.

The popular and frequent observation is that, during the crises of the dry years, men went to great lengths to work on road-gangs in order to stay off the relief rolls, to avoid having to ask their local council for underwear. The common belief is that the story ends there; that these men remained unchanged. This view of the Thirties emphasizes the bold, plucky, resourceful settler who overcame the odds with a smile, a swagger, and a lot of hard work. This view is celebrated widely all across rural Saskatchewan, but, generally speaking, that is not the case, mostly because it *cannot* be the case.

First and most obviously, we must understand and treat as unexceptional the idea that soul-withering drought, decadal crop failures, and excruciatingly humiliating relief aid had a warping effect on the spirit of the settlers, and then we must follow that unexceptional observation wherever it might lead.

As suggested earlier, the more a man received aid, the more he came to rely on it: this is a simple, basic human truth that received an extensive application in the 1920s and 1930s. The RMs actively and frequently complained about having to carry farmers, which resulted, finally, in their refusal to do so. Settlers were a burden to the municipality. As historian David Jones observes, "settlers had been handfed for several years and had come to expect it."<sup>11</sup>

The taking or non-taking of aid was an intensely moral proposition. Aid was viewed as “repugnant” to “self-respecting men,” and so the issue was all tied up in values concerning the strength of one’s character. The taking or non-taking of relief aid was a reflection, an expression, of who a person was on the inside and up to a certain point relief aid was in fact resisted, as legend has it, but that changed in the dry years.

In his report to the House of Commons in 1938, E.W. Stapleford, whose job it was to give MPs a sense of what had just happened on the south plains, wrote of how relief changed the spirit of the men who received it. There were three stages: “first, after a desperate struggle to stay off relief, [there was] very reluctant application for assistance. Second [there was] an attitude of passive acceptance of relief as inevitable and, finally, a tendency to demand all that they think they should have.”<sup>12</sup>

Settlers in Saskatchewan drifted away from the highly moral ideal of pulling themselves up by their socks and toward a reliance on state aid, and thus the droughts appear to have broken something in the spirit of those who settled south and west Saskatchewan; something was forever altered, forever changed. “Can we wonder,” asks Stapleford, “that with year after year of such experiences, human endurance sometimes reaches its limit and something snaps?” That “something” was the belief that a man could and should be able to make his own way without help from the state or other authorities.

Stapleford sent out a questionnaire to settlers, which probed and explored these kinds of questions and ideas, and he concluded that the results reveal “a sad commentary on the devastating effect of [these] adverse conditions on the morale both of individuals and the community.”<sup>13</sup> Stapleford found that there was a wide variety of opinion on the effects of year after year of drought, but the one common theme was spiritual capitulation, or, in other words, the loss of hope. Stapleford said there was a “definite tendency to discouragement and loss of ambition” for many people. Two years of drought can be borne, he suggested, perhaps even three, but after ten years and in many regions twenty, he found that “discouragement replaces hope and an attitude of apathy develops ... and this seems to be what happened to a great many people under the stress of drought.”

A part of the spirit that created and developed Saskatchewan died in the droughts and dust storms between 1914 and 1937. The death of that particular element of the Saskatchewan spirit seems to have been replaced with apathy, a desire for greater securities and assurances, perhaps even the desire for a greater level of government involvement in daily life. Stapleford

wrote that “a very large number of those who replied to the questionnaire expressed the opinion that ‘the state owes us a living.’”<sup>14</sup> Anecdotal evidence supports this: Alberta today is full of Saskatchewan refugees who argue that they have fled from the province precisely because of this apathy, this belief that Saskatchewan is full of people who persist in accepting the idea that government should do for us what we should be able to do for ourselves. This is a culturally pervasive spiritual habit that developed in the dust storms and soil drift of the dry years.

J. Isabel Winterstein was on the ground in 1937 and claimed to have been a witness to the development of that apathy. As a representative of the United Farmers of Canada, she delivered an address 1937 in which she argued that children and young adults had “adopted a defeatist psychology” because they felt there were “no opportunities for [the] realization of ambitions” in Saskatchewan.<sup>15</sup> It might have been an original and thought-provoking idea in 1937 but not so much today. Her words are a terribly familiar refrain for thousands of Saskatchewanians and the highway to Calgary is clogged with people who claim the very same thing.

But the point to note is that this “defeatist psychology,” this sense that our province “has nothing to offer” (Stapleford’s “apathy”), is another unique creature of the dry years. It may seem as though this “apathy” has been around forever, but that is just not the case. These ideas did not simply exist in the air and ether of our province; it is not “the way things have always been” – it got that way, it was caused by something. This defeatism and the sense that our province has nothing to offer is an ugly, unlovely child of the dry years, and it is a regrettable stain on the spirit of Saskatchewan.

In addition to these ideas of apathy, there was the development of another much deeper, critical spiritual crisis on south plains in the 1930s. Mrs. Winterstein claimed that the “moral code” of young people had been abandoned and that people had “come to regard ordinary moral standards with impunity” with “fatal results.” Mr. Stapleford noticed this thing too. He argued that young people had been “thwarted in the normal desire to marry [which] create[d] a serious social problem.” We can safely assume here that the issue to which both Stapleford and Winterstein were referring was the matter of the over 5,000 illegitimate births, which occurred predominantly in the rural areas of Saskatchewan between 1931 and 1938.

