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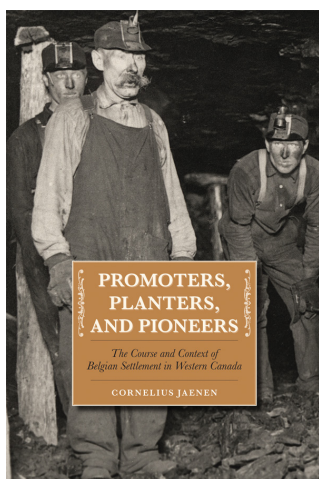
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PROMOTERS, PLANTERS, AND PIONEERS: THE COURSE AND CONTEXT OF BELGIAN SETTLEMENT IN WESTERN CANADA

by Cornelius J. Jaenen

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*View of the Belgian Horse Ranch, Springbank, AB, 1920s. (Glenbow NA-3350)
Belgians viewed ranching as an elitist occupation.*

image not available

*Dygert's Percheron and Belgian horses, Edmonton, AB, 1914. (Glenbow NC-6-4237)
Imported Belgian horses were prized for farming and urban delivery
throughout the Western provinces.*



TO THE FOOTHILLS OF ALBERTA

The boost of activity that saw settlers move onto the third prairie level to the foothills of the Rockies began when speculators bought up lands in anticipation of where the transcontinental railway would run and where townsites were planned. The land boom began in Moose Jaw, the divisional point of the CPR, in 1882 and at Notre-Dame de la Paix Mission, the future town of Calgary where a thousand inhabitants arrived within a year. The local newspaper boasted:

Calgary is a western town.... It is peopled by ... citizens who own religion and respect law. The rough and festive cowboy of Texas ... has no counterpart here.¹

Belgians began arriving in Calgary and Medicine Hat in 1888, Edmonton in 1894, and Lethbridge in 1900. The federal government extended Dominion Lands legislation to the railway belt, to place these lands “upon the market at the earliest possible date,” and revised regulations concerning mining, timber, and grazing.² Belgians were only marginally involved in ranching that developed in the southern regions of Alberta, but in the mid-north and Peace River country they would engage in mixed farming.

Immediately the question arose as to what class of immigrants should be encouraged to settle this region. Acton Burrows, a Winnipeg realtor, Archbishop Taché and Sir Charles Tupper, High Commissioner in London, deplored earlier appeals for all classes of people regardless of occupation or capital resources.³ Bishop Grandin of St. Albert had

a specific and narrower vision. He hoped to attract only Francophone Catholics, and to that end he appealed to the Société St. Raphaël in Belgium for colonists and priests who spoke French and Flemish.⁴

Boosterism, on the contrary, saw progress only in terms of unlimited European immigration and capitalistic endeavour. In 1895 the CPR began to consolidate its activities in Calgary and acquired a bloc of land withdrawn from homestead application to set up its irrigation district headquarters in Strathmore. It was here, between Baintree and Mewasin, that numerous Belgians eventually settled. In 1899, Father Delouche organized the Société d'exploitation agricole du Canada in Antwerp to attract investors to underwrite the Oblate missionaries' scheme. Lord Shaughnessy of the CPR had been approached concerning the "business undertaking" with the assurance that "Belgians are far more practical than Frenchmen." When Consul De Vos visited the area in 1901, he found Mr. Rouleau most helpful and noted that a certain M. Van Wart imported annually 30,000 square metres of timber from British Columbia to be processed at the Cushing Planing Mill.⁵ However, a downturn in European financial circles resulted in the abandonment of the Delouche project in 1902.⁶ By 1916, Calgary surpassed Edmonton in population, attributable in good measure to the aggressive propaganda, boosterism, of the self-styled "Denver of the north"⁷ The established Anglophone population reacted in no uncertain terms to the "open door" immigration policy, as a Strathcona newspaper editorialized:

Is this fair land to be given to the off-scourings of humanity?
If so the government would confer a favour by telling us, so we
can look for other quarters.⁸

Belgians were not anywhere near the bottom of the immigrant pecking order, by any means, but they shared the Catholic religion with many eastern European immigrants. Some were too closely associated in many of their settlement patterns with Francophone communities, for the liking of Anglo-Celts. This was the context of Belgian settlement on the third prairie level east of the Rockies.

Ranching and Horse-Breeding

Ranching appealed to Europeans, especially the English, with capital because it was an enterprise that promoted an ethos of the country estate, the retention of a manager-employee relationship as ranch labour was readily available, and the pursuit of a leisurely life-style. The Deputy Minister of the Interior reported in 1880:

... the advantages offered by the North-West for stock-raising are now receiving the attention from capitalists and experienced cattle breeders which they deserve.⁹

Ranching required large tracts because it took from twenty to fifty acres of natural range grass to feed one animal. The dry land grasses relied on shattered seed for most of their reproduction; therefore, moderate grazing was essential to permit natural re-seeding. An order-in-council in December 1881 permitted government leases of up to 100,000 acres for a term of twenty-one years at a rate of \$10 per thousand acres, or one cent per acre per year. There were no “land rushes” in southern Alberta. There developed a close relationship between ranchers and the North West Mounted Police.¹⁰

