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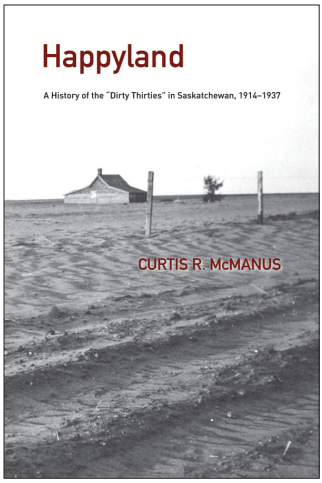

HAPPYLAND:
A HISTORY OF THE "DIRTY THIRTIES"
IN SASKATCHEWAN, 1914–1937
by Curtis R. McManus
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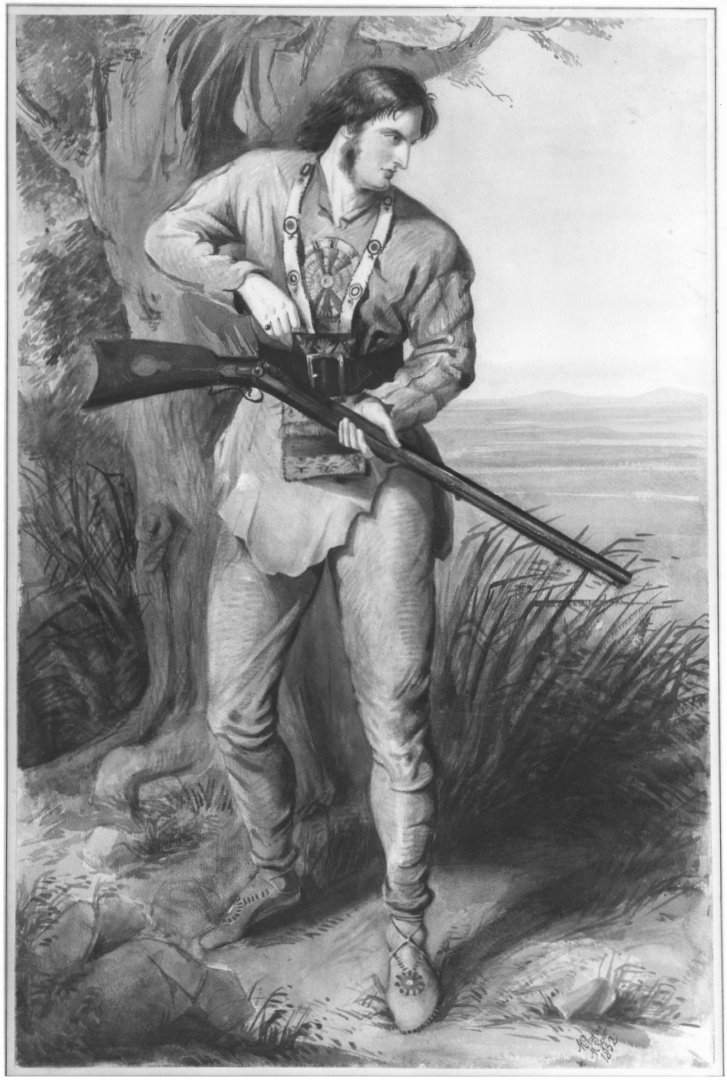
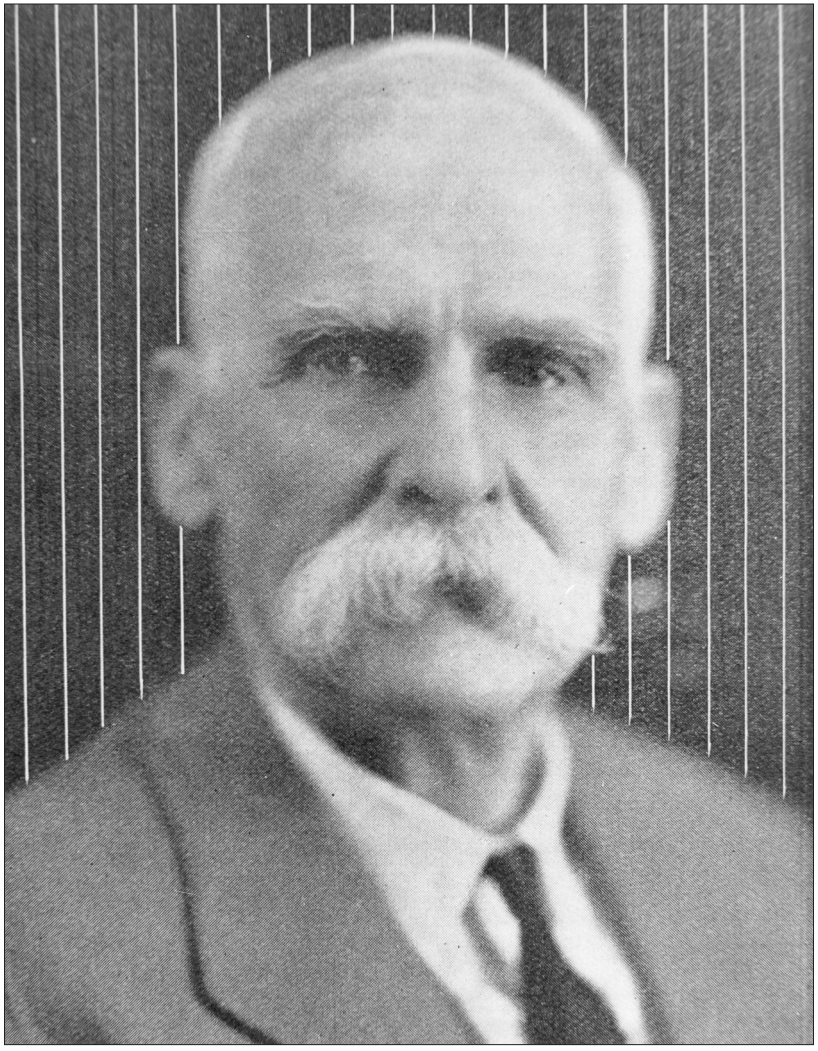
Before the "Dirty Thirties"

