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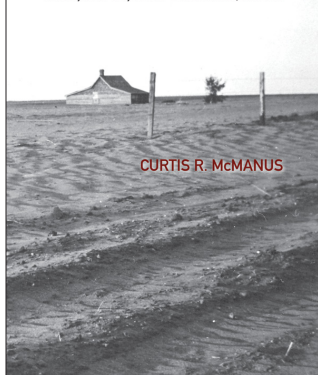
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Happyland

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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Introduction: Oblivion

Oblivion: (noun) the state of being unaware of what is happening around one; the state of being forgotten; destruction or extinction. From the Latin *oblivisci*, 'to forget.' – *Oxford English Dictionary*

On a hot, dry day during the blistering, drought-shot summer of 1921, a fire rampaged through the town of Hatton, Saskatchewan, located about fifty kilometres west-north-west of Maple Creek. The conflagration was devastating: thirty-five homes and businesses were destroyed including the regal, two-storey, forty-two-room Forres Hotel. In addition to destroying half of the physical portion of Hatton, the fire completely destroyed something that no one could see and so during that hot, sad summer afternoon no one immediately noticed its quiet incineration in the flames. Along with half the town, the fire consumed that intangible 'thing' that made the settlement of rural Saskatchewan possible – the spirit of the community. It is interesting to note what *did not* happen after the fire: residents of the town did not pledge to rebuild, they did not promise to start anew, nor did they start again from the ashes. Hatton residents gave up. According to a local historian, the fire represented “the beginning of the gradual death of the town.”¹ And so after the flames had died and the embers cooled, the forlorn little village of Hatton, on a smoky, sultry summer evening in 1921, began a slow but persistent downward spiral into oblivion.

The death of Hatton was a long drawn-out affair that dragged on slowly but implacably for another thirteen years after the fire. The councillors of this unhappy little village resisted dissolution as best they could, but it was a fight they could not win and in the end they could no longer rationalize their gallant defence. By 1934, there was practically no one left in the town and their determination to save the community could no longer be justified to themselves or others. On a desolate March evening when there was neither charming snow on the ground nor life-affirming leaves on the trees, just cold wind, the village men finally agreed to ask the province to officially dissolve the village. Thus it was that Hatton voted itself out of existence. It had existed for just twenty years.

That Hatton was once a spirited and energetic community-on-the-move is plainly obvious judging from the records of the town council. These records detail the benign and pleasing minutiae of daily life in a recently settled frontier town. Even though Hatton had two police officers – Dan Hanton and Hugh MacLeod – the community often policed itself or rather relied upon the good nature of its citizenry to obey the town fathers when they made a proclamation. There was a certain Mr. Rayton, for example, who was fond of ostentatiously driving his slick, new motor-car through town at excessive speeds. Council twice sent Mr. Rayton a letter “calling his attention to the speed limit” once in May and, evidently because he didn’t listen, again in June.²

Like most other prairie towns, Hatton had its own pool hall. The local pool hall was an institution in rural Saskatchewan that played a major role in the social life of young lads and old timers right up until the 1980s when pool halls sadly fell out of fashion. Hatton’s pool hall even conformed to the stereotype of the degenerate pool room because the town’s council received numerous complaints about “the manner in which [owner Mr. Fred Meier’s] pool room is conducted.”³ Perhaps rumours had sped about town that hinted at liquor, gambling, and wantonness. Historian William Wardill has remarked that pool halls in those early days were places where “a man could always find a poker game as well as the opportunity to drink himself into truculence or insensibility.”⁴ Whatever the reason and whatever the vice, the town councilmen gently urged Mr. Meier towards a proper and more gentlemanly form of conduct.

Pool-room ownership was actually a step down on the Hatton social ladder and Fred Meier’s ownership of it, to say nothing of the circumstance under which it was purchased, evidently caused some good-natured embarrassment to his family. It seems that Mr. Meier had bought the

Hatton pool-room on a bit of a lark: “while he was in Hatton” according to his family biography, “someone talked him into buying [the] pool room, much to the disappointment of the rest of his family”⁵

When they weren’t shooting pool (or, presumably, gophers) the school children engaged in mischief as a way to occupy their days. Young Hatton lads were often seen, much to the sensitive displeasure of the town fathers, “loitering at the school swings during late evenings” and there were numerous reports of “disorderly conduct” in addition to “disturbances around the homes of citizens.”⁶ Thus the councilmen pleaded with the local school teacher to keep a most watchful eye on her prairie-wild charges.

