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Voices from the Dust:

Women's Experience of Community and Its Dissolution during Alberta's Dryland Disaster,
1908 to 1936

by

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To my mother, grandmothers, and great grandmothers, without their stories I would not be able to tell this one.

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Although Mrs. Lois Valli passed away during the writing of this thesis and was in poor health when I did meet her, I would like to thank her for sharing her story. It was a pleasure to meet such a resilient and strong woman. I will take lessons for my own life from knowing hers.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Canadian Girls in Training (CGIT)
Canadian Pacific Railroad (CPR)
Library and Archives of Canada (LAC)
Medicine Hat and Area Archives (MHAA)
Glenbow Archives (GA)
Provincial Archives of Alberta (PAA)
Saskatchewan Archives Board (SAB)
United Farmers of Alberta (UFA)
United Farm Women of Alberta (UFWA)
Women's' Christian Temperance Union (WCTU)
Women's' Institutes (WI)

ABSTRACT

Voices from the Dust explores the roles women played in the development and dissolution of the communities in the southeastern corner of Alberta from 1908 to 1936. Many women were active in their communities, not only in the political and economic realm but also more importantly, the social realm. Their combined efforts turned an isolated and undeveloped area into a place they could proudly call home. From 1918 to 1926 however, these communities of women struggled to provide even the basic needs to their families, let alone to the community as a whole. Under mounting economic pressure and environmental disaster during an interminable drought, the women saw the growth of their communities slow then stop altogether. The abandonments of homesteads grew at an alarming rate until there were virtually no towns or homesteads left. This thesis surveys the reaction of women to the loss of their communities and the attempts at relief. The voices of a variety of women are heard throughout the thesis. Mrs. Catherine Neil was an early homesteader to the Grassy Lake area. She was a strong advocate of the Women's Institutes and offered insights into the role of women in the growth of the area. Mrs. Margaret Calder from Bow Island was one of the local correspondents to the *Medicine Hat News* and in her expressive column, outlined the growth and decline of the social life of the town. Mrs. Charlotte Cotter, a newspaper columnist and socialite, offered nearly three decades of commentary on the life and death of the town of Alderson. Mrs. Thurza Trebble, another columnist to the *Medicine Hat News*, told the horrors of a declining community, Winnifred. Also, Mrs. Lois Valli offered a

glimpse into this world through her poetry and her painting. She survived the dryland disaster with both her sanity and sense of humour intact. *Voices from the Dust* investigates these women's journeys through the growth, decline, and dissolution of the places they once called home.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE CONTEXT

Focus and Significance of Study

Women played a variety of roles historically in the creation of Alberta communities. This narrative seeks to describe the role women played not only in the economic and political spheres but also, and maybe more importantly, in the progress of the social development of the region. The social development of a village, town, or community, was what made this vast prairie, home.

This study is an account of the way settler women, in the southeast quadrant of Alberta, between 1908 and 1936, created, sustained, and abandoned their relationships with one another. Settlement of the dry belt began in the late 1800s, but the population boom did not begin, in earnest, until 1908 and lasted until 1913. Throughout the war years, the communities fluctuated in population with many young men leaving to serve overseas. Disaster began in 1917 when an environmental drought ravaged both the economy and the land. The dry belt, aptly named, sustained the drought until 1926. Whereas much of North America was experiencing the “roaring twenties,” in striking contrast, southeastern Alberta was devastated by economic depression, dramatic population losses, and environmental disaster. By 1926, the abandonment of the dry belt had reached epic proportions. People realized that they could not sustain a living in such a harsh and unforgiving environment. Both women and men were active participants in the abandonment. At the core of this study

is the importance of women's relationships, not only to the women themselves but also to the development and destruction of their communities.

This research is innovative in the contexts of both Canadian women's history and Alberta history. I interpreted the sources through the lens of women's relationships with each other and within the context of community building and abandonment. As well, this is groundbreaking in that, traditionally, the perception of women's roles is one of encouraging cooperation and building community. By contrast, this study examines the ways that women abandoned their communities as well. Additionally, this study examines the art of Mrs. Lois Valli. She left behind a series of poems and paintings that gave insight into this world of chaos and disillusionment. Much can be understood through Mrs. Valli. While there have been important works related to women in Alberta, there is still much to know about women's experiences and women's relationships.

Background

In 1896, the pro-settler Liberal government, led by Sir Wilfrid Laurier, set its sights on the expansion and colonization of the West. Aggressive campaigns launched in the United States and Europe attracted would-be settlers. Promises of free land and bountiful harvests drew many homesteaders. This was to be the "land of milk and honey," open to all who were willing to chase a dream. For many, the dream proved fruitful, but for some, the harsh prairie winter, coupled with severe drought, especially in the dry belt areas, proved to be a calamity.

The experiences of homesteaders in Alberta, both men and women alike, were as diverse as the geography itself. When we reflect on the predominantly American and European development of southeastern Alberta, immediately the idealized notions of taming

the West come to mind. They were the homesteaders, typically rugged individualists, struggling to survive the inhospitable climate to build a better life for themselves and their families. They built communities, along with their homesteads. The villages and towns offered not only the commodities needed to build their farms but also the social centre necessary to survive. It was a way for people to meet, to socialize, to build the relationships necessary to do business, and to enhance their quality of life. Some communities remained sustainable, while others disintegrated, replaced by tumbleweed and rattlesnakes. The people moved on to another dream and another community and thus proved their adaptability in reintegration. This evolution from community integration to disintegration to reintegration tells the story of humanity's ability to adapt and change according to the circumstances.

When Alberta became a province in 1905, a new level of government, new representation, a zealous interest in settlement, and the completion of a vision for a united Canada brought a rapid expansion in population. Even though excitement abounded for the newly acquired political status, the infrastructure still was not present in most of the rural areas of the province, and many struggled to provide the necessities to their families. The period between 1896 and 1936 saw tremendous change in the province of Alberta. The isolation of the homesteading experiences diminished as new neighbours moved in, and the demand for new services increased. With growth, especially in the female population, came new expectations for health care and educational services.

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the new knowledge developed surrounding health care, nutrition, sanitation, and the advent of electricity changed life for many, although not all. Technological advancements changed the way in which women socialized. No longer was it necessary for people to stay in their own communities

for social activities. The advent of the automobile gave people the mobility to expand their frame of reference. A correspondent from the *Medicine Hat News* mused in 1918,

Rural life and city life become one in the interchange of social activities rendered possible by the rise of the auto. Concerts, socials, and dances and benefits of every kind for patriotic purposes are attended almost as largely by citizens of Medicine Hat as by the farmers and ranchers, and the social intercourse and friendships formed become of inestimable benefit to both.¹

The automobile, like the railroad, shaped the communities in the dry belt and the social structure of the area. No longer was it necessary to confine oneself to socializing within a small intimate grouping. It was possible to open oneself to new people and ideas, which was especially beneficial to those who were yet unmarried.

In addition, international movements such as socialism, unionism, peace campaigns, and women's suffrage had an impact. World War I also dramatically changed the landscape. From peace rallies to war bond campaigns, women played a crucial role on the home front. The fabric of the population changed too with the decimation of a generation of young men in war and the devastating Spanish Flu epidemic. Alberta suffered along with the rest of the nation and, indeed, the rest of the world. In some ways, the changes that took place between 1908 and 1936 in Alberta were unique, but also in many ways, they were part of the global tide of change. The impact of the First World War, the Spanish Flu epidemic, peace and suffrage movements, were felt throughout the world.

Settler women continued to arrive in ever-growing numbers. As women started to concentrate on farms, in cities, towns, and villages, they set about to create the social conditions in this new environment that mirrored the ones they had left behind. However, in some cases women set about to create new social conditions suitable for their present situation. Settler women's experiences in Alberta were as varied as the growing population.

Some, in the earlier years had to suffer tremendous isolation, but, as the population of women grew, friendships with neighbours became possible and were welcomed.

Many women, although not all, developed friendships to combat isolation, and create the conditions for the advancement of women's issues in society. Although met with resistance, these women, through their various organizations and clubs, fought for women's suffrage and the right to become people under the law, advocated for and successfully attained prohibition laws, advanced the war effort, and created communities with fundamentally Christian values. These women created communities of the like-minded, built social networks, and created a legacy.

According to some at the time, how successful a community was, was determined by the value placed on a woman's position in society. As Aime Martin wrote in the *Farm and Ranch Review* in 1907 in her article entitled, "Wives and Mothers,"

If we wish to know the political and moral condition of a state, we must ask what rank women hold in it; their influence embraces the whole of life; a wife! – a mother – two magical words, comprising the sweetest source of man's felicity; theirs is a reign of beauty, of love, of reason, –always a reign! A man takes counsel with his wife, he obeys his mother; he obeys her long after she ceases to live; and the ideas which he has received from her become the principles stronger even than his passions.²

Women were involved at the local level in the dry belt, building schools, hospitals, and churches through groups such as the Mothers' Clubs and the Red Cross Sewing Circles. They worked as well as on the provincial and national levels in lobbying for a woman's equal treatment under the law and the right to vote through groups such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), the Women's Institutes (WI), and United Farm Women of Alberta (UFWA). These formal social organizations aided in the building of community and of lobbying efforts.

Often women who were active in one club were active in others. The networks they created intertwined. Through informal friendships, a sense of belonging, and a feeling of home, created the cornerstone of community identity. Friendships created the emotional attachment to place and people. Women saw themselves as the heart of the family and the community. A *United Farm Women's Annual Report* in 1917 expressed this:

Because the care of the race is not the man's job, it has never appealed to him in its full significance. It has never taken a secondary place. For this reason, medical inspection of our rural school children, rural hospitals, rural nurses, are still things we see only in our dreams. It is up to you, as organized women, to take up your burden, to shoulder your work, part of your work, which was taken, out of the home in the dim past of history, and bring these dreams to life. Perhaps we must not look too much for the help of the men in this movement. The bearing of the race, and the care of the race is the woman's job.³

This idea that the caring for the race should fall to women's shoulders provided the impetus for further action. This action found itself in the establishment of schools and hospitals and extended into educating other women about domestic affairs. Through these formal and informal social networks, women played a significant role in the development of communities in Alberta.

As the devastating crisis unfolded in the dry belt area, however, the friendships and organizations that women created, needed to adapt and change. Many of the clubs and societies lost the majority of their members and, of course, the leadership as well. This required these organizations to sometimes amalgamate, sometimes disband for a time, only to reconvene on a more appropriate occasion, and sometimes to disperse altogether allowing their members to shift their focus to other organizations with which they also might be involved.

Both 1927 and 1928 saw two good years for the farmers and the diminished communities that supported them. Nevertheless, this would not last. The hope and optimism that emerged in the good years, however brief, was dashed with the subsequent global depression and drought from 1929 to 1938.

Research Questions

The research questions this study aims to address centre on the story of the building and collapse of communities in southeastern Alberta. First, what was the nature of women's social groups as the area developed? What role did women and their organizations play in the growth and development of the area? What happened to these social groupings as the economic and environmental crisis unfolded? What were the effects of the collapse on individual women? What were the factors contributing to the collapse of these groups and organizations?

Chapter Summary

Chapter One, "Setting the Context," provides a contextual framework on women's friendships and organizations in the dry belt of Alberta in the early part of the twentieth century. Chapter One also discusses the focus and significance of the research as well as provides background information to the development and dissolution of these networks. The last component of this chapter is a commentary, describing the primary and secondary sources that were invaluable in creating the narrative and grounding the topic in prairie historiography.

Chapter Two, “The Hope of Eden: Building Community in the Prairie Dryland, 1908–1917,” outlines the contributions of women to the growth and development of communities in the dry belt of Alberta. Initially, the chapter outlines the demographic character of the Alberta and then, specifically, the dry belt area. It also provides a background to the economic conditions the newcomers faced. Chapter Two discusses the context for women's social groupings in the province of Alberta and, briefly, the national and international contexts. Chapter Two also describes both the formal organizations and the informal friendships. Putting the local groups in a larger context is important, as the women involved in these networks did not act in a vacuum. The theme then narrows to the development of women's social networks in the dry belt area. Women's social activism contributed, in part, to the growth of the communities and of the social, educational, and health infrastructure. From organizations like the Ladies' Auxiliary of the Medicine Hat General Hospital and the Women's Literary Society to Red Cross Sewing Circles and Mothers' Clubs, each provided a component to community that enhanced the standard of living for all. The hope and optimism of many people in the area in the development of the social and educational infrastructure is evident.

Chapter Three, “Hopes Dashed: Abandoning Community in the Prairie Dry Land 1918–1936,” begins with a background to the abandonment. Many changes were occurring to the political, economic, social, and demographic conditions in the province. Dramatic changes in the dry belt area and the rapid abandonment of communities changed the structure of the organizations to which women belonged. The stressors of this dramatic abandonment and loss manifested themselves also in individual psychological strain. Women felt anxiety and grief in losing the networks of friends and the sense of community. The reactions to the

attempts at achieving solutions were viewed initially with optimism, then with skepticism and doubt.

Chapter Four, “Surveying the Calamity,” discusses the formal surveys that were conducted to study the scope of the calamity. The *Southern Alberta Survey*,⁴ commissioned in 1921 by the provincial government, was a lengthy and detailed survey of the conditions that prevailed in the area. Testimonies of leading members of the various communities outlined the tragedy that was unfolding. The overall feeling was, “You have nothing but chaos.” Various themes presented themselves from the testimonies. Although no women formally contributed to the survey, the issues they would have deemed important found their way into the testimony of their husbands, brothers, sons, or fathers. These testimonies centered around the character of the community, the dissolution of the community, the welfare of families and children, the methods of farming, taxation, and the necessity of cooperation. The second major study, *The Report on the Southern Alberta Dry Belt*,⁵ conducted in 1924 by the Federal Department of the Interior, outlined more specifically what was happening in each of the townships as it related to drought conditions, the number of acres under cultivation, and the number of population losses in any particular township. Russell and Snelson, the authors of this report, determined the suitability of the land for irrigation purposes. The last major study in Alberta, surrounding the area was the *Tilley East Commission*⁶ in 1926. This survey, led by Ted Fream, reported on the each of the sections in the area and looked at the general community health and the schools still in existence. The comments of the Commission showed that the people who remained in the area were truly at the end of their tether. By 1926 ninety percent of population had left and those that remained hung onto the hope that maybe something would finally be done. Special areas designation helped municipalities and local improvement boards to consolidate. At the end, the

worldwide stock market crash and the Great Depression only exacerbated the struggle for existence. The lessons learned from this disaster translated into the creation of the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration in the 1930s, to lessen, the impact of economic collapse and environmental disaster. However, it would not be until 1939, and the beginning of World War II, that the price of grain again rose and these people felt some optimism in the future. It was certainly a long time to wait, and most simply did not.

Chapter Five, “An Artist's Lament: Mrs. Lois Valli's Story,” discusses the life and works of Mrs. Lois Valli. Living on a ranch in the dry belt during the disaster, Mrs. Valli expressed her thoughts and feelings through a series of poems and paintings. As a case study, Chapter Five offers an in-depth look at Mrs. Valli's experiences during the height of the disaster. It offers a narrative of her life and an analysis of her poetry and paintings. In some ways, Mrs. Valli's experiences were reflective of the women of the area. She worked hard, loved and cared for her family, and did whatever was necessary to survive. She outlived the struggles, outlived the disaster, and possessed the courage, strength, and resiliency to move past it all. Mrs. Valli's story is a story of self-discovery.

Chapter Six, “When all is said and done,” sums up the data collected and offers some conclusions to the nature of some women's experiences of community building and its dissolution during the dry belt disaster in southern Alberta.

Commentary on Sources

This research study focuses primarily on qualitative analysis through historical and archival data collection and analysis. However, a quantitative component was also completed in the analysis of census data. The census data provided an overall picture of the changing

demography of Alberta between 1908 and 1936. Both types of data collection, qualitative and quantitative, occurred somewhat simultaneously to create a descriptive analysis of women's experiences of community building and disintegration.

Primary Sources

A variety of primary sources enhanced and informed my understanding of women's experiences through the dry belt disaster and what that meant to their informal and formal networks of friends and acquaintances. One of the most valuable sources was the *Medicine Hat Weekly News* local correspondent page. The correspondents offered detailed descriptions of various parties, activities of the various societies, and often added editorial comments regarding the situation in their respective towns. Despite being the gossip page, *Page Eight* offered detailed information regarding the social life of the residents. Between eight and fifteen community correspondents, depending on the week, provided submissions to the Saturday newspaper. Through these local “gossip” columns they expressed their joys, delights, concerns and consternations, surrounding the events that were unfolding in their lives.

One of these women, Mrs. Charlotte Cotter, was a socialite in the small town of Alderson. As a correspondent to the *Medicine Hat News* and the *Medicine Hat Weekly News* for nearly thirty years, and as an official recorder of vital statistics for the area, she knew the comings and goings in her town. Similarly, the correspondents for the *Medicine Hat Weekly News* from Winnifred, Mrs. Thurza Trebble and Mrs. Margaret Calder from Bow Island, also town dwellers, were central in the town's activities and were occupied with their duties as switchboard operator and assistant postmaster and documented such in their

expressive columns.⁷ It is apparent from the writing in these columns that each was a woman. Their detailed descriptions of the fashions of the day, the decorations or lovely flowers at various functions, and the expressiveness of each in their feelings regarding the situations at hand, suggests their gender. These women needed to be active in the community, and they needed to have ready access to information of what was transpiring in other people's lives to become an effective correspondent. They needed to be central in the town's activities. In the case of both Bow Island and Winnifred, each of the following women fit the description. Through the local history books I was able to discern that Mrs. Calder was very likely the correspondent in Bow Island from 1920 – 1929 and Mrs. Trebble was very likely the correspondent in Winnifred from 1922 – 1929.

Each of the women gave unique insights into the disaster. How outspoken, negative, or reflective, depended on the woman writing. For example, Mrs. Trebble was extremely critical and outspoken regarding the role of the farmers in the disaster. On the other hand, Mrs. Calder offered a simple descriptive narrative of the events occurring in Bow Island. She was not particularly critical but did lament at the loss of her neighbours and the dwindling community. Mrs. Cotter, on the other hand, offered guidance and suggestions to the readers of the *News*. Rather than outright criticism, Mrs. Cotter tended to appeal to her readers' conscience to spur them into potential action. Each of these women added insight to the data collected. Each brought a unique perspective into their community's growth and eventual decline.

Additionally, two women who experienced the disaster from a different point of view were Mrs. Lois Valli and Mrs. Catherine Neil. Both women lived and worked on large sheep ranches in the area and each provided alternative documentation of their experiences. Mrs. Valli's husband managed the Nine Bar Ranch just south of Alderson. Mrs. Valli documented

her experiences in her collections of poetry, *Prairie Wool*⁸ and *Prairie Winds*,⁹ and through her paintings. Mrs. Valli wrote her poetry and painted as a way to escape, and to reflect, on her living conditions. She had no intended audience other than herself, her family, and friends. Mrs. Catherine Neil lived on a sheep ranch as well, just south of Grassy Lake. Mrs. Neil wrote a memoir of her early experiences for the Women's Institute, which she titled *Pioneer Days*.¹⁰

Each of these five women offered a unique insight into the dry belt disaster of southern Alberta. They are rural and urban, young and mature, childless and mothers, and each offers a different view of the mounting strain and pressure of losing close friends and family. The evidence these women left behind of their experiences of community building and dissolution was clear and comprehensible. Just as every woman's experiences and personality are unique, each of these women provided a different perspective of the social conditions at the time. They were witnesses to the destruction of the communities that they worked so hard to build.

As well, a variety of government documents provided bits of information into the world of women during the disaster. The lengthy *Survey Board Report of Southern Alberta*, the *Report on the Southern Alberta Drought Area*, and the *Tilley East Commission* documents offered some insight into the calamity and women's experiences. However, what was more apparent, was not what was available of women's voices within these lengthy surveys and testimonials, but what was not. Women's voices were limited at best in each of these *official* documents. However, many of their concerns were addressed at the hearings through their husbands, fathers, or brothers. Sometimes, it is necessary to listen through the men's voices to hear the women's influence, as in Sylvia Van Kirk's seminal study, *Many Tender Ties*.¹¹ In this study, Van Kirk looked at the world of women within the fur trading

industry from 1670 - 1870. To attain her information, Van Kirk surveyed the records of the factors of the Hudson Bay Company to create a picture of what life was like for the *country wives*. Van Kirk gleaned a great deal of information about the women's lives from the men themselves. Nonetheless, women's silence in an official capacity, in these important studies speaks to the limited formal role women still played in society.

The use of poetry to enhance historical understanding is also present in the literature. Adele Perry's *On the Edge of Empire*¹² and Jonathan Vance's *Death So Noble*¹³ provide excellent examples of the integration of poetry into historical studies. Poetry offers one way to understand experiences. My use of Mrs. Lois Valli's published poetry, *Prairie Wool*¹⁴ and *Prairie Winds*¹⁵, added to my understanding of the experiences she had during the dry belt disaster. The use of paintings extends understanding. The phrase, "a picture paints a thousand words," captures the richness that visual cues can give to history. Mrs. Valli's legacy was not only in words but in images as well. The Brooks Campus of Medicine Hat College houses many of Mrs. Valli's paintings, although many more ended up in friends and neighbours' houses. She painted what she saw, and what she knew, and her paintings and sketches measure her experience.

The primary documents surveyed from the Medicine Hat and Area Archives (MHAA) were documents such as building permits issued, local histories, school board minutes, diaries and letters. From the Provincial Archives of Alberta (PAA) many documents including Silverman's interviews, government documents from the Departments of Health, Municipal Affairs, and Education, and any of the documents and files that related to the worsening conditions in Alderson and the dry belt area. Most of this information was found in the Premiers Papers at the Provincial Archives. The fact that the material is placed specifically there makes this story important.

Eliane Leslau Silverman carried out a series of interviews with homesteading women in Alberta throughout the 1990s and published in 1998, *The Last Best West: Women on the Alberta Frontier, 1880-1930*.¹⁶ These interviews, available from the Provincial Archives of Alberta were a valuable source of information regarding women's experiences in homesteading and community building and the joys and trials that accompanied those experiences.

The Glenbow Archives (GA) offered all of the local newspapers of the region on microfilm as well as copies of each of the local histories written and edited by people in the various communities. The Glenbow Archives also provided the school records for both the Berry Creek School Division and the Cypress Hills School Division. As well, the Saskatchewan Archives Board (SAB) provided information regarding the dry belt disaster on the east side of the border. Although this thesis focuses on the Alberta reaction to the disaster, the dry belt itself extends across the border into western Saskatchewan. Many of the experiences of the Alberta homesteaders mirrored those in Saskatchewan. In addition, the Library and Archives of Canada (LAC) in Ottawa provided limited information regarding the crisis. What was exceedingly important at the local level lost its significance at the national level. Each of these repositories, the MHAA, PAA, GA, SAB, and the LAC were necessary in creating a narrative surrounding women's experiences in the building and dissolution of their communities.

Secondary Sources

To complement the primary source data, I also looked at secondary source data in the form of books or articles that enhanced my understanding. As I began the search for sources

to specifically enlighten my study and to place it in within the historical work that has come before, I began with David Jones's *Empire of Dust*.¹⁷ *Empire of Dust* is the only full-length study of the dry belt disaster in southeastern Alberta. *Empire of Dust* outlines the series of events that turned communities from bustling enterprises to wind blown dust bowls. *Empire of Dust* looks specifically at the town of Alderson, once known as Carlstadt, through its rise and fall in dusty southeastern Alberta. Beginning with the opening of the land to ranchers and then settlers, Jones begins his narrative with these struggles. The Canadian Pacific Railway and the Government of Canada wanted the land settled and with such powerful backing, the settlers won out; but at a great cost. The land was too dry, although many struggled to make a go of it. Despite valiant attempts, both environmental and economic factors, contributed to the calamity. The weather was fickle though, and through the years of 1915 and 1916, crops came in and farmers rejoiced. Then it began. Year after year, from 1917 to 1926, crops were lost due to poor conditions. Every year the hope began with a prayer that maybe this was the year. And every year, the hearts and hopes of the people were broken. By 1926, in some areas of the dry belt, the abandonment of homesteads reached ninety percent. People could not make a living where none was to be had. Those few that remained found good crop years in 1927 and 1928. Hope sprung again only to be dashed with the stock market crash and global depression beginning in 1929. All of this took a toll on the residents of the area. Businesses were closed, homesteads were abandoned, and community groups were disbanded. Taking the narrative in *Empire of Dust* as the background structure to my study, and then searching specifically for women's experiences, I was able to discern women's roles in the building and destruction of their communities. Although Jones did not focus specifically on women's experiences during the disaster, Mrs. Charlotte Cotter was introduced in *Empire of Dust*. The background information about Mrs. Cotter was gleaned from Jones' book; however, her

commentary in the *Medicine Hat News* about certain events in Alderson came from the newspapers housed at the Glenbow Archives. I extended Jones' work in focusing on women's experiences through the dry belt disaster. Beyond that, I describe the nature of female communities in both their growth and dissolution.

Another source of information that was invaluable was Jones', "*We'll All Be Buried Down Here*": *The Prairie Dryland Disaster 1917-1926*.¹⁸ *We'll All Be Buried Down Here* is a collection of primary sources from letters, to snippets of official reports, to some of the comments in the *Medicine Hat News*, all relating in some way to the disaster and people's reaction to it. Some of the letters penned by women during the disaster are found in this collection as well as at the Provincial Archives of Alberta. As well, some of the commentaries by the local correspondents to the *Medicine Hat News* are also included in this book but many more are located at the Glenbow Archives. In his introduction to this book, Jones observed, "When the full measure of calamity was upon the people of the dry areas of southeastern Alberta and southwestern Saskatchewan after the First World War, one witness called it "the nightmare of western Canada" and "the most crushing debacle in the history of the West." The dimensions of the agricultural disaster in the drylands in the decade after 1916 were, as one woman said, "almost beyond human understanding."¹⁹ As Jones commented, "It was a tale of the monumental blunder of western colonialization, of an unprecedented diaspora, of drought and infestation, of suffering and deprivation."²⁰ Jones organized these primary sources into a cohesive document outlining the beginnings of settlement, the nature of the catastrophe, the renunciation of the area, and the legacy of the disaster. He commented though, "Naturally the selection of records for the final selection is made with the added perspective of time and represents my assessment of some of the 'truly significant', prophetic, or milestone utterances of the period."²¹ The sources he chose to include in this

book, offer many key insights into the disaster itself. They reflect how people felt and the ways they reacted to the disaster as it was unfolding. Again though, the voices of women are not as loud as the men's, they can still be heard.

Adding to *Empire of Dust*, and *We'll All Be Buried Down Here*, Jones completed an exploration of the difficulties Albertans experienced through drought, disintegration, confrontation, and adversity and how they managed to prevail over their circumstances in *Feasting on Misfortune: Journeys of the Human Spirit in Alberta's Past*.²² *Feasting on Misfortune* discusses some of the people involved in the dry land disaster but Jones extends his initial study into the various ways people reacted and responded to extremely difficult situations in the building of Alberta. *Feasting on Misfortune* is a spiritual inquiry into the effects of deprivation on the soul. Mrs. Lois Valli was introduced in *Feasting on Misfortune*. From her birth in a blizzard on a cold January day in southwestern Saskatchewan, to her relationships with her mother and father, and her subsequent marriage to Buck Valli, Jones provided the narrative in *Feasting on Misfortune* of Lois Valli's life. He told the story of her struggles to keep body and sanity intact and the spiritual journey she undertook to survive. The interviews Jones completed with Mrs. Valli, provided on tape, also gave additional insight into Mrs. Valli. The stories that Mrs. Valli revealed in her interviews showed not only her ability to tell a story but also her lively mind and sense of humour. She loved to hear and tell stories. She was particularly enamored with the stories of those she found around her table, all of the herders and workers who would drift in and out of the ranch. When she had no tales from the herders, she would make stories up for her children. This active mind was one of the elements that helped her to survive. Where I extended Jones' study, as it related to Mrs. Valli, was to analyze and evaluate the poetry and paintings, she left as her legacy. I was also able to visit Mrs. Valli in a nursing home in Brooks. She was, at that point, in failing

health, and I was pleased to have met her. She died in January of 2008, just after her one-hundredth birthday. Jones' works on the disaster was the place for me to start in uncovering women's experiences of community building and destruction.