Saskatchewan underwent a small “*r*” social revolution during the 1930s. Sexual mores were held in abeyance for over a decade, suicide was rampant, murders frequent, more women than men were having illicit affairs, and divorce rates skyrocketed. One physician who answered Stapleford’s



questionnaire was fairly clear on this point: the drought was “conducive to a lowering of the morale of many individuals” and, he added, “the character of some of them has deteriorated.”<sup>16</sup> Stapleford recalled one pioneer who answered: “My boy was five years old when the drought began. I am very thankful he was not fifteen years of age at the time.”<sup>17</sup> Historian Fred Wilkes says that the dry years “mocked the dignity of man, betrayed his best judgment, and struck at his faith in God.”<sup>18</sup> This is another way of saying man was debased and defiled, made to look foolish, he had his spirit humbled and his faith rocked. It is only natural then that there should have been a response to this.

A settler by the name of T.L. Duncan lived in Alberta’s half of the drylands in the Tilley area near Medicine Hat, and he watched lives and spirits crumble. Mr. Duncan observed the effects of drought and isolation on three bachelors who lived up the road and who had been engaged in starvation farming. Living alone, miles away from anyone, and under some very extreme forms of stress, Mr. Duncan drew the fairly obvious conclusion that “the mental state of these settlers is certain to deteriorate under these conditions.”<sup>19</sup> And while Mr. Duncan was drawing attention primarily to the loneliness and isolation of their existence, if we also add drought, starvation, relief aid, and continual, repetitive, monotonous failure, one does not need to jump too far to reach the same conclusion as Mr. Duncan: that this kind of life “does not lead to normal existences.”<sup>20</sup> And indeed it did not.

In some ways, the broad and basic contours of Saskatchewan history itself support this idea that the Dirty Thirties carved out broad, deep, and profound change in the social landscape of Saskatchewan. There are two *distinct* periods in Saskatchewan history: pre- and post-1939, or, more pointedly, before and after the droughts. Each of these eras has a markedly different feel, as though neither period knows quite what to make of the other. The pre-1930s period has its settlers and homesteads and frontiers, its brothels, port liquor, oxen, and \$1.25 wheat. The post-1930s period has electrification, mechanization, rationalization, organization, consolidation and \$1.25 wheat. The general sense that these two periods are separate and worlds apart in nature is striking and distinct. The people and the values of the post-1939 world seem so very far apart from those of the pre-1939 world, as though they are different worlds entirely, and, if this is the case, if they are different worlds, then something in the pre-1930s era had to die, corrode, fade, or crumble and ultimately be replaced.

American historian Mr. Frederick Jackson Turner famously wrote of the closing of the frontier in the United States. But no one has ever considered

the closing of the frontier in Canada; no one has wrote about the ending of the settlement era, what happened and what it means, what changed. That the settlement era ended or died in the droughts is obvious, but the question remains: "What occurred within the social fabric of rural Saskatchewan during the dying days of the frontier?" Very little attention has been paid to the dry years and absolutely none to the social and moral dislocations that necessarily accompanied it.

Alongside the intriguing social questions related to the dry years, the political questions also need to be addressed. Untangling the political knots and questions to the dry years can result in a debate with no end. Was Frank Oliver's decision to open the south plains to settlement correct? Was it a good decision? Was it an informed decision? If not, then why? Were settlers the responsibility of the government? To what degree? Was the province responsible? Was Auld correct in approaching the crises as he did? Did he help or harm rural Saskatchewan? The questions quickly pile up.

Frank Oliver's decision to open the drylands was both wrong and ill-informed. Haste and impatience made it wrong; ignoring all the conventional wisdom of the day likewise made it wrong. With both pistols blazing he blasted his way onto the pages of history and at the end of the day the toll in human misery simply cannot uphold the view that his amendment was wise and good. The Rowell-Sirois Commission explicitly recognized this: "Rapid exploitation made mistakes in land utilization inevitable. Regulation and control were foreign to the immigration and homestead policies of the Dominion government and to the spirit of the agrarian frontier ... no particular blame is being attached to anyone in that regard, but the fact does remain that very little attention was paid to the suitability of land for agricultural purposes."<sup>21</sup> By 1940, a total of 958,460 acres of land had been taken over by the Land Utilization Board and signed over to the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration who turned the land back to grass; by 1945, the figure was at just over 1.2 million acres or about 7,500 quarter sections of land.<sup>22</sup> The RM of Mantario, the area in which the Huelskamp family had tried to farm, was singled out by the LUB as being particularly notable for the amount of abandoned land the RM had in its possession: by 1945, the RM still held title to 208 quarters of land, or just a little over 33,000 acres.<sup>23</sup>

Wrong or not, however, the amendment created the conditions under which a good portion of the south plains were settled. Had it not been for the amendment, Saskatchewan and Alberta would look very different to-day. But does that make Oliver's decision any better? To suggest 'yes' would be to suggest that the end justifies the means, which is dangerous territory

because that puts the goal ahead of the process to achieve the goal and that breaks open onto messy moral ground (the “gotta break a few eggs to make an omelette” theory).

If, by 1914, settlement was an accomplished fact (and it was), one can cease questioning the right-wrong nature of the amendment (such questions lead nowhere) and the inquiry then turns on issues of responsibility, but this too is equally perplexing because it requires one to measure culpability and responsibility. In the Canadian context, making this measurement is often as simple as saying the government was, is, and forever shall be responsible. But it is not that easy, still less so when one struggles today in this post-modern world to find any appropriate, publicly acceptable benchmarks against which to measure responsibility.

Assuming it was the government’s responsibility to assist settlers, and that is not entirely unreasonable to suggest, the question becomes one of degree. To what extent should the government assist? For its role in creating the mess, the Dominion government showed remarkable elasticity in accommodating the settlers and their demands. The Dominion government went so far in the 1920s as to encourage settlers to declare bankruptcy and get out of the drylands: all would be forgiven.