There were actually two schools in the community that the youngsters attended: one for the German-speaking children, and one for those who spoke English. This circumstance raises interesting questions because one does not need a too-vivid imagination to wonder at the inter-ethnic animosity and conflict that occurred between the Germans and the Anglos since Hatton was settled just prior to the outbreak of the First World War. This question of English-German conflict is not an idle one: one of Hatton’s closest neighbours was the town of Leader which, up to 1917, was unfortunately called Prussia, a name guaranteed to offend any Englishman within a thousand miles. Councilmen in the little town of Prussia evidently had trouble shedding their affection for the gnarled institutions of the Old Country – not only did Prussia have streets named ‘Wilhelm’ and ‘Kaiser,’ but also, members of the Army and Navy Veterans Association from Regina made an emergency trip to the little community in 1917 to encourage the Germans to reconsider their plan to name a boulevard after RMS *Lusitania*, a liner sunk by the German navy killing hundreds of civilians and prompting the entry of the United States into World War I. The visit was “most successful” in view of the fact that Prussia’s council not only refrained from celebrating the loss of the *Lusitania*, they also agreed, in a demonstration of nervous devotion to their new country, to change the name of the town to the much less antagonistic ‘Leader,’ the name of the Regina daily newspaper.⁷ The German kids in Hatton, though, were perhaps better behaved than their English counterparts: the German school was operated by the “Reverend Mr. Krug,” whose very name seems to suggest that he did not have a problem with discipline.

And social services in Hatton, such as they were back then, were delivered by the municipality itself, a derivative of that very English custom in which helping the poor was deemed a purely local concern. In 1925, for example, Councillor Stephens agreed to give a Mrs. Dewey fifteen dollars

for one month because it seems her “invalid boy” had been taking up all her time and the relief was meant to “provide her with the time required to get a job and earn her own living.”⁸ This statement suggests that there was the opportunity to find work in Hatton even if only on a nearby farm. Hatton, it should be noted, was the largest grain distribution point in western Canada in 1915–16.⁹

Even as late as 1929, the death of Hatton was still not an entirely foregone conclusion. Councillor Mr. Gottlieb Pfaff (a terrifyingly stern-looking Bessarabian immigrant whose own farm would burn to the ground in 1930) successfully argued for money to be spent on two “Welcome!” signs to be posted on the highway at both ends of the village. Council also agreed to give Mr. Yee Lung seventy-five dollars to help rebuild his fire-damaged Chinese restaurant. Chinese restaurants were one of the few avenues of employment open to Chinese immigrants fleeing from the creaking and debauched Qing Dynasty at the turn of the century. The local Chinese restaurant became an institution in rural Saskatchewan and played a major role in its social life.¹⁰ Still does.

In addition to Yee Lung’s restaurant and Fred Maier’s troubled pool-room, Hatton at its peak featured a downtown core with two banks, four stores, three restaurants, a hardware store, livery barns, laundries, and a theatre to complement the estimated eight hundred people who resided in and around the small community.¹¹ Allie Auger ran the general store and one of the lumber yards, William “Bill” Watson was the postmaster, Norm Robson was the proprietor of the hotel, and Happy Nicholas had a majority stake in the local blacksmith shop. Hatton was even located on a rail line that hauled both grain and passengers, though Mr. George Murray of nearby Golden Prairie recalls that the CP passenger train service through Hatton wasn’t very reliable even then because “in order to board the train, it had to be flagged down.”¹²

Life in Hatton, then, had all the appearance of life in other frontier communities. There was a thriving business sector, recreation for the residents, and the nine grain elevators strung out along the main line were a proud testament to the wisdom of settling that region. Hans and Bertha Mattson arrived in the region from Denmark in 1912 and she fondly recalls Hatton and the fact that the little community “was the focal point for all the homesteaders in the area.”¹³

But the damage had been done. The wounds inflicted by the summer fire of 1921 soon began to putrefy. By 1929, on the eve of that greatest of prairie disasters, the Dirty Thirties, so many people had fled the community

and its surrounding area that town council came to the sad realization that it could no longer levy and collect property taxes because there were “[too many] houses being removed from the village and there [was] too much dead real estate.”¹⁴

Losing houses meant losing people and thus ratepayers and as a consequence council had no way to finance infrastructure improvements. Broke and dying but still fighting the good fight council persisted, as rural councils still do today, in pursuing infrastructure improvements. Lacking any other sources of funds to pay for the improvements, council agreed to “get some man who owes the village money” to repair the sidewalks on Main Street. The councilmen justified this prairie variant of indentured servitude by arguing that a man’s debt should, if no other means were available, be paid back with his labour.¹⁵ Servitude of this type was a very common feature of life on the south plains in the early settlement years even though it was a morally messy arrangement with a high probability that the man who decreed another’s servitude could be and quite often likely was either a friend, employer, neighbour, or acquaintance.