It was then necessary to find a background to the ethnicity of the people of the area. In this quest, one book was particularly helpful. Howard and Tamara Palmer's, *Peoples of Alberta: Portraits of Cultural Diversity*,²³ describes the various ethnic and cultural groups that settled in Alberta. Alberta already had a distinct geography and history, and its population was diverse. The population first began with the eight First Nations tribes (Blackfoot, Sarcee, Plains Cree, Stoney, Woodlands Cree, Chipewyan, Beaver and Slavey)²⁴ and then grew with the arrival of the French, British, and American traders. The Metis also took part in Alberta's growth. The agricultural boom at the turn of the twentieth century saw a massive influx of settlers to the province, changing the demographic to firmly Anglo-Canadian. Because of the open door immigration policy of the federal government, settlers from other parts of the globe migrated to Alberta, including Scandinavians, Germans, and central and eastern Europeans. Others, like the Mormons, Doukabours and Hutterites, fled persecution and found a home in Alberta. This cultural heterogeneity was essential in the agricultural development of the province. For example, no group was better suited to developing irrigated farming than the Mormons, who came from the irrigation-transformed deserts of Utah. In addition, immigrants from the American Midwest could readily transfer their skills to dry land farming in southern Alberta. Not all were successful though, as the drought during the 1917 to 1926 period was more than many could bear. German-speaking people established several settlements in Alberta during the late 1880s and early 1890s. In 1889, nearly a hundred families arrived from two neighbouring settlements in eastern Galicia, in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and became

the first sizeable German settlement near Medicine Hat. Palmer and Palmer suggest that no one was “better prepared to organize the commercial and political life of this Canadian province and to make Alberta part of the Canadian nation than the early arrivals from Britain and central Canada.”²⁵ Not only were they by far the largest ethnic group in the province, but those of British origin, whether directly from the United Kingdom, the United States, or Central Canada, had the greatest impact on the future of the province. Regardless of this massive Anglo-Saxon presence, each of the immigrant groups played a role. The economic, agricultural, and industrial development of Alberta required all of these various groups to work together.

From there, I ventured into reading material on Medicine Hat's history. The history of Medicine Hat reflects the same optimism and disappointment that prevailed in the surrounding communities. Through all of the readings I was particularly looking for women's actions and reactions to the events that were unfolding. Burnet's *Next Year Country*²⁶ focused on the area surrounding Hanna. It too, like *Empire of Dust*, offered information regarding the lives and hardships of the people living in and around that area. This community study underscored the experiences of the farming community and the eternal optimism found there. The idea that “there's always next year” speaks to the crop failures and the certainty of uncertainty in this corner of the province. Some of the background information for this study was gleaned from this book as well, but the area around Hanna fared better during the drought and depression of the 1920s than did the portion further southeast. Burnet outlined the dry belt economy and what it was like to live in that area of the province. She also commented on the nature of the rural household, where the lines for the division of labour were vague. Women's roles were not just simply in the domestic sphere. They walked behind plows, mended fences, cared for the animals and the children, and cooked all the meals.

Burnet also discussed the ethnic division within the community, along with the nature of class and cliques in town. Where some women were welcome, others were not. It became apparent that women's experiences could not be generalized. Whether the woman was living on a farm or in town, her ethnic background, her age, and her status as 'mother' all played a part in the development of women's communities and the community as a whole.

Paul Voisey's study, *Vulcan: The Making of a Prairie Community*²⁷ provided a narrative of the experiences of homesteaders in the region centred on the town of Vulcan. Vulcan is situated west of the area in study, and, like Hanna, fared better as well. Voisey's study of Vulcan and the surrounding area offered insights into how prairie communities developed. He weaves a story of the economic and social development of Vulcan. Voisey commented, "Because of western Canada's ethnic diversity and its many economic and geographical subregions, the typical prairie community may not exist, but the Vulcan area shared major traits with hundreds of settlements."²⁸ Using this study as a background to the development of prairie communities, I was able to understand what elements are present in a town or area as they develop. Beginning his discussion, Voisey looks at how Vulcan was settled, not only on the farms but in town as well. The focus in the Vulcan area, like many others in the same region, was agriculture. He devotes much of his study on the agricultural development of the area, discussing crop selection, farming techniques, and farm sizes. Voisey also discusses the development of the social life of the area, describing the activities and institutions that were created along with the schools and the churches. He also extends this study through thirty years to examine the area through periods of boom and bust. Like this, I too extend my study through thirty years, to investigate the impact of boom and bust periods on women's lives and social organizations. However, both of these community studies, *Next Year Country*, and *Vulcan: The Making of a Prairie Community*, described the

lives of women and men in the early part of the twentieth century. I went beyond looking at a specific community and explored the relationships of women in an area that was devastated by drought, depression, and depopulation.

M.C.C. Dirk's *Caps, Bibs and Aprons: Memoirs of the Medicine Hat General Hospital School of Nursing*²⁹ illustrated the friendship and collegial bonds of the women in Medicine Hat's School of Nursing. This work was particularly insightful as it focused on the nursing students' experiences. The Medicine Hat General Hospital was the first hospital in the region and provided educational as well as social opportunities for young women entering the nursing profession. The women who chose nursing as their profession lived and worked under the strict control of the Medicine Hat General Hospital and the School of Nursing. They had certain rules to follow that were becoming of young women of the time. Because the number of nursing students was so small and their lives were controlled by these rules, the bonds of collegiality grew strong. This study provided a sense of what the nursing students' relationships were like in the growing town of Medicine Hat. The relationships between these women offered a sense of sisterhood. They trusted and supported one another, as the strict enforcement of their behaviour, as well as the stressors of medical emergencies, like the Spanish Flu Epidemic, as well as the building sense of doing something worthwhile for the community, gave them a common bond. The women in Dirk's study were young, developing a sense of themselves and a growing independence. As I began this narrative, Dirk's study gave me grounding into the lives of young and independent women and gave me an example of the bonds of sisterhood within this small community. The optimism and hope of Medicine Hat was mirrored in the lives of these women.

As well, J.W. Morrow's *Early History of the Medicine Hat Country*³⁰ provided illuminating stories of both the women and men who chose to settle in the area in the early

years. This short narrative provided the early history of the town of Medicine Hat prior to Alberta becoming a province. It is full of short stories outlining the lives of these early settlers. This too gave me a background into the history of the area and insights into some of the more colourful characters, both men and women that called Medicine Hat home. Beyond that, my study extends the stories of lives of women in Medicine Hat after 1908 and into the depression of the 1920s and 1930s.

Local histories have also proved to be most useful in this study.³¹ Many of these are either written or edited by women of the region and provide insight into each of the families of the community. They are the stories of each of the families, the community organizations, and the collective events that bound these people together. Each of these local histories provided a narrative of the communities and the families and activities that made each town a home. In some cases, the narrative is quite detailed outlining family genealogies, homesteading stories, and particulars of the events that offered educational and social opportunities for the residents. Both *Silver Sage: A History of Bow Island*³² and *Winnifred: Our trails, trials and memories*³³ provided exceptional information regarding both Mrs. Margaret Calder and Mrs. Thurza Trebble. In fact, in identifying both of these women as the likely correspondents to the *Medicine Hat News*, these local histories were invaluable. Much of the background for both of the ladies was derived from these local histories. All of these local histories³⁴ gave me a composite sketch of what was going on in each of the towns in the area. From there, I focused my study on essentially three communities - Alderson, Bow Island, and Winnifred - and created a narrative based on the experiences of these women in these small towns.

As I continued with the search for secondary sources to illuminate women's experiences during the dry belt disaster, I began to move further a field into women's experiences on the

prairies in general and Western Canadian women's experiences. There is significant literature on women's history in Alberta and the homesteading experience. Western women's history has been studied and documented for some decades. As a result, some of the earliest published documents offer insight into the homesteading experiences of women, their struggles in maintaining both a home, farm, and family, and the strength of character many possessed to build their dream. Like Morrow's early history of Medicine Hat, Margot Smith & Carol Pasternak's *Pioneer Women of Western Canada*³⁵ gave me a sense of what it was like for women between approximately 1900 – 1940. *Pioneer Women of Western Canada* is a source book consisting of magazine and newspaper articles, stories, excerpts from books, and archival photographs. Beyond the stories of women who performed the difficult domestic chores involved in running the homestead, there were also other women who participated in rodeo events at the Calgary Stampede, helped in the construction of the railroad, and ran their own homesteads (plowing the land, sowing the crops, and mending the fences). There were doctors, politicians, writers, lawyers, entrepreneurs, and explorers. As Smith and Pasternak commented, "Quite obviously, women did not spend all their time in the home even in the pioneer days."³⁶ *Pioneer Women of Western Canada* offered a broader understanding of women's roles even in the early years of settlement. Although domestic concerns were still a primary focus for many women, the experiences of women were as varied as the women themselves.

Other early work in western women's experiences includes Rasmussen, Rasmussen, Savage, and Wheeler's, *A Harvest Yet to Reap: A History of Prairie Women*.³⁷ This book is an overview of the history of white women on the Canadian prairies in the early years of agricultural settlement. Most women came to the West in the early 1900s as farm homemakers. During their first terrifying years on the land, they and everyone else who could

work were preoccupied with trying to stay alive long enough get a farm established. Kept apart by distance and overwork, women did not have much time to visit each other, but they had plenty of time to think about their legal and social status. As economic conditions became more secure and settlement more dense, they began to get together, at first for company and advice, and later for community improvement and political reform. They placed emphasis on laws, which affected the home. This work, which flourished in the women's suffrage movement, grew out of the experiences and needs of prairie women. Then, just as it was time to reap the results, the movement withered like a frozen crop, leaving the leaders to wonder what had gone wrong. Once the political reforms were achieved, many women saw their political work as finished. Women continued to be active in community building, and centred their sights on local activism instead. The authors recognized the oversimplification of the narrative in that women did not arrive *en masse* at the beginning of the settlement period but in surges from as early as 1812 to as late as 1920 and not all women lived on farms or joined women's organizations. They commented, "Material on the everyday life of 'ordinary' women is relatively difficult to come by. Even histories of individual families or communities, many of them written by women, generally leave centre stage clear for Hubby or Dad. Women have seldom felt themselves to be makers of history. For generations they've been stagehands and understudies, doing much of the work while someone up front took all the bows. Few women have thought their lives important or interesting enough to merit documentation."³⁸ I, too, found this same struggle. Women's voices were difficult to hear and many are reluctant to tell their stories. The narrative that these authors suggest though gave me a sense of how women's communities and organizations developed. From there, I could see if this same pattern developed within the communities surrounding Medicine Hat. It did indeed mirror the pattern, but the

environmental and economic crisis from 1917 – 1926 caused the women’s organizations to adapt and change and in some cases, dissolve altogether.

H. Robertson’s *Salt of the Earth: The Story of the Homesteaders in Western Canada*³⁹ provided an understanding of the lives of homesteaders through the use of photographs and autobiographical accounts. It is a portrait of the rural settlement of the prairies seen through the eyes of the settlers themselves, the ordinary people who did all the work, and created works of art. Among the more than two million people who came to settle the Canadian west between the building of the CPR across the prairies in 1882 and the outbreak of war in Europe in 1914 were those whose passion and livelihood was to record the construction of a new prairie civilization. These photographs and the stories that accompanied them, offered a different insight into homesteaders’ lives. Photographs, like paintings, tell a distinct story. Photographs were prized as records sent to relatives back East as proof positive of the family’s continued existence and illustration of its success. “Most pioneers preferred to be photographed outdoors, in front of their shops or homes, dressed in their best clothes, surrounded by their children and as many of their prized possessions as could be accommodated in the photograph. . . . Simply the effort to keep up appearances – the formal black taffeta dress and stiff-collared suit worn by a couple sitting on chairs in the dirt in front of their tiny clapboard shanty – speaks more than words about the culture shock of homesteading.”⁴⁰ The photographs reflect the values and attitudes of people wealthy enough to have their pictures taken and culturally sensitive enough to want to record the intimate details of their lives for posterity.

The sense of women’s communities and the longing for sisterhood was prevalent throughout the literature. Pioneer women did not have to suffer the isolation that is described in those earlier works, although some certainly did. One of the best studies in describing this

growing sisterhood is Norah Lewis', *Dear Editor and Friends: Letters from rural women of the North-West, 1900-1920*.⁴¹ Women were able to connect with each other through the letters sent to a variety of newspapers and periodicals like *Free Press Prairie Farmer*, *Grain Growers' Guide*, *the Farmer's Advocate*, and the *Family Herald and Weekly Star*, published in Montreal and Winnipeg. Whether they had neighbours that were women or not, these helpful columns provided the link to the outside world and to the world of women. They found a place, albeit remotely, to connect with other women. As the female population grew however, the need for these columns diminished. Women found that they could connect with their friends and neighbours and the networks they created changed the fabric of Alberta forever. This study goes beyond the isolation of the early homestead days. It describes the connection between women at the community level, their friendships, their neighbours, and their community organizations in a particular part of the province. This study also described what happened to those friendships and community organizations when put under the great strain of increasing poverty, strain, and abandonment.

Another source that provided some background to the development of Southern Alberta and women's roles in that development was Sheila McManus', *The Line which Separates: Race, Gender, and the making of the Alberta-Montana borderlands*.⁴² In this study McManus looks at how the border between Alberta and Montana was created. Focusing on early settlement of the mid- to late-nineteenth century, her description goes beyond the actual surveying and the drawing of maps to how governments and settlers, specifically women on each side of the border, perceived their particular notion of nation building. McManus argued the position however, that these constructs of border and division were not as important to the settler women as to the governments in Ottawa and Washington. *Voices from the Dust* confirms some of McManus' findings. Each country set about to create their nation in a

particular way. As McManus noted, “White women were certainly one of the important groups of players in every colonial context, but their exact role varied enormously depending on how many arrived, the timing of the arrival, and the specific colonial context itself.”⁴³ These varied roles of women are expanded in this study. Also, McManus commented that women in the early years of settlement sought out the company of women, even when they were many miles apart. “It is clear that while their white neighbours were few, women tried to make the most of these contacts to build a sense of community, and seemed very comfortable traveling around their areas to do so.”⁴⁴ This search for sisterhood began almost as soon as the woman came West. I also confirm the notion that the social ethnic divisions only become rigid after the growth in population of the “right” kind of women.

Like Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s, *A Midwife’s Tale*⁴⁵, and Jean Barman’s, *Sojourning Sisters*⁴⁶, I created a narrative that looks into particular women’s lives at a particular time frame. Thatcher Ulrich created a story that depicts the life of Martha Ballard, a midwife living in New England using Martha’s diary as her main source of material. Jean Barman too created a story by taking a series of letters written between sisters Jessie and Annie McQueen and created the story of their lives based on these letters. What I did do however, was take a variety of sources, from newspaper columns, to letters, to official government documents to try and piece together a story of women’s lives in the southeastern corner of Alberta.

Also, I extend Mary Neth’s work, *Preserving the Family Farm*,⁴⁷ in that I too offer insights into the cooperative nature of the farming practice and community life. In this she describes that although the Midwest United States ‘family farm’ seems to be an independent entity, its success was largely dependent on cooperation: cooperation among family members as well as cooperation within the community as a whole. Certainly, women had a significant

role to play in the success of the farm and as I assert, women had a significant role to play in both the success and failure of a community as a whole.

Along with a discussion of women's experiences in homesteading and community building, much research has enhanced the knowledge surrounding the various women's organizations. The Women's Institute, and The United Farm Women of Alberta, along with the Famous Five and the recognition of voting rights for women have been studied at length. The studies on the Women's Institutes of Alberta offer a variety of views into the activities and roles the women of the Women's Institutes undertook. Most notably, *Studies in Rural Citizenship*;⁴⁸ *The Story of Alberta's Women's Institute 1909 – 1955*;⁴⁹ *The Rural Women's University: Women's Institutes in Alberta from 1909 – 1940*;⁵⁰ and *Many and Remarkable: The story of the Alberta Women's Institutes*;⁵¹ offered insights into the Alberta experience of the Women's Institutes. The Women's Institutes were instrumental in the social and educational development of women on the prairies. Beginning in central Alberta, the movement quickly flourished offering social and educational opportunities for women. There, the women could get together to socialize and share their common experiences. The Women's Institutes was an organization that went beyond women complaining about their lives, their husbands, and their children to a place where the skills of homemaking could be shared. Practical concerns were of the utmost importance, from getting bubbles in a laundry with extremely hard water, to sharing recipes and patterns for children's clothing, to the organization of a charitable or simply social event for the community. The Women's Institutes became extremely popular and the idea was transplanted throughout the rest of Canada and to Scotland as well, becoming a worldwide phenomenon. These books tell the story of the Women's Institutes, what they proposed as their function, and the roles they played in their communities. The women involved in the Women's Institutes were active in

the community providing rest rooms for rural women and charity for those in need. They trusted and supported one another. They too, like the nursing students at the Medicine Hat General Hospital School of Nursing, created the bonds of sisterhood. Although the Women's Institutes fostered the growth and development of these bonds, they also had a particular view of the *proper* nature of community and society. Their values were based on the white, Anglo-Saxon, protestant model. Anyone not conforming to those values was seen as inferior and in need of rehabilitation and charity. They did not close their doors to members who did not fit the same profile; they set about to indoctrinate them into their particular point of view. Again, I extend each of these works into a particular time and place. The Women's Institutes were active in the dry belt region and offered many social, political, and educational opportunities to the women of the region. I describe the role of the Women's Institutes in the building of the communities along with the role they played in the destruction of those communities as well.

As well, the United Farm Women of Alberta have also been studied extensively. *The Rise of Agrarian Democracy: The United Farmers and Farm Women of Alberta;*⁵² *The UFWA: Political and Educational Advocacy;*⁵³ *Politics Pitchforks and Pickle Jars: 75 Years of Organized Farm Women in Alberta;*⁵⁴ and *Educational Role of the United Farm Women of Alberta*⁵⁵ add to the understanding of women's political, educational and social roles in the development of Alberta and Alberta's communities. Where the Women's Institutes were not a political organization per se, the United Farm Women were. Through these organizations and many others, women were integral to the health and well being of Alberta's communities and indeed the development of Alberta as *home*. Each of these books outlines various aspects of the history of the UFWA. The UFWA was founded on the belief that agriculture is the foundation of economic and social prosperity and stability, with the conviction that what

benefits farmers benefits everyone, the organization was a major player in the politics and socio-economic development of Alberta. Before they were formally invited into membership of the United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) in 1913, farm women were busy organizing, not only to serve their own need to connect with other women, but also to respond to the pressing needs of their communities for facilities and services, needs that could only be addressed by cooperative action. They emphasized the development of library services, youth programs, and social services. The organization emphasized the practical rather than theoretical approaches. In fact, Irene Parlby was elected to the Alberta Legislature in 1921 under the United Farmers of Alberta banner and became the first female cabinet minister in Alberta. Mrs. Parlby was responsible for the passage of 18 bills to improve the plight of women and children. She was president of the United Farm Women of Alberta and a staunch advocate for rural Alberta women and distance education. Similar to the literature for the Women's Institutes, I extend the knowledge of the United Farm Women of Alberta into a particular time and place. Again, I describe the role of the UFWA in the building of the communities and also the destruction as well.

Of all of the benefits women's organizations provided in many communities, one of the most destructive forces to those organizations was the predominant white, Anglo-Saxon, protestant values that flowed through the women themselves. Like many women of the time, the values of these community groups were based on the belief of the superiority of the British way. British imperialism and colonialization only exacerbated these attitudes, and they found their way to the Canadian prairies. Kathleen McCarthy describes in her book, *Noblesse Oblige: Charity and Cultural Philanthropy in Chicago, 1849-1929*,⁵⁶ the development of civic responsibility in the city of Chicago. In the Old World, noblesse oblige represented the duties attendant upon noble birth. However, in Canada, like the United States,

the hereditary responsibilities did not exist in the same fashion. Transported to the shores of the New World with the first European settlers, the notion of noblesse oblige, or richesse oblige, survived and flourished. “Often, it is interpreted as richesse oblige: the duties of the rich to society which has enriched them. [As well as]...Civic stewardship – the notion that successful citizens owe a dual obligation of time and money to the communities in which they have prospered.”⁵⁷ Although the idea of noblesse oblige encouraged women to become involved in charity and community work, it also perpetuated the attitude of superiority and exclusiveness. Despite the vast ethnic mix that would become Alberta, this notion limited the resources and capacities of the people of the province. Not all of the human resources were used to their greatest potential. I will extend McCarthy’s work by looking at this notion of noblesse oblige as one of the most destructive forces of women’s organizations.

The role of female social groupings in particular social contexts has only been studied in a limited way. These networks of women, both informally and formally, provided the basis for strength and support for individuals and communities alike. These networks were also as destructive as they were encouraging. Two books that enlightened my understanding of women in community were Grey-Osterud’s, *Bonds of Community*,⁵⁸ and Vicinus’, *Independent Women*.⁵⁹ Although each is a narrative of particular women’s communities in the United States and at an earlier time frame than this study, each provided insights into women’s relationships. *Bonds of Community* describes the lives of farm women in nineteenth-century New York and their connections to each other. This, to some degree, parallels the lives of the women on the sheep ranches in southeastern Alberta. The most remarkable difference however, is the size of the farms and the physical distance between friends and family. *Independent Women*, however, talks of the lives of Victorian women. These were women that were living independently without the constraints of family or

marital responsibilities. These were single women working and building communities of the like-minded. As women homesteaders moved west, they brought with them many of the same sensibilities that were described in *Independent Women*. The tension between these Victorian ideals and the reality of the West, played out in stark contrast, and yet, many women like Mrs. Calder and Mrs. Cotter struggled to maintain some of these expectations for the ladies.

One study, *Reciprocal work bees and the meaning of neighbourhood*, by C.A. Wilson⁶⁰ discusses the reciprocal nature of work bees in Ontario in the 1800s. In this, Wilson explores how relationships are formed and the necessity of these relationships in early settlement periods. I also extend this discussion of the development of women's relationships of the early years of homesteading to a description of how those relationships develop, what nature they take, and the necessity of informal networks to be present to allow the formal organizations to grow. It is primarily through the advocacy of the formal groups that the political, economic, and social developments in Alberta took place.

In the United States, the relationship between the creation of social networks and the women's suffrage movement was examined in E.S. Clemens, *Securing political returns to social capital: Women's associations in the United States, 1880s -1920s*.⁶¹ In this Clemens explores the development of social networks to advance the suffrage movement. She also contends that these networks were tenuous for once suffrage was attained, the network dissolved. My discussion of the tenuous nature of women's communities and organizations enlarges this particular work.

All of these sources offer glimpses into the past. Yet, they are only glimpses. Our understanding of a particular event, or community, or person, is enhanced by all of these works, but can never unearth the complete truth. The understanding is at best, partial. What

this study aims to do is to enhance that understanding. It offers a narrative of women's experiences in building and dissolving their communities. The voices of women throughout the disaster reflect much of the prevailing attitude of the time: silence. Most women are not accustomed to being the primary subjects of their own conversations, or of valuing what they do and think as important or interesting. Yet, in sometimes subtle, and sometimes not so subtle ways, their voices are heard. These are the voices from the dust.

1 Introduction: Setting the Context

- ¹ “What the Auto Does,” *Medicine Hat News*, 26 September 1918. p. 8.
- ² A. Martin, (June 1907) *Wives and Mothers*, *Farm and Ranch Review*, p. 23
- ³ L. Rasmussen, L. Rasmussen, C. Savage, & A. Wheeler, *A Harvest Yet to Reap: A History of Prairie Women* (Toronto: The Women’s Press, 1976), p. 144.
- ⁴ Report of the Public Hearing of the Survey Board for Southern Alberta, PAA 69.289 f43c
- ⁵ B. Russell and W. H. Snelson, *Report on the Southern Alberta Drought Area: Appendix 5: Suitability of Lands for Grazing*, (Canada: Department of the Interior: December 17, 1924)
- ⁶ *Tilley East Commission Report*, December 8, 1926
- ⁷ No official record is attainable to indicate who exactly was the correspondent to the *Medicine Hat Weekly News* for Winnifred and Bow Island. Despite various attempts at contacting relatives and archival searches, I never received any official confirmation. I do however believe, from the local history records that these women are the most suitable to fill the position.
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CHAPTER 2

THE HOPE OF EDEN: BUILDING COMMUNITY IN THE PRAIRIE DRY BELT, 1908–1917

Introduction

In the summer on the short grass prairie, the heat and wind are intense. This is one of the greatest open spaces in the world; the sky is so wide and blue that even the circling hawks, looking for their next meal of gopher or mouse, seem tiny. Antelope are intent on their grazing, but sounds too faint for the human ear will send them leaping off. Underfoot the grass is crisp and dry. Cacti grow in this harsh land, and the faint smell of sage floats on the breeze. This is a silent and curious place. From a distance, it seems so lifeless, and yet, with every step the prairie comes alive.

Eastward, the prairie seems endless. Waves of wheat rustle in the wind. The heat radiates from the ground and the sight blurs. The golden tones of late summer suggest a bountiful harvest, at least for this year. On the horizon to the south, the Cypress Hills are barely visible. An anomaly on the prairie landscape, they are lush and green. The trees and the shimmer of Elkwater Lake provide a stark contrast to the rest of the land. On the western horizon, the Rocky Mountains are only shadows in my imagination. To the north is still more prairie. The rivers and creeks stretch through the countryside, offering the only green in an otherwise golden and brown palette. The South Saskatchewan River flows lazily through the

area, from west to east, and the Red Deer River runs further north. There are small creeks and streambeds throughout, but they are dry in the heat of late summer.

Today, this prairie now shows little evidence of the calamity that forced many to leave their homes. Crested wheat grass, planted by the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration, replaced the once cultivated land. The natural short grasses never returned. In some places, there is abandoned farm equipment and a few lost buildings, but little is left. Roads that were once busy are now barely ruts in the grass, and remnants of railroad lines lay twisted in the sun.

In 1857, Captain John Palliser, commissioned by the Royal Geographic Society, set out on an expedition to explore the land between the South Saskatchewan River and the United States border. He found the land treeless and seemingly lifeless. Palliser suggested that the area was an extension of the Great American Desert and that it would not be suitable for agricultural purposes. Palliser's Triangle is the name of this area of southeastern Alberta and southwestern Saskatchewan. Palliser claimed that the land was simply too dry to sustain the farming industry. As immigration to the west expanded, ranching became the settlers' choice, and for many years ranchers occupied the land. This dry, apparently barren soil



proved to be excellent for ranching, as cattle and sheep grazed the land alongside the antelope and deer. The land was open and offered a lot of space for grazing.

Figure 1: Palliser's Triangle¹

The Canadian Pacific Railroad and the Dominion of Canada had other plans, though. To expand the railroad and the vision of a Canada united from sea to sea, it was necessary to populate this land, not just with ranchers, but also with farmers; many, many farmers. Moreover, farmers bring and create families. Large families were what the Dominion wanted, and massive propaganda campaigns provided the impetus for increasing the population in the west. If the railroads were going to be successful, it was imperative for the area to be populated. In addition, if the Dominion were to flourish, the population needed to extend from coast to coast.