A few Belgians took up cattle-ranching alongside English gentlemen and Canadian entrepreneurs. Adile Desmet from Meulebeke in Flanders arrived at Lethbridge in March 1893 and quickly organized a ranch at Pincher Creek. The location was chosen along a river because there were sheltering trees and swards of forage essential for winter survival.¹¹ The following year, the federal government prohibited all permanent diversion or exclusive use of the water of such bodies of water except by permission from the Crown.¹² In April 1904, Léon van Haverbeke and Alphonse Vanden Berge arrived from Tielt and proceeded to the Milk River district to take up ranching. The following month, six more Belgians arrived to scout out ranches, two of whom (from Meulebeke) decided to work on irrigation projects.¹³ Nicolas Floener arrived at Cochrane with his extended family in July 1905, filed for a homestead and invested his entire capital in cattle. He relied on local opinion that cattle could graze out all winter. However, the exceptionally severe blizzards of 1905–06 wiped out his herd and his investment. Floener took a job in the local brickyard owned by a compatriot, Joseph Bodeur, and after many hardships decided

in 1919 that the Peace River country offered better prospects. The winter of 1906–07 was no better because, as Victor Van Tighem noted in his diary: “Cattle are dying by the hundreds on the prairies.”¹⁴ The consul-general wrote pessimistically about young men who wanted to emulate English gentlemen ranchers at Wetaskiwin: “Several young Belgians from good families took up ranching at Wetaskiwin. The enterprise does not appear to have been sufficiently successful to permit them to live like ‘gentlemen farmers’; on the other hand, they may not all have desired to live by manual work. Be that as it may, some abandoned the project, while others wished to continue. We do not intend to analyze the causes of these opposing determinations, which we deem to be foreign to our study of the agricultural and pastoral value of the region.”¹⁵ By 1900, the lands reserved for ranching became subject to settlement following a series of wet years which changed the perception of the dry belt and the introduction of winter wheat. Older officials who were favourable to commercial ranching lost political power after 1896.¹⁶ Belgians were more interested in horse-ranching and horse-breeding than in cattle-ranching. The Belgian breed of draught horses, descendants of an ancient breed originating in the upper Meuse valley, were first introduced into the United States in 1866 for farm work and town dray operations. American ranchers who moved to Western Canada often brought Belgian horses with them. The Oxarat Ranch south of Maple Creek, for example, wintered seven hundred horses outside without a single loss in 1886–87. Gustave Delbeke came to the Cochrane area in 1902 from Kortrijk with several big chestnut brown Belgian horses. He made several trips to supply the demand for these work horses, and in 1907 he brought some grey-speckled Percherons as well to his Belgian Horse Ranch, south of Cochrane. The following year he filed for a homestead in Beaupré Creek Valley but he continued to train horses for area ranchers. He soon acquired a reputation showing his fine horses at agricultural fairs.¹⁷

In 1905, Maurice Ingeveld of Oudenarde, who had been trained in the Belgian Cavalry and the French Officers’ Riding School, came to Millarville to train horses for Count Georges de Roaldes, Baron Dougat d’Empeaus and R. de Malherbe. Ingeveld filed for a homestead in 1907 and also started the Victoria Livery stables in Tilley. In 1914 he returned to Belgium but he came back permanently to Millarville in 1927.¹⁸ Raoul Pirmez came to Calgary in 1903, bought four sections of land on the Elbow River southwest of the city to start the Belgian Horse Ranch in

collaboration with Baron George Roels. In May 1910, a post office was established on his ranch, he was named postmaster, and from there mail was sorted for those west and delivered by mail carrier over dirt roads. He was also instrumental in bringing the telephone system to the area and having road access established.¹⁹ In 1911, Pirmez, Roels and H. De Burlet formed the firm Pirmez and Company in Calgary. They became prominent members of the Ranchmen's Club, organized in May 1893 and eventually located on property belonging to Isaac Vanwart, where men of education, culture and broad world views met socially. Raoul Pirmez served as Belgian consul from 1913 to his death in 1920, with the exception of an interlude in 1916–19 when he went to England and H. De Burlet served as his interim replacement representing Belgian interests in southern Alberta. Calgary began constructing a civic identity around cowboys and ranching activities although these were marginal in its development.²⁰

In October 1907 the Canadian Belgian Draught Horse Breeders Association was incorporated in response to widespread activity in the West. The plan was simple yet effective:

Members of each club guaranteed a certain number of mares to be bred to an approved stallion, while the owner agreed to restrict the use of the stallion, at a stated service fee, to the members of the club. The federal Department of Agriculture gave financial assistance depending on the membership of the club and on the number of mares in foal.²¹

A familiar sight was the “stud horse man” travelling through the countryside, leading one of these heavy-set stallions from farm to farm. The most famous Belgian stallion in North America was ‘Farceur’ who sold for the phenomenal price of \$47,500 in 1917. The offspring of these studs were greatly prized for work in the field and in draught horse shows. In time, they were successful in pulling contests at country fairs.

The Hector Delanoy family was probably the most active in establishing a network of these work horses. He had been convinced by a childhood friend, who had purportedly saved \$20,000 in eleven years in Canada, to sell his farm and start selling draught horses in Canada. They became so familiar that during World War I the Belgian War Relief Fund used them on city streets to raise money. A son recalled:

Due to the fact that there was a big demand for heavy horses at that time, and that he and his relatives were in the horse business, in 1909 my father [in Deloraine] started to import Belgian horses from Belgium, and endowed with untiring energy crossed the ocean 13 times and on 5 crossings imported Belgian horses.²²

The Delanoys sold horses in Nebraska and in all three western provinces. The father made his headquarters in Ste. Amelie in 1913, while his sons settled around Radville, and other relatives in Belgium kept them supplied with stallions and brood mares. They supplied the “stud circuits” of Willow Bunch, Fife Lake, Radville, and La Flèche in Saskatchewan.²³ Sales were interrupted for a decade because of the large-scale slaughter of these animals in battle and also for food during the war. The resumption of imports was marked by the arrival of five superb stallions in 1925, two of which were sold at the Regina Agricultural Fair, and the three others went on tour with a ‘stud horse man.’ A well-known supplier of horses was the firm of Hippolyte Steyaert & Fils in Moerbeke, which the Knight Sugar Company contacted when it needed workers for the sugar beet fields in southern Alberta. In the cities, breweries transported their barrels of beer on large wagons pulled by sturdy Belgian horses. As farmers organized local breeders’ clubs, several families began to specialize in raising champion horses which they showed at local agricultural fairs, eventually at larger service centres, and ultimately at the Toronto Winter Fair. Michael De Pape and Nestor Lombaert in Bruxelles, Remi De Pape in Mariapolis, August and Charles De Pape in Holland, Jean Smeets in St. Hubert, Victor Liebaert in Mayfair, Louis Nachtelagaele in North Battleford, and Louis Dhoedt in Rivière-Qui-Barre were among the well-known breeders and exhibitors.²⁴