In 1932, Hatton began seeking a buyer for the town’s fire hall, which had been built in 1923, just two years after the Big Fire of 1921. (Mr. M. Gnambe was paid sixty-five cents per hour to do the work and Mr. Leonard Jahnke was paid forty-five cents an hour as his helper.) Council asked the nearby rural municipality of Big Stick if it was interested in purchasing the fire-hall (“it’s a good fire-hall”) presumably because so many houses had been burned down or moved out of the town that there were no longer any houses to protect.¹⁶ Indeed, the removal of buildings had created safety problems because of the open cellars and basements left behind. Mr. Gottlieb Anhorn (a man about whom we shall later have occasion to hear more) was ordered to fill in the cellar on the municipal property he owned because council had “declared [it] a nuisance.”

The end for Hatton advanced but council fought for as long as they could. They declared that they were “capable and able and willing to continue to administer the public business cheaper and better” than the Department of Municipal Affairs.¹⁷ But time had simply run out. With no people left to speed down the streets, no kids left to “loiter” in the school grounds or cause “disturbances” around the homes of the citizens (indeed with no more homes around which to cause those “disturbances”), with no pool hall left in which to congregate or in which to drink or play poker, no Chinese restaurant in which to socialize, and no hotel bar to which tired and overworked settlers could repair, village councillors held their last

meeting in March 1934 stating the obvious: “there does not appear to be any reason to expect a revival of business and development in Hatton.” Council transacted its final business (the settling of some \$200 in unpaid accounts) and then walked into the fog of history.

Today, nothing remains of the town. It is not even allowed the grim dignity of being called a ghost-town because there is nothing there: it is precisely as though it never existed. There is nothing at all to suggest that a town and the immediate area that surrounds it sat astride grid 635 and was home to as many as eight hundred people at its peak. The “Welcome!” signs were torn down many years ago, likely after being shot full of holes with .22 rifles as is the common fate of road signs in rural Saskatchewan. The land that surrounds the site of the dead community has been turned back to prairie. Nearby “Bitter Lake” vanishes during dry years. And still, the intriguing question lingers: why did the townsfolk choose not to rebuild their community? Hatton, after all, had been one the largest grain distribution points in western Canada, and in addition to stores and services located in a burgeoning downtown core, it also had a railway line for both grain and passengers. The answer to the question “why?” envelops us in one of the great tragedies of western settlement and indeed all of Canadian history.

Up to the summer fire of 1921, Hatton had been, or rather nervously pretended to be, just like any other community in the burgeoning rural province of Saskatchewan. But it wasn't like any other community. Not really. Hatton had the geographic misfortune of being located near the centre, the core, the arid and barren heart of Palliser's Triangle that great swath of land between Regina and Calgary dismissed by the heroic gentleman-adventurer Captain John Palliser as “unfit for human habitation.” Indeed, Hatton is not too very far away from the Great Sand Hills, a region characterized by cacti, coyotes, petrified wood, and sand dunes. By even the loosest definition, that area is a desert and recent studies support this idea. Just two hundred years ago, at the opening of the nineteenth century, “a large swath” of southern Saskatchewan was an active desert that featured sand dunes and other features we usually associate with Death Valley or the Sahara.¹⁸ Local historian Mr. J.R. “Bud” Thompson from the Alsask district a couple hours north of Hatton picks up on this desert theme. Describing west Saskatchewan in a drought, Mr. Thompson explains that “the earth becomes drier and drier until very little vegetation will grow. Water holes, sloughs and shallow wells will begin to dry up until they are completely empty.”¹⁹

This region of Saskatchewan, the south-central, south-west and west-central area, was the epicentre in 1908 of one of the largest mass movements of humanity the world had ever seen when thousands upon thousands of immigrants came to Saskatchewan and Alberta during the last great land rush of modern times: it was billed in the promotional literature as *The Last Best West*. But it was just a few short years later between 1914 and 1937 that Hatton and the millions of acres of land that surround it would be the grim, joyless epicentre of the largest wholesale land abandonment disaster in all of Canadian history.