In 1884, the Canadian Pacific Railway published a pamphlet entitled *The Wise Policy of Selecting the Southern Route*² aimed at dispelling the old myths of the Great American Desert and the ill-suitedness of the land for farming. Establishing a system of ten experimental farms in the region, from Secretan in the east to Gleichen in the west, the railway set out to prove the fertility of the region. As David Jones related, “After the first crop year, the results tumbled in – the land would provide crop yields as heavy as the gumbo of Manitoba; a fine crop could be expected the first year; cereals, roots and garden products could be successfully grown at an altitude of 3000 feet.”³

The railway’s tainted propaganda promoted further settlement; however, the settlement process was very slow and little population growth occurred between 1887 and 1896. It was not until the election of the pro-settler Liberal government in 1896 that the boosterism became full blown. In 1905, when the torch passed from Clifford Sifton to Frank Oliver as Minister of the Interior, efforts to settle the land further intensified. Various pamphlets and publications, distributed throughout Europe and the United States, aimed at

encouraging settlers to come west. The following are two examples of the propaganda posters produced by the Dominion government.



Figure 2: Recruitment posters⁴

The ranching community continued to advise newcomers of the arid conditions, but many farmers saw this as a ploy to maintain control of the land. Soon, the optimism and sheer numbers of the new settlers overwhelmed all but a few sheep and cattle ranchers.

When Alberta became a province of the Dominion of Canada in September of 1905, it was the least able of all the Prairie Provinces to take care of itself. Wheat production was minimal, as the price of wheat was not yet sustainable, and barley and oats were sown only as feed for cattle, sheep and horses. However, this did not stop the wave of investment and the settlement boom that occurred between 1906 and 1913. As Eric Hansen pointed out in his seminal study *The Financial History of Alberta*, “The number of farms doubled between 1906 and 1911, and the field crop acreage more than tripled. The value of the wheat crop in

1913 was seven times that of 1906... largely attributable to the opening of the southeast for settlement.”⁵

The increasing population created several problems for the inexperienced provincial Liberal government. Social expenditures were necessary to provide the infrastructure for the growing population. Eric Hansen commented,

Education accounted for most of the social expenditure during the 1906 to 1913 period. The provincial department of education drew up school curricula, provided a school inspection staff, and made grants to schools according to statutory stipulations and ministerial direction. In 1908, a provincial university was set up as a separate entity and derived its revenue from student fees and provincial government appropriations voted annually. Agricultural schools began to be established in 1912 and more than half of the federal agricultural assistance grants which began to be received in that year were devoted to expenditure on such schools.⁶

Although the Dominion government provided financial resources, this was often not enough to sustain the level of growth of the province. The provincial government continued to borrow money to finance the boom.

The growth of Medicine Hat, the heart of the southeast corner of the province, coincided with the boosterism of the entire district. The CPR viewed Medicine Hat as a prime location for the building of the railway as Medicine Hat was situated between Moose Jaw and the Crowsnest Pass. In 1883, the construction of the railway began. While digging for water in Langevin just outside of Medicine Hat, a CPR crew inadvertently came across a natural gas reserve. According to the municipal census of Medicine Hat, this busy town soon grew from a population of 1,570 in 1901, to 5,606 in 1911, and to 9,634 in 1921.⁷ At the height of the boom in 1913 Medicine Hat boasted a population of around 15,000. A variety of industries and services was necessary for the growing population. In 1898, construction of the

Merchant's Bank began. The Lands Office was built by 1901. In 1905, the new Canadian Pacific Railroad station became another fixture in this bustling town. St. John's Presbyterian Church held the first classes for the public school board, and, as more settlers migrated into the town, a school was built.



Figure 3: Medicine Hat's first school⁸

With the growing population and the boom in industry, the town incorporated in 1907, and Medicine Hat residents elected their first mayor, William Cousins. Building began on the Bank of Commerce and the Cypress Club (a gentleman's club) in 1907.⁹ The Alberta Clay Products, started in 1909, as well as greenhouses, natural gas production, and other industries and services soon laid the foundation for community life. By 1912, all of the major churches had been built: St. Patrick Roman Catholic; St. John's Presbyterian; Fifth Avenue Methodist; and St. Barnabus, Anglican. Looking at the number of building permits issued gives an excellent indication at the pace and level of growth.

Table 1: Number of Building Permits Issued by Year 1909–1914¹⁰

Year	Number of Permits Issued
1909	108
1910	160
1911	289
1912	635
1913	792
1914	222

As noted in Table 1, the growth of Medicine Hat reached its apex between 1911 and 1913. In 1912, Medicine Hat ranked second among Canadian cities in building growth, up 281 percent from the previous year.¹¹ There was unbridled enthusiasm surrounding the expansion. Many towns and villages grew up around Medicine Hat, including Carlstadt, which eventually changed its name to Alderson, Whitla, Bow Island, Winnifred, and Redcliffe. The people in each of these towns and villages felt the same optimism that was evident in Medicine Hat. As a headline in the *Carlstadt News* suggested, “Carlstadt is booming.”¹² This newspaper exhibits an extreme optimism of the hopes and dreams of the newcomers, and this was not the only village to see nothing but clear skies ahead. Both Etzicom and Orion claimed, “Boom times” and “busy.”¹³ The building and population boom in Medicine Hat spilt into the surrounding area. In her travel diary of 1909, Alexandra Smith, a resident of Whitla, described the rapid growth of the entire area. She had taken a trip by train through southern Alberta, down the west coast to California and then returned through the plains of the United States to Whitla. She commented, “Bow Island – a dozen new

buildings going up, looks like they mean business, Burdett – half a dozen new buildings, Grassy Lake – has about twenty buildings mostly new.”¹⁴

Although their names and dates of arrival are unknown, the first white women to enter the area were the sisters and mother of Constable Graham, a North West Mounted Police officer, settling near the Cypress Hills. They made the long overland journey from Simcoe, Ontario. As the young ladies were the only white members of their sex nearer than Fort Garry Manitoba, members of the police force were frequent visitors and displayed a wonderful appetite for Graham bread.¹⁵ More and more settler women arrived in Medicine Hat almost as soon as the railway went through in 1885. One of the first land purchasers in Medicine Hat was Mrs. Thomas Botterill.¹⁶ Among the first female residents of Medicine Hat and the surrounding area was Mrs. Bassett, who, along with her husband, ran the Cosmopolitan Hotel. Many sick or injured railway men regained their health under her watchful eye and careful nursing.¹⁷ Mrs. Finnigan, of Gleichen, was a woman of considerable character and ability, who was known to entertain ministers, students, and railroad men most kindly. She also had the honour of being the first female school trustee elected in the Province of Alberta. As J.W. Morrow reminisced, “The door of the Finnigan's always swung easily open in the enlarging, ennobling, irradiating and divine grace of hospitality.”¹⁸

Two other women arriving in the area engaged in the laundry business. Even though the Dominion limited and discouraged the immigration of Black settlers, a Black woman who came across the border from Montana and claimed to be the first white woman, though she was known to everyone as “Nigger Molly MacKay.”¹⁹ The other was a white woman who answered to the nickname of “Slippery Annie.” Being both engaged in the same business, there was considerable rivalry between these two women, which occasionally assumed

alarming proportions, especially if both had been indulging in alcoholic beverages. In one instance, Molly took after her rival with a butcher knife. Annie, however, seized a pail of hot water and threatened to “scrape Molly’s hide.”²⁰ Molly started to abuse Annie, and a regular stream of expletives accompanied each outburst. After enjoying this for some time, Slippery Annie advised Molly to “go home and use the cleaver on her tongue, and after she had done this to be sure to fumigate the knife.”²¹ Later, Annie managed to marry a Frenchman, but not without incident. The first time she arrived at the church, the minister refused to perform the ceremony because Annie was intoxicated. The marriage eventually did happen sometime later, and the honeymoon trip to Quebec began by walking along the Canadian Pacific Railway and stopping at section houses en route.²²

Whatever their motives, settler women moved into the area and filled a void in the community. In the centennial pamphlet, *Medicine Hat: The First 100 Years*, commentators wrote, “Indeed some of the first ladies who came to town claimed to be in the laundry business, but most of their time was taken with bootlegging and the sale of sexual favours.”²³ Prostitution remained an uncomfortable element in the Medicine Hat community well into the twentieth century. In January of 1917, the City Council Chamber debated eliminating the houses of ill repute. The newspaper report suggested that the debate centered on venereal disease and education, and that public instruction was necessary. It also noted that the churches could best do the work of education. Additionally, the City Council report in the *Medicine Hat News* discussed economics as a cause of prostitution. The editor suggested, “Many girls were forced into a life of shame through poverty. Any girl who had to earn her own living should be assured of a salary large enough to enable her to live decently.”²⁴

As more and more women arrived in the area, the fabric of community life changed as well. Women were actively participating in the development of the community in a variety of different functions. They were housewives, telegraph operators, teachers, nurses, and entrepreneurs. The numerous ways in which these women participated in their communities added to the growth and development of this region of Alberta.

Women's Social Networks: The Alberta Context

Women's social networks played an extensive role in the development of communities throughout Alberta and, specifically, the Medicine Hat area. Both formal and informal networks helped create the foundations on which a community could be built, and their formation gave women a strong sense of belonging. Informal networks, which were created through familial and friendship ties, offered women an emotional attachment to the place where they lived. Formal networks, made up of official organizations like the Women's Christian Temperance Union, United Farm Women of Alberta, Women's Institutes, Mothers' Clubs, or the Red Cross, gave women an opportunity to socialize, network, and complete projects that would improve themselves and their communities. Many of the networks women created were multi-dimensional and provided women with the strength and support they needed to participate in the public as well as the private spheres.

Kinship and Friendship Ties (Informal Networks)

Women traditionally formed social networks through kin relationships. The relationships between mothers and daughters, sisters, aunts, and grandmothers, often provided the foundational knowledge necessary for women to become good mothers and wives. Women learned how to cook, sew, knit, clean, garden, bake, preserve, and quilt from their mothers. The knowledge of childbirth and child rearing also passed from generation to generation. Learning to be female, with all that entailed, was women's business. Some women, like Mennonite, Hutterite, Doukabout, and Aboriginal women, as well as those young enough to travel with their family, maintained these familial ties. For many women in Alberta, however, the pioneering experience left them without these ties. Practical skills associated with pregnancy and child care that women had traditionally gained from their kinfolk were absent, and, in the early years of prairie settlement, many women found the isolation and lack of support particularly hard to bear. Without close kinship ties, women looked externally for the support they required.

Since so few settler women were present in Alberta prior to 1900, often the only contact women would make with another woman would be by chance. Each day, she would eagerly watch for a wagon with a female occupant, even while she was busy with the laundry, cooking, mending, gardening, and childcare. Her loneliness was not from the lack of human contact, but from the lack of *female* social contact. Her wish was to find a sister in a remote place. Through informal friendships with neighbours, women provided emotional and material support to one another. They delivered each other's babies, offered childcare and domestic help, and provided a sympathetic ear when needed. Despite this apparent isolation, women found ways to connect with other women. Newspapers provided another way for

women to informally reach out to each other. In 1890, Minnie May, women's editor for *The Farmer's Advocate*, summed it up:

In all our trials women's greatest friend should be women. It is the very greatest comfort to have a woman friend to whom one can turn for consolation when all seems dark around us, and she can say the words you want to hear.²⁵

The women's pages in many newspapers like the *Free Press Prairie Farmer*, *Grain Growers' Guide*, the *Farmer's Advocate*, and the *Family Herald and Weekly Star*, published in far off places like Montreal and Winnipeg, offered rural women the opportunity to help and support one another, even when they were far from their neighbours. Bluebird, writing in "Good Company," *Family Herald and Weekly Star*, April 12, 1904, commented on the importance of these columns:

While your charming circle was still in its infancy I became a member and received a pin. I have never written since, still I have kept a close eye on its growth and must say we are quite a community now.... Dear Hostess, how I do enjoy your weekly talks; they seem to cheer me on; you have no idea the amount of good you are doing. I trust you may be long spared to lend us a helping hand, as you have done in the past four years. Now dear Hostess, some poor member in Manitoba or N.W.T wished for some print pieces for quilts. If you could send me her address I could send her some. I wish I could do more for the Circle, but what papers and books I get I pass them on to a neighbour who gets none.²⁶

Through the newspapers, women were able to connect with each other, despite the physical isolation many of them experienced. The newspapers provided an endless amount of information to these new settlers. It offered practical household tips from sewing to cooking, baking and preserving, to tips in childcare and homestead management specific to life on the prairies. It also offered emotional support as women could connect with those they may never meet. The early Women's pages, in newspapers such as the *Family Herald and Weekly Star*,

offered much of the practical, material, and emotional support a woman needed. As the area populated with women however, the Women's pages in local newspapers such as the *Medicine Hat News*, became less of a practical support and to a greater degree, a column that outlined the weekly social goings-on in the communities. Further into the crisis, the columns took on a greater political tone as some of the writers tackled issues of destitution, poverty, and the imminent loss of their communities.

Catherine Neil was one of the earliest settlers to the Grassy Lake/Burdett area, emigrating from Scotland in 1905. Mrs. Catherine Neil described the experience of her first summer in a camp wagon with her husband. As there were few settlers in the area, there was no need to remain on their own land, so the sheep pastured in different areas. Supplies delivered each week brought lots of salt pork and beans and little choice in what she received. Catherine longed for fruit and vegetables, but none were available. She also longed for her days of leisure in Scotland, sleeping in until eight o'clock in the morning. In the camp wagon, she rose at four thirty to make breakfast and turn the lead sheep so the sheep did not roam too far away. As she and Jim (her husband) became more prosperous, they ended their stays in the camp wagon and hired a man and his wife to do the same.

Mrs. Neil did not receive the company of another woman until seven months after her arrival. The first woman she met was Mrs. Slawson, the midwife for the area. As Mrs. Slawson was a German and spoke broken English, it was difficult for Catherine to elicit the information she needed to bake bread. Catherine was so embarrassed at her lack of knowledge, and uncomfortable with the difficulty in communication, she could not summon up enough courage to ask. A week later, she visited another early settler, Mrs. Clark, who, with a tiny baby, became a confidant and a friend:

When we met we ran to each other, and put our arms round each other's neck, and just had a good cry. All the hunger and longing we each had to speak to a woman, and had stifled for so long, gave way, and we felt better after our cry. She led me to a little cot fashioned out of an orange box, and daintily hung with muslin, and there I saw the first little Canadian boy. These were the days "When a feller needs a friend."²⁷

Mrs. Neil's search for sisterhood and the eventual realization offered her relief from her loneliness. After the birth of her first baby, Catherine spent some time with the section manager's wife, Mrs. Billie Burch, as it was shearing time and being alone in the ranch house was overwhelming for her as a new mother.²⁸ When her brother-in-law Bob married, Catherine gained a new sister and friend.

These informal networks, whether through friendship ties or the more abstract means of newspaper columns, allowed women the opportunity to connect. These networks formed the basis for the more formal ties of organizations. Without coming together and sharing everyday experiences and grievances, many of the gains women achieved through the formal organizations would not have been possible.

Formal Organizations

Female networks provided the impetus for expanded health care, education, and other social services to improve the standard of living. Through organizations such as the Women's Institutes (WI), The Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), and The United Farm Women of Alberta (UFWA), Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire (IODE), and many others, women were able to make a difference in their communities. However, race, class, and ethnicity complicated this. The IODE women did not allow non-British members; the WCTU was a white women's organization; and women in farm

organizations advocated the emigration of domestic servants. In some ways, this defies the notion of sisterhood, as their sisters could only be those who were of the same race, class, and ethnicity. Often, women who were involved in one of these organizations were drawn into others as well. These women knew each other on an informal level. They were friends and neighbours first and then recognized their collectivity in living on the prairie. This web of relationships demonstrates the complexity of female networks during the first-wave feminist movement. Nellie McClung, Alice Jamieson and Emily Murphy collaborated to help achieve the vote for women in Alberta.

The Women's Institutes held national conventions to build a bridge between all the grassroots groups and the national organization. The feeling prevailed that no matter where a woman lived in Canada, the common bond of an organization kept her with her sisters. Commenting at the Women's Institute convention in Edmonton, Miss Francis Beynon stated in 1918, "The west is the west and east is east, and never the twain shall meet, is very true geographically, but it is not true in the cooperative spirit of women that is surging through Canada today."²⁹ By 1926, there were hundreds of organizations to which women belonged. Some examples include: the National Council of Women; the IODE; Federated Women's Institutes of Canada; the Catholic Women's League of Canada; the WCTU; the Young Women's Christian Association; the Canadian Women's Press Club; Canadian Federation of University Women; the Victorian Order of Nurses; the Canadian Nurse's Association; Canadian Girl Guides Association; the National Girls' Work Board; Big Sister Associations; and many others at the local level.³⁰

The power of these relationships, and of the networks they created, gave these women the strength and support needed to achieve their aims. The reality remains that the coalition of suffragists, temperance groups, and women's social welfare organizations began

with personal relationships. Women could then expand these connections into formal networks, which had the power to attain franchise rights for all Canadian women. Some thought that these networks and coalitions were counter-productive to the war effort. The authors of the *Canadian Annual Review War Series* commented,

Canadian women, during 1916... did a good deal to aid Patriotic objects and help their country and Empire. There were slackers amongst them as amongst the men, with similar elements of indifference and inertia or worse; Suffrage and Prohibition, Pacificism and Society, kept some from labour and helpfulness.³¹

The idea that each of these organizations kept women away from their duties to King and Country and to their families was a prevailing attitude of the day.

There were women who hampered the recruitment of soldiers during the First World War. Both men and women alike offered harsh criticism of these actions:

Mrs. Cummings, at a Women's meeting in Toronto on Mar. 30 declared that there was "appalling apathy among many women while some were openly hostile to recruiting;" Lieut.-Col. Bradley of the 149th Battalion told a Sarnia meeting (Apr. 2) that "there are two classes of women in the country, those who give their men, seeing their duty, and those who try to prevent them from enlisting;" Lieut.-Col. W.H Price of the 204th made this point (Apr. 8) in Toronto; "I am not blaming the young men. I am blaming the women. Some mothers seem to think there is something different about their sons, some peculiar reason why their sons should not enlist, while sons of other women on the same street should."³²

Despite opposition on some fronts, these networks at the various local, national, and international levels, both formally and informally, gave women the strength and support to participate in the public sphere as well as the private sphere. Women were involved in all aspects of community life; economically, socially, and politically.

They participated actively in the economy by providing domestic services to bachelors, selling goods and services, or fundraising for various causes. By the 1920s,

women worked in a variety of occupations including nursing, teaching, as telegraph operators, in offices and factories, and in newspapers. They owned their own businesses and worked as domestic servants, waitresses, cooks, and store clerks. Their involvement in economic life proved to be another area where women worked together to achieve certain ends. Cooperative laundries and bakeries offset the heavy weight of daily labour. However, these amenities were advantageous only for those who lived in towns and cities; rural women did not have the same luxury. One of the first tasks where women sought to help other women was to set up rest rooms in towns and villages throughout the province. These rest rooms, provided by the town women of the Women's Institute, offered a place for rural women to rest, socialize, feed their children, have a cup of tea, and find out the latest news. It was a woman's place, created by women for women.

Although the task was much more difficult, rural women did find ways to work cooperatively; in fact, sharing work with another woman was often the only way for a farmwoman to escape both the routine and isolation of housework. Sandra Myres commented on rural women's cooperative work in her book, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience*:

They visited back and forth, usually for the entire day, taking their small children and some mending or other handwork with them to occupy their hands while they chatted and visited with a woman friend busy with her cooking or washing. The next week the visit was exchanged with a reversal in the type of work to which each woman attended.³³

The ways in which women worked cooperatively for economic gain depended largely on their age as well as when and where they resided in Alberta. The experiences of farmwomen's and early homesteading women differed greatly from the young working class woman or the middle-class and middle-aged woman of the 1910s and 1920s.

Women were often active participants in the social life of many communities.

Dances, picnics, and teas provided women the opportunity to connect with other women, to balance the isolation of farm and domestic life. These social engagements were opportunities to bring the people of a community together, to share their lives and experiences, and to create a sense of belonging and attachment. Beth Light and Joy Parr offer insight into women's role in community building:

In each locality women set about to reproduce the traditions they had left behind, the missionary societies, Bible classes, teas and suppers attached to religious fellowship, the temperance organizations, women's institutes, and less formal networks through which medical knowledge and the craft skills of domestic life were shared.³⁴

As they grew to know their neighbours, they realized that many of the concerns they had echoed in the voices of other women. The Christian value of charity was certainly an underlying current in the growth of women's activism for social reform, but they too realized that beyond charity there was an expectation of higher living standards for all. Nancy Langford, in her book, *Politics, Pitchforks and Pickle Jars*, commented on the growing realization of common bonds and concerns:

They found as they connected with each other at events such as childbirth, picnics, teas and eventually women's meetings, that they had common concerns and a shared vision of community improvement. They identified early the needs of children, mothers and the less fortunate in their farm districts. Most pressing were the needs for appropriate medical care for expectant mothers and for family illnesses and accidents. Most mothers worried about the opportunities for the children to be educated and to have some of the advantages, like libraries and social activities that the mothers themselves had enjoyed as young people.³⁵

These women wanted health care, hospitals, schools, and libraries. They wanted safe food, safe water, and sanitation services. They wanted access to transportation. Those who had emigrated from urban centres wanted all of the amenities that they had left behind that were

available in an industrializing nation. Nancy Langford continued her analysis of the growing community bonds:

The social welfare activities of farm women changed both in character and size, expanding over the years to include more issues and challenges. The focus in the early years was on the immediate concerns of neighbours and residents of an area who were dealing with problems like spousal or child abuse, destitution because of fire or failed crops, alcoholism or desertion of a family by a father or mother. Farm women were always ready to help with food, clothing and quilts, contacting and persuading appropriate authorities, or by raising money to remedy the situation.³⁶

Women's social goals soon translated into political action. Women were able to step from the domestic sphere into active civic life with the help of formal and informal networks. The smaller, more informal groups allowed women to take care of each other and their communities, and the larger, more formal groups gave them the platform from which they could pursue goals like suffrage and social reform. Women's organizations soon realized that, without political power and the right to vote, these social changes were not likely to occur.

It is important to remember that the women's suffrage campaigns were not unique to Alberta alone. This wave was just part of a larger movement throughout the rest of Canada, Britain, and the United States as well. Lobbying the provincial and federal governments, women finally succeeded in attaining the vote provincially in 1916 and federally in 1918. Interestingly, for the vast majority of women in Alberta, gaining the right to vote did not seem to make a considerable impact on their lives. What did make an impact were the social reforms and educational opportunities that provided an enhanced standard of living for all in Alberta. What they could not achieve alone, they began to achieve together.

As early as 1886, women began to involve themselves in the development of the community. As the female population grew, more and more women were actively participating in the advancement of the district. The numerous ways in which these women participated in their communities added to the productive growth and development of this region of Alberta. These women felt the enthusiasm, optimism, and shared vision of building community: the hope of Eden.

Women's Voices, Women's Contributions

Few women left any written record of their experiences in the communities they were trying to build. In the odd place there are diaries and letters and in others a set of poems or paintings. However, the local news columnists from the *Medicine Hat Weekly News* provided an interesting and informative account of events as they unfolded around them. Three of these local correspondents, Mrs. Charlotte Cotter from Alderson, Mrs. Margaret Calder from Bow Island, and Mrs. Thurza Trebble from Winnifred, added their commentary on a variety of subjects and community activities. Not only did they describe in detail the latest fashions to be found in the Eaton's catalogue, or the lovely decorations at a Saturday afternoon wedding, but they also commented on the crisis in schools in the area, the attempts at resolving the economic crisis, and were often outspoken in what they saw as their communities crumbled around them after 1917.

Alderson Correspondent: Mrs. Charlotte Cotter

Mrs. Charlotte Cotter was a powerful voice in describing the social conditions of the Medicine Hat area. She arrived in the area in September of 1909, went to work as the postmistress, and immediately became actively involved in town life. As one of the most energetic members in town, as well as being well educated, she also performed the task of the area's correspondent to the *Medicine Hat News* as well as the *Calgary Herald*. When she began writing for the *News*, she would have been in her twenties and continued in that role until her mid-fifties. If anyone knew what was going on in town, it was Mrs. Cotter. An accomplished musician, she was also a member of the St. Mary's Anglican Church and was the organist until 1935. It was Mrs. Cotter's submission that gained approval when Carlstadt changed its name to Alderson in May of 1915. Childless, she had the time and energy to become involved extensively in the town's social life. She craved tea parties, bridge, and the company of other likeminded individuals. She and her husband Weymus were members of the 400 Social Club, the polite and cultured element of town. At various times, members included such prominent local names as the Wagners, the Swanbys, the Scollards, the Starrs, the Macmorrises, and others who participated in the club until there was virtually no life left in the town. Mrs. Cotter was also involved in a number of organizations other than those she attended with her husband. She also participated in the Community Circle³⁷ and the Sunshine Club³⁸. She and the other ladies of Alderson took part in these groups to learn how to paint, fancy sew, and practice other skills necessary in a refined lady's life.³⁹ Mrs. Cotter was outgoing, and she very much enjoyed being the centre of attention in a crowd.⁴⁰

No one knew more about the people of the district than Mrs. Cotter did, even though she denied reading everyone's post cards in the mailroom. She was also the official registrar

of vital statistics for the entire region of the dry belt, recording births, deaths, and marriages. For roughly three decades, she translated the rumour and happenings of the area into her informative column in the *Medicine Hat Weekly News*.⁴¹ Throughout this period, Mrs. Cotter kept records of the events as they unfolded in the area.

Bow Island Correspondent: Mrs. Margaret Calder

Mrs. Margaret Calder arrived in the Bow Island area in 1908 at the age of thirty-four. There, she joined her husband George, who had left their home of Aberdeen, Scotland, two years before. Maggie, as her friends knew her,⁴² made the journey with two young children in tow: George Jr. who was seven and Margaret who was five. Mrs. Calder had never been on a farm until she came to the bald prairie of southern Alberta. Two additional sons, Bert (1908) and Bill (1910) were born in their small homestead shack. In 1915, George Sr. heeded the call to enlist and went overseas leaving Mrs. Calder and George Jr., then fourteen, to run the farm. In 1918, upon George Sr.'s return, the family moved into Bow Island.⁴³

Both George Sr. and Mrs. Calder were popular in town where they were active members of the St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church. George Sr. played the bagpipes to solemnize the occasion when the foundation was laid for the church. In 1917, after the first year of drought occurred, the congregation of the Presbyterian Church found themselves without a minister, and the Methodist Church congregation found themselves without a building. The two congregations united into one for practical purposes, eight full years before the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches officially joined to become the United Church of Canada in 1925.