But the province, as we have seen, moved in a different direction. Even into the 1930s, the Saskatchewan government would not embrace evacuation or removal as policy in the same way that Alberta did in the 1920s. True, the Land Utilization Board removed settlers to other areas of the province, but that was only ever a *by-product* of the primary policy goal of classifying and assessing lands as fit or unfit for agriculture: the settler, for all intents and purposes, was incidental. The Saskatchewan government decreed a policy of non-evacuation, and, even though the LUB removed settlers, it successfully operated within the confines of the policy of non-evacuation.

The settlers and the provincial government had different goals. The Saskatchewan government was building a province within a nation and all matters refracted through the prism of that goal. The settlers, for their part, came to Canada for freedom, for opportunity, to escape tenant farming in Old Europe or the United States, to be “masterless men” in D.H. Lawrence’s famous phrase. These goals and purposes are continually at odds through the entire twenty-five-year history of drought in the early years of settlement on the south plains.

The province’s policy direction was steered in large measure by Deputy Auld, a career bureaucrat who held immense power within the Ministry of Agriculture. Mr. Auld was the man principally responsible for shaping

agricultural policy in Saskatchewan during the dry years, and his thoughts, words, and opinions cry out for judgment.

Auld is an easy target. His own words and ideas run at antagonizing, not to say hostile variance with, those of the settler. He denied the existence of a region prone to drought, he denied the government had any responsibility to act on it – in the end, he suggested that settlers should provide themselves with relief aid. The tone of his correspondence with settlers was frequently condescending, and he seemed to enjoy parading his erudition before the settlers, as was the case when he quoted Shakespeare to a grizzled, haggard, burned-out settler. Deputy Auld is not a historical figure who is easy to like.

But, on his watch and during his tenure, the south and west plains survived the catastrophic years of 1914–37. Where the rural areas of east-central and south-east Alberta were gutted of almost all human life (gutted to the point where, in certain areas, one can drive three hours on a Sunday morning and not see another human soul), south Saskatchewan was put on life support. Evacuation never became policy and the region survived to become the healthy area it remains today. If we take as our barometer of success the ultimate salvation and survival of the south plains, then the Deputy is to be commended for his actions. (This approach reads history backward.) If we take as our barometer of success the effectiveness of the efforts to care for the settlers who were placed in a do-or-die situation in what can be accurately called one of the grossest policy miscalculations in Canadian history, then the conclusions regarding Auld will be correspondingly different. (This approach views history how it was at the time.)

Even though the province steered course away from responsibility, the Dominion government recognized its culpability for its policy failure with the passage of the 1939 Prairie Farm Assistance Act. This act, according to historian John Archer, “indicated some responsibility for farmers placed on land which should not have been settled.”<sup>24</sup> The act assured farmers that the next time their crop production fell below five bushels an acre, the government would provide unconditional support, thus ending the absurd cycle of crop failure–relief aid–road-gangs.

As time moves on and we separate ourselves from the past, we continually learn more and more about the monster the settlers were dealing with on the south plains in the early years. One is surprised to learn, for example, that the twentieth century on the south plains is today considered by many scientists to have been a wet century.

University of Regina Professor Dr. David Sauchyn and the Prairie Adaptation Research Collaborative have studied this region of south

Saskatchewan. Dr. Sauchyn was among the first scientists studying the prairie region to examine tree rings, which unintentionally reveal information about drought, its length and frequency. His conclusions indicate that in addition to the twentieth century being wet, the droughts of previous centuries were longer and more severe, and he notes that, in a few instances, droughts on the south plains have lasted at times for a century.<sup>25</sup> Dr. Sauchyn's ideas are supported by the conclusions of Dr. B.R. Bonsal, a climate scientist who has traced the footprint of the Great Sand Hills. He has concluded that two hundred years ago the south-west plains region had a greater resemblance to the Sahara desert.<sup>26</sup> Traces of this desert were certainly evident to Mr. Gust Mutter, who grimly remembers that "the land was dry and sandy and nothing much grew except Russian thistle."<sup>27</sup> For Mr. Mutter, it was the winters that mattered – Chinooks frequently rolled through the south and west plains and this, he concludes, was "the only thing good about that country."<sup>28</sup>

As mentioned, drought is not just a lack of water but a prolonged absence of water. And one of the elements that make the south plains different from other regions is not just the absence of rain but the rate at which moisture evaporates and the periods during which it falls. On the one hand, we have rain's absence: Dr. Bonsal observes that, during the drought of 1961, for example, the south plains received about four and a half inches of rain, which is roughly 50 per cent of normal growing season precipitation.<sup>29</sup> 1961 was even more destructive than 1937.

The "temporal distribution" of rain also matters. In the drought of 1988, rainfall during May and June was well below normal, while July and August had ample rainfall. But the fatally dry conditions during the most critical part of the growing season resulted in one of the worst crop yields of the twentieth century.<sup>30</sup> And here we reach a crowning absurdity: even when it rains in the drylands, there is still a drought.

Timing and quantity are important, but so too are evaporation rates. If the rain dries before it sinks into the soil, it will not be of much value, and this is a common problem on the south plains. Dr. Sauchyn has pointed out that high winds, Chinooks, and incredibly strong winds during the summer result in a higher level of moisture loss on the south plains and this is to say nothing of the lighter soils common to the region. It is characteristic of lighter soils that they have less ability to retain water.<sup>31</sup> Of course, the question remains: would Frank Oliver have settled the drylands if he had known all of this? The answer is probably "yes."

A municipal councillor from one of the most devastated areas on the south plains was at a meeting during the worst years of the 1930s and he recalled a story in which one settler said that he was “prepared to stay with this ship until she sank.” An oldtimer responded that “if we get no more rain than we’ve had in the last few years, she’ll be a long time sinking.”<sup>32</sup>

Laughter was in short supply during the dry years, but it never quite disappeared. Laughter never really does. It is one of those elements of the human spirit that persist. A smile or a laugh is something that cannot be resisted, like a sneeze. The settler who painted “Meadow Lake or Bust” or even “In God we trusted, in Kansas we busted” on his wagon did so because it was the only way he could find a smile in the midst of so much that was wrong and hurtful. A man will rummage through even the greatest of tragedies in order to find a smile or a laugh and so retain just a little trace of what it should feel like to be human.