The 1921 census indicated that there were 3,610,494 horses on the Prairies and only 38,600 farm tractors. The 1931 census showed that the number of horses had declined sharply, then during World War II horses enjoyed a brief renewed popularity. By 1944 there was a surplus of an estimated 300,000 horses in Western Canada. What happened to the large number of horses in the West? At Val Marie, in 1944, the Western Horse Marketing Co-operative was organized for the slaughter of horses and the processing of horsemeat for export. Plants were built at

Swift Current and Edmonton with the French and Japanese markets in mind. The co-operative's first contract was with the Belgian government for 10,000 tons of pickled horsemeat. Sales for canned meat for the United Nations relief programs began to decline in 1948 so attention was turned to the domestic market. Small *boucheries chevalines* appeared in many cities, including St. Boniface. Over a seven-year period, the two packing plants processed nearly a quarter million horses, a sad conclusion to a period when these noble beasts had been at the forefront of prairie farming.²⁵

South Central Alberta Settlement

Leonard Van Tighem, an Oblate missionary who served multi-ethnic parishes in this southern dry belt, a successful horticulturalist and promoter of permanent irrigation through canal networks, could enter in his diary in 1905 that his efforts were being rewarded:

Many people come to see our apple trees, loaded with apples, five trees bearing fruit; three crabs and two large sized. The Hon. Minister of Agriculture came also today, in company of Mr. MacGrath, Mayor Begin, and some other gentlemen. They were astonished when they came in the garden to see such fine fruit, apples and plums. These trees were planted in the spring of 1900.²⁶

Van Tighem served mostly coalminers in the Lethbridge area, only a minority of them Belgians. His closest collaborator was William English of Bruges, manager of the local the Union Bank.²⁷ When Van Tighem was named to a chaplaincy in 1909, he left behind in Lethbridge a property surrounded by a fine shelter belt, a productive vegetable and flower garden, and flourishing orchard where there had been only dry bald prairie. He wrote, "I am just like a fish out of water... I just wish to be in some small parish, with my people like in the old days of Lethbridge."²⁸

Belgian investors had been attracted by the prospects of Calgary becoming the "Denver of the north." By 1901 it was already an important service and manufacturing centre, therefore. Consul E. H. Rouleau was quite proud to give Robert De Vos a tour of the important plants so that Calgary would receive a favourable mention in his impending report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Brussels.²⁹ Rouleau was a prominent

member of the small Francophone community and owner of the bloc of land known as Rouleauville, the embryonic settlement that expanded into Calgary. He had been named Belgian consul in November 1888 and served in that capacity until 1912. The influx of Belgian immigrants never surpassed a trickle.³⁰

François Adam, a graduate engineer who in Jesuit college in Belgium had befriended several notable world leaders, including Ignace Jan Paderewski, came to recover his health in the North West Territories, armed with letters of reference from political and professional leaders. He contacted Prime Minister John A. Macdonald and William Van Horne of the CPR upon arrival. Consequently, he soon found himself in charge of building a section of the transcontinental line west of Calgary. In 1885, equipped with a team of horses and a wagon, Adam began a trek from Calgary which led him into the fur-trapping and fur-trading business just north of Edmonton. The following year, he began operating a trading post and a ranch at Duhamel mission, founded in 1882 by the Oblate missionaries on the Battle River. At that time, freighting by Red River cart was still a profitable business; therefore, Duhamel was an important stopping place between Fort Edmonton and Fort MacLeod. The fur trade was still of primary importance, so Adam as a wily entrepreneur ventured north of Edmonton at nine locations to purchase furs from Indians and trappers for resale. He soon came into stiff competition with the dominant Hudson's Bay Company and Révillon Frères.³¹ He sold the bulk of his furs to the London company but kept back the prime pelts which he took in large consignments to London to be sold by auction. This he did for five years, the sales bringing him from \$50,000 to \$100,000 annually in competition with the venerable company. This also gave him the opportunity each year to visit family and friends in Belgium. On the fifth such voyage overseas he married a young woman who influenced him to invest in real estate.

The Adam ranch was transformed into a town site after François Adam learned that the CPR was planning to build a line into the area in 1905. He went to Winnipeg with a proposal to invest \$100,000 in construction of a town site if the CPR promised to locate the railway station at the end of the proposed main street which would run along his property. The company agreed and Adam built twenty large commercial buildings, including the landmark Windsor Hotel, in what became Camrose. Adam

realized further profits from his lumber yard because a building boom followed the arrival of the railway.

His friends in high places had enabled him to become wealthy, but his loyalty to his friends and his patriotic sentiments also caused his virtual bankruptcy. At the end of World War I, he undertook large shipments of cattle and foodstuffs to the hungry of his native Belgium and to Poland, where his old college friend Paderewski was prime minister. Political events and civil war in eastern Europe brought about the overthrow of Paderewski, the loss of Poland's best ports, and finally a Bolshevik invasion that resulted in the loss of Adam's considerable investment in aid. In 1921, Adam returned to the Peace River country and settled at Hythe. Camrose remained a permanent tribute to his enterprise but he does not appear to have encouraged his compatriots to settle there.³²

Belgians were scattered throughout the area. In Lacombe, Eckville, and Ponoka, for example, there were a few families but they did not maintain any sustained communication with compatriots in other districts.³³ In the Castor area, several families settled and prospered. Albert Govaerts had the distinction of installing the first telephone in the community as well as having the first wind-powered electrical plant. But none captured the community's attention more than a certain Servius Coene, who filed for his homestead in 1908. On one occasion he disappeared for many weeks without warning and leaving no trace. His neighbours began to search for him, speculating that his meagre diet of bread, buttermilk and chewing tobacco must have failed to sustain him. When Louis Bierinckx thought they should auction his few personal effects for charity, Coene suddenly reappeared, explaining that in the interests of economy he had walked to Winnipeg on business, a journey that had taken a month in bitter winter weather.³⁴ Eccentrics and those unable to adjust to unfamiliar situations were not likely to succeed.