After working as a clerk in the post office for a couple of years, George Sr. became the Postmaster of Bow Island in 1921. As a result, Mrs. Calder became his clerk and assistant. They ran the post office and the Alberta Government Telephones operation until George's health failed in the 1940s. At that time, the switchboard was located in the post office, and Mrs. Calder became the telephone operator. The post office was located in the centre of town, and one can imagine Mrs. Calder sitting at the switchboard, amid all the activity, beckoning someone to the phone. "Many times her piercing whistle would summon someone from across the street to the telephone."⁴⁴

The post office in the early days was the hub of the community. It served a variety of functions for its patrons. The local history of Bow Island suggested, "the Postmaster was the general registrar and it was his duty to register all births, marriages and deaths, he was also paymaster for all grain companies, and was an issuer of licenses for radio receiving sets."⁴⁵

The Calder family was very active in the community. George Sr., along with being postmaster, became mayor in 1927. Mrs. Calder was the secretary treasurer for the Bow Island chapter of the United Farm Women of Alberta.⁴⁶ She was also a member of the Women's Institute of Bow Island.⁴⁷ The children too were active in the town, belonging to groups such as the Campfire girls and the Young People's Society.⁴⁸

The Women's Institute of Bow Island began in 1917. Originally overshadowed by the Red Cross, the group did not gain real ground until after the end of the war. Interest waned in the Red Cross and the group disbanded, leaving the Women's Institute the main organization of women in town. The rest room was set up and organized by members of the WI. In the early 1920s, after two years of total crop failures left many local people destitute, the WI began a program of relief.⁴⁹

All of this activity put Margaret Calder at the centre of the community. She was in her early fifties when she wrote for the *Medicine Hat Weekly News*, and her children had grown. She had the opportunity to know what was going on in town and would be the most likely candidate for the correspondent position for the *Medicine Hat Weekly News*. Her column is expressive in not only community activity, but also in its commentary on some of the difficulties arising in the crisis.

Winnifred Correspondent: Mrs. Thurza Trebble

In 1906, Mr. Tom Trebble arrived from the Somerset district in England to seek a homestead. Upon filing a claim in 1907, he met his neighbours, Mr. and Mrs. Milo Scott. Tom was active in the community aiding in the construction of the Rocky Lake School in 1913 along with Milo Scott and J.L. Wright.⁵⁰ Tom enlisted in the armed forces, as did many of his neighbours, and served overseas during World War I.

Upon his return, he found a much grown up Thurza, Mr. and Mrs. Scott's daughter. Thurza captivated Tom, and the two were married in the manse in Winnifred. They lived on the farm until Tom's appointment as postmaster in 1922. At that time, the Globe Store housed the post office, being in a central location in the community. Eventually, Tom bought the old bank building and moved the office there. The Trebbles made residence in the same building. Along with his duties as postmaster, Tom was the paymaster for three grain elevators as well as the manager of the Alberta Government Telephones operation that was housed in the same building.⁵¹

Tom and Thurza had five children between 1922 and 1933. Ray, the only boy, was born on the farm in 1922; Irene in 1924; Phyllis in 1925; May in 1928; and Lois in 1933.

Along with the substantial activity of taking care of the house and the children, Thurza acted as assistant postmistress and telephone operator. In 1929, Miss Emily DeWald became Tom's full time assistant and took over the operation when Tom took a trip back to England in 1935. Upon his return, Tom continued as postmaster until his death in 1944. Then, Thurza assumed the postmistress position until 1945.⁵²

The Trebble family was active in the community. The editor of the local history book noted that “[Thurza] took part in all of our activities.”⁵³ She was a member of the ladies' basketball team in 1927 as well as a frequent member of all of the community's activities.

Having grown up in the area, Thurza was familiar with all of the people in the area. She had the means to know what was going on in town and was active in the community. Although she would have been busy raising her children and taking care of her husband, being only in her late twenties or early thirties, along with the duties she had at the post office and the switchboard, she also fits the role of the correspondent to the *Medicine Hat Weekly News* well.

Mrs. Catherine Neil

Catherine Neil was one of the earliest settlers to the Grassy Lake/Burdett area. Like many others, she emigrated from Scotland on the promise of marriage and a new life. She wrote a memoir of the early years, *Pioneer Days*,⁵⁴ in her mid to late forties, when she recalled her experiences as a wife and mother on a sheep ranch. Initially she told this tale to a Women's Institute gathering and then wrote the story as a published account. She described

her experience from the beginning of her journey from Scotland in 1905, to various stories of the characters and work that enveloped her life. The narrative ends rather abruptly in 1918.

Mrs. Neil left Scotland in early June 1905 to spend seventeen days via ship and train to reach Medicine Hat and her awaiting betrothed, Jim. Jim and his brother Bob had been in the country for four years, setting up the farm. Shortly after her arrival, they married and began the journey to her new life and her new home of Grassy Lake. Coming from a city in Scotland, her life on the farm was a new experience altogether. After a rough drive in a lumber wagon, ten miles south of Grassy Lake, Mrs. Neil entered upon her new home. “Then I realized I was alone in a strange country with no neighbours, no stores, and little experience in cooking or housekeeping.”⁵⁵ Where many women received their education about being a wife and a mother from their relatives, Mrs. Neil confessed she knew very little.

As I came from a large city, I had never been on a farm except for a short visit of a week. I was an only girl, and had been raised by one of those reserved Scot's mothers, who think it time enough for a girl to learn things about married life, after they are married, always in the hope that she will be at hand to tell all a young wife should know. Unfortunately for me, I was married in Medicine Hat, so my mother was far away.⁵⁶

Mrs. Neil found the first weeks of her marriage did not live up to what she imagined married life would be. With the men all otherwise engaged, as it was shearing time, she remained alone in the house with her thoughts. “I felt that my romance had not ended like most fairy tales, ‘And they lived happily ever after’. It looked as if I were to live alone ever after.”⁵⁷

As the area populated, Mrs. Neil rejoiced at gaining new neighbours and the growing feeling of community. “I had many visitors these days and met many pioneers. They all seemed happy, and why not? Our government was giving them 160 acres free.”⁵⁸ Mrs. Neil commented about the active social life, as the newcomers arrived:

These new settlers soon felt the need of comradeship, and get acquainted parties were held at each other's homes, and later on as the schools were built, concerts, box socials, and dances were held. It was quite common to hear a noise like a lot of coyotes howling, and on investigation to find out that it was several sleigh loads of folks from all over the district coming to spend the evening. They brought the eatables and all you had to provide was the tea and coffee. They did the work. Beds were taken apart or piled on top of each other to make room for all who came. Elegance had no part in these gatherings. A good time was all we looked for.⁵⁹

In the early years of settlement before 1910, pioneer women appeared inclusive in who could belong to the various groups and who was invited to social events. Catherine Neil commented on the nature of the growing community and the common bonds that tied them all.

In these Pioneer Days we were pretty much one big family. No matter what the nationality and we had many from different parts all around us. There were the German settlers, and the Swedes and Dutch and a few Norwegians; all who kept pretty much in small settlements. Then there were the English, Scottish and Irish, and a number of Eastern Canadians. When there was any sickness there were always willing helpers, and when sorrow came, we all felt it.⁶⁰

Along with the growing sense of community came an unwritten obligation to help others. This notion of reciprocal action aided in the development of the community itself. Mrs. Neil offered a story to describe this phenomenon when she broke her arm.

As the children were still in bed and there was no one to leave them with, we got them dressed and took them to a neighbour's, about two miles away, and then drove twelve miles to Grassy Lake where the doctor was located. He set my arm and I drove home again, wondering how I could ever manage alone, when a neighbour's girl came in and said, "Ma sent me, and I 'aint agone home either. She said I could look after the kids." She was only fourteen, but I didn't have the heart to send her back home, so we had to get busy and build an addition to the house, for we only had one large room divided by curtains.

Perhaps I should explain why this neighbour felt indebted to me and sent her girl to help. About a year before my accident some one told me that the girl's mother was very ill and not expected to live. I went to see her and offer my help. Mrs. Kirk was there nursing her and she told me it was a case of blood poisoning through neglect at childbirth. The woman was a German, and had quite a number of little ones, and as doctors were far way and the cost of bringing them too much for these poor people, they had a neighbour come in whenever a baby was expected.

I asked Mrs. Kirk if I could help in any way and she said if I could possibly take the two youngest children home with me, as they kept running up and down the wooden stairway, which was above the mother's bed, and she could get no rest. I took three of them home, one a girl of eight, and she was able to keep an eye on the other two, as I had three little ones of my own and no help, so they stayed until their mother got well again, and she felt I had added greatly to her recovery. In sending her girl to help me, she was showing her gratitude, and it was really a sacrifice too, as the girl was badly needed at home.⁶¹

As more and more women arrived in the area, the development of the Women's Institute offered a growing sense of sisterhood to women in the area. Mrs. Neil wrote,

What I would like to say is, that to the present day immigrant, we should give a friendly welcome, and show them that the Women's Institute is a great sisterhood of women, banded together for the bettering of conditions, socially as well as morally, helpful at all times in sickness and trouble of any kind, and always with the one aim before them of a better and greater Canada.⁶²

The Women's Institute was one of the only organizations that offered membership to all women regardless of ethnicity, religion, or class. Mrs. Neil also commented on the effectiveness of the Women's Institute:

I believe this is where the Women's Institute can do a lot of good. If we can only reach the farmer's wives and bring them in amongst us.

Some of them live day to day, going through the same routine of work, cooking, washing, milking cows and feeding chickens, and the only time they get to sit down is when something has to be darned or patched. No wonder many of our women look tired. If we could infuse a little happiness into our meetings, and bring someone to enjoy them, we would be doing something worthwhile.⁶³

The Women's Institute was an inclusive organization aimed at elevating the standard of living for all in Alberta. Mrs. Neil also commented on this inclusiveness:

Perhaps it would not be out of place to say a word for our immigrants from other than English speaking countries. I am sure most of us know that the English language is hard to learn. We have so many words spelt the same way, yet the meaning is different. To a Foreigner, these are very confusing.

Most non-English speaking people are very sensitive about talking English, for fear of being laughed at. I think it is our duty to see that we make it as easy as possible for them to fall into our ways and customs.

I have met many people who speak broken English, and I always feel like helping them out. In this way you gain their confidence, and the result is that they try to learn our language. It sometimes requires a lot of patience, and in this age of hurry and scurry, some of us don't have the patience, but, if we could only realize what it must mean to these people to know that we want to mix with them and treat them as sisters, then we would know that the time was well spent.⁶⁴

Mrs. Neil's comments suggest empathy for the plight of non-English speaking foreigners. She pleaded with the other members of the Women's Institute to be patient with these new immigrants, and, by showing them kindness and treating them as sisters, the new immigrants would embrace both Canadian and British customs and traditions. However, Mrs. Neil and many others assumed that these immigrant women should embrace the British ideal. Nothing else was acceptable.

Mrs. Catherine Neil's comments reflect the sentiment of many British born settlers in the area. The assumption behind this women's organization was that those of foreign lands, with foreign languages and foreign ways, required intervention. They compared the foreign women to the British ideal. Essentially, every foreigner should have the opportunity to get help. She expected the area to develop into the British ideal of community. She experienced the rapid growth and development of the area and the devastating effects World

War I had on communities throughout the area and, indeed, the country. Although Mrs. Neil's narrative ends abruptly in 1918, she dedicated her memoir to neighbours and friends and mentioned the turmoil that the drought and poverty inflicted on her neighbours in the 1920s: "I dedicate this record to the many true friends I met. Some are still with us, others have moved away, and some have passed on to their rest but none of them will be forgotten."⁶⁵

Local Women's Organizations

In Medicine Hat and the surrounding area, settler women formed all sorts of networks. These networks, which were as unique as the settlers themselves, centred on common social interests, religious affiliations, and the political and economic conditions of the participants.

The social life of many of the women in Medicine Hat and surrounding area was full of refined and engaging activity, much the same as was present in other communities in Alberta. Theatrical presentations, operas, dances, and community picnics all provided women (and men) with plenty of opportunities to meet and socialize. Many of these organizations held dances, teas, and bazaars to increase membership and earn extra funds. Most small towns and villages, including Carlstadt, offered their inhabitants events in which to socialize. Mrs. Cotter from Carlstadt/Alderson wrote,

The Farmers Union Carlstadt will have a social meeting on June 18, 1912 in F.E. McDiarmid's Hall and you are cordially invited to attend and eat ice cream, drink pink lemonade and enjoy yourself generally. There will be a program arranged for. We want representatives from all the neighbouring Unions. Tell your husbands, Sweethearts, Sons and Fathers. Bring them along to pay for your ice cream. This is not a dance but a better time. Arrangements will be made for the farmers' picnic to be held;

when and where we'll decide then. Now ladies, bring the men out and enjoy yourselves.⁶⁶

The only time that social activities were limited and banned was when the Spanish flu pandemic hit Alberta in 1918. By order of the Provincial Health Act, the theatres, moving picture houses, churches, and all public assemblies were closed.⁶⁷ For many, this restriction of social engagement was a difficult one. The Spanish Flu pandemic, although not reaching the proportions that occurred in larger centres, had a profound impact on the people of Medicine Hat. Although many complained about their apparent isolation, they did understand the necessity of it.

During the pandemic, schools closed, and the buildings were converted crudely into temporary hospitals.⁶⁸ Medicine Hat's Board of Health placed an advertisement in the *Medicine Hat News* for nurses. It suggested, "Volunteer workers for the city are wanted immediately by the local Board of Health. Help is urgently needed at the Hospital Annex. It has been suggested that the teachers or the city staff might help where possible."⁶⁹ Many teachers volunteered to help in the Spanish Flu Crisis.⁷⁰

The women of Medicine Hat were active not only in health care and social activities, but also in the political sphere. They expected that social improvements would eventually occur if women gained the vote. As one editorial put it, "the enfranchisement of women will gradually transform certain ideas and sentiments which ... will tend to uplift conditions generally."⁷¹ In Medicine Hat, an amendment to the city charter in February of 1915 granted the municipal franchise to women.⁷² Commenting on the role women could play in public life, one editorial suggested that women should be encouraged to run for public office, particularly school trustee, since it was reasonable that "a woman ... could keep more closely

in touch with the things that belong to a child's life."⁷³ When women received the right to vote in provincial and federal elections as well, voting is exactly what they did. In Winnifred, in October of 1920, 70 of the 183 registered voters were women.⁷⁴

Early Women's Organizations

One of the earliest and most active groups of the district was the Ladies' Aid Society established in 1894 in conjunction with the Medicine Hat General Hospital.⁷⁵ The General Hospital was certainly one of the centres of activity for women of the region. The stories of Florence Nightingale and the Crimean War, as well as limited opportunities for women to find paid employment, gave the School of Nursing, established in 1896, some popularity. At its inaugural graduation ceremony, two graduates were present. By the 1922 graduation ceremony, the number of graduates had grown to ten. As time went on, the school continued to grow and certainly provided the women who attended a sense of community and camaraderie as well as an economic role in society.⁷⁶

In 1906, the Women's Literary Club was established. Not only did its members read and debate the literature of the time, but also worked actively to launch libraries in the area.⁷⁷

Every small town surrounding Medicine Hat and the various individual communities within Medicine Hat had a Red Cross Sewing Circle and had members in the WCTU, WI, or UFWA. As well, each church had a local ladies' auxiliary, actively committed to enhancing lives in the community. With over 100 school boards in the Medicine Hat area, women became active participants in education, not only as teachers and school board members but also through the Mothers' Clubs. Over a hundred different organizations were available and

actively pursuing members. Women passed these ideals of community networking and activism down to their daughters in a variety of ways, and through a variety of organizations. However, much of the social, economic, and political activity involving women went unnoticed: as Mrs. Calder from Bow Island suggested, “The Women’s Institute of Bow Island is always looking to do acts of kindness, and perhaps they are not as fully appreciated as they should be.”⁷⁸

The Women’s Institutes

As early as 1910, the Women’s Institutes were active in the Medicine Hat area and provided much aid to members of the community. Women relished the chance to get together and learn from one another. The aim of the movement was to educate women as homemakers and to inspire them with the dignity and significance of their profession. This group was discouraged from being political, as their funding came from the provincial government. As a result, even in rural communities, where women were often divided through politics, religion and language, one of the few organizations that admitted any woman was the WI. The community activity in which the WI branches participated offered the women an acceptable means to broader public life.⁷⁹ As Mrs. I. Nobel observed,

Here too was an opportunity of getting together in pleasant social affairs throughout the years. And what can give a finer feeling of contentment and satisfaction to the mother of the family, than to fare forth to a meeting, where she is to meet others who have her problems, where she is to hear something for the betterment of the health and education of her family, and to wit where she can wear her new dress and hat, of the latest mode, that she has learned to make at the sewing or millinery course – at a minimum cost, too.⁸⁰

The extraordinary efforts of the various WI branches throughout the region provided much needed aid for the local community and benefitted the war effort. In 1917, this organization had contributed \$3200.00 to the Red Cross and had furnished over 4000 garments.⁸¹ By 1918, WI membership in Alberta was over 8000 and had grown by one hundred percent in the former year alone. Meetings were held to make gifts for children's Christmas trees and to plan Christmas festivities. Poppies were sold on Armistice Day; dances held to earn money for continuing aid and activities; card parties held; meetings held for singing and discussing Canadian poets; talks held on how to vote; and there were demonstrations on salads and other domestic interests. These groups created quilts for the needy and for local bachelors; sent boxes of candy to children in the hospital; donated money to a couple who were burned out by a fire; raised money for the Red Cross; and helped orphans.⁸² The fact that school children studied the WI movement as part of the curriculum reflected the vital importance of the organization in many communities.⁸³ The activities of the WI cast a wide net, from meeting the social service needs of community members, to providing educational services in both the domestic and political spheres.

Red Cross Sewing Circles

During World War I, women played a crucial role in the war effort. Women's contributions in Medicine Hat mirrored the assistance of women from across the country. Although their labour often went unnoticed and unappreciated, they continued to do their part for the war effort. Housewives were encouraged to produce, conserve, and ration food. Pledge cards produced the impression of gravity and enhanced the patriotic zeal of the bearer. Placed on this level, it became "a point of honour for the [housewives] to observe the

regulations in their homes and assist the Food Controller in his efforts to conserve the exportable foodstuffs.”⁸⁴

Through the war, a myriad of women’s organizations sprang up in Medicine Hat and surrounding area. In nearly every church basement, parlour, and empty room, women would gather to knit, sew, and make care packages for soldiers. The Red Cross Sewing Circles, although often unnoticed, provided significant aid to the war effort. The Crescent Heights Red Cross Sewing Circle, in one of the neighbourhoods in Medicine Hat, was an example of the tremendous effort women made: “For the month of March [1917] this enthusiastic circle has handed in 162 T bandages, 12 military bands, 48 towels, 52 pillow cases, 3 day shirts, 1 surgical shirt, 8 pairs socks, 18 pairs pajamas, 72 sling bands and \$6.40 proceeds of tea.”⁸⁵ The Whitla Red Cross also contributed in a comparable fashion: “Whitla Red Cross circle has forwarded to the local society 43 pairs of pajamas, 70 T bands, 30 pillow strips, 70 triangle bandages, 3 dozen shirts, 21 towels, 8 pairs socks, 50 khaki handkerchiefs and 7 many tailed bands.”⁸⁶ Suffield and Etzicom produced similar outputs of war materials.⁸⁷ What the women could not make, they bought, and a small fee was levied to each group member to provide extras to send to the soldiers. Each one of these small communities of women made a significant impact on the war effort and collectively provided much needed materials and comforts for the soldiers.

The Mothers' Clubs

The Mothers’ Clubs were another way in which women contributed to the building of community. The creation of the Mothers’ Clubs in Medicine Hat began with the Elizabeth Street School Club in 1911. These clubs were active in individual schools, building a bridge

between the schools and home. As the forerunner to the Parent Teacher Associations created in Alberta in 1929, the Mothers' Clubs lobbied school boards on behalf of their children and the teachers within the local schools. *The Annual Report of the Medicine Hat Public School Board 1913* stated,

Formation of other Mothers' Clubs in various parts of the city followed, each with a slight variation in character of work undertaken. In one case specialization was made of instruction in English to foreign mothers; in another, school gardening, etc., etc. In common, all Mothers' Clubs have the one general aim, viz., to bring the home and the school, the mothers and the teachers, into closer and more mutually helpful relationship for the benefit of the children.⁸⁸

The Mothers' Clubs were active in presenting requests and providing a voice for parents and children in a variety of matters. Public health was certainly an issue and these women pursued the commission and retention of a Medical Superintendent of Schools. Dr. Annabel McEwan, of Fergus, Ontario, was employed as Medical Superintendent by the school board in 1913 and provided health care to school aged children.⁸⁹ The Mothers' Clubs fully supported Dr. McEwan in her efforts. "Delegates from the Mothers' Clubs of Elizabeth and Elm Street Schools presented a petition signed by nearly all the mothers in the district asking that the services of Dr. McEwan be retained."⁹⁰ The Mothers' Clubs enthusiastically approved of Dr. McEwan's services being so readily available. These clubs also gave support and aid to the teachers, and they donated money and equipment to enhance the educational opportunities in the various schools. The efforts of the Mothers' Clubs not only benefitted the school but also to other schools in the area. "Alexandra Mothers' Club bought a couch for Riverside School. In exchange the Mothers' Club is allowed to use the school for the purpose of putting on a concert to raise funds."⁹¹ As well, these Clubs purchased additional school

equipment. Alexandra Mothers' Club donated swings, footballs, etc. to Alexandra Primary School.⁹² They also visited local children's shelters to help in providing the best possible care.⁹³ These women built bridges between school and home by contributing material goods to individual schools, building relationships between parents and teachers, and offering support to the teachers to benefit the children of Medicine Hat.

United Farm Women of Alberta (UFWA)

The United Farmers' of Alberta (UFA) was established in 1909 at the Alberta Farmers' Association convention in Edmonton. Combining the forces of the Alberta Farmers' Association and the Society of Equity, the United Farmers' movement was born. Brad Rennie in his seminal study, *The Rise of Agrarian Democracy: The United Farmers and Farm Women of Alberta, 1909–1921*, suggested that the UFA and the UFWA would see “all their candidates elected in the 1921 federal election; would spawn a great cooperative movement culminating in the Wheat Pool; would be responsible for important women's rights, social, and agrarian legislation; and would immutably mould Alberta's political culture.”⁹⁴ As Rennie pointed out, “This is the story of one of the greatest mass democratic movements in Canadian history and one of the most successful state or provincial level farm bodies in North American history.”⁹⁵ The United Farm Women of Alberta (UFWA) were not formally part of the Alberta farm movement until 1915.

Once in the organization, they espoused the same movement culture as the men, including the radical or liberal ideology, while concerning themselves with women's rights and domestic and social issues associated with their 'sphere.' Their sense of class was generally stronger than their gender loyalty, although neither

predominated in all situations. Both women and men simultaneously had class, movement, gender, religious, community ethnic, racial, and other identities; and any could come to the fore in a particular situation.⁹⁶

Like other women's groups at the time, the UFWA sought membership to achieve particular goals. Their focus was centered on the rights of women politically, economically, and socially. Certainly, they were a powerful force in the politics of the province achieving 'government' status for much of the 1920s and into the early 1930s. They advocated for farmers, and farm women, and their families. However, their central role as government in the province did not translate into a flurry of activity at the local level. What the UFWA did however, in the dry belt of southern Alberta, was to cooperate with many of the other organizations in providing educational and social benefits to those who lived in the area.

In "Alberta Women and their activities in the Institute," a short column in the *Medicine Hat News*, the correspondent wrote of the cooperation between the UFWA and the Women's Institutes where Calgary women of the UFWA set up restrooms for rural women shopping in Calgary.⁹⁷ As well, cooperation between women's organizations such as the UFWA and the Red Cross is apparent. From *Seven Persons* the correspondent wrote, "The UFWA is doing Red Cross work in this district."⁹⁸ There may have simply been too few women living in the area to perform all of the tasks required, so cooperation was necessary. It may also have been pragmatic. Rather than duplicating services, the organizations worked together to make the best use of limited resources.

Sometimes the correspondents to the *Medicine Hat Weekly News* made comments to lift the spirits of the residents in the community as well to promote cooperation. Mrs. Cotter wrote from Alderson, "The New Holland UFA have recently ordered a car of "Five Roses"

flour from Medicine Hat, and also a car of coal from the same place. Unity means strength.”⁹⁹ Mrs. Cotter, and the UFA, saw the power of working collectively and buying local products from local merchants.

Of the correspondents to the *Medicine Hat Weekly News*, Mrs. Margaret Calder also detailed the activities of the UFWA. As secretary treasurer of the Bow Island branch, she had detailed information to pass along to her readers. She noted not only the social activities that the UFA/UFWA undertook but also the political activities. “The U.F.A. and U.F.W.A. jointly held their meeting ... The communication from Edmonton on the issue of income tax was read. The secretary pointed out the importance of such a letter and that an answer must be sent of some kind. It was decided to have the secretary write that the decision of the local was to the effect of upholding the Income tax as it now stands, for we ourselves would only be too glad to pay it if we had the income to pay tax on.”¹⁰⁰ The communication from the locals was delivered to the provincial body but the UFA government had a difficult time addressing the needs of the local residents of the dry belt. The locals wanted to cooperate, but were without the means to do so.

Mothers and Daughters: Perpetuating the Cycle

Women passed a legacy to their daughters in social networking and social activism. Not only did women pass down the skills of womanhood but also the value of community involvement. Networking skills were necessary, and women tried to make sure that their daughters were prepared and able to be successful in the community.

There was an understanding that women and their daughters needed to maintain strong bonds. This bond not only manifested itself in the home but also in the community at large. Mrs. Margaret Calder, the correspondent from Bow Island, suggested,

This being Mother and Daughter week it was thought that mothers and daughters should make an extra effort to understand and help each other more, and knowing what the fear of the Lord does for women, these mothers should help daughters to become Christians by the example set.¹⁰¹

The perpetuation of the Christian ideal of wife and mother, reinforced in editorials in newspapers as well as in community activities, helped to develop the nature of the community itself.

In childhood, a daughter was taught by the beginning skills of a wife and a mother. Early on, girls were required to help in the house with the chores and taking care of younger siblings. Those chores did not vanish as a girl entered school age but were adapted to fit the school schedule.

Nor did life for a young girl centre simply around school and home. Many social activities permitted and encouraged broadening a girl's (and family's) networking abilities. Women gave their daughters an opportunity to become involved in the community in a variety of ways. Young girls hosted (with their mothers' help) tea parties and birthday parties. Outside the home, girls were encouraged to become active members in a variety of groups including the Junior Red Cross and the Girls' Clubs. The Girls' Club was an offshoot of the WI and offered a parallel structure to the parent organization.¹⁰² Schools often provided the space for the Girls' Club.¹⁰³ The farm club movement also began in Alberta in 1917. The original name, "Boys' and Girls' Clubs," was changed in 1952 to the 4-H Clubs of Alberta."¹⁰⁴ Girls were encouraged to become involved in these organizations, as their mothers were.

Religious organizations also provided a place for girls to socialize and network. Groups like the Christian Girls in Training (CGIT) perpetuated the notion of the ideal Christian wife and mother. It was also a place where women and girls could celebrate their sisterhood. Mrs. Calder wrote from Bow Island,

The United Church was a scene of happy girls and their mothers, when the Canadian Girls in Training gave their first banquet to their mothers... These are the kind of gatherings that draw both the mothers and girls in closer with each other and makes for a better feeling between them.¹⁰⁵

The CGIT also offered girls an opportunity to learn new skills besides those relating to their role as potential wife and mother. Recitals, dramatizations, and other events offered the girls an opportunity to broaden their horizons and learn new skills. In Bow Island, the CGIT was particularly active. The CGIT put on a play, "Farmerette," about a young girl who makes good on the homestead when her mother dies.¹⁰⁶ The essence of the play not only taught theatrical skills but also an underlying message of independence and hard work. Church-based groups like the CGIT offered girls a place to explore and learn new skills, all under the watchful eye of Christian women.