It wasn’t just laughter that people found, but beauty also. Those struck down by dust storms, or grasshoppers, or whatever calamity was on for that day still managed to see in the destruction a kind of sublime, almost entrancing aesthetic. We recall the tales of lighting lamps at noon or of fearfully watching a dust storm approach and those images conjure negative colours – shadings of how bad things were. But, even to the people who were on the sharp end of this nature gone mad, they still saw beauty in it. The desolate and isolated lunar misery through which the Mankota settlers trudged to get coal was likely offset more than once by a second, or a minute, or a morning of wonderment at the desolate, stark, and forsaken beauty that surrounded them. Certainly this was not the rule, but it happened and the fact that it did says wonderful things about the human spirit. It also adds another dimension to the crises of the dry years – one cannot view these years as uniformly bad all of the time. Our initial inclination might be to see the dry years in this way, but that would be a mistake.

There is an old Taoist parable that is frequently told in China. A farmer has had a run of bad luck for many years. One day his horse runs away. The neighbours hear this and commiserate with the old farmer. They say what a terrible misfortune it was. But the old farmer only said “we’ll see.” Later, the horse returns with three other wild horses trailing behind. The neighbours exclaimed what wonderful news it was. But the old farmer only said “we’ll see.” The next day, the farmer’s son was riding one of the wild horses. The horse bucked the young lad and his leg was broken. The neighbours exclaimed how awful it was. The old farmer only said “we’ll see.” A week later, the emperor’s troops rode through the village recruiting all able-bodied

men for war, but the farmer's son couldn't go because of the broken leg. The neighbours excitedly shared round this wonderful news. But the old farmer only said "we'll see."

Everything that happens, good or bad, is provisional, contingent upon what happens next. All states of existence are temporary, fleeting. Grinding through those hard, dry, desperate years, many settlers could only hold on for dear life, bumping and dragging along behind a power entirely out of their control. But they held on desperately waiting for what would happen next.

The Konschuh family fled the drylands after almost ten years of crop failure. They were virtually penniless and had signed on to work the lands of Western Stock Ranches in return for food, clothing, and shelter. Reflecting the old Taoist parable, they even lost many of their horses on the way. The neighbours would have agreed it was terrible news. But this was not the end.

The Konschuhs eventually purchased Western Stock Ranches directly from Mr. Honens, the man to whom they were indebted for years after 1923. Peter Konschuh, son the patriarch Phillip, bought it in 1942 and over the course of eighteen years expanded the ranch before leaving farming in the 1960s. Peter always referred to it as "a swell place to live."<sup>33</sup>

Adam, son of Phillip, was a young man in his mid-twenties when the family fled. The world must have seemed like it was coming apart. He went to Cluny, married, had a large and handsome brood of children, and eventually got his own place all around which he defiantly planted trees as protection from the brutal prairie winds. His daughter recalls that their homestead was one of the prettiest in the region due in large part to the fact that their hill-top homestead "was one of the few with trees around it."<sup>34</sup> Adam also developed extensive irrigation works on his farm, and here one must conclude that he was motivated, at least in part, by his experiences in west Saskatchewan.

The Konschuhs also committed another small act of defiance. When they were fleeing the drylands, the family took their barn with them. It was "dismantled board by board" and reconstructed at Cluny.<sup>35</sup>

Adam, his daughter recalls, was a good singer with a deep voice, and, like many Germans, he "loved philosophical discussion." He moved to Calgary in 1957, where he eventually passed away. Jake, Adam's brother, the Konschuh who wiled away his hours studying "steam engineering," moved to Cluny, coached hockey, and was a trustee on the local school board. Phillip, the patriarch, the German shoemaker from Saratov Russia, left farming in 1928. He passed away in Cluny surrounded by his family. One



of the Konschuh grandchildren still farms the family lands at Cluny, and it was an area in which the family must have taken at least some happiness and pleasure because there are approximately fifteen entries for different branches of this family in the local Cluny history book. Like many thousands of settlers, the Konschuhs embarked on a long, dark ride in 1913 and experienced a kind of rebirth on the other side. This was not uncommon.

The family of Anthony Huelskamp was also able to enjoy some measure of peace after the savage droughts. Anthony's daughter, little Polly, who was just a child at that time, recalls arriving on the bare west plains likely having little idea that she and her family would spend the next six or seven years of their lives living on the knife's sharp edge, although the scene that greeted them might have given them pause as a kind of ominous talisman – they arrived only to find an empty “ship-lapped tar-roofed shack” and nothing else. For as soul-shaking as the prospect of living in a ship-lapped tar-roof shack might have been, the Huelskamp house was actually pretty standard for that time and place. Housing on the south and west plains was rated to be some of the worst in the Dominion, not least because early settler dwellings were characterized by the least room-space per person in the entire country. Houses on the south plains were usually “small, unpainted, dreary wooden shacks inadequate in size and warmth” and whose furnishings were characteristically “utilitarian,” absent living room furniture, rugs, books, pictures, and “other furnishings of a modest urban home.”<sup>36</sup> It goes without saying that there were no trees, and this contributed to the pathetic nature of most early south and west plains homes. (Settlers in the north and east could at least build homes out of wood.)