Only a few Belgians were involved with Dr. Tanche's utopian socialist commune established at Sylvan Lake, west of Red Deer, in 1906. This social experiment was inspired by an abortive coal miners' strike in northern France in 1905 and was based on the Fourier concept of Phalanstery, where urban dwellers learned to live together in a rural setting pursuing agricultural tasks for the common good. Tanche's colonists lived in one large building which served as living quarters for people, domestic animals and poultry. It was not a popular arrangement and the commune was dissolved within two years but some families remained in Alberta.

Pierre Fégienne, who had come to Canada in 1904, worked as a printer for the *Red Deer Advocate*, and he kept in touch with these immigrants. In 1909, he began doing some work for the University of Alberta, and in 1913 he opened his own printing business and launched *L'Union*, the only French weekly in Edmonton, in November 1917. The provincial French Canadian Association ACFA tried to buy his paper in 1928, and when he refused to sell ACFA launched *La Survivance*. Fégienne felt obliged to sell his paper in 1932 but he continued to specialize in job printing and publishing in French, German and Danish. He was recognized as one of the leading citizens in the small Belgian group within the larger Albertan Francophone community.³⁵

In the Strathmore area, a few Belgians families were intermingled with the Dutch immigrants who took up CPR lands. They came at the solicitation of Father Van Aaken, a Dutch priest recruited in Montana in 1908 to promote Dutch and Flemish immigration. Upon arrival they were dismayed to find the fields unbroken and the irrigation works in a very primitive state. The colonizing priest soon disappeared. The Flemings formed a small inner group of eighty persons in the vicinity of the village and another ninety dispersed throughout the larger Dutch community. Joseph Desmet of Maulebeke, an uncle of Joseph Van Tighem, the manager of the Union Bank in Strathmore, opened his home to compatriots and mass was said there weekly by Father Camille Deman, who also served Catholics at Rockyford, Carbon, Langdon, Shepard and Chedale, so great was the shortage of bilingual priests.³⁶ A carpenter by trade, Desmet worked for the Canadian Pacific Land and Colonization Department building town sidewalks and bridges over irrigation channels. He eventually settled on a farm east of Strathmore.³⁷ None of these settlers had much capital, as family histories reveal. The Van Bavel family survived on the modest wages earned in construction of the irrigation system for the CPR. Pieter de Munta, a bachelor, lived in his root cellar in winter which was stocked with the savoy cabbage from his garden.³⁸ Some who lived on CPR lands, known as the Strathmore Farm, were unable to meet their annual payments and they had to beg for leniency but the Colonization Department of the railway company maintained a callous attitude toward these settlers who had in essence been misled. The Storduer family, for example, had made a down payment on their farm but they were unable to draw on their account in Belgium after the German invasion of 1914. They asked for a small refund in order to buy a team of horses but the

only concession was the offer of “a team of horses from some of our culls, and a couple cows, on lien note,” which would further indebt them. When the Cammaert family was unable to pay its tax bill, the CPR colonization manager paid the bill but took a chattel mortgage on all their possessions. The agent recalled that they owed a sum for seed grain they had received earlier. Consequently, Cammaert was given “some cows which he could feed his alfalfa, and turn the milk into the Strathmore Farm [and] have a portion of his cream cheques turned in against the cattle month by month.”³⁹ The CPR Colonization Department was not very sympathetic to the problems of implantation that confronted these Belgians.

The challenges of pioneering in Alberta were vividly portrayed in a historically based novel *New Furrows* (1926). A Walloon-Flemish couple, assigned the names of Henri and Rachel Fourchette, were forced to leave their homeland because of terrible tenant farm conditions. Although most pioneering accounts failed to mention the prejudice and discrimination many immigrants experienced, the author of this novel was sensitive to Anglo-conformist pressures. On the ocean crossing they were made aware that they were destined to what was still a British colonial outpost, although “a certain amount of deference was shown them because they were Belgians and hence considered clean and thrifty, superior beings to those who came literally in hordes from Central Europe.” There was an additional element in their favour: “Moreover they were going to take up land, had a little money, understood farming.”⁴⁰ Once settled in the foothills of Alberta, they suffered successive crop failures from freak storms and prolonged drought. The attachment to land became obsessive and drove Henri insane. The Flemish wife held out with a martyr’s determination, enduring hard work, loneliness and unimaginable dangers, the lot of many farm women at the time. The numerous children did not share the same attachment to land, nor dedication to hard work. They adopted new values and vainly dreamed of becoming wealthy. Only a daughter, Marie, saw the possibilities of success in a land and at a time when class distinctions abounded. The few established well-bred, well-educated, yet modestly wealthy, English families dominated social and political life. She concluded that through a combination of fortitude and industry with this dominant social ethos one could become a successful New Canadian.

Sugar Beet Growing

In 1902, Jesse W. Knight, a wealthy Utah mine owner, saw an opportunity to grow sugar beets under irrigation in the dry belt of the southern Alberta district of the North-west Territories. He obtained a tax exemption for twelve years as well as a sizeable government subsidy to launch the project.⁴¹ His plan was designed also to stimulate Mormon colonization of the region but the American immigrants were not much interested in the intensive field work involved. The beets were grown from a multi-germ seed which produced several plants, consequently the rows had to be hand-thinned. Moreover, the seedlings had to be weeded sometimes as many as three times during a growing season. Finally, in the autumn, the beets were harvested by hand, the excess soil shaken off the roots, the leaves and crown cut away with hand tools. It was difficult to find workers for this back-breaking labour, so it was natural that a search should be directed to Flanders which provided experienced workers for northern France, Indiana and Michigan in the United States, and southwestern Ontario.⁴²