Captain John Palliser, young, leggy, and in his prime (SAB R-A4962, c. 2).



Captain Palliser, 1852, after his first visit to western Canada to hunt buffalo (SAB R-A1563, c. 1).



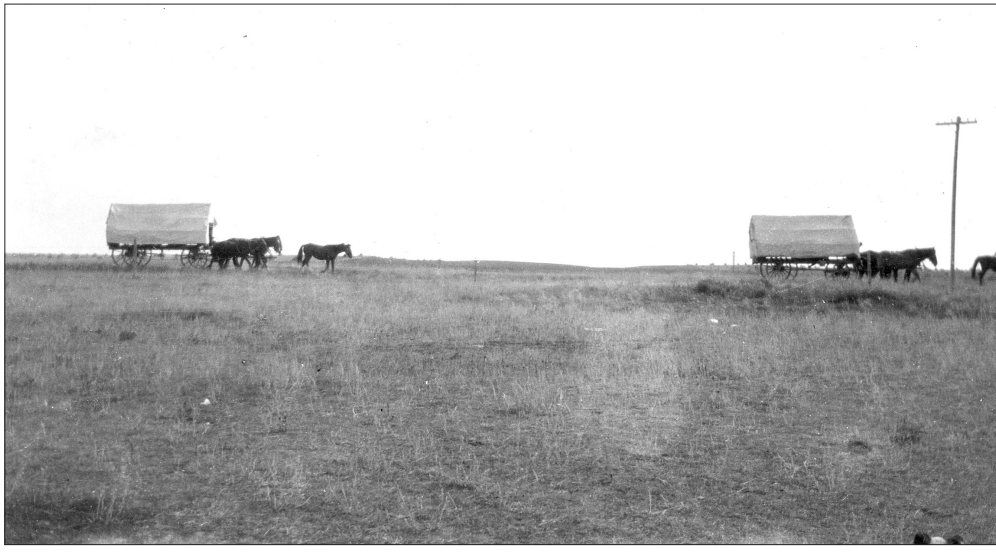
"The meanest man in Canada" Frank Oliver in an undated photo (SAB R-A12958).

The Deputy resplendent in Mason regalia (SAB R-A7884).