During their time at Masonville, Polly recalls that they kept lights in the windows of their house as an aid for people who might become lost during the ferocious winter blizzards. The Huelskamps, though, fled the west plains and lit out for points further west, with branches of the family eventually spreading to Calgary and Vancouver, a long way away from the two-room shack and the starvation of Alsask in the dry years, and where Polly was “enjoying a peaceful old age.”<sup>37</sup>

The Lomow's, that hardy tribe of Russians who sang and danced and fought their way across the stormy North Atlantic only to see their farm crumble to dust in the 1930s, likewise fled west. They would have stayed, Alex recalls, “but every year kept getting worse.”<sup>38</sup> From Kamsack, the family left to Medicine Hat and Calgary, where Alex wrote with not a little sadness about the failure of so much that had seemed possible, that “it's the turn of future generations to take up the challenge of the land and forge



ahead with hope and courage.” These are not the words of someone who did not have an appreciation of farming and its possibilities. They are the words of a man who had grown attached to the land he farmed.

There is no single way to view or remember the Dirty Thirties. They cannot be remembered only as universally bad. Some stories have happy endings, some don’t, and there are myriad combinations between those two extremes. Even the histories of the little dryland communities reflect this idea.

The writers of *Val Echo*, that history of the area done in 1955 by the teachers and students of Val Marie High School, wrote of the 1930s that “a few settlers left” but added that “most stayed in this almost desert ... and built a progressive community.”<sup>39</sup> This goal of building a “progressive community,” indeed the *ideal* of Progress, exerts an enormously powerful almost talismanic draw on the people of the little communities of Saskatchewan. References to it are everywhere: the history of the RM of Wilton is subtitled “Fifty Years of Progress,” the subtitle for the earliest history of Kindersley is subtitled, “Fifty Years of Progress,” the subtitle for the first history of the Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities is “Sixty Years of Progress,” the slogan for the town of Leader is “Where Progress is Unlimited.” And, as the reader by now may have guessed, there is in fact an RM of Progress.

There is a deeply rooted impulse in Saskatchewan to glorify progress – forward-looking prosperity is seen as an end in itself, as a necessary and self-evident good. This deification of progress likely has its roots in the undignified and brutal struggles of the early settlement years, and this impulse to glorify progress is reflected in the Val Marie history: “And so the undaunted resourceful pioneers carved their homes from the wilderness. Courage and cooperation were the factors that made the wild and woolly west beautiful and prosperous.”<sup>40</sup> *Ad infinitum*. Of the Dirty Thirties, the writers of the Val Marie history are laconic: the government gave “some relief” and also “some relief was given in the form of vegetables.”

Next door to Val Marie is (was) a strange, curious, exotic little town called Aneroid whose name suggests anti-inflammatory ointments but which actually refers to the brand name of a barometer lost by a member of a survey crew (hence the title of their history “The Rising Barometer,” a clever enough play on words but somewhat incorrect because there is not much left of the town – a more accurate title would have been “The Falling Barometer”).

Aneroid sits amongst Assiniboia, Shaunovan and Swift Current (“it is approximately sixty miles from all of these places”). In the 1920s, Aneroid had a doctor, a bank, a drug store, a general store, a Masonic Lodge, a hotel, and four restaurants (“they all sold bread”). There was even a newspaper called the Aneroid *Magnet* and an amateur radio station, which was run by Mr. Wallace Orr (“until he was stopped by federal authorities”). In addition, there was a local branch of the Ku Klux Klan (“there were people here who publicly questioned the Klan’s teachings”) and a soap factory (“which failed as housewives thought powdered soap was extravagant.”).<sup>41</sup>

Aneroid incurred deep scars in the Thirties and those wounds were clearly and distinctly felt even fifty years later in 1980 when the editors of the community history wrote their introduction: “No words can describe the devastation which the drought wrought in this vast area. Nature destroyed the years of back-breaking work in a short space of time and worse, broke the spirit of many who felt the country to be doomed.”<sup>42</sup> One’s heart aches at the failure of so much that had been possible in Aneroid.

Even at the individual level, there are stories with wildly different trajectories. Mr. William Dale’s family originally came from Ireland and settled in Quebec in the 1830s. His wife, Amanda Chamberlain, was born in Quebec and was descended from one of the first white families to settle the Ottawa valley who in turn came up from New England in 1800 likely as Loyalists. They had originally emigrated from Scotland in 1600.

They moved west in the early years and raised their family. They had six children. Along with being a farmer, Mr. Dale and his wife also raised horses, including Clydesdales, Percherons, and Belgians. Over time they acquired thirty head, which could be sold for \$300 per animal. Then the droughts came: “the 1920s saw many crop failures,” a family member recalls, and “when the thirties got worse” and dust storms rolled in, the Dale’s rolled out. They moved to Victoria, just about as far west of Saskatchewan as one can get and still remain in Canada. Here Mr. Dale’s son Bill trained in track and field and participated in the 1938 British Empire Games in Australia and later served with his brother in the RCAF during World War II.<sup>43</sup> Thus the family’s trek took them, quite literally, from one side of Canada to the other. The most painful stop was on the south plains.

On the other side of the coin, we have this: an anonymous government clerk circulated an order in 1945 indicating that interest payments on all relief debts accrued between 1931 and 1944 would be cancelled.<sup>44</sup> This effort was specifically directed at the thousands of settlers who had fled the dry-lands for the northern grain belt, oftentimes ending up in settlement camps.

It was directed at these people because, as it turned out, these settlers in 1945 “have in many cases reached old age” and the stock and implements they had shipped up north in the 1930s has “either died or is now obsolete.” This is how the Thirties ended for some settlers – with a pathetic little whimper – an obscure government official caring for people who had grown old and had criminally wasted their lives trapped in a futile and hopeless cycle of absurdity.