Accordingly, James Ellison was sent to Belgium to recruit workers for the Knight Sugar Company. He was authorized to promise workers passage money and seasonal accommodation, as well as a house and a cow if they elected to settle permanently in the district. Soon there were complaints in Antwerp that the Knight Sugar Company agent gave travel vouchers to very few prospective employees, leaving others to find their own passage money.⁴³ Upon arrival in Alberta, many workers found that there was no adequate housing available and, in most cases, those who intended to settle permanently were never given any cows. The Belgian authorities became concerned at what they viewed as false advertising on the part of the sugar company and exploitation of field workers by the growers, identified specifically as Mormons.⁴⁴ Maximum production was reached in 1908, and thereafter there was a steady decline as it became increasingly difficult to recruit seasonal field workers. The twenty-seven Flemish families that came in 1912–13, for example, found that the company failed to honour its employment and housing engagements. Some workers had come to Raymond by way of South Bend, Indiana, where there was a sizeable Belgian community. When some families wished to return to Belgium, they were unable to do so because of lack of funds.⁴⁵ The tax exemption ran out in 1914, so Jesse Knight closed the

refinery, dismantled it and moved it to the United States. The company alleged that it ceased operations because of “low beet prices, high grain prices, technical problems with beet raising, and lack of cheap labour.”⁴⁶ The workers in the beet fields were left without jobs and bitter feelings toward both their employers and the Knight Sugar Company.⁴⁷

By 1925 interest in beet growing was rekindled. The Utah-Idaho Sugar Company, a Mormon Church enterprise, opened a large modern sugar refinery in Raymond under the name Canadian Sugar Factories. The Mormon church had land settlement experience and was able to exercise a good measure of influence in southern Alberta because of its political influence and its participation in the dominant capitalist and corporate philosophies of colonizing projects in the West. Catholic workers felt insecure before such a missionary sense of social unity and the priests worried about the influence of Mormon social and sports activities on Catholic youth.⁴⁸

The Canadian Sugar Factories held a monopoly of sugar production in the province and further entrenched its position through agreements with the beet farmers and the immigration authorities. The beet growers signed contracts committing them to deliver a certain tonnage of beets produced on a specified acreage at a price to be set by the refinery. Immigration regulations in P.C. 2668 in 1921 had been stiffened to require immigrants to be in possession of \$250 upon landing. The United Farmers of Alberta, an agrarian protest movement, opposed immigration promoted by the railway and land companies, but the federal government still looked favourably on Belgians as “preferred” immigrants. The CPR collaborated in bringing out Belgian workers. The Lethbridge Northern Irrigation District was created and opened large tracts of land to cultivation through irrigation near Picture Butte and Iron Springs. An immigration agent in southern Alberta opined:

I may say that colonization of the Lethbridge Northern Irrigation district has been occupying a good deal of my time. There seems to be a sentiment with the Board of Trade Committee and the Immigration District Trustees that we would be better advised to get settlers from Central and Northern Europe than from Great Britain, or even the United States, for this project. The contention is that the Anglo-Saxon is more ready to give up and leave the land than is the European.⁴⁹

By this time the beet industry was expanding into the Magrath district south of Lethbridge and Picture Butte north of the city.

Had working conditions improved after World War I? Field workers entered into contracts with the growers, their immediate employers, for fixed fees for each stage of field work and the stipulation that 30 per cent of the wages would be held back until completion of the harvest. Most contracts provided that growers would provide workers with suitable living accommodation. The immigrant workers almost invariably complained that the accommodation provided was in the order of a “shack,” i.e., a granary, an old chicken coop, an abandoned house. This only added to the dissatisfaction caused by tedious seasonal work, low wages and isolation. In general, they were poor and ineligible for government relief and they lacked English-language skills. They were isolated and vulnerable and had little hope of satisfaction through recourse to the law. Laws existed primarily to maintain public order and to promote production rather than to guarantee worker protection.⁵⁰

Did they fare any better than the Hungarian, Croatian and Slovak workers? Probably only to the extent that the Belgian authorities kept them informed about working conditions in Canada. When the commissioner of emigration in Antwerp learned from an agent of the Canadian Pacific Railways of a plan to recruit beet workers for southern Alberta, he informed the Minister of Foreign Affairs who in turn instructed the consul-general in Montreal to communicate with the consul in Edmonton to find out if it was preferable for workers to leave only with invitations and guarantees of work from family members or by blanket orders.⁵¹ The CPR Superintendent of Colonization in London instructed the company agent in Antwerp, A.L. Robinson, to communicate with P.J. De Coster, Commissioner of Emigration for the Belgian government:

In accordance with the arrangements made we are now endeavouring to arrange for one of the existing Boards in Southern Alberta to secure the co-operation of Belgian residents and organize the placement of Belgians especially in Sugar Belt work in Southern Alberta. As soon as this is made the Belgian Consul will be notified with the view of his reporting the arrangements made to his Government.⁵²

But Belgian authorities were not convinced the negotiations were quite as represented. An established Alberta farmer named Camille Van Wassenhoven had started recruiting agricultural workers in Flanders. It was unclear if his efforts were related to the railway project: "I connect this affair to the present project, without at the same time having proof to support my supposition."⁵³

Responses from consular officials were not altogether encouraging. Maurice Polet in Edmonton was not favourable to continued immigration to the sugar beet region of Alberta and did not think the irrigation project would prove successful. Charles Rochereau de La Sablière in Toronto warned about the proven disingenuousness of agents' promises, and A. Remes in Montreal believed bricklayers and electricians were in greater demand than farm labourers. But James Coley, who was in charge of railway colonization efforts in Calgary, encouraged Arthur De Jardin, consul in Winnipeg, to promote continued recruitment of beet workers in Flanders.⁵⁴

How serious were the economic problems in the area in question? The experiences of the Ernest Holvoet family that arrived at Taber in 1927 may serve as an example of how to survive when only seasonal work was available. In addition to summer and fall work in the beet fields, they picked stones at fifty cents a day for the irrigation company that owned two thousand acres of the land under cultivation, and later they picked potatoes at ten cents a bag for local growers. Within a few years they bought their own farm, began to grow sugar beets and also vegetables on irrigated land for a local cannery. Holvoet was the first farmer in the district to own a beet topping machine and the first to have irrigation sprinklers instead of ditch.⁵⁵ The Holvoet success was a vindication of Father Leonard Van Tighem's dream when he exercised his ministry as a poor priest serving poor parishioners of different ethnic origins in a dwindling mining community during World War I. Van Tighem had had a vision of a productive community under irrigation in the region. When the depression struck Taber was actually beginning to enjoy more prosperity because of the expanded irrigation project.