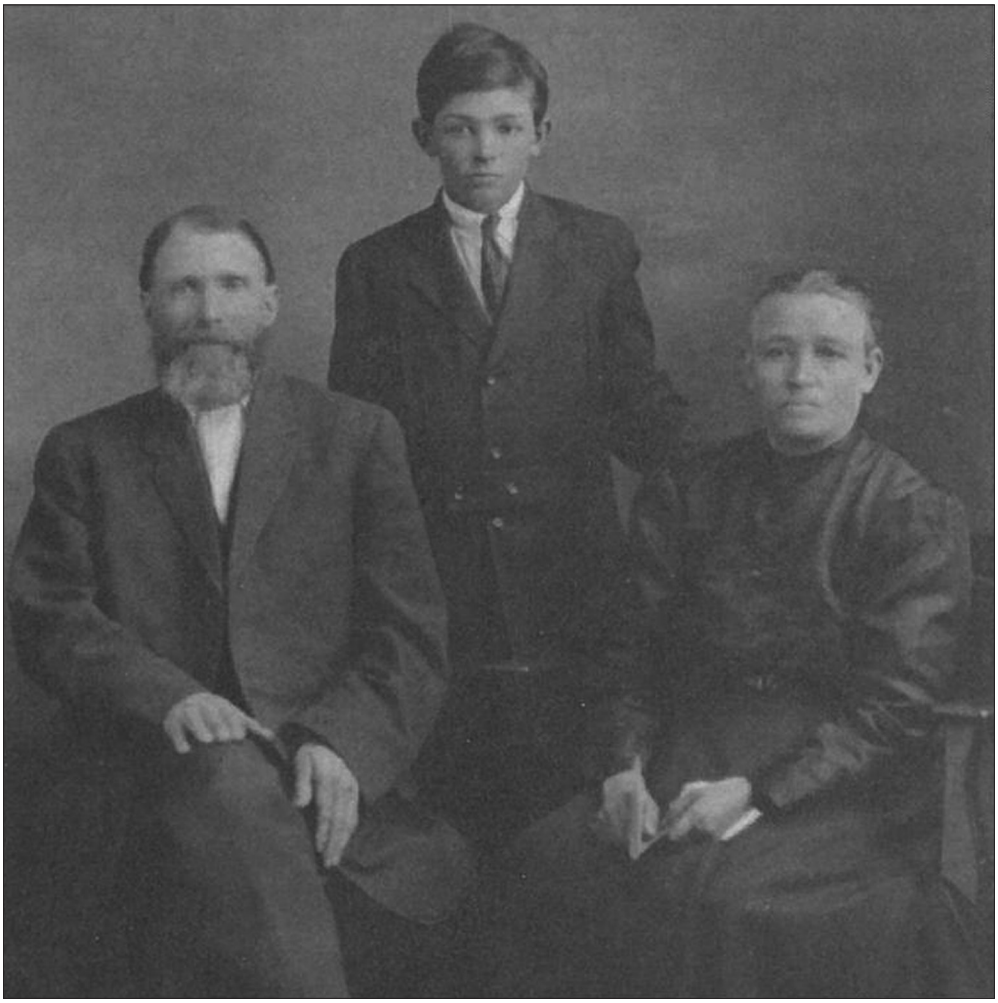
Downtown Hatton in better days (SAB R-B9178).

A vibrant Estuary during the afternoon of an annual Sports Day (Sports Days were usually followed by a dance in the evening); Estuary was nestled in a valley on the banks of the south Saskatchewan (SAB R-B11592).

"Each room has a Brussels Rug." The refined Palace Hotel in Estuary before it burned down in 1923 (SAB R-A23358).

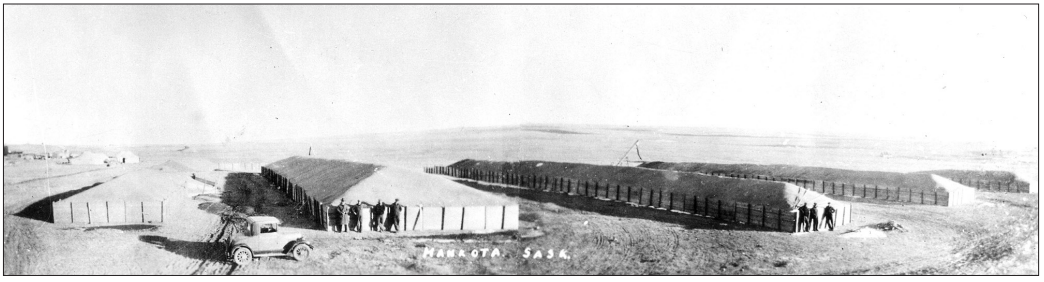


They were amongst the first to leave. Settlers fleeing the Vanguard area in south-west Saskatchewan and "moving north" in 1919; note the telephone pole (SAB R-A2727).