Tens of thousands of people fled the area between 1914 and 1937, dragging behind themselves ruined lives. In all of Canadian history there is no other period quite like this one: it is unique in our country's history and the tragic arc of Hatton's existence parallels this twenty-five year period of land abandonment. The fire in Hatton occurred in 1921 almost exactly midway through the virtually unknown land abandonment crisis of the 1920s. Prefiguring the Dirty Thirties by a decade, the period between 1917 and 1924, saw an estimated 30,000 men, women, and children flee the south and west plains of Saskatchewan because of drought, crop failure, starvation and destitution.²⁰ While the fire gutted the town of Hatton, drought gutted the countryside and so in this context it becomes easier to understand why Hatton residents gave up: their town and the country that surrounded it were being emptied of human life. Residents of Hatton packed up what they saved from the fire and fled two steps ahead of drought, crop failure, relief aid, and indentured servitude. The twenties roared; just not in Hatton.

Hatton was officially dissolved in 1934, again almost exactly mid-way through the crisis of the Dirty Thirties during which an estimated 40,000 people fled this same region. All those who hadn't fled in the first round of drought in the 1920s did so in the second round of the 1930s presumably because the prospect of enduring a third seemed unappealing.

And Hatton was incorporated in 1913, just one year before the Dominion government, the provincial government, and thousands of settlers experienced the full-on fury of the legendary and devastating drought of 1914. Fully \$8 million in relief aid was funnelled into the south plains of Saskatchewan over the course of that year; today, that drought is widely recognized as one of the worst south plains droughts of the twentieth century.²¹ 1914 was also the year in which the basic pattern of life for settlers on the south and west plains of Saskatchewan was established for the next twenty-five years down to 1937 and beyond: drought and crop-failure would

be followed by starvation, relief-aid, indentured servitude, labour-gangs, land-abandonment, perdition.

It is a common enough belief that nothing much of consequence occurred on the south plains prior to the Dirty Thirties. It has been suggested that there is often a tendency to emphasize the healthy nature of the years prior to 1929 in order to make the crisis of the 1930s appear that much more dramatic and compelling. This reluctance or failure to explore the nature of the years prior to the 1930s has resulted in a historical vacuum in which a great deal of the history of that period has either never been told or indeed has been lost altogether.

The “Dirty Thirties” proper, that period between 1929 and 1937, is actually only one element of a much larger story. The Dirty Thirties did not begin in 1929, coincident with the crash of the stock market, nor were the Dirty Thirties a singular event without precedent. The “Dirty Thirties” as we understand the term to mean agricultural devastation, drought and misery, starvation and land abandonment began in 1914, was strictly limited to the south and west plains, and with a few exceptions, lasted all the way down to 1937 when the fever, as it were, finally broke.

Between 1914 and 1937, there were three different and distinct stages of drought, crop failure, and land abandonment. Each stage was worse than the one before and these stages ultimately culminated in the calamitous dust storms, starvation, and catastrophic land abandonment of the 1930s. The “Dirty Thirties” was not a sudden cataclysmic event that caught surprised settlers unaware, heartlessly tearing them from prosperity and contentment. What happened in the Dirty Thirties was a simple and basic fact of life on the plains of southern Saskatchewan for decades and which occurred *only* on the south and west plains: dust storms (“black blizzards” as they were called) did not happen anywhere else in Canada. By focusing only on the 1930s, only half the story has been told and the other half has either been remaindered or forgotten.

In addition, then, to re-calibrating the years in which the “Dirty Thirties” occurred, this work attempts to untie another equally difficult conceptual knot. Often times, the Dirty Thirties and the Great Depression are thought to be the same event, that they were somehow necessarily intertwined. In public discourse, one frequently hears both phrases used interchangeably when in fact they denote different periods entirely – our day-to-day language reflects the common assumption that the two events are the same. They are not. Even though both events occurred at roughly the same time, the Great Depression in a number of important ways actually

had very little to do with the Dirty Thirties. Most obviously, the Depression was a global economic crisis while the Dirty Thirties was an agricultural-environmental crisis that struck at a defined and particular region. The Depression mattered only insofar as it made a bad situation punitively worse. At thirty cents per bushel, what little wheat was grown on the south plains during the Dirty Thirties was virtually worthless because of the global commodity price failure. But, as we will see, for literally years on end, absolutely nothing or the next best thing to absolutely nothing was grown on the south plains. If one is not growing anything, the price of what one is not growing does not really matter. Nothing of nothing is still nothing.