There was a crisis in the sugar industry in the 1920s because of a world shortage and prices rose steeply. A government-appointed Board of Commerce tried briefly to fix retail prices but it had little success. Yet refineries continued to make handsome profits, until November 1920 when share-stocks of the sugar companies reached a low level as prices dropped

from twenty-four cents to ten cents a pound. In 1931 the British Columbia Sugar Refineries Limited, owned by E.T. Rogers and operating Rogers Sugar Limited and Lantic Sugar Company, bought the Canadian Sugar Factories and planned to open plants in Picture Butte and Taber.⁵⁶ With consolidation came industrial strife and unrest on the sugar beet farms. Farm workers were without union protection and growers were somewhat at the mercy of the monopoly company. In 1930, the Communist Party of Canada organized the Farmers Unity League (FUL) to defend the interests of exploited farm workers. Eastern European beet workers were enthusiastic about union organization but the Flemish workers were more cautious participants. A Beet Workers' Industrial Union (BWIU) was formed and affiliated with the left-wing Farmers Unity League. The BWIU tried to form a united front of growers and hired labourers, but the Roger's company resisted all attempts to unionize farm workers and tried to sow discord between growers and field workers.⁵⁷

The growers formed their own association to protect their interests so that there were three players in the drama that ensued – the unionized field workers, the associated growers, and the monopoly company. Confrontation erupted in 1935 when the BWIU demanded a wage of \$22 per acre and better living accommodations. The Growers' Association ignored the union and offered workers on an individual basis a continuation of the \$17 wage scale. The workers held out for better conditions by organizing a work stoppage. The provincial Minister of Agriculture opined that “we do not deny the right to organize on fundamental lines, but most of our growers believe the affiliation is a branch of the Communist Party.” The implication was that because Communist organizers had promoted the union it was part of a Red plot to overthrow constituted authority and the free enterprise system. In fact, most beet growers came to terms with their workers offering a compromise settlement of \$19 per acre.⁵⁸

In 1936 the BWIU again demanded an improved wage of \$21.50 per acre and signed up about 1,800 of the estimated 2,500 beet workers. The company held out for \$20 an acre for thinning, hoeing, weeding and topping beets. E.T. Rogers out-manoeuvred the union by signing a profit-sharing agreement with the growers. Also, in 1936, a second refinery was opened at Picture Butte, north of Lethbridge. Once again there was a work stoppage and the growers decided to recruit “scab” workers. The Canadian Sugar Factories publicly threatened the union with the prospect of recruiting four hundred Belgian workers for the

Growers' Association. Frank Taylor was sent to St. Boniface to recruit field workers who had been employed by farmers who sent their sugar beets to the refinery in Grand Forks, North Dakota. These efforts resulted in about three hundred "scabs" coming to Alberta with the blessing of the provincial government, and being transported to the beet fields in buses chartered by the Growers' Association and protected by the police. The growers began evicting striking workers and their families: therefore, many of the workers went back to the fields. Fortunately, the harvest was large enough to provide paying for work by most of the original workers and the replacements. The BWIU realized that its affiliation with the Communist-oriented Farmers Unity League was a serious liability so it broke off its formal ties with the league. The Growers' Association still refused to deal with the BWIU, so the union appealed to the provincial government for recognition as a legally constituted union. The Alberta Board of Industrial Relations ruled that the beet workers were "farm labour" and therefore did not come under the statutes and regulations that were supposed to protect industrial workers.⁵⁹

During the drought and the Depression the sugar beet industry contributed to a degree of economic stability in the Lethbridge area. Local irrigation works proved extremely valuable. The acreage under sugar beets increased from 4,845 hectares in 1930 to 8,692 hectares in 1939. A regional historian commented: "The completion of a second sugar factory in 1936 stimulated increased production; its expansion was limited only by the industry's inability to persuade housewives that beet sugar was as sweet as cane sugar. Many continued to use imported cane sugar to make preserves."⁶⁰ Belgian growers and field workers became scarce as there was a concerted effort by Mormons to buy up farmland around Lethbridge. The provincial police handled suspected organizers of farm labourers "without gloves" and regularly began arresting them on charges of vagrancy.⁶¹

During World War II the production of beet sugar once again became important. The BWIU reappeared as an affiliate of the Canadian Congress of Labour, and the Rogers monopoly undermined unionization by obtaining cheap Japanese labour from the internment camps of the British Columbia Security Commission. In 1950, Rogers Sugar Limited built a refinery in Taber, which remained in production until 1998. In 1956 a joint committee of the Alberta Sugar Beet Growers and the Canadian Sugar Factories recommended recruiting three hundred

families for field work but immigration officials believed that number was unreasonable because of “the increase of mechanization in the sugar beet industry both in thinning and hoeing and also in harvesting.”⁶² G. M. Mitchell, immigration officer stationed in Brussels, was certain he could “secure agricultural families from the Flemish part of the country” but a spokesman for the Alberta Sugar Beet Growers warned:

These people, however, are quite cautious and insist upon having a contract in hand before leaving for a new home. One of the terms insisted upon is guaranteed year-round employment for the family head for a period of one year.⁶³

The sugar company and the provincial authorities thought the plan to find fifty families who would meet these conditions was sound, but they did not count on wariness that past experiences had created in the Belgian community and its network overseas. The plant in Raymond was closed in 1963, and the one in Picture Butte was finally shut down in 1978. The refinery at Taber was unable to attract Belgian field workers or factory workers. The success of the Flemish nationalist organization, Vlamingen in de Wereld, in supplying seasonal labour in southwestern Ontario beet and tobacco fields was not replicated in southern Alberta.