The Konschuhs, and the Dales, and the Huelskamps, and the Lomows provide us with remarkable examples of the Taoist belief that all is not lost, that all is contingent, that life is provisional and entirely dependent upon what happens next. Echoing the substance of that Taoist parable is Prime Minister John A. MacDonald, who was fond of saying “the long game is the true one.” In the short term, the lives of many thousands of people were put on hold – they were “lost years” as Mr. James Gray rightfully remembers them. Mr. Walter Anderson, who settled in Carlstadt/Alderson (“The Star of the Prairie”) in Alberta remembers the Dirty Thirties as “a waste of life.”<sup>45</sup>

But even still, in many cases they were not “last years.” The Konschuhs and the Dales provide the proof of what can and likely often did happen next, after the droughts. They offer a proof that it was (and is) possible to make something out of nothing and thus their story is not one of defeat but rather one of victory and it was a story replayed in a thousand different ways up and down the length of the south plains.

And what of the south plains? Whither the drylands? The government-sanctioned clearances that occurred in Alberta in the 1920s are without parallel in Canadian history. The massive population haemorrhages and abandonments in Saskatchewan are likewise without parallel and in numbers exceed Alberta’s in both the 1920s and the 1930s. The south and west plains supported life, but they also took life. So how does one make sense of this region?

Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Wallace Stegner grew up in Eastend. Eastend is located just a little west of Aneroid. Stegner remains extremely divided about the value of this region. His father was one of thousands who came, tried and fled, but that is not the reason for his complex feelings about this region. In the mid-1950s Mr. Stegner returned to Eastend. He analyzed it thusly: “a dull dull little town where nothing passes but the wind, a town so starved for excitement that a man’s misfortune in losing his false teeth in the river can enliven a whole winter’s pool-room and hardware-store conversation.”<sup>46</sup>

Mr. Stegner is critical of south plains settlement and refers to it as a “brief improbable dream” that has faded.<sup>47</sup> It was improbable because of the nature of the region that was being settled. Mr. Stegner argues that the “iron inflexibilities” of high winds, low rainfall, short growing season, monotonous landscape, and wide extremes of temperature must necessarily “limit the number of people who can settle, and limit the prosperity and contentment of the ones who manage to stick.”<sup>48</sup> With tongue firmly in cheek, Mr. J.R. “Bud” Thompson calls the Alsask region “the driest, coldest, hottest, windiest place you have ever been at, or ever may go to.”<sup>49</sup> Mr. Stegner’s statement, then, and even to a lesser extent Mr. Thompson’s, tends to suggest that the population dislocations of the south plains were necessary, inevitable, foreordained. It had to happen.

Of settlement, generally, of the mass transplanting of people into a wilderness, Mr. Stegner is likewise critical because he feels there is so much good that is lost in the process. “Conventions suffered decay and disintegration ... and the amenities suffered even worse than the conventions.” The matter of sewage and public rest-rooms might be highlighted here: Mr. Stegner noted in 1955 that in all of Eastend, “there is not a service station with a toilet to which a woman from the country can take a desperate child.”<sup>50</sup> Indeed, public sewage was a substantial sign of progress. When a public sewage system arrived in Aneroid in 1963, “it was like a dream come true.”<sup>51</sup>

More specifically, though, Mr. Stegner was speaking of culture when he spoke of the elements of life that are lost in the process of settlement. Mr. Stegner unfairly and somewhat cynically observes that what developed in Saskatchewan was not culture but instead “a whole baggage of habits, customs, tendencies, leanings, memories, political and religious affiliations, codes of conduct, educational practices,” and it is this that he sees as the great failing of settlement. Even the once vibrant local pride in which settlers revelled in the early years seems dead to Mr. Stegner. He notes that in Eastend there is no longer a town baseball team “to play for the town’s honour against Shaunovan” (although that vibrant local pride persisted down the road in Aneroid where, in 1975, the local ball club was so good that it “carried the village name” all across “the south half” of the province).<sup>52</sup>

There is much anecdotal evidence to support the observation that, despite a brief flirtation with the possible, an inevitable cultural withering occurred, a withering of that unique and particular Saskatchewan culture (it did develop, contrary to what Mr. Stegner claims) that continues down to today: there are no more annual sports days followed by evening dances;

.22 rifles are illegal without the necessary permits thus impairing gopher hunts; rabbit culls are frowned upon; harvest parades are rare; pool halls and barber shops have disappeared; rural schools and churches once the site of festivals and plays and Christmas pageants are gone; compelling political ideologies have all vanished.

And what of the Dirty Thirties? What of the dry years? What of the memory of this period in Saskatchewan history? Even when the droughts occurred, there was a distinct lack of awareness amongst Canadians as to what was going on. Mr. James Gray notes that the development of the PFRA is unknown to 99 out of 100 Canadians and known “only vaguely at best” by 99 out of 100 people living in the south and plains.<sup>53</sup> Even at the time of the national Red Cross appeal for relief in 1931, “nobody outside the Palliser’s Triangle was told much or knew about what was going on inside.”<sup>54</sup> The crises of the dry years were unknown at the time and have faded since.

Of course, people were and are generally aware of the Dirty Thirties, but, beyond that, of its nature and tragic course, of its own peculiar history, there lay nothing. This is not helped at all by the absence of historical work on the subject. James Gray’s *Men Against the Desert* remains the standard work on the Dirty Thirties, and it was published forty years ago. The PFRA no longer exists. It was replaced in 2009 with the Agriculture Environment Services Board, whose acronym is the decidedly clunky, rhythmically impaired “AESB.” There are no schools of thought or recent works or challenges to Saskatchewan’s settlement history. There is only emptiness.