Many other organizations for children surfaced. Certainly, girls were encouraged to become involved in the Junior Red Cross. They contributed to the war effort just as their mothers did. Knitting socks, sewing bandages, collecting recyclables, and conservation work were activities reinforced both in the home and in the school. As Mrs. Cotter wrote,

Miss Seymour, teacher of the primary grades, following the custom of the last three years, will hold a flower day on Saturday. The custom has been to have the children sell flowers and the proceeds given to some charity. This year the money raised will be given to the Red Cross.¹⁰⁷

Other groups organized themselves around simply having social fun. The focus was not on social activism or charity work, but around the idea that people need to socialize. Mrs. Cotter wrote from Alderson,

The organization of the young peoples "Something Society" was held in the United Church. This society is for all people from the age of "umpteen" or actually speaking, for everybody who feels young. The aim of the society is not to make money, but to bring the people together for mutual benefit.¹⁰⁸

It was a good thing for people to get together and simply enjoy each other's company.

These groups also gave girls an opportunity to learn new skills, skills that were required for a young lady of refinement. Mrs. Calder wrote from Bow Island, "The concert given by the Golden Keys on Friday night, April 9, was a beautiful affair and much credit is due Miss Esther Kyldgaard, leader of this girls' club. The program consisted of choruses by the girls; recitations and sketches."¹⁰⁹

Sometimes these social activities became excessive. We sometimes have the impression that adults and children only worked and slept, but in fact the opposite was true. People hosted social activities and parties not only on weekends, but on weeknights as well. Sometimes these parties lasted all night and into the early morning. While most enjoyable for those who attended, the Medicine Hat School Board objected to these parties, and recommended, "That parents make sure there are no parties except for Friday and Saturday nights and that parents should require their children to be home no later than 11:30 pm."¹¹⁰

Through the informal and formal networks, women and their daughters were able to contribute in countless ways to the building of community. Friendship and familial ties, either in the form of face-to-face contacts or through correspondence, gave settler women a connection to other women in the community. Early on, these informal networks provided a psychological lift in a life that was sometimes isolated and harsh. They were able to see that

their experience was not so different from others and realized a sense of belonging. As women started to gather in larger numbers, they formalized these friendships and built organizations with a particular purpose in mind. These formal networks provided the impetus for school and hospital building; for health and literacy education in the community; for social and cultural activities, which brought all members of the community together; for political purposes; and for economic gain. Whether it was through organizations that centred on the church, the school, the hospital, the war effort, or simply social activities, women provided a sense of community, a sense of belonging, and a sense of home. In short, they laid the foundations for a community.

2 The Hope of Eden: Building Community in the Prairie Dry Belt, 1908-1917

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CHAPTER 3

HOPES DASHED: THE ABANDONMENT OF THE PRAIRIE DRYLAND,
1918-1936**Introduction**

The post–World War I recession, coupled with high costs and low commodity prices, produced an economic crisis for many in the dry belt. The growing disillusionment with economic conditions forced changes in not only the political landscape of the province, but also in terms of demographic adjustments that would not be overcome until well after World War II. The changing demography also transformed the social conditions. Subsequently, the social networks that women built so carefully faltered, and then failed.

The 1920s saw a downturn in the economy, one that would produce dire consequences for many living in the dry belt. Unlike other areas of North America, the Roaring Twenties was not something that was evident in and around the Medicine Hat area or in Alberta as a whole. As Eric Hanson commented,

In Alberta, the 1920s were marked by a sharp and short downturn in prices, income and employment in 1921; by several years of depressed economic activity until 1925, broken by one good crop in 1923; and by intermittent and unspectacular recovery until 1929. After the setback in 1921, Alberta largely marked time until the middle of the decade, and prosperity was not sustained when it did come. It was a decade, too, in which Albertans lost much of their optimism, and many of them left the province, especially between 1921 and 1923.¹

From 1917 to 1926, the farmers in the dry belt region suffered from severe drought and crop failure. The experiences of the women in the dry belt areas were focused on the

trials of creating and maintaining a homestead, a family, and sanity at the same time. Many were at a loss: some deserted their homesteads and others decided they could neither afford to leave, nor stay. The impact of the depopulation was overwhelming.

When economic disaster struck on a global scale in 1929, the people of the region had already been through a decade of disaster. With increased acreages, and the plentiful years of 1927, and 1928, the remaining farmers were able to get on their feet, just in time to meet the “Dirty Thirties” head on.² The impact of the Great Depression only exacerbated the conditions that already existed. Without intervention by the provincial and federal governments, many people would have lost everything. Eric Hanson commented,

The province entered the depression with a direct debt excessive in terms of depression revenue. In 1921 the direct debt, aside from guaranteed loans, amounted to one-quarter of the provincial income. In 1929 it was one-third. Thus the debt position, despite attempts at retrenchment during the 1920s, was worse at the end of the decade than at the beginning. By 1930 income had fallen so rapidly and debt had risen to such an extent that direct debt equaled one-half of the provincial income, and by 1933 it exceeded the provincial income.³

The impact of this economic decline was catastrophic to the farmers of the dry belt. Again, as Hansen remarked,

The decline in the net income of farmers between 1927 and 1929 was drastic. Such income fell further from \$62 million in 1929 to \$6 million in 1933. Thus for the six successive years 1930–35, the net income per farmer was less than \$400 annually. Under such conditions it became impossible for many farmers to make repayments of debts incurred in the 1920s, to meet the interest payments on such debt, or to pay municipal and provincial taxes. Many farmers, indeed, were unable to obtain enough cash to meet their much-reduced living and operating expenses and became recipients of government relief.⁴

The falling commodity prices made it difficult, if not impossible, for the farmers to succeed. The peak price for wheat in the dry belt area, reached its height in 1918. Certainly,

WWI played an important role in the rise of commodity prices, as Canadian farmers were not only supplying the Canadian market, but the Commonwealth market as well. Between 1919 and 1940, the price of wheat would not again reach even three-quarters of the peak price.

The Liberal provincial government had tried to maintain some level of careful budgeting during the early years of the province's existence. However, the unprecedented demographic growth in the province created the conditions for increased spending, without increased revenues. The Federal government was supportive of the growth in population but reluctant to offer revenue to the province. Through the 1920s, Hanson commented,

There was little change in the amount of the Dominion subsidy and it shrank to less than 10 percent of total revenue by the end of the decade. Several grants in aid were received, but they failed to relieve the financial pressure upon the province. Indeed, they tended to increase the pressure because they required the province to match Dominion contributions with equivalent, and sometimes greater, expenditures.⁵

Under growing pressure from the farmers, a new populist movement, the United Farmers of Alberta, defeated the provincial Liberal government in 1921 and maintained provincial power until 1935. The United Farmers of Alberta under the leadership of Henry Wise Wood, and the United Farm Women of Alberta under the leadership of Irene Parlby, struggled under the economic burdens of low revenues and increasing debt management. They had hoped to focus on agricultural economic conditions, solidarity, cooperation and democracy, education, social ethic, reformation, agrarian ideology, and the social gospel, but the burden was too great. Hansen noted, "It was ironic that the UFA, which had plagued the Liberal administration for many years, had to cope with the consequences of its own pressures".⁶ The rhetoric the UFA espoused during their time in opposition, forced them to

put their plans into action when they were elected as government. The UFA found the task extremely difficult given the financial situation of the province.

In 1935, the Social Credit Party took control of the provincial government. William Aberhart offered the people of the province a new and radical way out of the seemingly endless depression. Social Credit was, in essence, a regional protest movement and a reaction to the inability of the UFA to act. Aberhart and the Social Credit Party offered radical changes to some of Alberta's institutions. They continued to consolidate school boards and districts in an attempt to centralize education reform, and changed monetary policy to try to isolate the provincial government. Based on Major Douglas's theories, the atmosphere was ripe with reform for Alberta and Albertans.⁷ The Social Credit Party in Alberta maintained power for three and a half decades. Although the party platform changed over time under the leadership of Ernest Manning, they were instrumental in the development of Alberta.

As the farming conditions continued to worsen, many farmers and their families left the dry belt. If they had the means to leave, they did. The government made a deal with the railroads to ship farmers and their possessions out of the region. Many of those who left returned to the United States or Ontario. Some moved to the Crowsnest Pass in British Columbia and others to central or northern Alberta. When the abandonment began, the population did not migrate to Medicine Hat in any significant way. These were farmers and farm families. There was little appeal to move into the larger centre of Medicine Hat. They wanted to remain farmers. Rather than migrating to larger towns, they left to other parts of the province, or other parts of Canada and the United States. Lou Forsaith recalls, "During the dirty thirties many of our neighbours just packed up and left. I can't remember where they were going but many headed for somewhere in B.C."⁸

The cyclical nature of the crisis manifested itself in many ways. The economic problems that existed created tensions, not only in families, but in communities as well. Those who had the opportunity and the means abandoned the region, leaving fewer and fewer resources for those who remained. The impact of losing valuable resources, in both money and leadership, created further economic loss for the region. In many cases, individual losses were great. Formal organizations witnessed the loss of both leadership and material resources. Almost everything these women (and men) had worked to achieve was lost under the economic and psychological strain.

The Toll on Individuals and Communities

The economic crisis of the Medicine Hat area began with high prices on goods, depressed crop prices, and extremely low crop yields. Each of the years of the crisis began slowly, with a cautious sense of optimism, and each year disappointment and devastation resulted. It truly was “next year country.” Each crop failure proved worse than the last, whether because of hailstorms, grasshoppers, or drought. By 1919, after only two years of drought, farmers and their families appealed for help. The need grew exponentially through the twenties. One editorial from the *Medicine Hat News* suggests, “How widespread is the need may be gathered from statement that at least 90 percent of the farmers in this district will need help before spring”.⁹ Some relief, in the form of money, goods, seed and feed, did come, but it was neither fast enough, nor effective enough to stem the tide of devastation. Eric Hanson stated,

By 1919 both governments [Provincial and Dominion] combined their forces to provide feed and seed for farm operation in the drought areas, and to provide food and coal for drought-ridden

farmers. In municipal districts, the councils were required to supervise and distribute relief, with the money borrowed guaranteed by the province. The Department of Public Works was to do the same job in the improvement districts.¹⁰

A headline from the *Medicine Hat News* and the corresponding column explains the level of relief that was necessary:

During the week ending January 31 [1920] assistance from the Federal Emergency Appropriation Fund was granted to ninety-seven applicants from Medicine Hat and district, the amount expended being \$2809.15. The total amount expended to date is \$14,588.00.¹¹

By 1921, correspondents from the various communities surrounding Medicine Hat expressed grief, almost weekly, about the dire conditions. From Alderson, Mrs. Cotter wrote: “The harvest work is so slim that it is hardly worth speaking of; to mention it only makes all feel badly. Best plan, try and forget it as soon as possible.”¹² Nevertheless, amidst the misery, there was also an underlying sense of optimism. From Bow Island, Mrs. Calder wrote, “There has been an inch of moisture this month. Speaks well for next year’s crop that we always talk about”.¹³ Hope springs eternal.

The Red Cross also provided much-needed assistance. In a survey completed in the summer of 1921, the Red Cross determined, “practically the entire country and a large section of the eastern part of the province would require assistance during the winter.”¹⁴ By September 1922, the Red Cross had helped approximately 8000 individuals.¹⁵ Local branches of the Red Cross tried to slow the poverty and ease the desperation. In Winnifred, the local Red Cross assembled for a winter pound party. Everyone at the party donated a pound or two of provisions to help those in need, which was very helpful in the district.¹⁶ However generous people were, it was impossible to stop the poverty. The local aid organizations like

the WCTU and the WI lost members and financial backing. They had no resources themselves, and so had none to share. Even with brief relief in 1927, and 1928, many farmers, and the small towns that supported them, found themselves enveloped in misfortune.

With drought from 1917 to 1926 and a post-war economic depression, followed by the global economic depression, many women and their families migrated out of the Medicine Hat area, searching for new economic and social opportunities. This created a lot of anxiety among the remaining community members.

Individual Strain

The poverty and desolation took a toll on community members. Those with the means to do so left the region in the hopes of securing a livelihood elsewhere. Those hardy few that lingered found themselves without the encouragement and infrastructure that was present in other areas of the province. The psychological effects of the crisis created great concern for many. However, the psychological effects were only one part of the equation. As communities contracted and resources dwindled, many could not see past the impending doom. Those who remained grieved, not only for the loss of trusted friends and family, but also for the communities themselves, which they had worked so hard to build.

Psychological Loss

The psychological strain of successive years of poor crops, poverty, fatigue, and desolation were devastating. It was hard to cope under such circumstances. Many women

wrote to Premier Herbert Greenfield or the organizations to which they belonged looking for support. The crisis was such that even the formal organizations were at a loss. One of the voices that lamented the living conditions and the dusty devastation was that of Mrs. Reinhard Frerichs, a German woman from Social Plains, Alberta, just north of Medicine Hat. Writing in a letter to Premier Greenfield dated September 16, 1921, she commented,

It is 8 years since we moved out here, and never raised so much that we had enough to live on or get the clothes we needes [sic] 1919 n [sic] 1920 we had no crop at all and this year, we have 400 bushels wheat and some oats sheafs [sic] for feed. From this 400 bushel crop, we have to give around 300 dollar to the bank for seed and feed, we got this spring n [sic] 110 dollar, we have to pay thresher bill, so there is again nothing left to live on and pay the debts. Every year, we've got deeper in debt. Not even the garden stuff does well ... We have three children and it is hard to see them raised so very poor. ... I thought I write to you, maybe you are able to give us a different piece of land where we can make our living.¹⁷

Mrs. Frerichs was not looking for charity from Premier Greenfield; she wanted the opportunity to start again, somewhere more hospitable to farming. Women pleaded for help in the poverty and desolation, looking to get whatever they could. Appealing to one of the women's organizations was common. In a letter from the Birdsholm UFWA to the Calgary UFWA, dated September 15, 1921, Mrs. Edward Body wrote:

Can you help us at all this year with relief clothing in this district? None of us in this country south of Foremost have more than one or two hundred bus. [sic] Wheat, and this will not keep us and certainly will buy no clothes. I should be glad to hear from you that I may tell other women at meeting on Oct. 1st. As you have noticed we have only seven paid up members this year, but we are trying to keep the Society going although there are many who cannot possibly pay fees. We received your circular asking about men wanting work, but most of the married men in here find it impossible to leave home. Where there is a little crop to be taken care of and too many stock for women to attend to. Speaking personally with three little children and another one coming in December, I cannot pump water for sixteen head of stock and so my husband cannot go out to earn money and there are liens on

the stock so they can't be sold. This is the position of many of the people in here. If you can help me with any clothing, I should be very much obliged. My boys ... need shoes and stockings badly. My husband would be very glad of warm sweater... and any women's underclothes or overshoes for myself. I have also written the Red Cross, Calgary, and I do hope you will be able to help us.¹⁸

Women's organizations in the immediate area did what they could, but often these organizations found themselves destroyed as well, and outside help was required. Women wrote to allied organizations in Calgary and Edmonton for support. Those that remained found themselves embedded in greater and greater poverty and anguish. As James M. Roebuck from Whitla, writing to Premier Greenfield in July of 1922 stated:

But after eleven years of constant toil I have come to the end of the road. My money and my children have gone, and now my wife says this is her last year on this desert.¹⁹

No matter how close knit the community had become or how strong the spirit of cooperation, the appalling economic conditions overrode any cohesion. As Mrs. Calder from Bow Island suggested, the economic and social conditions left many feeling sorrow: "[A] general air of depression does prevail in some localities and it is communicated to those who come in contact with it. ... therefore it is an unfortunate change to witness".²⁰

The devastating effects of the crisis were mirrored in the minds of the people. The fatigue, strain, and stress created mental health issues for many. Some found themselves simply too tired to socialize, wanting to retreat from community and family events. The mental stresses of isolation, of rejection, and of poverty and extreme hard work were often too much to bear. Margaret Funnel of Oyen spoke in an interview with Eliane Silverman:

I remember talking with one woman who, and she didn't call it a nervous breakdown, she didn't use that kind of vocabulary, but she just said, well, I remember mother sort of crying for two years just constantly.²¹

The Alberta Psychiatric Hospital at Ponoka admitted a number of women through the 1920s. *The Annual Reports of the Alberta Psychiatric Hospital*, from the Department of Public Health, indicate a growing trend of women admitted due to "prolonged mental stress" resulting in mental breakdown. In 1923 they admitted 10 women; in 1924, 29 women; in 1925, 30 women; and in 1926, 24 women.²² The dry belt disaster may not be the sole cause of this trend, but likely the excessive strain of poverty and desolation contributed to these growing numbers.

The poverty pushed some women to desperate actions. Where the psychiatric hospital admitted some, others were not so lucky. Mrs. Bolosky, a widow in the Polish community of Tide Lake, north of Alderson, took the lives of her two children before committing suicide. Jones remarked, "Transfixed with poverty, the pending loss of her homestead, and the recent death of her husband and another offspring, she left a note of incoherent phrases crying that she did not want her children to freeze to death."²³ Extreme conditions resulted in extreme measures. Mrs. Bolosky must have felt desperate loneliness and hopelessness to take her children's lives and then her own.

Another family east of Tilley, found themselves in a similar situation. A man relentlessly abused his wife and daughters. He would not allow them to use sugar in bread making. He hated waste, so their worn out dresses he ordered cut into strips and braided into rugs. When he needed a new coat, he sent for Mackinaw cloth, and after it arrived, the girls used the old one as a pattern and made him a new one. Once the wife had to walk ten miles to have the cow bred. Jones commented, "Oppressed at every turn, she finally snapped and fell insane."²⁴

A letter to Premier John Brownlee from T.L. Duncan, of Onefour dated July 6, 1926 illustrates concern for the dire straits that some were facing:

The mental state of these settlers is certain to deteriorate under this isolation, and in some cases no doubt has already fallen away to a point that may take years to overcome under more favourable conditions. No estimate can be placed on the great value that lies in human contact, human associations and relationships that have been lacking in this community ... No church, no organized social activity, school struggling for existence, bachelors living alone – these do not lead to normal existence.²⁵

The economic crisis and mass exodus left those who remained with fewer and fewer resources. The isolation of the very early years of settlement was again present. The Provincial Police Commissioner commented on the mental state of the homesteaders as well, and gave a warning to Premier Brownlee in May of 1925.

The settlers north of Medicine Hat seem to be in a deplorable state; through our efforts, the Salvation Army of Lethbridge are sending a man down to try and educate these people into a better way of living and be more cleanly in their habits, etc. ... I would strongly recommend that some official from the Government should be sent down into that country [the dry belt] to thoroughly investigate the conditions under which these people are living as they are only breeding insanity. They have practically nothing to do and if they get a crop this year, they will get nothing out of it as it is all mortgaged and it only means more destitution next year in this particular district.²⁶

The stress of the conditions in the Medicine Hat area created certain mental health issues for the residents. As Mrs. Calder from Bow Island wrote, “It is taking an iron will for the rest of us to keep up courage.”²⁷ Whatever courage, or daring, or sheer will, was necessary, the spirit of some prevailed. However, some simply could not cope no matter how hard they tried.

This example from Alderson illustrates the mental health issues in the area and the inadequacy of town officials, or anyone for that matter, to assist. In a letter from John L. Scott to the Deputy Attorney General dated, May 31, 1923, he wrote,

I will call to your attention, a case of a mother and son. The mother is 75 years old, the son over 40, has been mother's support as a shoe mender till last year, when owing to consumption he has taken to his bed, and they have been living on charity ever since.

The mother is too feeble to look after the son. I saw the mayor of the town [Alderson] and he said the town had no money and can't keep them. I feel that something should be done in the matter. They came from Denmark 12 years ago. If you can do nothing for them, kindly let me know what steps can be taken to make the town look after them.²⁸

The Deputy Attorney General's response, dated June 11, 1923, stated,

In reply to your letter of the 31st ult., regarding an indigent mother and son in the Village of Alderson, I regret that this department is not in a position to grant relief. The responsibility rests entirely with the Village authorities. A cheap rate can be obtained from the hospital at Macleod, Midnapore, or Daysland.²⁹

Rather than dealing with the situation, the Deputy Attorney General suggested that either the village deal with the problem or place the mother and son in a hospital. Neither solution was a concrete or immediate one.

The poverty and fatigue took their toll on the psychological state of many of these settler women. None of their hard work could stop the wave of desolation. For some, the mental strain was too much to bear. Most retreated to another place to try again and others still found the courage to carry on.

Loss of Community

Individuals grieved over the rapid loss of community members and the destruction of the community itself. As businesses disappeared, citizens left, and funds to support social activities dried up, cries came out mourning the loss. When the population became too small, businesses left the communities. Mrs. Calder from Bow Island commented, "The town gradually gets smaller, some buildings taken by fire not replaced and during the last two years buildings being drawn away or taken down to be shipped away."³⁰ In Alderson, the

dismantling and removing of the Alberta Hotel, and the departure of the Union Bank, signaled the continuing loss of community infrastructure. Typically, when businesses closed and moved the employees left as well. Mrs. Cotter commented, “Residents of town and district regret exceedingly that bank officials find it necessary to close their branch of the Union Bank here.”³¹ The departure of Dr. S.F. MacEwan left Alderson without a doctor or a drug store, leaving the editors of *The Alderson News* lamenting, “This is a blow at the welfare of this community.”³²

By 1918, the situation had become so severe in Alderson that even *The Alderson News* was unable to continue. The newspaper editors wrote, “It has come. After giving the matter due consideration, we have decided that it is impossible to keep the News running any longer. About two thirds of our subscriptions are overdue, with no chance of collection this fall: while the lack of local advertising has hastened our end.”³³ In Bow Island, the lack of funds, and the loss of another doctor, left Mrs. Calder wondering, “How will Bow Island get a doctor?”³⁴

Community members expressed their opinions of the exodus throughout the district, although most understood the need to leave. When C.T. Thompson and family of Bow Island departed, Mrs. Calder mused, “They are among the pioneers of the district and many friends will miss them though fully appreciating the necessity of moving.”³⁵ As the exodus began, social activities in the community became increasingly rare. Those who remained though tried to enliven the sense of community and to create a little fun for those left. The following example illustrates the contribution of the people who remained. Mrs. Calder wrote from Bow Island:

There has been a flow of people moving out of this district and it is still going on a little at a time. It seems as though when affairs are given – all who are left buckle in and do all or more than it

seems possible, result being successful amidst sociability and smiles, even if some of the smiles are imitation ones covering a sore heart, but not a weak one.³⁶

For many years, those who remained, the dwindling few, tried to continue the social events. Nevertheless, the growing pressure caused much pain and anguish. Mrs. Trebble from Winnifred cried out, “It is universal regret to see our very best people leaving.”³⁷ And Mrs. Calder from Bow Island commented, “It seems too bad to see settlers leaving these parts after working so hard for years and being worse off than when they came.”³⁸ The newspaper correspondents from the district described the feeling of utter abandonment and loss. Mrs. Trebble from Winnifred suggested, “Nobody can realize the calamity that does not see for themselves . . . Farmers leaving daily; forced out in order to make a living. No pasture for stock, no gardens, no prospects.”³⁹ Mildred Millen also commented about the toll the drought and depression had on her parents, John and Helena Lahd. “In 1923, my folks left. They, together with many more, had come to this country with money, youth, and enthusiasm. They left broke and in debt, and the best years of their lives spent.”⁴⁰

Often, it was the leaders in the community who had the means to leave, and despite their commitment to the community, their family’s welfare had to come first. In many communities, a farewell dinner, tea, or dance provided an opportunity for the community to express their friendship and regret. In Alderson, an impromptu dinner, in the United Church, provided a final community farewell for those who were leaving.

[I]n the course of the evening’s programme, expressed regret on behalf of all at the removal from Alderson of these old timers who may return if conditions favour the opportunity . . . The evening closed by all forming a huge circle with their hands and singing Auld Lang Syne and the National Anthem.⁴¹

This mass exodus left many wondering what would be the fate of their community.

Throughout the dry belt, communities lamented their losses. Mrs. Calder from Bow Island

commented, “The church people are wondering how affairs will be carried on without their support,”⁴² speaking about the imminent departure of Mr. and Mrs. A.C. Gage from Bow Island.

Mrs. Cotter, the correspondent from Alderson to *The Medicine Hat Weekly News*, spoke of the lack of funds to support social activities and the disappointment of canceling a well-attended and enjoyed affair.

All regret that at present prospects would not warrant a contract being signed for next years’ return of the Chautauqua much as the majority would like to see it, but it will be necessary for crop conditions to improve before anything of the kind can be considered.⁴³

The economic and social crisis was deepened by the loss of businesses and community members, and by the diminishment of social activities.

Collective Strain

The toll on individuals, families, and businesses in the communities of the district was devastating. Informal networks of friends and family faltered under the crisis, but the bonds with family and friends did not necessarily break. Letter writing became the communication mode of choice once again, and the mail system proved instrumental in keeping women connected.

However, the challenge to the formal networks of women proved to be daunting. Keeping those networks alive was difficult, not only because of the financial strains placed on the organizations, but through exclusion of particular women, and through the reduction of membership and leadership. Individual choices and various groups’ attitudes all contributed to the disintegration of these formal networks.

Exclusion

As the population bloomed with greater and greater numbers of British women, the ties of sisterhood changed from acceptance to assimilation. Certainly, World War I changed the attitudes, as propaganda appeared warning of the German “Hun.” In many cases, these British women had a particular notion of what their community should be and who should engage in it. The different women’s organizations were careful in their choice of members. These organizations were white, middle-class, middle age, and English speaking. Anyone who was outside that norm could not, and did not, participate in these groups.

The Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire (IODE) limited its membership to those who had British Commonwealth ties. Their role, as they saw it, was to advance British ideals into their communities. Their activities included buying flagpoles and flags for each of the schools in Medicine Hat, with the expectation that each of the students would salute the flag.⁴⁴ The IODE also saw the value in rewarding students who had achieved high grades in their examinations, and provided prizes to the student with the highest marks.⁴⁵ Much of what the IODE accomplished through their fundraising efforts drew attention to the British ideal and British patriotism. Those women who did not represent the ideal were not accepted.

Both the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and the United Farm Women of Alberta (UFWA) were white, English-speaking women’s organizations. Although these groups were careful in the choice of membership, there were some attempts to be more inclusive. Mrs. McDaniels of Whitla and Mrs. Maddaugh of Alterado reported that, in a speech to the UFWA meeting in Edmonton, Miss Frances Beynon of Winnipeg

urged them to make their work international as well as provincial and federal. The time is coming when women of this organization will reach out to all the women in the world, and they should learn

to see that every woman of every nationality is a sister whether she lives in this country or in another, and they will make it impossible for things to happen as they are now happening; they will make war impossible.⁴⁶

The rhetoric of the leaders of these organizations expressed inclusiveness, but that rhetoric did not translate into action in the local and provincial organizations. The WCTU, in a provincial conference, proposed that it was necessary to place an employee in communities of foreigners. The correspondent to the conference wrote, “A worker will be placed who will go into the homes of people and also use her home as a social centre for spreading Canadian ideals.”⁴⁷ The local delegates to the meeting supported this initiative and devoted financial support to this cause.

The WI, although inclusive in its membership, also wanted to assimilate those from non-British backgrounds. The goal of the WI was to educate women about many different issues from domestic work to politics. They believed that “The Women’s Institute is a great sisterhood of women, bonded together for the bettering of conditions, socially and morally, helpful at all times in sickness and trouble of any kind, and always with the one aim before them of a better and greater Canada.”⁴⁸ However, they were promoting the British ideal, considering no other possibilities.

This psychological strain, whether because of poverty or deliberate exclusion, diminished women’s contributions to their communities. Not all women were able to contribute and some who were able were not welcome. However, it is important to note that all women did not necessarily want to participate either. The “slight” of exclusion for some, was not a “slight” at all. Many women, who arrived in the dry belt, came with an already tight network of family and friends. Those of the same ethnic or linguistic origin tended to congregate as a social group as well. Many would not have cared whether they were included

in these predominantly British groupings, as they had their own social network upon which to rest.