Northern and Peace River Country Settlements

The Athabasca district of the North West Territories was initially fur-trading country, its commercial activity dominated by the Hudson’s Bay Company, and mission country as Oblate priests, among them a number of Belgians, staffed isolated mission posts. In 1821 Fort Edmonton became the dominant centre of the western fur trade. St. Albert, founded in 1861 by Father Albert Lacombe, was the chief mission centre and eventually hub of the Francophone community. In 1867 an unofficial “republic of St. Albert” was put in place by Father Lacombe and lasted a decade until the arrival of the North West Mounted Police. The St. Albert Code of by-laws was enacted by nine elected committee members who served as a kind of legislative body for an executive consisting of a *chef du pays* and two councillors. In 1870 the region became part of Canada as the North West Territories.⁶⁴

The prospects for northern agricultural settlement were first considered in 1888. Senator John Schultz chaired a senate committee inquiring into the potential resources of the Mackenzie Basin. Schultz, who had been a leader of the Canadian Party that opposed Louis Riel and the Métis at Red River in 1869–70, was a western expansionist hostile to Catholics and Francophones. He was impressed by the agricultural possibilities of the Peace River country. The problem was that the fertile area was separated by about 400 kilometres of non-arable land from the few settlements along the North Saskatchewan River.⁶⁵

French Canadians started a bloc settlement anchored on the old Métis settlement of St. Albert. Colonies were added at Morinville, Legal, Beaumont and Rivière-Qui-Barre. In the 1890s there were a few isolated Belgian families at these settlements as well as at Ray and Edmonton.⁶⁶ In 1897 in the Edmonton and Wetaskiwin districts there were 112 Belgians who had filed for thirty-five homesteads, had 460 acres in crops and owned 380 head of cattle. Others had settled successfully at St. Peter, Fort Saskatchewan, Stony Plain and Vegreville.⁶⁷

In 1901, Robert De Vos visited the northern region and met many Belgian immigrants who seemed quite satisfied with pioneer conditions. He reported on several practical measures that these early arrivals had adopted. The Baert family from West Flanders had sent a son to scout out conditions in 1899, where the Verstraete and Van den Houte families were settled, before deciding to emigrate. Camile Verstraete had come to St. Albert in 1885 to raise horses, shipping several boatloads of purebreds to Belgium, thus maintaining ties with the home country.⁶⁸ Van den Houte spent the winters cutting wood to accumulate enough cash to buy a farm. Van Ackere had rented land from a colonization company but soon came to the conclusion he would do well to buy a farm outright rather than rent land. De Vos concluded:

It should be pointed out that all the Belgians I met told me they were happy to be independent and no longer to have to work, according to their laconic expression [in Flemish]: to begin with for the lords and taxes and afterwards only for the children.⁶⁹

Morinville he referred to as a Franco-Belgian colony because of the number of Belgians settled there but he had time only for a superficial visit so was unable to make any assessment of the state of implantation.

As was the case in other regions, chain migration as illustrated in the Behiels family history was a common experience:

Joseph Behiels came to Canada in 1893 from Antwerp, Belgium, on a cattle boat. Mr. Louis Van Acres had hired Dad to help and care for his cattle during the two-weeks crossing. It was also necessary to bail water out of the boat at times. Upon landing in Canada they proceeded to travel to Edmonton stopping to rest at government shelters enroute. In those days the government put up shelters or rest places every thirty or forty miles for pioneers to stop to rest at. My Dad was nineteen years old, a strong young man with a vision of adventure.⁷⁰

Young Behiels worked for Van Acres at Fort Saskatchewan until he had sufficient money in 1898 to file for a homestead near the Soetart and de Dobbelaere families not far from Morinville. By this time he had been joined by his parents and five siblings, all of whom left for Watson, Saskatchewan, in 1903 because they preferred open parklands to clearing bush. Joseph Behiels took up dairy farming and prospered, raising fourteen children in a twelve-roomed three-storey house.⁷¹

There was considerable mobility at the time as early pioneers sometimes decided to pull up stakes. Two notable examples were the Vandenberges who moved to Detroit and the Laremys who took up ranching in South Dakota. In 1892, John and Edward Borle planned to take up sheep-ranching in Australia but literally missed their boat, so they came to Edmonton instead. Edward Borle farmed in the Ray district and John at Rivière-Qui-Barre. Their brother Pierre visited the area in 1895 and returned with his large family two years later, along with a nephew, Adolph Rommelaere. Perre Borle left farming and took his family to Edmonton in 1907, where he bought the Parisienne Café and built a large livery barn which proved profitable. Apparently he preferred village life because after three years he returned to Ray, bought a hotel and livery barn, built a general store and was awarded the post office. The Borles all had large families, the children usually marrying into other Belgian families so that a large network of relatives evolved. On a visit to

Belgium, Pierre Borle spoke so glowingly of life in northern Alberta that the Omer Victoor family joined them in Ray, adding to the community.⁷² Small towns sometimes aspired to become cities through a combination of public and private interests. There was an ideology that depicted the cities as dangerous, immoral and selfish in contrast to “that which uplifts the community – the activities of the businessmen, the church news, the civic good accomplished by women, school gatherings ... the simple annals of the great common people who are really the foundation of this broad country of ours.”⁷³

The family histories of some of these “great common people” illustrate the networking and cooperation that enabled them to survive and succeed in a great lone land:

... Joseph Clotin came to Canada in 1906 with the understanding that if it was a good country he would let Theodore Jacobs know. Mr. Clotin and wife came to Morinville and sent back word to Belgium that there was plenty of land to rent. Mr. Jacobs and his family followed in the fall of 1907.⁷⁴