Even some individual family entries in local community histories bypass not only the 1920s but also the 1930s. Mr. Jake Bassendowski wrote a fine and compelling personal history in the RM of Shamrock history book, but when it came to the Dirty Thirties, he merely notes: “the years of relief in Saskatchewan is quite a story in itself.” He stops there. Mr. Keith France remembered that 1928 was a good year and “our next good crop was in 1942, with the Dirty Thirties in between.”<sup>55</sup> Like Bassendowski, he stops there. Mr. Ole Carlson’s daughter Edna Russell remembers that “there were good crops in 1915 and 1916 and again in 1927 but many failures in between.”<sup>56</sup> She likewise stops there. The memory of the dry years is a hit and miss affair. There is more missing than hitting. Mr. Stegner recalled arriving in Canada and remembers that he and his friends had the distinct impression that Saskatchewan, and indeed Canada, was “a new country and a new country has no history.” Even though he was writing about a period a hundred years ago, that general sense still remains: Saskatchewan has no history.

Many administrators with whom the present writer spoke during the course of research for this work knew very little of what had occurred in their own RMs during either the twenties or the thirties. Many of the communities that sprung up in the early rush, communities like Aneroid, had newspapers but not a trace of those papers from the early settlement years can be found. There are, for example, only three months of Aneroid newspapers from the early settlement years. Coverage resumes in the 1940s and 1950s, but there is nothing prior to that. There is no newspaper record from Leader that predates 1948. The Alsask newspaper, as Mr. Thompson informed the present writer, was established in 1911 by a Mr. A.G. Holmos, and yet the earliest newspaper record we have of Alsask begins sometime in the 1940s. (Mr. Thompson has two copies of the Alsask paper – one from 1935 and one from 1974, and they were used as part of the remembrances of the history of Alsask at its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in August 2010.) In between, though, there is nothing. The newspapers from all those little communities that sprung up in those heady early days of settlement have vanished. They were stuffed into walls as insulation, buried in the basement of a house that burned down or perhaps simply thrown into the garbage as waste, embarrassing evidence of a bad memory, proof of the collapse of the possible, a mocking reminder of the failure of a grand promise.

In fairness, though, drought, like PFRA history, is not very sexy. Mr. Gray is certainly clever enough to recognize that his subject is not really exciting “unless 50,000 farmers planting crested wheat grass on five acre plots is exciting.”<sup>57</sup> Those years, and despite Mr. Gray’s momentous literary efforts to combat it, have drifted into a formless, shapeless blob, which attracts very little attention from scholars and even less interest from the public. The world is so very different today from that of the dry years. It is sophisticated and “post-modern” and very far removed from the frontier world. Indeed, many cities and towns in Saskatchewan have tried desperately to rid themselves of their agricultural settlement past.

Both Regina and Saskatoon have enthusiastically abandoned the historically pungent names of their annual summer fairs, Buffalo Days and Pioneer Days. Today Regina has its “Exhibition” while Saskatoon has “The Ex”. These cities discarded the particular, the unique, the historic, the colourful, in favour of the bland, the generic, and the vacuous.

Saskatoon has also rid itself of the Louis Riel Relay and Riel Days. A downtown park that had been named Gabriel Dumont Park was renamed “Friendship Park” and in that park there is the statue of a man on a horse

with a gun, which one can only presume is Gabriel Dumont because all signage that would have indicated who he was has been removed.

The memorial to Immigration Hall in Saskatoon, the hall in which thousands upon thousands of settlers stayed prior to venturing out to their homesteads, was torn down and not replaced. The memorial itself was only ever a small plaque hidden by bushes and nailed to a building on a little-used intersection. The only way one could view it was by getting out of one's car and moving some tree branches.

The very word "pioneer" today elicits mild embarrassment while the word "settler" is rarely used, and in the meanings of these very words, but especially "pioneer," one might find a reason for the utter lack of attention to the dry years, specifically, and Saskatchewan settlement history, generally. The word "pioneer" in Saskatchewan is forever and irredeemably linked with our grandparents, with senior citizens, with oldtimers. When the word "pioneer" is used, the Saskatchewan mind automatically conjures up an oldtimer in overalls driving a John Deere D down Main Street in the annual harvest parade that used to be held in small Saskatchewan towns but which fell out of fashion sometime shortly after the 1980s. The Saskatchewan mind simply does not make the necessary connection that this man might have lived through one of the greatest spiritual struggles in Canadian history. He is just an oldtimer, as natural and ubiquitous as PFRA pastures, barbed wire fences, rock piles, and weather-beaten saddle-backed barns – and these things Saskatchewan people have come to regard as unexceptional. They go unnoticed and if they go unnoticed, so too does our past. The oldtimer does not attract attention; neither does the history through which he lived. The story of settlement is something quaint and archaic, it is the story of our grandparents and great grandparents.

Local community histories have played a valiant role in keeping the memories of those years alive, but the readership of these works is very small. Instead, reflecting a broader and more general cultural fever that afflicted minds in the 1990s, many small communities have splashed colourful murals all over the sides of buildings and bus stations depicting the settlement years. This is horribly inadequate. It is short-course quickie-history designed not only to educate visitors but also to remind residents of the history of their own towns. That Saskatchewan people need to be reminded of their past indicates just how far in esteem the history of Saskatchewan has fallen at the general cultural level.

The small communities in the drylands are simply not keen on their past, perhaps in part because they themselves remain unaware. Perhaps they



simply don't find anything of interest in it. Swift Current has adopted the slogan: "Swift Current: where life makes sense." Veering wildly away from its past and its grand, tragic-victorious history, the city fathers have chosen to emphasize lifestyle amenities. The community of Leader offers "Where progress is unlimited," and Kindersley has "Experience our energy!" a punning reference to the prodigious amounts of oil-well drilling in the area but a step up from its previous "The town with a future" – but apparently no past.

Maple Creek is one of the few communities to embrace its history with the town slogan: "Where the Past is Present." But then again, folks down Maple Creek way have always been a little different.