Lack of Funding

The social networks that women created were under great strain because of the continuing loss of members and the absence of funds essential for any community activity. Public appeals asked for new members and additional donations. *A Medicine Hat News* correspondent wrote, “For many years this active work has been carried out by a few ladies and for much of the time by the same few. For different reasons these ladies find that they cannot otherwise continue to participate in this important work.”⁴⁹ The Red Cross Society asked for additional donations as well, often appealing to people’s sense of what is right. Mrs. Cotter, from Alderson, commented, “This district and surrounding districts know well what this society has done for them not so many years ago. Now this is an opportunity to show appreciation.”⁵⁰ Perhaps she was hoping that where a general appeal failed, old-fashioned guilt would succeed. She also encouraged the young people to get involved in the Junior Red Cross and to do their part as well.

Still are there not some more young people who are able to contribute twenty five cents by joining this worthy object and organization? Think of the work it does alone for sick and crippled children who otherwise would be obliged to suffer for want of the necessary funds. A little sacrifice and it will make some poor child happy and possible on the road to health. Earn a little and donate it to the cause.⁵¹

Whether these appeals took the form of guilt or emotion, when women were worried about having enough money to feed and clothe their children, providing money to charity organizations seemed less than responsible. These social networks simply did not have

adequate people or money to carry on. Sometimes correspondents used a sarcastic tone to get to her point. Mrs. Trebble, the correspondent from Winnifred commented,

Ten ways to break up an organization:

1. Don't come to the meetings.
2. But if you do come, come late.
3. If the weather doesn't suit you, don't think of coming.
4. If you attend a meeting find fault with the work of the officers and other members; bawl them out.
5. Never accept an office, as it is easier to criticize than to help do things.
6. Nevertheless get sore if you are not appointed on a committee; but if you are appointed do not attend the committee meeting, and after the meeting tell every one how things ought to be done.
7. Do nothing more than is absolutely necessary, but when other members roll up their sleeves and do the work diligently, howl about it to everyone.
8. If asked by an officer to give an opinion regarding an important matter, tell him you have nothing to say. After the meeting tell each member what's what, in a loud, wailing tone.
9. Hold back your dues as long as possible or don't pay at all.
10. Don't bother about getting new members. Let the others do it.

One sure way to put your organization over the top: Cooperate. Help. Do your bit. Don't knock.⁵²

The rest rooms, located in each town to provide comfort and a place to rest and socialize for rural women, were often the first to feel this strain. Although seen as important to the community and the surrounding area, the rest rooms too, felt the brunt of monetary loss. The Bow Island rest room offered a place for women to meet, but as the financial

conditions worsened, an appeal went out to regain additional funds. Mrs. Calder, the Bow Island correspondent to the *Medicine Hat News* offered some wisdom regarding the importance of these rest rooms and appealed to the readers for additional funding:

Last Saturday afternoon the Aug meeting of the Women's Institutes was held in the rest room. Chief among those was in reference to the rest room. It is a great boon to the country women and is used every day. But it takes money to pay rent and keep up the place. Money is needed and the W.I. needs help. Town has always given the Institute gas at \$1.00 per month but this is to be changed and a meter installed. Expenses are increased. Will readers consider these points?⁵³

As the funding crisis deepened, local organizations that had often provided aid to desolate community members simply ran out of resources. Despite appeals to parent organizations at the provincial and federal levels, the absolute lack of funds was a huge problem. If organizations could not remain financially fluid themselves, then they simply could not help anyone else.

Membership and Leadership Loss

Mass exodus from the district caused incredible strain on the women's organizations. The loss of membership and leadership caused many of the organizations to disband or dissolve. Appeals went out in the newspapers to increase membership from those who remained. In Alderson, the Ladies' Aid of the United Church lost both its president and vice president at the same time.⁵⁴ In Bow Island, Mrs. Calder commented, "Many workers have left the community, entailing more work on the ones left, but these few come to the front and make an extra effort to meet the demands."⁵⁵ However, many

tried to remain optimistic. Reverend Orman, speaking to the Women's Auxiliary of St. Mary's Anglican Church in Alderson, commented, "It is not always the number of members in an organization that make it a success, but the quality and harmony displayed by those engaged in the work."⁵⁶

Those who remained maintained their organizations for as long as possible. One of the strategies in the preservation of the groups was to unite. Mrs. Calder from Bow Island commented on this partnership: "[The Women's Institute is] to officiate itself with the Red Cross Society, it being more advantageous for the two to cooperate in small centres."⁵⁷ As well, the Seven Persons correspondent commented, "The UFWA is doing Red Cross work in the area."⁵⁸ From Bow Island, Mrs. Calder continued to comment on this growing level of cooperation between organizations: "The affair was a community one, given by the UFA, UFWA, Women's Institute, the Curling Club and the Ladies' Curling Club, two members from each being selected for the committee, and a glorious time was spent for the space of six hours."⁵⁹ Another way in which these organizations changed was keeping the group dynamic. The correspondent from Rainier in the *Brooks Bulletin* suggested,

The Bow Slope cooperative community spirit takes spells of lapsing in a sort of desuetude; and then as suddenly it takes on new life and vigour and comes to the front with renewed energy toward accomplishing beneficial community work. Just now the community spirit is dominating...⁶⁰

The changes, in levels of activity and partnerships between organizations, often were quite natural. Mrs. Trebble from Winnifred wrote,

Winnifred Red Cross arranged a meeting and a class of fine ladies met to carry out the work of reorganizing for 1928. After nearly three years of no interest taken with the local Red Cross members, but beginning Saturday, February 11th, the local Red Cross society is now under entirely new administration.⁶¹

Each of these groups was dynamic, sometimes offering much help to the community, while at other times unable to perform any work whatsoever. With the ebb and flow of members and resources, women tried to maintain their role in community development. The immediate goal was still to help the community, and generally the women belonged to several organizations. Each of these groups maintained the network for as long as possible. The difficulties in these communities were far too profound for women's networks, however strong, to overcome; indeed, the fragmentation, poverty, desperation, and misery caused the ties that bound women together to loosen.

The Toll on the Schools

Beginning in 1917 and continuing for nearly a decade thereafter, the region was the scene of a serious disaster related to drought and depopulation. Arranging for their children's schooling became a major burden for the people who remained in the region. Conflicts arose surrounding financing, teachers, and jurisdiction. As Jones has suggested, "Significantly this interpretation of the school as a source of conflict, community discord, and social anxiety runs counter to the traditional view of the school as community centre and source of integration."⁶² As the school was often the social centre of the district as well, the loss of the school meant the loss of the community. The slow loss of people and financial resources strained many communities to the breaking point.

Women played an active role in the schools in a variety of capacities. They were school board trustees, teachers, parents and students. It is clear from the school board records of the area that women worked as school board trustees. In 1919, both Mrs. Anna Lahn and Mrs.

Flossie Goehring served as trustees, the latter in the role of secretary treasurer for the Daisy Dell School District.⁶³ Mrs. Finnigan of Gleichen served as a trustee as well. In the Creole Bell School District, both Mrs. Thompson and Mrs. Brandner served as trustees in 1924.⁶⁴ Since primary schooling was an extension of mothering at home, the distance between mother and trustee was not really that far. Women were actively encouraged to run for school board office, and run they did.

As the growing economic crisis manifested itself in the schools, trustees often had to make some difficult decisions. A number of problems occurred: low or no enrollment of students; high turnover of both trustees and teachers; school closures and compromises; and, primarily, the lack of funds necessary to support the schools. As the tensions mounted, conflict between school districts arose surrounding jurisdiction and financing. The Brecon Hill trustees displayed concern over whether trustees were personally liable for any debt incurred by the school board.⁶⁵ It became as much of a personal struggle as it was a community struggle. The fractious nature of the economic crisis pitted neighbour against neighbour.

The rapid depopulation of the area caused many problems for the school boards. Many had buildings but no students; some had students and no buildings. The crisis in the schools splintered not only communities but families as well. Children moved from school to school and sometimes went from living at home to living in dormitories in other communities as far away as Calgary. Many took their high school courses in Medicine Hat. As the crisis unfolded, even the family unit divided in search of educational opportunities for their children. The compromises in the form of combining schools and school districts changed the local power arrangements and gave residents a sense that the community, as they knew it,

was disappearing forever. Schools, and the communities that housed them, were slipping away.

The loss of the population also translated into the loss of trustees. As people left the area rapidly, there was little stability in school district administration. The crisis became so severe that in many cases the School Inspectors - employed through the Department of Education - were appointed to the position of Official Trusteeship, as there was no one left in the community to administer the school boards. Mrs. Robert Mailer commented about the appointment of an Official Trustee.

There had been no local school board, as trustees and ratepayers had differed so often and so violently among themselves that the hassle was resolved by the school inspector assuming the position of official trustee.⁶⁶

In the Daisy Dell school district, in 1925, no one remained to administer the schools and, “As there were no trustees left the Department of Education appointed F.S. Carr School Inspector as Official Trustee.”⁶⁷ Throughout the school board records of the Berry Creek School Division and the Cypress School Division, many of the school districts relinquished power to the School Inspector. Often though, the school inspector, when surveying the school boards, found no administration in place and simply took over.

Schooling was important and often people would pay their school taxes before they would pay any of their other creditors. Nevertheless, as time went on, tax collection became increasingly difficult. The Medicine Hat Public School District resorted to providing discounts in the rates paid just to get some money.⁶⁸ If discounts were impossible, school boards tried to ensure that the tax rate was as low as possible. Rainy Valley School District minutes suggested,

Moved that owing to the difficulty of collecting taxes during these hard times School taxes be made as low as possible. There being no children of school age at present and have over \$2200 of uncollected school taxes in the district.⁶⁹

As the area depopulated, the issue of absentee landlords arose. It became increasingly difficult to get money for back taxes when the ratepayer was absent and their whereabouts unknown.⁷⁰ School boards could neither collect taxes nor find the ratepayer, and financial losses resulted.

Some school boards had teachers' salaries in arrears for several months. Some school boards like Brecon Hill, borrowed money to pay their teachers⁷¹ while others did not even have the means to get a loan. The government tried to ensure that the teachers were paid. By indicating on the *Statement of Grant Forms* for rural schools "Hand cheque to the teacher if salary is unpaid,"⁷² the Department of Education requested the grant money go to the teacher directly, before the payment of any other money owed.

There was a frantic determination to maintain the schools at all costs, and school boards were creative and relentless in trying to maintain their schools. Among the different options schools tried were applications for loans from the banks, demands for government assistance, adding territory to widen the tax base, implementing short-term schools, and cooperation between school boards. Each of these solutions was problematic, and when strategies to maintain the schools failed, the heart of many communities failed as well. Lamenting the maintenance of the school and the devastating effects of community loss, Stanmore's secretary-treasurer best caught the sense of desperation and hopelessness: "No rain: No crop: No taxes: No school: Why do parents put such a penalty on children as to keep them in this desert? What a world. What a people."⁷³

Teachers too contributed to the growing upheaval of the school system and the community. Before 1915, school boards employed mostly young single men and women in the rural schools, as rules forced women who married to resign. Nevertheless, as young male teachers and principals left their positions to join the armed forces during World War I, wives of enlisted men and former teachers stepped in to fill the void. The demographic of the teaching profession changed dramatically.

Society had profound expectations of teachers. Not only were they to educate the children of the area, but they should also develop a sense of pride and patriotism in those foreign-born. Teachers' contributions to the war effort centred on developing a sense of devotion in the children, in the hopes that these children would influence their parents and thus secure their loyalty. Teachers were expected to use every available means to do this, including prominently displaying flags and reading and writing patriotic essays.

Along with everyone else, the teachers also faced the economic insecurity. The school boards would often give only short-term contracts, having considered the economic and demographic volatility in the communities. This instability caused the schools to become very transitory in nature. Members of the community lamented the fact that as schools closed and teachers left, a vital part of their community was leaving as well. Mrs. Cotter, the correspondent from Alderson, suggested as much:

The school board thanked Miss Hughes and excellent services with the Tide Lake School, and regretting her departure from the school and district but stated that the school would always welcome her back at any time. At present, unfortunately it being found necessary to close owing to lack of funds and insufficient number of children available.⁷⁴

If the schools did not shut down completely, the lack of funds meant that some teachers had to wait for their pay. The Forcina School District in the December 12, 1921 minutes suggests the growing worries over the payment of the teacher's salary: "If Miss McLeod is unwilling to wait for the part of her salary that can't be paid on 16th [owing to a shortage of funds] we will borrow enough if possible to pay her at Bank of Commerce."⁷⁵ Many school districts did not have the capacity to borrow money and the teacher was simply not paid. As the *Annual Report* of 1924 from the Department of Education stated,

The difficulties the teachers faced in these communities were profound. As F.L. Aylesworth, the Oyen School Inspector, comments, "Regarding teaching conditions – Provided on the whole with modern up-to-date buildings and equipment the rural teacher is presented with perhaps only three really serious problems: (1) The location of a suitable boarding house; (2) How to avoid being entangled with the different factions, and in petty disagreements and quarrels rife under present economic conditions; (3) How to provide herself with suitable and adequate recreation and entertainment without acquiring the habit of attending six or more barn dances in a week. Fairly sound judgment, tact, and common sense are requisites for avoiding one or all of the above mentioned pitfalls."⁷⁶

It would have been very difficult to keep out of the community struggles and to remain as professional as possible under the circumstances.

Schooling was important for a variety of reasons. Parents viewed education as a way for their children to better their circumstances and provide opportunities that may not have otherwise existed. They viewed schooling as a way to build a community and a sense of belonging for those involved. Schools also provided a physical place for community events to occur, further building communities. Schools, and those in them, also taught Canadian ideals, joining the community to the larger nation. Schools were not just for children but for the nation as well. Many hopes rested on the schools.

The closing of the local school was the final straw in the destruction of the community as a whole. As each building disappeared, a piece of the fabric of community disintegrated, along with the sense of belonging and attachment to the place and the people. As Mrs. Cotter suggested,

We hear reports of two or more school houses in the district being on the move; the Tide Lake school house being sold and going to Duchess Alta. and the Fertile Flats school house which is not sold yet but if the desired amount is forthcoming it will likely be on the move too. There is also another one a few miles north of town, which will not likely be required again in its locality. All are well built and fine looking buildings and it seems too bad to see them unused when some growing districts require buildings of the kind.⁷⁷

It was hard to hang on to something that was not even recognizable. In fact, once the school closed, families were even more likely to leave the community. In March of 1926, Mrs. Cotter commented that families were leaving the area because the school is closed and “probably permanently.”⁷⁸

In the late 1920s, as the crisis deepened, the UFA government sought to consolidate the schools. Perren Baker, the Minister of Education, put forward legislation in the 1920s that met with much opposition. People did not want to give up control of their schools. Baker knew, though, that the time had come for consolidation and bided his time. By the early 1930s, the drought of the previous decade had forced widespread abandonment of homesteads and created a crisis for the schools. By 1933, the Province merged the school districts in the area into the first large unit of administration.⁷⁹ The school problem finally stabilized with the consolidation of the schools, first by the UFA government and then by William Aberhart’s Social Credit government in the mid-1930s, which allowed the schools that remained to move forward.⁸⁰ The consolidation that followed the abandonments was the first of many in the Province. Start of the school board consolidation began in the Berry

Creek Division on June 2, 1932.⁸¹ These small school boards were formally organized into two large rural divisions, namely the Berry Creek School Division and the Cypress School Division, each with a central administration encompassing a wide area. Out of the 70 schools originally in the Berry Creek School District, only 14 were operating when the large division went in.⁸² However, the local autonomy of the school board and the centre of many communities would be forever lost.

On the schools rested much of the hope of community. Schools were often the social, religious, and educational centre of the community. The schoolhouse provided the place to gather, to commiserate, and to build a community, a province, and a nation. School board members offered their time and leadership skills to ensure that the children were being educated. Teachers offered genuine involvement in the community, and contributed to the richness of community life. The school building was the beacon for the community. It seems reasonable to conclude that as the school went, so went the rest of the community. The economic and social crisis was simply too overwhelming for the school members, whether board members, teachers or parents, to overcome. The rapid depopulation and subsequent lack of funding destabilized the education system of the area, and therefore destabilized the community and the area as a whole.

Reactions to the “Solutions”

As the economic crisis deepened, and volleys of cries rang out, many realized that something must be done to quell the tide of poverty and desolation. The question then became what to do?

Early in the crisis, the prevailing thought surrounded the idea that in some cases, it was simply the farmers who were the problem: they were not using the most effective farming practises to attain the best crop. As time went on, though, and the drought strengthened, people considered changing the very nature of the problem. If they could only get water to the crops then the predicament would be solved. From irrigation to hiring rainmakers, the people searched for solutions to bring water to the crops. Both the provincial, and to a more limited degree, the federal government, also tried to help in the mounting crisis, although the federal government did not do much until the 1930s. An attempt at helping was an agreement between the CPR and the provincial government to move people and their effects out of the dry belt. The provincial government established a variety of studies and commissions to investigate the situation. The Survey Board of Southern Alberta was established in 1921. This group travelled throughout the dry belt area and heard testimony from community members regarding the situation that existed. As well, Russell and Snelson's *Report on the Southern Alberta Drought Area* (1924), and the Tilley East Commission (1926) suggested recommendations to remedy the devastation. Also, various pieces of legislation were also passed in the effort to limit the devastation. The Tax Recovery Act (1922), the Drought Area Relief Act (1922), and the Special Areas designation (1927), all contributed in suppressing the tide. Not until the establishment of the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA) in 1935, and the end of the Great Depression in the 1939, did the devastation and community loss subside. W. Strojich observed, "In an attempt to alleviate the distress in the drought areas of Western Canada caused by climactic variations, the Dominion government passed the PFRA... Immediate assistance was given the farmers by providing funds for the construction of stock watering dams, dugouts and small irrigation projects."⁸³

However, as much as legislation, inventive solutions, and academic methods helped in the crisis, the people of the area would not recover for many years. The promises of the Dominion government and the CPR in settling the area benefited only the few in the network of power and wealth. The farmers, their families, and the communities that supported them bore the brunt of the economic crisis. All of the hard labour, the hopes, and the dreams that rested in the development of the area were lost under the weight of poverty and stress.

Free Freight Scheme

In 1919, the beginning of the free freight scheme allowed farmers to move their stock from one area of the dry belt to another. A headline from the *Medicine Hat News* and the corresponding article explained some of the conditions necessary for the farmers to take advantage of the free freight scheme: “The time for the free shipment of stock from the dry area to feed area has been extended to December first, and shipment may now be made from one point in the dry area to another point in the same area.”⁸⁴

By 1924 the crisis was deepening. Jack Gorman commented in his study of the special areas of Alberta, “Even in 1924 it was more puzzling to determine why anyone remained than to understand why the vast majority left.”⁸⁵ And certainly, the question remained, why would anybody stay? Maybe it was a stubborn determination to try and make it work after all the toil and strife they had gone through. Most, however, were more pragmatic and left if and when they could.

By 1926, the scheme changed from moving just livestock to transporting families and their belongings. Simply finding another place for the livestock was not enough. The endless crop failures required people to leave their homesteads. Most of the families that took

advantage of this scheme moved to central and northern Alberta in search of a new beginning. Mrs. Cotter wrote from Alderson,

The joint arrangement between the Dominion and Provincial governments and the railway companies for the movement of settlers from the dry districts has been extended to June 1 next with the understanding that no certificates will be issued after May 1st, but that settlers to whom certificates have been issued will be given until the 1st of June to move their outfits.⁸⁶

Many of those who did leave left in the early part of the year. They wanted to make a start of it in the spring. The correspondent from Suffield wrote, “A number of farmers of this district are starting to move to another district before spring so that it will not interfere with spring work.”⁸⁷

The agreement between the Dominion and Provincial governments and the railway companies providing free freight to anyone who wanted to leave the area was, to some degree, effective. The total number of families moved under the free freight scheme was 3785 or 6600 cars.⁸⁸ However, it did not change the fact that the population was rapidly changing and with that a profound change in the communities and the spirit of camaraderie that had once prevailed.

Seed Grain and Feed Relief

Another scheme that provided some relief to the people of the area was the seed grain and feed relief. This was one of the earliest measures in trying to stem the tide of failing crops and growing poverty. For the Provincial government, this was a less expensive option than moving people by train. The seed and feed relief started as early as 1918. Mrs. Cotter commented about the applications for feed and seed relief: “J.C. Anderson, secretary for

King Municipality, and William Hutchinson, of local address, secretary for Sunny South, are ready to receive applications for seed grain from the farmers who were haled out or who lost their crop through drought as the municipalities are looking after the interest of these men.”⁸⁹

By 1923, there was reluctance from the Provincial government to continue the seed grain and feed relief. They were starting to realize that throwing money at the problem was not going to work and in crisis they had less money to throw. The disappointment many felt in the elimination of this scheme is reflected in the sentiments of Mrs. Thurza Trebble of Winnifred: “Many farmers will not be able to crop as the government is not allowing any seed. Many have stayed here this winter in expectation that they would be allowed feed, seed and relief.”⁹⁰ The lack of communication and unwillingness of the Provincial government to continue this scheme left many of the farmers and families wondering what they were going to do. Mrs. Trebble from Winnifred commented on the lack of feed grain for the farmers. Farmers would travel into town only to find that there was no feed grain available. She felt it was “Pretty harsh on the poor farmer who is ready and willing after all these failures to try farming again.”⁹¹

Although the seed grain and feed relief helped a little in stemming the poverty, it did not do enough to stop it altogether. Putting seed in the ground where the likelihood of drought, hail, and grasshoppers was great was a scheme waiting to fail. It was simply a band-aid solution to a much bigger problem, and it cost the government significant amounts of money. The direct loss to the provincial government for the whole of the province including seed grain, other advances and taxes, but not including direct relief and uncollected school taxes was approximately \$20,000,000.⁹²

It Must Be the Farmers' Fault

Of all of the correspondents to the *Medicine Hat News*, Mrs. Trebble of Winnifred was by far the most vocal in expressing her anxiety and displeasure in the dry belt calamity. She lamented the loss of her neighbours and friends. She expressed her displeasure with all of the various schemes that were undertaken. She was, by all accounts, extremely upset at the situation. Mrs. Trebble was also the most critical of all the correspondents. She was witness to the disaster and felt that something needed to be done and in her case, she had much to say.

As a result of the ongoing crop failures, one of the harshest criticisms was that the disaster was none other than the farmer's fault. If the farmers would only follow good farming practices then the soil would again be as bountiful as it had been in 1915 and 1916. Mrs. Trebble was adamant that with the right method, farmers would not be losing their crops every year. She commented, "All sorts of farm relief schemes are offered, but none of them, we venture to say, will beat the system of early seeding and careful cultivation, coupled with no plunging and putting in only what is reasonable for one farmer to handle."⁹³ She not only was giving advice to the poor farmer on early seeding, cultivation and crop size but also ventured her opinion on the type of seeds the farmers should use: "A complete germination test of spring threshed grain has been made by the Dominion Government seed branch at Calgary, and according to a statement made on Monday, a large number of the samples secured from stooks left in the field and threshed show that little if any of the wheat will be suitable for seed...One thing is certain, farmers should sow tested seed, and by someone capable to do the testing, not the work of an amateur."⁹⁴ Mrs. Trebble was convinced that those from the agricultural schools knew best. She said the crop failures were the fault of the farmers: "Too many farmers practice poor farming more than once. It is a pity to see the

fields choked with weeds; they resemble a Brussels carpet from the results of poor farming.”⁹⁵ Maybe Mrs. Trebble allowed herself to complain as she did because she had spent most of her life on a farm. She had been witness to the excellent crop years and could not understand why the failures happened.

Mrs. Trebble also gave considerable attention to those in the community who repeatedly complained about the situation: “A few who have extreme views and the same ones every year are always expressing the need of moisture. When the fact is, nothing has come short of moisture as yet. But it seems it's a spring season epidemic and a habit with some farmers to carry on this pithy old tiresome conversation – rain.”⁹⁶ She thought it imperative that the conversations and complaining cease and that people really just needed to do something about it. She put the blame solely on some of the farmers who, in her opinion, did not know what they were doing: “A few of Winnifred extreme calamity howlers are still expressing crop complaints, but when the fact is known, it is our poorest farmers that howl rain needed badly. Farmers who have not seeded the grain down into the moisture find their grain is not germinating and it is these fields and farmers that want rain.”⁹⁷ Mrs. Trebble was certainly critical of the farmers and blamed their ignorance for the crisis in the dry belt. It is likely that Mrs. Trebble felt some community backlash from the comments she made in the newspaper. If and how she felt the repercussions of her comments is unknown, but given that her father and her husband had at one time been farmers, she may have received an earful at home!

However, it was not only Mrs. Trebble who weighed in on the discussion surrounding poor farming practices. The fact is the soil was continually being eroded and nutrients routinely taken out of the land. As Jack Gorman observed, “As a result of tillage methods and summerfallowing, the loss of soil through erosion was massive during the 1920s and

1930s.’⁹⁸ The poor farming practices were not a figment of Mrs. Trebble's imagination. The farmers did need to change their methods, although in some of the areas no method would work. It simply came down to a lack of moisture. What they needed was rain.

Maybe We Can Change the Weather

Desperate times call for desperate measures. All of the schemes to change people's fortunes had done little to actually help. In their desperation, the people of the area started to look for any scheme that would help. The idea existed that maybe it would be possible to change the weather patterns.

One of the most well-known schemes and one of the earliest in 1921 was to hire a rainmaker.⁹⁹ Charles M. Hatfield was a professional rainmaker. Hatfield signed a contract with the United Agricultural Association of Medicine Hat to generate as much precipitation as possible. The territory was to cover was one hundred mile radius centring on Medicine Hat. The contract offered him \$2000 for every inch of moisture that fell to a maximum of \$8000 for a four-inch rain. His attempts at making it rain failed miserably. People soon realized their folly. Mrs. Trebble at first was grateful for the suggestion and the hiring of the rainmaker but eventually she too gave up hope: “The farmers in this district are exhausted with finding faults with Hatfield 'the rainmaker'. His first play is enough! Winnifred farmers won't bite again!”¹⁰⁰

Over a decade of drought, dust, and devastation washed away the hope and optimism that prevailed in the dry belt in the early years of settlement. The mental strain of the situation created devastating effects on the communities and indeed the people themselves. The isolation and fatigue caused some to break, while others tried to hold on with

an iron will and courage. The mass exodus of the area left fewer and fewer resources available for those who remained. Although in some cases, the abandonment was a blessing as more land became available and farmers could actually purchase or lease enough land to make a sincere go of it. Material and community resources modified quickly and social resources soon followed. For those that remained, adaptation was necessary. As much as the formal networks tried to maintain some cohesiveness, the exclusivity of the organizations, and their own lack of material resources prevented this from happening. They simply had to rewrite the script of their lives and their communities.

3 Hopes dashed: The abandonment of the prairie dryland, 1918-1936

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CHAPTER 4

SURVEYING THE CALAMITY

Introduction

The Provincial and Dominion governments tried to stem the tide of desolation. Through various studies and commissions, provincial legislation, and eventually, special areas designation, the government tried to offer some relief to the residents of the area.

One attempt at quelling the increasing poverty was to pass legislation. The Drought Area Relief Act (1922) was passed to give the settlers some protection against their creditors.¹ The government secured loans for the farmers of the area in the hopes that the banks would not go forward with legal action. This was only effective in that it gave some time to the farmers but not enough to sustain the seemingly never-ending drought. The second attempt at recovering some of the losses sustained in the crisis was the Tax Recovery Act (1922). Taxes, both to school boards and municipalities, were not being paid, which created a desperate financial situation. The infrastructure of the area was slowly disappearing. In 1929 the Tax Recovery Act was amended in the hope that at least some taxes would find their way to provincial and local coffers.² Amid all the cries from the federal government to break more land and to put in more wheat in 1915 and 1916, the farmers in the southern Alberta dry belt over extended themselves in both bank loans and the number of acres farmed. Typically, this would not necessarily be an issue, but the year 1917 would prove calamitous for the farmers and their wives and families. However, one poor year does not make a crisis. How long did it take for communities and families to fragment and fracture?