Philip Konschuh, his wife Marie, and young son David. Courtesy of *Memories of Cluny* (Winnipeg: InterCollegiate Press, 1985) and Stanley and Haddie Konschuh.

The Konschuhs fleeing the Fox Valley district 1923. Adam, or perhaps it is young David, is taking a rest. Courtesy of *Memories of Cluny* (Winnipeg: InterCollegiate Press, 1985) and Stanley and Haddie Konschuh.



Proof that grain could be grown in Mankota country. The 1928 harvest before the construction of grain elevators (SAB R-A506).

Interlude: A Collection of Absurdities

Absurdity existed everywhere and in such large quantities on the south and west plains during the dry years that it's a shame no one tried to farm it. Like Russian thistle and gophers, absurdity was everywhere between 1914 and 1937. Absurdity's handmaidens – insanity, suicide, drunkenness, and general idiocy – were also present. It may strike one as insensitive to draw attention to these elements of life but they remain just that, elements of life and they are just as real as happiness, courage, sadness, persistence. The good, the bad, the tragic, the profoundly sad, the wonderful, the silly, and the ridiculous are all part of one piece.

There are things that occurred on the south plains that can only either bring a tear to one's eye or reduce one to helpless laughter because the border between infinite desperation and infinite absurdity was crossed so often and with such enthusiasm by so many people and officials during the crises of the south and west plains that it is hard to tell where the misery ends and the ridiculous begins. We might begin with insanity.

Insanity is defined as a "derangement of the mind," and it seems that many settlers had been going insane before proving-up their homesteads: so much so that government officials quietly amended section twenty of the Dominion Lands Act to ensure that only the cultivation requirements of settlement duties (i.e., keeping a certain amount of land under cultivation) need be satisfied "in the event of any person … becoming insane or mentally incapable."[1]

That a disproportionate number of south plains settlers had lost their marbles trying to farm was in fact one of the chief findings of a study undertaken by University of Saskatchewan professor E.C. Hope. Hope was a "professor of soils" who travelled throughout the south plains in the mid-1930s. Hope considered the histories of thirty-nine abandoned farms in the RM of Wood River. The average number of owners for each farm was three and the average length of operation was ten years. Hope also came to the unfortunate realization that a number of the occupiers of these lands "either committed suicide or went insane."[2]

Of course, defining insanity was fraught with difficulty. There was "a man by the name of Dahl" who apparently went insane on the drylands. It seems some neighbours were riding by his place one evening in the early stages of the 1914 crop failure and heard noises. Dahl was inside his house "tearing the whole inside out of the house and generally smashing things up." Restraint evidently proved useless because "he had the strength of five men." His neighbours tried to subdue him but in the course of this "he [Mr. Dahl] had torn off most of their clothes as well as his own."[3] Serendipitously, a doctor was nearby and walked into the room full of grunting, wrestling, half-naked men: he took one glance at Dahl and "pronounced the man insane." Mr. Dahl was carted off to Regina.

Suicide back in the crisis years was still front page news. Entirely lacking any and all sense of the delicate (and one can only assume that being delicate on the south plains was something upon which generous frowns were proffered), the editors wrote that a man accomplished his grim task by the following means: "[he] put two shots from a number twelve hammerless shotgun into his head."[4] Another man in the Glidden district located very near the RM of Happyland, "had been depressed about drought conditions" in the terrible year of 1937 and killed himself. He had survived the Boer War in South Africa.[5]

Although no formal academic studies have been done, drunkenness, too, was likely a not-insignificant element of settler life during the worst years of the crises. There was the constant drink-inducing threat that one's aid relief would be terminated if one was found to be drinking, and in the 1930s, in a small community or RM, it would be very hard to hide drunkenness, which likely led to grim and infrequent bouts of solitary boozing. But serendipity smiled. A cure for drunkenness was developed in the midst of the first absolute crop failure in the drylands in 1914. "Alcura #1" was sold for a dollar a box. It helped "build the system [and] steadies the nerves."