The slogans get more banal, feeble, and wimpish as one moves away from the small towns. Saskatchewan celebrates "The Land of Living Skies" on its licence plates and "Saskatchewan Naturally" on signs welcoming people to our province. Saskatoon has "Saskatoon Shines," Moose Jaw has "Moose Jaw: Surprisingly," and Regina recently adopted "Regina: Infinite Horizons." *Anything* would be better than that, even the memorable, back-handed one-liner offered by Mr. Gray: "No prairie community ever went farther with less going for it than Regina."<sup>58</sup> Picture it in neon.

What these slogans actually mean is anybody's guess. Reflecting yet another insipid general cultural trend, perhaps the designers of the slogans wanted each person who read them to come up with their own special idea of what they mean. But it is quite apparent that there has been a profound rush to embrace the vacuous, the generic, the meaningless, the non-particular, the non-specific, the moronic.

There are no public memorials to the people who settled the region, and indeed there is no indication that one is entering a special area when one drives through the south and west plains, aside from the innocuous PFRA pastures that dot the countryside. The only thing that remains from our settlement period is forlorn detritus, and even the detritus is being removed. Mr. J.R. "Bud" Thompson is fond of touring through the remote areas of the west plains. In the course of these tours, he sees "pasture land with rock piles and maybe a caved in cellar hole, long over grown by buck-brush with perhaps the remnants of old farm equipment half buried in blow dirt."<sup>59</sup> These are the only monuments we have to the settlement years, and, when that is gone, there will not be much left.

There has been no Canadian writer like America's John Steinbeck (author of *The Grapes of Wrath*), who succeeded in permanently etching the dry years into the collective Canadian consciousness. There nothing on film



and very little on the printed page; aside from James Gray, there are no histories of it. Talk is local, myth is common, tall tales accepted as true. The history of the Dirty Thirties is one of the strangest stories in all of Canadian history, one of the most bizarre and tragic and ridiculous, and it has drifted into nothingness. Mr. Ralph Mutter recalled that he did not ask very many questions about the family past when he was growing up. As he put it, "I was ten years old and didn't care where Hatton was."<sup>60</sup> The present writer grew up with that very same historical sensibility, as did thousands of people in Saskatchewan. It is here, in this neglect that we shower upon our past that we see the proof of the truth in what Stegner wrote in the 1950s: "this is a new country and a new country has no history."

We began our story with Hatton and we shall end with Hatton. The death of Hatton was a long-drawn-out affair that began in 1921. Hatton might have survived the crisis of the dry years but only if there was a period of stabilization. Historian David Jones observed that, for the drylanders, there really was no transition period at all: it went straight from bad to worse. Everyone, notes Laura Phaff, suffered greatly during those years, "which resulted in many pulling up stakes, loading their possessions into a CPR box car and heading for greener pastures." But it took a long time for Hatton to shrivel up and atrophy. There was, according to Mrs. Phaff, "a nucleus who had faith to believe" and those few remained in the district in the years after fire and municipal dissolution.<sup>61</sup> Mrs. Phaff remembers a time when, driving north along that grim back road, all one could see anymore was a school and a church, and "a few rundown weather beaten shacks." Even though gas was discovered in 1950, even though a well was built in 1954, and even though a compressor station was erected in 1960, it was a case of too little too late. The church closed in 1950, the school followed suit in 1966. Today there is nothing.

Hatton is not so very far from the community of Estuary. In 1921, Estuary proudly opened the grand Palace Hotel and the name and its decor reflected a very sharp appreciation in those early settlement years for the opulent, the refined, the tasteful, even out in the middle of nowhere.

According to the reporter who was dispatched by the *Medicine Hat News* in 1921 to review the promise and glory of the hotel, the Palace featured large oak and leather upholstered chairs, eighteen four-chair tables ("for a seating capacity of seventy two"). There were eleven wide and spacious windows off the dining room that looked into the beautiful valley in which Estuary was located. There were twenty-four rooms on the second floor and each came complete with a "Brussels Rug." The Estuary Hotel

allows us a glimpse into the refined and stately accommodations that could have been expected in the Hatton's Hotel Forres.

Both hotels burned to the ground.

Both communities died in the droughts.

There were seven streets in Hatton: Cummings, McTavish, Main, Hamilton, Kincorth, Wilson, and Stephens. There were three avenues: Prairie, Pacific, and, of course, Railway Avenue. These are the streets up and down which Mr. Rayton repeatedly drove his fancy motor car at excessive speeds. This is how Mr. Rayton is known to history.

Allie Auger owned the general store and the lumber yard. William Watson ran the post office. Norm Robson was the proprietor of the hotel, and "Happy" Nicholas ran a blacksmith shop up the street. There was a theatre in which Hatton people were entertained by "travelling live shows." Dan Hanton and Hugh MacLeod policed the town. Fred Meier ran the disreputable pool hall. Yee Lung fled China, crossed half the world, and somehow ended up in the middle of nowhere cooking food for "barbarians" as white men are frequently (hopefully affectionately) called by Asian men. The Reverend Mr. Krug taught the Germans.

The history of the community of Hatton was written by Mrs. Laura Phaff, a relative of Mr. Gottlieb Pfaff. She wrote her conclusion to the brief history of Hatton as prose. It works just as well as poetry:

What used to be streets  
Which at one time were even named  
Are overgrown with weeds.  
It's hard to realize that many cars, trucks, or wagons  
drove there  
Or people walked there.  
The old wooden sidewalks  
Were torn up and used for firewood many years ago.  
The old school bell that tolled four times per day  
To beckon students to their classes  
Is forever silent.  
The voices of happy children  
At the school playgrounds  
Are heard no more.