By 1918, farmers were looking for seed and feed relief. Maybe next year would be

better. If they could only get their crop in and their livestock fed, hope lay right around the corner. Again, the crop of 1918 was poor, and so were 1919, 1920, and 1921. Cries rang out from the dry belt looking for some sort of aid. Local agencies, like the Red Cross, offered limited help, but they too lacked both the human and financial resources to really stem the tide of poverty now enveloping all those in her wake. Families abandoned their farms in alarming numbers. This was, by no means, an easy decision. Many an evening would have been spent, husbands and wives discussing what conditions were necessary for them to abandon their all of their hard work, their sweat, and their tears. Would she have been more willing to let it all go? Or he? Or both? For many, departing simply meant putting all their meager belongings in a wagon or truck and walking out the door, not necessarily knowing where to go or what to do, but just going. However, some still stayed. By 1924, the population in many townships throughout the dry belt had lost *over 90 percent* of the residents of the population at the peak.³

The provincial and federal governments sought to study the growing disaster in the dry belt. The first major study of the entire dry belt region was *The Better Farming Conference* in Swift Current, Saskatchewan in July 1920. The first major study in Alberta was the *Southern Alberta Survey* completed in 1921. By 1924, the federal government stepped into the fray with the Department of the Interior's report on the *Southern Alberta Drought Area*. By 1926, the situation had grown hopeless, and the *Tilley East Commission* with Ted Fream at the helm studied the problem yet again. Each of these studies provided insight into the growing calamity of the dry belt in Alberta. Each provided individual testimony and statistics. However, each only provided a snapshot of the communities at the time. The lessons learned from the dry belt disaster would translate into some policy changes and relief for the people living through the depression of the 1930s.

This chapter outlines each of the three major studies compiled on the Southern Alberta dry belt disaster. Women's testimonies were limited in each of the studies. However, it is still possible to determine women's experiences through the voices of the men, their husbands, fathers, or brothers, at the hearings. There is no question that many of the women in the area were resolute about their family's and community's well being and many “had the ear” of their husband. Most husbands and wives saw the adventure of building a homestead and community as a joint venture. They were in this together, sharing equally the joys and burdens of their life experiences.

“You have nothing but chaos”: The Southern Alberta Survey (1921)

The Southern Alberta Survey Board was created in November 1921 by the newly elected UFA government to travel throughout the area and hear the testimonies of a variety of people regarding the situation in the dry belt. Charles A. Magrath was named chairman of the board and, although reluctantly, accepted the position. He was the former mayor of Lethbridge and a prolific entrepreneur. Along with Magrath, Judge Arthur A. Carpenter, of the Public Utility Commission, George R. Marnoch, former President of the Board of Trade, Lethbridge, and William H. Fairfield of the Dominion Experimental Farm at Lethbridge made up the membership of the Southern Alberta Survey Board.

Many in the area were content that some action was being taken regarding the situation in the dry belt. H.W. Lever, from Kipp, Alberta, wrote to Premier H. Greenfield, “It brings life and renewed strength to many a farmer who had given up. Your government realizes that the land itself is no real asset to a country - but that the man is what is worthwhile.”⁴ One paraphrased comment from W. Rabbitt of Etzicom echoes the character of

the farming community: “After all, he said, the best asset we have in the country is the people who are here. . . . All they wanted was a square deal. They had the soil, they had the climate and they had the families, and they would pull through given a fair chance.”⁵

However, some expressed their disapproval about the makeup of the Board. In a telegram, P.R. Wedderburn questioned Premier Greenfield's choice of Board members. He asked, “Why are neither the farmers nor the constituency represented on the Southern Alberta Survey Board?”⁶ Greenfield replied: “May I suggest the exercise of patience in this matter and that you withhold any criticism of the Board until they at least have had an opportunity to work on the problem.”⁷ Greenfield's response requesting tolerance would have been difficult to bear. The people of the region had already lived through five years of drought and depression and asking the people to be a little more patient shows a lack of understanding of the severity of the situation. However, Greenfield had received a number of letters suggesting the desperation of the people. One letter from Rudolf Johnson of the Blue Grass UFA, Alderson, to Greenfield said:

Too much stress cannot be laid upon the fact that relief of some kind will have to be undertaken at once as quite a few families are in urgent need of relief at once. . . . such as food, clothing and coal and if these are not aided us . . . and should cold weather suddenly set in they undoubtedly would be in a precarious condition.⁸

The poverty and desperation took its toll on families. Children and their parents were without food and clothing and were in a shaky position to begin the upcoming winter. Mothers gave up their own food so their children could eat. Clothes were recycled from child to child. Another letter to Premier Greenfield from R. Johnson suggests the growing discontent with the new UFA government: “. . . is it any wonder that people are commencing to get peeved?”⁹

As it was, the Survey Board continued its work amid the frustration. It established

seven public hearings throughout the dry belt region hoping to gain insight into the situation. The banks of the region created a list of men to speak at the Board hearings. Those invited to speak did so. However, many UFA groups wrote letters to Greenfield suggesting that this method of obtaining information was not necessarily a good one. Many farmers were concerned that their voices would not be heard. However, the Survey Board, at the beginning of each of the hearings, outlined what it saw as its task. Providing there was time, anyone present at the public hearings would be given a chance to speak. Mrs. Horspool was the only woman to actually speak at the hearings and was not officially invited, but she was heard nonetheless.

The Survey Board hearings were held in November and December of 1921 in various communities throughout southern Alberta. Charles Magrath opened the initial hearing in Medicine Hat with a speech outlining the Board's objectives and understandings: "The commission is conscious of the fact that settlers in certain districts in the Province have suffered severely in recent years owing to unfortunate crop conditions. There never was any time in the history of the Province a greater need for proper team play by all interests in order that some satisfactory solutions of the problem may be arrived at."¹⁰ The Survey Board understood the need for cooperation and the gravity of the situation. Magrath continued, "The future welfare of a very large portion of the people of the province depends upon the solutions to the problem."¹¹ His comments were not just restricted to the men, the farmers and ranchers, but the entire community including women and children.

Families came to the area for a variety of reasons. The choice to move to the area was not solely the husbands'. Many wives came with the same sense of adventure, looking to create a home and a better life for themselves and their children, although there certainly was a strong family orientation attached to this as well. Their resolution in wanting to stay in the

area after so many years of toil and hardship was evident in the testimonies. They simply did not want to give up on what they had worked so hard to achieve already. J.J. Lee of Travers commented, “I came here to make a home and I am going to stay until I am forced to leave.”¹² In addition, C.F. Brown’s paraphrased testimony echoed those sentiments: “He was up here to raise a family. He wanted to stay if he could.”¹³ Although B.S. Polinkas of Whitla had a particularly socialist position regarding cooperation within the community, his comments reflect the reasons why many chose to build their lives in the dry belt:

I think that most of them tried to expand to build a better home for themselves, to give an education to their children which they are entitled to... the only solution to the problem to my mind is the establishment of production for use – cooperation farming and cooperation production in every line of industry for the working people. By working people I mean every man and woman who is engaged in the necessary and useful work of the welfare of society.¹⁴

Mr. Polinkas’ ideas mirrored the statements of many others. The women and men of the area had built their homes and their lives in this region. They wanted what most others did; a home, a livelihood, a healthy family, and a good education for their children.

Comments from the men who participated in the Survey Board hearings offered a wide array of subjects. Some commented about the difficulties of dry land farming; some offered tentative solutions. Much of the testimony surrounded the varying complexities of farming in such an area. However, a few of the men echoed concerns about the character of those involved, the dwindling communities, family welfare, proper farming methods, high taxes, a concern for the children, and the need for cooperation.

“It might as well be us”: Community Character

The testimonies of the Board hearings offered some insight into the character of the people living in the region. Most of these people, both the women and men of the community, were good people: hard working and honest. They cared about their families and their communities. They earnestly had tried to achieve a good life, and yet the situation at hand with high taxes and prices for commodities and low or no yields was forcing an otherwise industrious couple into despondency. E.A. McCrimmon of Jenner commented,

The Board had before them today a bunch of men who are faithful and honest, but a number of them were discouraged. Give them a little encouragement and they would respond and the country would become great and prosperous. They had passed through an unfortunate experience but with some encouragement he was confident they would pull through. He had every faith in them and in the country.¹⁵

T. Partridge of Monitor echoed those comments.

The people in this district are all bankrupt or on the verge of bankruptcy with the exception of a very few, a fact common to a great many more districts and unless aid is forthcoming in their financial distress it is very little use bringing in other reforms. The people are discouraged and they are assuming a don't care attitude which will be very hard to overcome... The farmers are feeling that they are being robbed of all they produce so what is the use trying; we must eliminate that feeling before we can succeed... We are getting ashamed to meet another man because we owe him money which we are unable to pay... This load of debt is degrading and demoralizing on many people... allow him to become a self-respecting man again.¹⁶

The comments of Mr. Partridge illustrate the feelings of many in the community. How could a woman go to town to get the mail or supplies without encountering someone to whom they owed money? How would they feel going to the general store to ask for credit on goods yet again? For a group of people who valued independence and self-sufficiency, the humiliation

of asking once again, with cap in hand, for an extension on credit would have been completely demoralizing. The relationships built in the communities through the church or the schools became awkward. Although most were in the same predicament, swallowing their pride to ask for help would have been a difficult thing to do, although for many it was a necessity for survival.

It was not just the farmer and their families who felt this awkwardness and loss. Mrs.

F.A. Moir, a business proprietor, of Milk River wrote to H. Greenfield in 1922,

There can be no difference in opinions among all classes when the grave conditions in the South are stated. They are simply appalling and almost beyond human understanding...

You will readily agree with me that the terrible uncertainty of affairs is an added burden to our financial worries. We do not know whether we will be able to take off our next crop or not. Selfish creditors wishing their pound of flesh are threatening at all times.

As a business woman running the largest general store in this district and know[ing] how my customers were situated I simply held back this fall on collections, only to see the banker, lumberman or implement man grab it all by threatening suits or court action. There is no use my holding off only to let some other heartless creditor clean the debtor up. Some people fairly numerous at that, do not know that there are finer things in life than chasing the dollar.

Cancellation of Liens or Government loans is not the honest way out nor is it right that the Government should step in as it has done in several cases here and take everything because some one creditor wanted to hog it all.

I am grubstaking a man now whom the Province cleaned up, did not even leave him seed and give as a reason for doing this that some Plow Co. has issued writ.¹⁷

Some testimonies suggested that these families should not be asked to simply give up on all of their hard work. M.D. Mills of Sundial commented, "These people should not be asked to abandon the saving of a lifetime and the home they had put their all into."¹⁸ There is the recognition that these families were entitled to a fair settlement. After all, the perception

was that the Dominion government was in some way responsible for settling a part of the country that was marginal at best. The Federal government set these people up for failure in their zeal to populate the country.

Mr. McDaniel's comment shows the strength of the people: "Some people are going to make this one of the greatest farming countries in Canada. It might as well be us who have been here and gone through the hardships."¹⁹ The problem with reaping the rewards though was that those rewards were too few and many simply could not and did not wait for that time to come.

H.J. Keay from Jenner articulated the feeling of devastation and loss in the area. He noted, "...at the present time you have nothing but chaos."²⁰ The people in the various communities throughout the region slowly lost their dignity and their sense of connection to their communities. The chaos included the dissolution of schools and activities that were once the foundation of strong and vibrant communities. As more families left the area, the communities were less and less able to sustain themselves.

Dwindling Communities

One of the biggest problems families and communities faced during the crisis was the abandonment of homesteads. Of all of the factors of community development, the most important is the families. The variance of gender and age create the conditions for a healthy community. Families provide the backbone of a sense of belonging and of identity. The economic crisis, however, compounded the family's financial situations, and many, if not most, of the families found it necessary to leave. Survival became paramount. Community

life was important, but survival was absolutely necessary. If families could not be maintained in a healthy way, how could a community?

Different areas of the dry belt offered different levels of evacuation. By 1921, in some areas, half of the region had been abandoned. Norman L. Stewart of Pandora estimated “the percentage of people who had left the district during the last two years at about 50 percent.”²¹ However, in other areas, the decline in population was just beginning. Mr. Clarkson of Suffield spoke at the Medicine Hat hearing. Mr. Clarkson noted that between five and ten percent of the population had moved out leaving those remaining to pay the \$81,000 in taxes.²² This additional tax burden along with little or no crop production and mounting mortgage bills left many people with little choice. Mr. Clarkson commented, “Unless they can get some relief and some way of staying the hands of the Mortgage Companies they do not think it is worthwhile to stay on.”²³ Mr. W.C. Smith of Redcliffe also commented on the growing abandonment of the region: “I have traveled through the West part of this district and north of Alderson and it looked at least as though three quarters of the houses were shut up... house after house there for miles you could go along the road, the houses were empty, and on this side of the river conditions are about the same.”²⁴ Those empty houses and abandoned buildings only provided stark reminders of the loss of community, of friendship ties, and of loved ones. They were the symbols of a dream unrealized.

However, not all in the communities sympathized with those who had abandoned their dreams. H. MacIntosh of Macleod passed judgment on the dwindling communities: “The weak of heart folded their tents like the Arabs of old and silently stole away.”²⁵ Does strength lie in persisting on an ill-founded dream or knowing when to start again with a new dream and a new hope?

Family Welfare

Of all of the groups of people in the region during the disaster, the economic trials hit families the hardest. The farmers and their wives were working off the farm to make enough money for their families to survive. If they were working off the farm, the farm itself would not have been developed which is contrary to popular belief that the development of the farm and the property came first. In fact, what did come first was the survival and wellness of the family.

Another issue arising from the hearings of the Southern Alberta Survey Board was the farmers' concern as to the rising costs of hay for the stock and vegetables to feed their families. Mr. Earle remarked, "If each man could have a few acres irrigated and the water was distributed through the country it would relieve this high price hay and vegetables we are up against very often. It would also enable everybody to keep a few head of stock...The farmers are suffering."²⁶ If farmers could not keep their families fed, they had no choice but to abandon their homesteads. Mr. Earle also commented later in the hearing, "If a man could grow a few potatoes he could feed his stock. A good many people realize that if the grass does not grow we cannot get milk. We have to have such things to get along with."²⁷ Trying to keep a few animals and a garden proved difficult for many on the farms. Without these, the necessities for survival needed to be bought, and with little or no credit, and the humiliation of asking for a relief, providing a meal for the family became an exercise in creativity and self-sacrifice. The growing need for relief, however humiliating the asking, became a concern. R. Carroll of Macleod commented: "They had to feed more than a hundred families in the north and east end of the municipality."²⁸ It became the municipality's job to provide the relief, and, yet, the growing depopulation added to a growing debt problem for the

municipalities themselves. They had fewer people from which to draw taxes and yet those who remained required relief. The municipalities became caught in the middle with little income generated and yet still required to pay out for seed and relief schemes.

Mr. Hanna of the Canada Land and Irrigation Company of Medicine Hat also spoke at the hearing: "Farming is not a quick rich scheme. I have had experience with it and I know it is not a process whereby anyone gets exceedingly rich, but, if you can make enough to feed and clothe yourself well, educate your children, and look after yourself in old age, that is all one can expect."²⁹ Farmers and their wives realized that they were not going to get rich quickly farming. In fact, all they wanted was to provide a good home and good health to their children. They wanted to build a home and community. They wanted their children to have the opportunity to go to school, to be healthy, and to be happy.

In other areas like Milk River and Manyberries, it was not the lack of milk but no way to get the excess to any market. In fact, many produced extra milk. As J.J. Evanson of Manyberries testified, "He milked about eight or ten cows this year. They could milk more cows than those needed for their own use if there were any way of getting their produce to market."³⁰ Frank G. Smith of Milk River also commented about the excess milk he produced: "Last year he milked four or five cows. They brought him a return of \$335, besides supplying his family needs."³¹ The lack of railway facilities in some of the areas prevented farmers from marketing some of their excess goods they produced on the farm. Where there was poverty in one area, there was wastefulness in others simply because of the lack of infrastructure.

Mr. J.H. Mason, another resident to speak at the hearings, also made an observation about the welfare of families within the community: "Would suggest that the Health Department find a solution of our medical difficulties, most of the population in this district

are 30 miles from a doctor: as a rule the people won't send for a doctor until it is almost too late as the cost is too high, and sometimes in winter the roads are impassable for that distance."³² Beyond the difficulty of feeding their families in some areas, the isolation of some of the farms added to the health concerns many of the mothers had. A midwife in the area often aided childbirth, but as the abandonment advanced, midwives too disappeared. If a family lived closer to a town, health issues may have been taken care of in due time, but, if they were isolated on a farm, the mother became nurse and doctor in times of medical emergencies.

Some of the testimony to the Survey Board cited stories about particular families that were destitute. G.W. Hess of the Municipality of Flowerdale remembered,

He was one of the hopeless ones. He was in debt badly although he was not going to ask for assistance for himself. He had gone to the limit. He was a family man. He had put \$7,000 into the land and his wife had put in another \$5,000 of her own. The good families had moved out of the neighbourhood. They had become discouraged. Some had been more successful, some were better farmers but they all sunk their money in the country. How were they to better themselves?³³

Often husbands and wives combined their financial assets in creating a home for their children. The story of the family, described by Mr. Hess, is reasonably typical. A woman came into a marriage with certain assets of her own and shared them with her husband. The farm became a family endeavor where everyone, including the children, worked for the betterment of the farm and their lives.

A letter from Frank E. Owen of Whitla to Premier Greenfield described this idea that the farm was a family affair: "I have gone behind every year until I am in debt 3,500 dollars, could not afford to hire any help so had to take my 2 boys out of school to help me, one out of high school. My wife has gone out in field and done the work of a man which is no work

for a woman...³⁴ Sometimes there were sacrifices made so the farm could prosper. It may have required women to work in the fields alongside her husband. Although the notion of women doing field work was not a very popular one by social standards, some women relished the idea of working outside in the field or helping to mend fences or to roof barns. The so-called gendered work divisions, more prevalent in towns, blurred on the farm. Women who resided in towns and villages throughout the region lived significantly different lives than their friends on the farm. Although the town women would likely be employed either in her own business or working for someone else, there was the expectation that in town, the behavior of a proper lady be maintained. Therefore the activities that women pursued often were those that were seen suitable for a woman. However, women on a farm had a completely different experience. It simply did not matter whether the particular activity was deemed lady-like. If it needed to be done and she was physically able to do it, she did it. This did not mean though, that all labours on the farm were equally doled out. Women still attended to the children and domestic duties but also participated in the realm of “men’s work” as well. These farm women were pulling double duty working to build a home and a life for themselves, their husbands and their children.

No Matter How You Farm It

Some of the districts within the dry belt proved a little more successful. For a few, a little intermittent moisture would hit their fledging plants and their crops would grow. Farming practices came under scrutiny during the testimony to the Southern Alberta Survey Board. R.W. Rissinger of New Dayton reported to the Board that some farmers in the area

were doing well.³⁵ It must have been disheartening to hear one neighbour talk about success and another nearly destitute. Women, too, would have gathered at various social events, church, or schools and talked about what was working and what was not. It was likely that the women would have returned home with new knowledge of the condition of various people in their communities, discussing with her husband what was working for others and what did not. It is unreasonable to think that many women did not speak their minds to their husbands regarding the farm. Women would have known what was going on in their neighbourhoods and had a crucial role to play in the care of their families. They would not typically have been silent on matters concerning their children's welfare.

Even residing on irrigable land did not guarantee the farmers' and their family's stability. J.W. Hooker of Travers worried that he did not know whether he could afford irrigation if the price was too high.³⁶ Being so close to irrigable land and unable to afford the one thing that would consistently help the crops and the family's future on the farm would have been extremely frustrating.

No matter how they farmed it, in some areas of the dry belt, farming was an unsuccessful venture. It did not matter how they farmed it, what method they used, the type of seed they had, or how much backbreaking labour went into it. Some of the land in the dry belt was simply unsuitable for farming. Trying to continue year after year just became too costly and too frustrating.

Taxes

Accompanying the difficulties in farming the land and the increasing poverty of those residents remaining, the issue of taxation became a topic for discussion at the hearings. Mrs.

Horspool of Foremost, the only woman to officially address the hearings, added her comments: “[She] made a complaint against the amount of the provincial taxes at the present time, stating they were double what they were a year ago. Judge Carpenter took particulars of the case.”³⁷ However, Mrs. Horspool's comments were not addressed at the larger meeting. Just after the lunch recess, Mrs. Horspool cornered Judge Carpenter to make her comments. The comments, however, did end up in the official minutes of the meeting.

Dr. W.G. Anderson of Steveville also complained about the unfairness of the taxation schedule: “It meant that the persistent farmer who stuck had to pay higher taxes; many people were leaving the district because of that. Their taxes were becoming heavier because adjoining farms were being abandoned.”³⁸ With a low or no income and a high debt load, including taxes, families simply could not afford to stay on their farms.

Again, municipalities and school boards were caught in the middle, being unable to collect taxes, but required to provide services to the community members. W.R. Henry, Reeve of the Municipality of Acadia testified, “...it was impossible to collect taxes enough to keep the schools going.”³⁹ In some sense, the schools were the cornerstone of many communities. Parents wanted their children to go to school. They wanted to make sure that their children had the opportunities that schooling provided. Yet, they found it extremely difficult, if not impossible to pay their school taxes, when they barely had enough money to feed their family. If they could, parents paid their school taxes first. Schooling was a priority, just behind food, clothing, and shelter. It was seen as a necessity, and many families abandoned their farms, not because of the poor crop conditions, but because the school was closing or only open intermittently.

What About the Children?

One of the truest tests of a community's strength is how it deals with the children in the community. Children, being the most vulnerable in society, are protected when a community is healthy. Some of the testimony during the Survey Board hearings discussed the concerns many members had for the children. The primary concern that many expressed was about the education system providing a good education for the youth of the area. Many saw the children suffering, not only because of the lack of nourishment but also because of the lack of an education. For many, the choice to abandon their farms came with the diminishment of educational opportunities for their children. Some children went without an education completely. As Rev. Cruikshanks observed from the Hanna hearings, "The children were simply having to go without education because of the climate conditions from which they had been suffering for the last four years."⁴⁰ Dr. W.G. Anderson of Steeveville echoed those thoughts: "The schools had to be kept open. It was bad enough to ask the people to spend their time and labour there, but they could not be expected to bring up their children in ignorance."⁴¹ Some even suggested that rather than keeping the schools open, a system of correspondence courses would be satisfactory in children achieving a good education. As J.T. Bindland of Peerless argued, "If children would study some at home and attend regularly when school is open they could have a fair education by the time they were fifteen years of age."⁴²

For many, the choice to leave their farms was based on the availability of schooling. As Cliff Call of Carlston commented,

Education in the south country was in a deplorable condition. [Call] had heard about the school system in Alberta being held up as a wonderful system but in his district the schools were very

unsatisfactory. The suggestion the junior high schools with dormitories should be built should be carried out so that the children would have an opportunity of receiving a fair education. [Call] would leave the country no matter how prosperous he was if better educational facilities were not available when his children needed them.⁴³

Mr. Call's reference to boarding schools reveals the belief that, especially for those children of high school age, the only opportunity they had to go to school was if they lived away from home. These children would visit home at the various school breaks but would only see family on those rare occasions. The notion of fracturing a family further by sending children off to boarding schools, even as the community also fractured, would have been another reason for abandonment. It is one thing for a community to rupture but a family as well? W.J. Winning echoed Mr. Call's assertions about schooling: "He himself had been compelled to move into Hanna to obtain educational facilities for his children. But a great many of the farmers were not in a position to do that."⁴⁴ Many were caught. They could not stay, nor could they leave, and their children were suffering as a result.

Cooperation

Of the many solutions suggested to help the crisis, the most prevalent in the testimony was the notion of cooperation. Mr. McDaniel from Whitla gave a number of suggestions that centered around cooperating between neighbours. These ideas included sheep circles, where a farmer combined his flock with others and then they shared in the cost for a hired man to look after the sheep, and cooperating to build dams to benefit many.⁴⁵ The farmers seemed to more readily adopt cooperative practice when times were tough.

W.H. Shield of Macleod commented, "Cooperation was necessary to bring the country back... The people generally did not want to move. Some settlers who had sold out

and had returned and bought land close to their old farm. If given a fair chance the majority of the farmers would stay.”⁴⁶ The cooperation Mr. Shield referred to, however, was not just the cooperation between farmers, although he recognized this as necessary. He was also alluding to the cooperation between the mortgage companies, the banks, and other debtors that were seemingly trying to draw water from an empty well. The competition between the creditors was a driving force in many of the abandonments. R.N. Mangles of Youngstown echoed the thoughts of many of the farmers: “We shall have to get away from our individualistic tendencies and learn to cooperate otherwise we shall lose our markets just as at the present time we are losing the British bacon market to the Danish cooperators.”⁴⁷ Mr. Mangles saw the necessity of a cooperative market for farmers to sell their goods.

Socialist ideas of cooperation were on the rise throughout the world. In some places, like Russia, those ideas took shape in Communist parties taking control of all of the means of production. The socialist ideas of unions and workers’ rights were being debated in Manitoba, and next door, in Saskatchewan, the beginnings of a new political party, Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) were taking root. Although these cooperative movements gained political ground in the rest of Canada and in parts of the world, the cooperative nature of farmers in Alberta remained simply at the grassroots level, with farmer helping farmer and only in times of crisis. The testimonies of a number of men during the Jenner hearing suggested the importance they placed on cooperation. Many advocated that pastures should be community-owned and that the land leased to larger corporations should revert to community pastures. All of these cooperative ideas were not only possible, but also preferable, and found their way into the testimony at the hearings.

All of the testimony at the Southern Alberta Survey Board hearings provided insight into the plight of farmers and their families in the dry belt. Although much of the testimony

concentrated on farming and ranching practices, a few of the men echoed concern about the families in the area. These testimonials discerned the character of the individuals and communities, family welfare, concerns for the children, and the need for cooperation. Each of these issues would have been paramount in the minds of the women of the communities.

The Report of the Survey Board

The official report of the Southern Alberta Survey Board was presented to Premier Greenfield on January 22, 1922. Included in the report were a variety of tables, statistical charts, and maps of the region. The official report's content read much like a survey of the crop conditions, meteorological reports, and farming and ranching practices in the region. The official report espoused the benefits of mixed farming: "The farmer who has been consistently carrying a few head of milk cows, a few cattle, and a few hogs, and whose wife has been keeping poultry, is in much better financial condition than his neighbours; he has usually been able to care for the greater part of the living expenses of himself and his family by those means."⁴⁸ By mixed farming, a family could, at least to some degree, maintain its livelihood.

The Survey Board also chastised the government for settling a land that did not have the infrastructure present to support families and communities. They thought the planning was shortsighted. The report stated, "...irrigation facilities should have been provided before farming was started."⁴⁹ In some of the areas, irrigation was possible, but, in others, settlement should have never been allowed. Again, the Dominion government's zeal in settling all available land proved disastrous to many families.

The Survey Board also gave a recommendation for the ideal size of an irrigated farm in the dry belt: “The ideal size of a farm under irrigation is approximately 160 acres for a farmer and a family to operate properly.”⁵⁰ For many farmers then, extending themselves too much in the Dominion government's cry for more wheat created farms simply too big for the land to sustain and the farmer to handle, not to mention all of those who settled without even the potential for irrigation.