Academics have been strangely silent on the Dirty Thirties, strange because it is, after all, the seminal event in Saskatchewan and indeed western Canadian history. The silence on the pre-history of the thirties is thunderous. While there are some precious few studies of the 1930s, there are none on the subject of the pre-history of those years. Even local community histories are largely silent on it. There is an enormous historical vacuum in Saskatchewan historiography.²² The existence of this vacuum was explicitly recognized by one of the rural councillors who fed starving settlers during the crisis of the 1920s. Former Big Stick councillor Mr. R.L. Carefoot wrote proudly of the role he and his fellow councilmen played in saving settlers from starvation during the 1920s: “we had to get hay, oats, and relief for the people,” he recalls, “[but] I don’t suppose anyone remembers those days anymore.”²³ He’s right. They don’t.

There have been no detailed single-volume works on the history of the Dirty Thirties since writer and historian James Gray published his justifiably famous *Men against the Desert* more than forty years ago. In that work, though, Gray gives the reader only a proxy history of the 1914 to 1937 period. The focus of his work is on explaining how and why the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA) developed; thus, he does not explore the nature and detail of the crises that struck at the south plains between 1914 and 1937. Gray’s book is a fine and exceptional work well-deserving of the respect it receives, but it is one to which virtually nothing has been added in the decades since he wrote it. Additionally, historian Dr. David Jones wrote a book about the land abandonment crisis of the 1920s, but this work, for the most part, explores the nature of the Alberta experience – not Saskatchewan.²⁴ This emphasis on Alberta is not a fault: Dr. Jones is an Alberta historian and he explored this interprovincial crisis with an eye on the drylands in that province.

In Saskatchewan, though, there has only been silence on this period in our history. There have been no works that examine the terrible drought of 1914 and its implications; there has been no work on the land abandonment crisis in south Saskatchewan between 1917 and 1924; there are very few studies of the Dirty Thirties, none of which have examined the 1914–37 period from the perspective of the small rural municipalities that were scarred by the crisis. The social problems that arose from the droughts – the suicides, the drunkenness, the ubiquity of sex (both illicit and pre-marital), the temporary suspension and corrosion of moral codes and personal values – have likewise never been explored. The present work attempts to address those deficiencies.

The disaster of the dry years between 1914 and 1937 was as much a man-made crisis as it was an act of God. It was an ecological disaster created by naturally occurring forces (the drought) and brutally primitive farming techniques (summer-fallowing) that stripped and pulverized the soil to the point where it became in many cases quite literally sand, and when the soil turned to sand people fled. Responsible estimations place the number of people who abandoned only the south and west Saskatchewan plains between 1914 and 1937 at 70,000 men, women, and children. They fled in the hundreds from towns like Hatton and from forlorn and forgotten communities like Senate, Ravenscrag, Estuary, Scotsguard, Vidora, Robsart, and Aneroid. And by the tens of thousands they fled from rural municipalities like Shamrock, Mankota, Pinto Creek, Big Stick, Deer Forks, Hart Butte, and Happyland, leaving their land behind to blow into sand.

The greater tragedy is that the events that occurred in Hatton and the rural areas of the wider south and west Saskatchewan plains also occurred with dulling and tragic monotony in every American state directly south of Saskatchewan all the way down into the Texas Panhandle: Palliser's Triangle is, after all, the northern tip of what is called the Great American Desert.

There is no other region in Canada quite like the south and west plains of Saskatchewan and the south and east plains of Alberta. It is not just the geography of this region that is unique (there is very little water; trees are viewed with alarm) but its history too. The social and moral dislocations that occurred in the dry years, to say nothing of the population haemorrhages, are completely without parallel in Canadian history. Likewise, there is no other period in our country's history that features such abundant helpings of the ridiculous and the absurd, for that, in the end, was what the dry years became. In fact, the line between tragedy and absurdity is crossed so often and with such enthusiasm by so many people between 1914 and 1937 that it

becomes nearly impossible to untangle the absolutely sad from the utterly ridiculous.

The “Dirty Thirties” is a singular historical event with its own causes, courses, and consequences; it has its own history, nature, and trajectory quite separate and distinct from the Great Depression. Of course, the separation of the two events is not absolute: that was not the case at the time nor shall it ever be. But the Dirty Thirties did not need the Great Depression in order to happen; the economic collapse did not cause the agricultural catastrophe nor did it give to the droughts their dark and desperate dynamics. The two events happened at the same time, true, but that was only ever only a coincidence. The Dirty Thirties would have happened even if the sun had been shining, the birds had been singing, and all remained right in the world.