Theodore Jacobs, his wife and four sons left their prosperous inn near Brussels convinced that a European war was brewing, so they settled on a homestead near Egg Lake. Three of the sons quickly founded a brickyard near St. Albert.⁷⁵ That same year, the Jacobs took in the six members of the Henri Verbeek family until they found lodgings and were provided with seed grain and the offer by a French Canadian neighbour to plant their first crop. The municipality offered him a job doing roadwork at \$1.50 a day, a wage which helped him provide for his family. The year their mortgage fell due, a hailstorm wiped out their crops but compatriots came to their rescue.⁷⁶

The reception at Rivière-Qui-Barre was particularly warm as all these immigrants also spoke French, the dominant language of the community. René Boddez had a family of nine children when he left Ichetyken, but they all soon felt at home when neighbours welcomed them. The presence of a Flemish-speaking priest, Father Charles Okhuysen, was a further comfort to the immigrants. Joseph Verhulst arrived in Edmonton in 1913 in a boxcar, met a compatriot who farmed near Villeneuve, and was soon settled on his own farm. He later moved to Rivière-Qui-Barre, and when the Depression struck it was several Boddez families who helped his family.

These Belgians had no formal ethnic association to give them a sense of solidarity but they maintained contact with each other and displayed a strong degree of mutual care and assistance in the face of adversity.⁷⁷

Not all who arrived in these rural communities had been farmers in Belgium. In 1906, Gentiel Van Brabant, a brother in the Oblate order, arrived at St. Paul-des-Métis, a reserve organized by Father Albert Lacombe in 1896. In 1907, Adélard Thérien the parish priest and manager of the Métis colony, obtained the support of Frank Oliver, Minister of the Interior, to open the reserve to French Canadians. Van Brabant left the Oblates and took up a homestead.⁷⁸ Another Oblate brother who obtained a dispensation from his vows was Henri Van Tighem, who married in 1919, worked for five years at Lac la Biche on the Dunvegan or Northern Alberta Railway, then in Edmonton as a hospital worker, carpenter and real estate agent. In 1927 he took up farming at Rivière-Qui-Barre, while continuing his original trade of carpentry, building fine homes and churches.⁷⁹

A Brussels university graduate in foreign languages, Joseph DeWetter, who arrived in 1908, worked for the Brewster Company, a ranching enterprise that supplied pack animals to surveying parties. A correspondent recalled:

He received a degree in languages and spoke several fluently. I remember when people would bring letters to him for translation because they had forgotten how to read the language after being away from their native lands. The Government Agent and the Provincial Police often asked him to act as interpreter.⁸⁰

In 1911 he was joined by his brother Frank DeWetter and they went over the Edson Trail to Pouce Coupé where they began farming.

In 1899, Father J.A. Lemieux obtained a tract of land from the Department of the Interior in the Peace River country. He organized the Peace River Land and Colonization Company to settle Francophones in what was conceived as a triangular bloc bounded by what became Peace River, Jossard and Spirit River, with Falher in the centre. The project was largely a failure because of the poor quality of the land, the lack of good transportation links, and the difficulty to find recruits.⁸¹ Interest was somewhat rekindled in 1903 after Professor John Macoun, botanist son

of James Macoun, undertook a survey of the Peace River country for the Geological Survey of Canada. He observed:

While the country ... should not be settled by either the rancher or the grower of wheat until there is more satisfactory evidence that it is suited for either of these pursuits, it may be safely prophesied that after railways have been built there will be only a very small part of it that will not afford homes for hardy northern people who, never having had much, will be satisfied with little.⁸²

Belgians were regarded by the immigration agents as a 'northern people' but not all were poor, as we have seen, upon arrival in Alberta. It was later observed that the region had been glaciated several times and consequently the soils were relatively thin and subject to erosion. There was usually adequate rainfall and snow cover and much less evaporation from the soil surface than on the prairie grasslands. The soil seemed sufficiently fertile to sustain mixed farming and even grain growing. The stage was set for settlement.⁸³

A Société de la Colonisation de l'Alberta was created in 1912 by French Canadian community leaders in Edmonton. They opened a bureau on the city's main street but failed to establish a satisfactory network of agencies out of province to achieve their objective of recruiting in Europe as well as Quebec and New England. Grouard was to be the focus of settlement in anticipation of the arrival of the Edmonton, Dunvegan and British Columbia Railway to Lesser Slave Lake and steamer connection to the town. But the railway passed ten kilometres south of the town, which rapidly went into decline. The Dominion Lands office and many other buildings were dismantled and moved to towns on the railway line. There was suspicion the railway company wanted to build its own divisional point and deliberately bypass the Francophone centre.⁸⁴

Between 1926 and 1930 the Francophone bloc near McLennan extended to the Falher and Donnelly districts. Among the Francophones were a number of Flemish families who introduced apiculture, which became so successful that soon there were 35,000 beehives around Falher. The Belgians were also interested in small business enterprises such as operating a garage, a general store, or an implement dealership. Mixed farming was still attractive. Jules Dechief and his son, for example, each

took up a homestead at Girouxville in 1928. They had previously farmed at Lampman, Saskatchewan, but decided to move out of the dry belt. Although not officially a “return man,” Dechief recruited the Joseph Deschepper family from Antwerp.⁸⁵

By 1930 the bloc settlement period was coming to an end according to an immigration report:

... solid colonies of persons of the same nationality are in the minority, which means that a general mixture of nationalities of all kinds has taken place. The principle object of those coming here is to find a homestead which will prove productive and very little attention has been paid to block settlement.⁸⁶

Belgians had come mainly as part of family and village migration or Catholic immigration projects. Throughout the 1930s there was a marked decline in homestead entries throughout the West in what has been called the “land-use shakedown.” On the other hand, in the Peace River country the population increased and there was consolidation as those who remained increased their farm size.⁸⁷