This wonder-drug could be administered by "any wife or mother wanting to restore a dear one to health and usefulness."[6]

The RM of Pinto Creek was brutalized terribly during the droughts of both the twenties and the thirties. Councilmen there tried to restore their settlers to health and usefulness by shutting down the bars and beer halls during the crisis. "The government beer stores" council assured a worried population would "serve the needs of the public very well."[7] Anything, one must suppose, was better than sniffing ether.

There was a certain "Edward Pim, Inventor," who dabbled in "experimental research" involving "ether." He claimed in the drought years of the 1920s to have found a cost-free way to generate electricity by using gravity. Pim tried to interest Premier Charles Dunning in his discovery because it was, according to Pim's own estimation, "one of the greatest discoveries of modern times!"[8] Gravity-made electricity was hailed as the energy that would enable farmers to wash clothes, do chores, cook meals and, generally speaking, make all of life "really worthwhile." Pim's invention might have actually gone over well with the women of the south plains. According to the Rowell-Sirois commission, it seems that there were very few "domestic conveniences" available to women during the dry years. In fact, one of the few labour-saving devices to be found in most south plains homes was "some sort of washing machine," which was apparently "operated by a small gasoline engine."[9] For women wishing to upgrade from gas-powered laundry machines, gravity-generated electricity would have had a natural appeal. Pim, like ace rainmaker Charles Hatfield, was one of the last of the nineteenth-century snake-oil salesmen who preyed upon Naïve Credulity before it met its match and ultimate death at the hands of Cruel Irony.

In addition to drunkenness, credulity, suicide, and insanity, there was also no shortage of delusion. D.C. Kirk was a settler who "farmed" land very near to the Great Sand Hills, the informal and unofficial border between the west-central and south-west drylands. Kirk explained in a letter to Premier Dunning in the summer of 1921 that he "awoke and found himself sitting up in bed" one evening because he had "seen a vision of what will in time take place" in the drylands.[10] Kirk had dreamed of a colossal construction project to develop lakes and canals for irrigation in order that the drought and soil problems might be solved absolutely. Swift Current council also dreamed up a similar project in 1937 and tried to interest the province in damming up the Swift Current Creek, but it was less delusional and driven instead by desperation. In Kirk's fevered estimation, however, such a project would cost roughly $15 million ("the best money ever spent") and it would

ensure "splendid crops and millions of bushels," which he not unreasonably suggested "would be a wonderful asset in paying off our national debt." The project, as Kirk dreamed it that hot sweaty evening, would be "the greatest enterprise in the history of the dominion."[11] Kirk, along with "hundreds of others," was on the verge of losing his farm, though whether he could be "pronounced insane" or even delusional is a matter for debate.

The care of the deranged, the insane, the delusional, and perhaps even the alcoholic fell, not surprisingly, to rural municipalities. The tiny community of Burstall, located just south of the RM of Happyland, paid fifteen dollars to Ferdinand Zeitner of Leader (formerly Prussia) for the upkeep of one Jacob Grentz, "a feeble-minded person of no fixed abode."[12] It seems that no one was left to care for Mr. Grentz and so that responsibility fell to the RM whose councillors indelicately recorded that Mr. Grentz was "a proper subject for a mental hospital."[13]

Insanity, suicide, drunkenness, delusions, and idiocy all formed a part of what passed for life during the worst of the several crises to hit the drylands. There were often even combustible, highly emotional over-reactions to even the kindest and gentlest of measures. The province, for example, passed a 1936 Act, which evidently afforded some small measure of protection to the hated and detested coyote of the south plains. But two Swift Current councillors had others ideas. Councillors Koch and Dyck both moved a motion declaring the coyote "a pest" and, furthermore, "rather than being protected should have a bounty put on its destruction"[14] That bounty finally came years later in 2009 when Saskatchewan's popular Agriculture Minister Mr. Bob Bjornerud announced the long-awaited twenty-dollar bounty. Proof of a kill was required in the form of coyote paws, which were to be cut off (all four of them) and handed in to grateful administrators at the local RM office.

In 1934, when the crisis was at its peak, and relief had become a part of daily life, the Saskatoon *Star-Phoenix* wrote a story about the closure of that city's relief office. It was closed to save money: an "economy measure" it was called.[15] The story quoted a common saying of those dying days of the frontier: many settlers joked that they have "come into the country with nothing and still have it."

It was lunatic laughter; crying and laughing at the same time.

John King had hard times in the drylands. He had strange times. He and his friend Pete Kuczek came up to the south country in 1913 and, judging by the laundry list of things which went wrong, one can safely assume that he was pleased when the droughts finally forced him out ten years later.

Like many pioneers, Mr. King built a shack upon arriving at his homestead a little west of the Great Sand Hills. In the spring, both he and Mr. Kuczek went looking for the stakes but found that "my shack was on another guys land."[16] Mr. King's difficulty in locating his homestead stakes may have had something to do with rancid, embittered cattlemen who were known to alight on dark evenings to tear up homestead stakes and throw them away, angry at the loss of their lands to the mossbacks.[17] Or the stakes could have just been buried under the snow.

At any rate, Mr. King asked his neighbour, Marty Solberg, to help him pull the shack to the right location, and when Mr. Solberg showed up the next day, the oxen broke through the harness because the house was so heavy. Mr. King removed the dirt he had used as insulation and the next day, when harnessed to the suitably lightened house the oxen "nearly ran away with it." This was Mr. King's first memory of the drylands. From here on in, things just stayed weird.

While working in Alberta, he paid a neighbour forty dollars to plough his land, but "all he done was to run down the land with one furrow."[18] Later on, this same neighbour had Mr. King co-sign a note for "$27.00 worth of chickens," but the neighbour defaulted. As Mr. King ruefully recalls, "[the neighbour had] eaten the chickens so I had to pay the note."

Another neighbour entered into a contract with Mr. King. It was a fifty-fifty crop share agreement. Mr. King went back east for work with his chum August Ingenthron, but when he came back in the fall, "[the neighbour] had sold my share of the crop." Discussion occurred; threats were general. Later, settlers John Koch and Joe Kuntz asked Mr. King to help dig a grave. When he asked for whom the grave was being dug, Mr. King was advised that he would be digging the grave for the man who still owed him 50 per cent of that year's crop.

Another neighbour, Jack Fleck, used to let his cattle run wild on Mr. King's fields. After chasing them out, Mr. King observes that he "was not a good neighbor after that."

Mr. King and Peter Hafitook were hard at work, digging a well when Mr. Hafitook "decided to go for the mail." John kept digging until dark when, with a rope, he finally had to haul himself out of the hole by himself. "Pete never did come back," a wistful Mr. King remembered.

Mr. King was permanently blinded in one eye when shards and sparks flew from a plough share that he was sharpening.

On a fine summer day, Mr. King and his friend Mr. Harry Keeble were on their way to a picnic when a storm blew up. When they arrived at the

picnic, Reg Nelson told them he had been hailed out. So too, it later turned out, were Mr. King and Mr. Keeble – "In fact, the storm killed quite a few of Keeble's chickens."[19] It wasn't just Keeble's chickens but chickens generally who were subject to the brutal and capricious fate of the Heavens. Daryl Moorehouse from down Aneroid way recalls that one year, they lost not only the crop to hail but also "all the chickens in the yard."[20] It would appear that chickens led short, brutal, violent lives in the early settlement years. Alma Mutter, daughter of Gustav Mutter, recalls that the hail storms during the 1930s were so bad and the hail was so big that it "broke the chicken's legs and sometimes smashed their heads."[21]

And so it went for Mr. King. He hired the Coderre boys for harvest one year and had to watch to make sure they were not putting the wheat and the chaff in the same bin.

The Coderre Boys were apparently not very bright. Mr. King recalls that they could not find the money to patch the tires on their car so they filled the front tires with cement.

Mr. King mentored the local one-room school teacher who was having a tough time with some of the lads at his school. Some "tough boys" wanted to "gang up on him." Under Mr. King's tutelage, the teacher resolved the situation by carrying an axe.

Mr. King summarizes his years farming on the west plains between 1913 and 1923 thusly: "there was only about three years that I might say I had a crop out of the ten years that I was farming."