The Survey Board's report centred on the economic viability of the region. The individual farmers and their family's welfare seemed furthest from the Board's minds. Although the testimonies to the Board commented about the dwindling communities and the character of the individuals involved, little was found supporting farmers and their families in the official report. One comment, however, that was made by the Board regarding the farmers described them as “absolute misfits”⁵¹ and the continuing problems in the country will have these “misfits eliminated.”⁵² The Survey Board seemed to place the blame of the economic catastrophe squarely on the shoulders of the farmers and their families. According to the Survey Board, the depression and drought existed because some of the farmers were simply inept. If more capable farmers occupied the lands then the whole situation would turn around. The fact that the number of abandonments would continue to rise suggests that the “misfits” left. Nevertheless, when over ninety percent of the population leaves a township, this depopulation does not just include the misfits. This also includes many of the pillars of society willing to build a better life for all in the community. This attitude of the Board of the “unfit farmer” may have been unpopular with the UFA government; after all, it was the farmers and the farmers' wives who put the UFA in government in the first place.

The success or failure of the farm was as important to the women of the community as to the men. The farm business was a joint venture. When he broke his leg, she stood

behind the plough. When the dry wind swept in and sucked the life out of the seedlings and the topsoil from the land, they cried together. She hauled water and cared for the chickens and sheep. She did the laundry and watched the children. Husband and wife needed each other on the farm. Their “separate spheres” did not separate. Each did what he or she had to do to make a go of it, to make their families thrive and survive.

Nevertheless, there comes a point where enough is enough. Many families lost thousands of dollars and years of their lives trying to make a go of it. At some point, many began the difficult decision to give it all up and simply start over somewhere else rather than continuing to risk everything on a dry and dusty piece of land.

Report on the Southern Alberta Drought Area (1924)

In 1924, the Dominion government's Department of the Interior stepped into the fray, commissioning B. Russell, a Reclamation engineer, and W.H. Snelson, a senior irrigation specialist, to survey the southern Alberta area between the Red Deer and the South Saskatchewan Rivers. Russell and Snelson were to survey the area and report on the conditions in the area. Their mandate was to report on the improvements made to the area, the availability of water, and the suitability of the land for farming and/or ranching. They also determined the level of population depletion for each particular township studied.

Although both Russell and Snelson presented in the final report a commentary on the suitability of the land and the potential for irrigation in the district, the most useful information was a description of each township studied and a list of the owners of particular parcels of land. In their report, they listed three women as the ranchers/owners in area. Mrs. Annie E. Stapleton, owned ranch numbers 6092 and 7265, both near Cavendish. Mrs. Grace

A.M. Hallum owned ranch number 11896, near Jenner, and Mrs. J.A.M. Hallum owned ranch number 8175, near Suffield.⁵³ The importance of this is not necessarily that women actually owned ranches on their own, but more so that they suffered the same losses on their land as did the men in the community. Again, these homesteads were not just individual ventures. They required the cooperation between husband and wife (and the children) for the farm or ranch to prosper. It was the “family farm” in many ways!

A few comments made by Russell and Snelson in their report centred on similar issues addressed by the *Southern Alberta Survey*. In the *Southern Alberta Survey*, they mentioned that the farmer who was actively involved in mixed farming was in a better position than the neighbouring farmer. However, by 1924, the conditions worsened to such a point where, as Russell and Snelson commented, "The present position of the rancher in the district is about as untenable as that of the farmer."⁵⁴ This deterioration of farming, ranching and mixed farming practices made it impossible for most to make a living on the land.

Another issue addressed by Russell and Snelson, similar to the *Southern Alberta Survey*, was that the mortgage and insurance companies owned large tracts of land. These absentee proprietors left a lot of the land untilled and desolate. The taxes for the municipalities as well as the school taxes came largely from these companies.⁵⁵ However, by 1924, abandonment in many of the townships throughout the region had almost reached its peak.

Russell and Snelson addressed the water problem in the area. They echoed the ideas of the Southern Alberta Board regarding the rainfall amounts. The intermittent rainfall was a problem. It could rain at a neighbour's place but not on his or her own piece of land.⁵⁶ This intermittent rainfall would have been disheartening, to say the least. Many sincere prayers could have floated to the heavens to send a little rain their way. Russell and Snelson, in discussing the supply of water, suggested, “While about two thirds of the area may be

considered adequately supplied with water for stock, the other third is at the present time practically destitute of water.”⁵⁷ One of the essential ingredients to successful farming or ranching is water, a paramount need for all of life. The people of the region found themselves, by 1924, without the necessities of life. No food. No water. No living. No life. There was little in Russell and Snelson’s report that offered the people of the region any optimism. Even the last hope of irrigation was proven unreasonable. Russell and Snelson reported, “. . .it may be concluded that the reclamation by irrigation of any considerable proportion of the area under review is not economically feasible.”⁵⁸

Of all of the information in Russell and Snelson’s report, however, the most striking was the information concerning the population loss in the area. Their report outlined the devastation of the population loss in each of the townships. What was beginning to look alarming in the Survey Board’s findings in 1921 was downright disastrous by 1924. They observed, “Since this time [1916] farming operations have not met with any success and settlers have been withdrawing at such a rate that out of a total of some 2336 resident farmers who once occupied lands in the district only some 645 are remaining.”⁵⁹ This was 72.4% of the total population. In these statistics, they are only measuring the number of resident farmers. The farmers’ families are not included in the numbers. However, even without the number of family members not included, the devastation to the communities was profound, for hundreds of families had left the area by this point. It was easier for a bachelor or a couple without children to survive in those conditions than those couples with young children. The concerns for the welfare for their families not only in proper nutrition, clothing, and shelter, but also with educational opportunities, provided parents with enough evidence to abandon their homesteads. The population declined dramatically from 1917 to 1923, so by 1924, when Russell and Snelson completed their report, many couples with children would have

abandoned the region already. Russell and Snelson continued their bleak survey with “Due to continued drought the majority of farmers originally on lands in the area have already been forced to abandon their farms and the prospects are that, unless present conditions change, this general abandonment of the area will continue.”⁶⁰

Appendix A outlines for each of the townships, the improvements made, the largest number of farmers settled, and the population lost. The most dramatic losses in population in the townships occurred in T12R10, T14R10, T15R10, T16R10, T18R10, T13R9, T14R9, T16R9, T16R8, T20R8, T19R7, T22R7, T23R7, T18R6, T20R4, T21R4, and T21R4 with over 80% of the population abandoning their homesteads in search of a better life elsewhere. In some of these townships, the population loss was greater than 90%.

Appendix B, *Depopulation Map based on Russell and Snelson's figures (1924)*, shows each of these townships. The concentrations of population losses are centred on a few of the towns and villages. Some of these villages, like Alderson and Winnifred, eventually would be abandoned altogether. It should be noted that the largest population losses and the largest area affected centre around the towns of Alderson and Suffield. From Tide Lake south to the South Saskatchewan River (and south of that as well) over 80% of the population had abandoned their homes and communities. In addition, the area just south of Jenner into the Peerless and Bingville area and then areas closer to the Red Deer River like Atlee, Cavendish, and Bindloss also suffered dramatic population losses. Each township surveyed by Russell and Snelson showed at least some level of depopulation. It seemed not to matter whether the river, a perpetual source of water, was near or far, population losses continued at a dramatic rate through to 1924. Nowhere in the area surveyed did the population increase. It is imperative to understand the devastation these kinds of population losses cause.

Where did all these people go? Most of these men and women who homesteaded in the area either left for other homesteads in Alberta in the Peace River country, Red Deer area, or the Crowsnest Pass. Many migrated back to the United States where they took up farming once again. In addition, some moved back to Ontario to return to the stability of family and friends and a developed infrastructure. However, many of these homesteaders who lost most of their assets—and some their sanity—on the dusty prairie, did, however, remain farming.

Russell and Snelson concluded,

i) the area is not good for either ranching or farming but ranching is a much better choice; ii) topography and water supply are okay for ranching; iii) with exception of the river flats the area is not suitable nor economical for irrigation; iv) it is not economically feasible to improve the present water supply other than filling Tide Lake; v) grow food for stock on the river flats and pump in water from the rivers; vi) it is not economically feasible to pump water from rivers for a stock water supply; and vii) stock water supplies can be erected in many places by constructing cheap dams in coulees.⁶¹

Their observations of the land were at least more favorable to the rancher than the farmer, though just barely. They found the conditions of the water supply poor for farming but enough for stock. The ranching families may have been pleased with Russell and Snelson's explanation but their observations may have been nothing different that the families in the area did not already know. Russell and Snelson made a few suggestions to the Dominion government to help the situation in the south;

i) Reduce both rental charges and taxes so it is similar to the value of the land; ii) Extend the term of the grazing lease to 20 years; iii) No more settlement by farmers; iv) Adjust the existing leases to make better use of the water supply.⁶²

Russell and Snelson recognized in their report that the taxation value of the land was in excess of what the land was actually worth. Owing more on a piece of land, in taxes and in

mortgage and insurance, than the land itself was worth, and having little to no revenue from which to pay the creditors, would have made deserting a homestead a reasonable and prudent choice. As well, Russell and Snelson suggested that the Dominion government suspend its policy on settlement on “free” homesteads in this particular area. They recommended that even though some people wished to move back to the region, settlement here needed to be closed. The policy of the Dominion government of 160 acres of land free, if the homesteader “proved up,” indicates how disastrous this was on this particular piece of the prairie. The unwitting immigrants who suffered because of the harsh environmental and economic conditions took up land that was marginal at best.

The greatest evidence Russell and Snelson gave regarding massive failures in the region was the statistics they provided in the numbers of families that had moved from the region by 1924. Township after township suffered losses. For some of the townships it became near total failure with over 95% of the population leaving. In other townships, the drain was not as swift, but, nonetheless, each of the townships described by Russell and Snelson lost some of their population. There was no net growth, only net failure.

By 1926, the provincial government thought it was necessary to study the area again. As a result, the Tilley East Commission was established. However, by 1926, those areas that had suffered tremendous population losses by 1924 were on the brink of becoming ghost towns, merely shadows their former past.

Tilley East Commission (1926)

The Tilley East Commission was appointed by Order in Council, February 20th,

1926. The Commission, chaired by E.J. (Ted) Fream of Edmonton, held thirteen public hearings and conferences from February 25, 1926 to March 25, 1926. Along with Fream, Victor Meek of Ottawa, Jonathan Ward Martin of Calgary, and Zachariah McIlmoyle of Edmonton were appointed commissioners. Similar to each of the Commissions that had gone before, none of these men resided in the area in question. The Tilley East Commission included the municipal areas of Redcliffe, Suffield, Alderson, Jenner, and Empress and the municipal districts of Sunny South, King, Britannia, and all of the school districts, which was a slightly larger area studied than the Russell and Snelson's *Report on the Drought Area of Southern Alberta*.

The Tilley East Commission mirrored the other two studies in a variety of ways. Fream suggested in his report that the liability of the land was in excess of what it was worth: "The financial liability of the farmers and municipalities collectively is greatly in excess of the value of lands and it is more than the land can earn."⁶³ It must have frustrated those still living in the region in 1926 that this latest commission was just repeating what was said in the past. Land owners were required to pay taxes and loans on land that had lost its value. For those who had become conditioned to make the best use of the resources they had, this would have seemed like such a waste. Why continue to pay out money when the land they were paying on had no real value?

The Tilley East Report also discussed the diminishing population in the area: "It was admitted, however, that not less than ninety percent of the land in this district was now unoccupied and that most of this had been abandoned."⁶⁴ Fream continued, "The information secured from the residents remaining in this area shows that although there has been a considerable depopulation, in fact the number of families moved from this area under the free freight scheme is over 250, there was the desire on the part of those remaining to stay on their

farms and make their homes there if at all possible.”⁶⁵ Some families took the opportunity to move to other locations to start over with the free freight scheme. However, this comment spoke more about the character of those who remained. The *Tilley East Report* repeatedly suggested that those who remained in the area wanted to stay on their farms if possible. Now, whether these people were a little crazy or a lot stubborn is not known, but they certainly had a unique strength that allowed them to persevere through ten years of drought, devastation, and depression.

The people who remained had watched their communities vanish, one family at a time, one building at a time. The initial pain of the years 1917 through 1920, feeling the sting and sorrow of communities losing some of their strongest and most active members, would have dulled to an ache by 1926. The isolation of the first years of settlement would have returned by 1926. Yes, there was a transportation system that was a little more reliable and yes, the mail delivery was much more consistent, and yes, even in some cases the use of the telephone had begun. Nevertheless, those who remained behind still could hear the lonely cry of the coyote at night, the howl of the wind through a neighbour’s abandoned buildings, and the dust finding its way through the broken panes of glass.

By the time of Ted Fream’s commission in 1926, the homesteaders really were at the end. After ten successive years of crop failures and the devastation of the natural, human, and financial resources, many families had come to the point where the situation necessitated their departure. “The further crop failure of 1926 has however determined many of the settlers that the time has come when they must move to another locality and it is probable that several families will remove from the district in the near future.”⁶⁶ Even the most stalwart of families in the community had come to the end of their suffering. They had nothing left to

hang on to: no money, no resources, no friends, no crop, no community, and no schools. Why stay at all?

Where both the *Southern Alberta Survey* and Russell and Snelson's *Report on Southern Alberta's Drought Area* differ from the *Tilley East Commission* is that the *Tilley East Commission* reported on each of the sections in the area and looked at the general community health and the schools still in existence. In 1921, the Southern Alberta Survey Board heard testimony at the hearings about some of the school issues. Parents were concerned with their children's welfare and the loss of educational opportunities afforded their children. For some, this lack of educational opportunity was reason enough for families to make the decision to move. Although many threatened leaving and many fulfilled those threats, there were still a few families remaining in the area by 1926. There were also a few schools still running and a few school boards intact. Table 2 is a summary of the comments made by the *Tilley East Report* surrounding the health of various communities and school districts in the region.

Table 2: *Tilley East Commission Report: Community Comments by Section*

Section	Schools	Comments
South Western Section (including Alderson, Suffield, Redcliffe)	23 school districts total 7 closed (no children) operating and 6 districts sending children to those schools at 30 cents per day 5 operating jointly 1 operating as funds permit	
Empress/Bindloss Section	8 school districts 1 closed; 1 pending closure 1 sending children elsewhere Empress and Bindloss operating full year 3 working on deal to operate jointly	Practically isolated Remainder of the area used by the Remount Reserve of the Department of the Militia

Cavendish/Buffalo Section (Known as “Little Sweden”)	3 school districts 1 closed 2 open full year	“A demand being made for school accommodation although there does not appear to be sufficient children to warrant same.” ⁶⁷
Atlee Section	2 school districts 1 closed 1 operating for part of the year	
Jenner/Iddesleigh Section	11 school districts including consolidated school in Jenner 6 districts not in operation (there are no children in these districts) 2 operating jointly 1 operating full year	
Bingville/Blue Grass Section	9 school districts 4 closed (no children) 3 operating jointly 1 operating full year	

Each of the sections described by the Tilley East Commission had lost schools. Some of those schools disappeared due to the lack of children. Some school boards were operating jointly to share the costs of building maintenance and a teacher’s salary. Some school boards were sending children to nearby districts, paying a nominal fee per day for their education. Some families were sending their children away to school to live in dormitories or with other family members. The issues with the schools were just indicative of a larger problem within the communities themselves. Parents desperately tried to get their children educated, and school boards desperately tried to accommodate their wishes. In the Cavendish/Buffalo section, Fream suggested that there was a demand for school accommodation but there were not enough children in the area to warrant it. Despite all of the hardships families were going through, they still wanted educational opportunities for their children.

Echoed in the *Russell and Snelson Report*, the Tilley East Commission also heard the residents' cry for limiting the number of settlers in the area and for giving the land to those already present: "There is a distinct difference of opinion in the various sections, although all sections are unanimous in wanting outsiders kept out of the area and that the present settlers should be given the first opportunity to use the vacant lands."⁶⁸ This is contrary to the suggestion in the *Southern Alberta Survey*, however, that the farms remain small, no more than a quarter section, in order to be profitable.

The *Tilley East Report* summed up the views of the settlers:

- Taxation (Assessments have been made in fictitious values and arrears of taxes should be cancelled or reduced)
- Community grazing (In some parts only by community grazing can the lands be made productive)
- Limitation of stock (A limit should be placed on the number of stock each resident shall run)⁶⁹
- Compulsory fencing
- Additional land for residents where the resident has less than a section
- Limiting areas designed for summer grazing
- Watering places (open access to river and secure water from wells)
- Road work discontinued except for main highways
- Demonstration plots encouraged under the supervision of the Department of Agriculture
- Establishment of centralized communities in unoccupied areas moving abandoned buildings to central area
- Centralization of residents so that it would be possible for them to enjoy social and educational facilities
- Readjust the seed grain and relief indebtedness now charged against the land
- All creditor interests should share in the losses sustained in the area⁷⁰

Of all of the recommendations and suggestions outlined by the remaining residents in the area, the one with the most impact on families themselves, and not just the farm operations, was the suggestion to centralize all of the residents. The isolation of some of the farms and the sheer distance between the farms fractured the sense of community. The residents recognized this seclusion as a deterrent to community building. With the

centralization of communities, families would then have a greater opportunity to engage in social, educational, and religious activities: those activities that make a community a home.

The main recommendation that the Tilley East Commission made regarding the area was to give families the opportunity to move out if they so wished. By 1926, ten years since the drought began, the proposal was to finish abandoning the region. Fream wrote,

That any of the present settlers desiring to move to new locations be assisted with free freight and in the event of the new location being a second homestead, that arrangements be made by which it will be possible for such settlers to receive advances, properly secured, from time to time, not exceeding in any one case the sum of one thousand dollars, to enable such settler to provide buildings on the second homestead and to carry him until the new farm is productive, this to only apply to the man who has failed on his first homestead, through no fault of his own, and who is being moved to a new location.⁷¹

The Tilley East Commission recognized the futility of continuing to farm in some of the sections of the dry belt. They thought it was fair to provide the families with the means to start over in another area. It was time to give it all up.

Conclusions to “Surveying the Calamity”

All of the studies and commissions throughout the 1920s provided insight into the growing disaster unfolding in the dry belt of southern Alberta. Each of the commissions, the *Southern Alberta Survey*, the *Report on the Southern Alberta Drought Area*, and the *Tilley East Commission*, commented upon the devastating loss of the population in the area and offered suggestions about what to do with it. Each acknowledged the loss of families in the area and the loss of community. Each also recognized the devastating effects this was having on those residents who remained. Although each study offered solutions to the situation, and

various pieces of legislation were enacted as a result to try to help the situation, nothing really helped. The utter devastation of the families and communities in the area throughout the period of 1917 to 1926 made an indelible mark on the men, women, and children. Robert L. Reid of Sheerness wrote to the editor of the *Farm and Ranch Review* in 1932 and summed up all of this rather nicely: “All of this wasted effort and years of disappointment and trial in these marginal districts is one of the greatest tragedies of western colonization.”⁷² And it truly was a tragedy.

The land near Suffield was eventually offered to the Department of Defense and provided a useful site for Canadian and British troops to practice maneuvers. One woman commented, “I hope the first bomb they practice with will drop on the spot that has enslaved me all these years.”⁷³ This woman’s comments spoke volumes about her experiences as a wife and a mother in the dry belt: enslavement to the land, to all the hard work, to all the sweat, and to all the tears, without anything to show for it.

Despite all of the attempts at studies, commissions, and legislation, and various relief programs, nothing worked to stem the increasing financial and human costs of this disaster. From 1917 to 1926, southeast Alberta was in the path of economic, environment and community destruction. The worldwide depression that resulted after the stock market crash in 1929 only exacerbated the conditions. The boom years of 1908 to 1914 and brief relief in 1927 and 1928 became a distant memory. The cruelty of these “good” years gave a false optimism and hope to the residents. As Jack Gorman stated,

It took a couple of generations to learn that a quarter section in East Central Alberta would not support a family. It required 40 acres of grass to graze one cow. The soil was light and the topsoil layer was thin. The drought and winds were to wreak more tragedy on families than any other.⁷⁴

The farmers were optimistic that a living could be had in this harsh and unforgiving environment. Mrs. Calder from Bow Island commented,

Inspector Wilcox, of the Dominion Land Department, was a guest with Mr. and Mrs. Ben Whitney during his recent investigations re. Preemptions, i.e., cancelling of same from the farmers who have not come up to regulations or from farms which have been deserted and otherwise neglected. This is the move which is being made by the government to revert as much as possible back to grazing with the object of the ones left to go into stock raising. By degrees a few are starting on that line.⁷⁵

With the escalating costs to the municipalities and to the provincial government, Special Areas designation offered some relief. The creation of the Special Areas Board allowed these municipal and improvement districts an opportunity to consolidate whatever resources they had left and control administration from a central point. Tilley East Special Area was established in 1927 and provided the foundation for the subsequent establishment of the Berry Creek Special Area in 1932 and other special areas in the region.

Most of the people who had occupied the area had left to begin their lives again. The town of Tilley was deserted in 1917⁷⁶, made a comeback of sorts, and was abandoned again in 1926/1927.⁷⁷ Tilley sprung up again in 1930 just as the depression hit. Families moved in from the United States, from Europe, and from neighbouring towns.⁷⁸ This designation changed the organizational structure of the area, centralizing administrative control. Since few people lived in the area, the designation itself had little impact on their daily lives. It did, however, curb the spiralling costs. As Gorman noted, “The recommendations of the Tilley East Special Area Act were to become the model for which the Special Areas Act would evolve and become enacted a dozen years later.”⁷⁹ The Special Areas designation solidified control and stabilized the area.

The establishment of the Special Areas Board, whose role was to administer the area, had members of the special areas to sit on the Board.⁸⁰ The residents of the area were allowed to participate in the process. This is just what they wanted. Through the designation of these areas as Special Areas, some stability returned to the region. The residents that remained had ridden out the storm but would be forever changed in the process.

Although much legislation was passed, commissions and surveys were conducted, and broad public consultation were attempted, women were surprisingly silent surrounding all of these attempts at changing the fortunes of the people in the dry belt. Little was heard from women in the consultation processes. Even Mrs. Cotter, Mrs. Calder, and Mrs. Trebble were relatively silent. These correspondents had much to say about everything else and yet chose to remain quiet when it came to “official” business. It was a curious notion.

4 Surveying the Calamity

- ¹ W. Strojich, *Land tenure in W. Canada with particular reference to the special areas of Alberta*. (M.A. Thesis, University of Alberta, 1940) GA M-369 p. 95.
- ² For more detail on the Drought Relief Act and Tax Recovery Act see J. Gorman, *A land reclaimed: The story of Alberta's special areas*. (Hanna: Gorman & Gorman Ltd. Published for the Special Areas Board, 1988)
- ³ See Appendix A: *Report on the Southern Alberta Drought Area* (Russell and Snelson, Department of the Interior, 1924) indicating the population loss by township.
- ⁴ Letter to H. Greenfield from H. W. Lever, Kipp, Alberta, November 8, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43a (emphasis in original)
- ⁵ *Report of the Public Hearing of the Survey Board for Southern Alberta*, Minutes from Lethbridge, December 1, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43c (testimony paraphrased in original) p. 18.
- ⁶ Telegram to H. Greenfield from P. R. Wedderburn, November 10, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43a
- ⁷ Letter to P. R. Wedderburn from H. Greenfield, November 10, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43a
- ⁸ Letter from Rudolf Johnson, Blue Grass UFA, Alderson to Hon. H. Greenfield, October 7, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43a
- ⁹ Letter from R. Johnson to H. Greenfield, October 31, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43a
- ¹⁰ *Report of the Public Hearing of the Survey Board for Southern Alberta*, Minutes from Medicine Hat, November 29, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43c (testimony paraphrased in original) p. 2.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.2
- ¹² *Report of the Public Hearing of the Survey Board for Southern Alberta*, Minutes from Enchant, December 8, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43c (testimony paraphrased in original) p. 2.
- ¹³ *Report of the Public Hearing of the Survey Board for Southern Alberta*, Minutes from Youngstown, December 15, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43c (testimony paraphrased in original) p. 10.
- ¹⁴ *Report of the Public Hearing of the Survey Board for Southern Alberta*, Minutes from Medicine Hat, November 29, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43c (testimony paraphrased in original) p. 32.
- ¹⁵ *Report of the Public Hearing of the Survey Board for Southern Alberta*, Minutes from Jenner, December 21, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43c (testimony paraphrased in original) p. 26.
- ¹⁶ *Report of the Public Hearing of the Survey Board for Southern Alberta*, Minutes from Youngstown, December 15, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43c (testimony paraphrased in original) p. 40-42.
- ¹⁷ Mrs. F. A. Moir, Milk River, to H. Greenfield, January 2, 1922, PAA 69.289.f5a
- ¹⁸ *Report of the Public Hearing of the Survey Board for Southern Alberta*, Minutes from Enchant, December 8, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43c (testimony paraphrased in original) p. 20.
- ¹⁹ *Report of the Public Hearing of the Survey Board for Southern Alberta*, Minutes from Medicine Hat, November 29, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43c (testimony paraphrased in original) p. 3.
- ²⁰ *Report of the Public Hearing of the Survey Board for Southern Alberta*, Minutes from Jenner, December 21, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43c (testimony paraphrased in original) p. 12.

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- ²¹ *Report of the Public Hearing of the Survey Board for Southern Alberta*, Minutes from Hanna, December 16, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43c (testimony paraphrased in original) p. 10
- ²² *Ibid.*, n.p.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- ²⁵ *Report of the Public Hearing of the Survey Board for Southern Alberta*, Minutes from Macleod, December 13, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43c (testimony paraphrased in original) p. 2.
- ²⁶ *Report of the Public Hearing of the Survey Board for Southern Alberta*, Minutes from Medicine Hat, November 29, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43c (testimony paraphrased in original) p. 17.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- ²⁸ *Report of the Public Hearing of the Survey Board for Southern Alberta*, Minutes from Macleod, December 13, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43c (testimony paraphrased in original) p. 18.
- ²⁹ *Report of the Public Hearing of the Survey Board for Southern Alberta*, Minutes from Medicine Hat, November 29, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43c (testimony paraphrased in original) p. 40.
- ³⁰ *Report of the Public Hearing of the Survey Board for Southern Alberta*, Minutes from Lethbridge, December 1, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43c (testimony paraphrased in original) p. 9.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- ³² *Report of the Public Hearing of the Survey Board for Southern Alberta*, Minutes from Enchant, December 8, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43c (testimony paraphrased in original) n.p.
- ³³ *Report of the Public Hearing of the Survey Board for Southern Alberta*, Minutes from Youngstown, December 15, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43c (testimony paraphrased in original) p. 36.
- ³⁴ Letter from Frank E. Owen of Whitley to Premier Greenfield, July 26, 1922, PAA 69.289 f34
- ³⁵ *Report of the Public Hearing of the Survey Board for Southern Alberta*, Minutes from Lethbridge, December 1, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43c (testimony paraphrased in original) p. 12.
- ³⁶ *Report of the Public Hearing of the Survey Board for Southern Alberta*, Minutes from Enchant, December 8, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43c (testimony paraphrased in original) p. 3
- ³⁷ *Report of the Public Hearing of the Survey Board for Southern Alberta*, Minutes from Lethbridge, December 1, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43c (testimony paraphrased in original) p. 16.
- ³⁸ *Report of the Public Hearing of the Survey Board for Southern Alberta*, Minutes from Hanna, December 16, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43c (paraphrased testimony in original) p. 5.
- ³⁹ *Report of the Public Hearing of the Survey Board for Southern Alberta*, Minutes from Youngstown, December 15, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43c (paraphrased testimony in original) p. 39.
- ⁴⁰ *Report of the Public Hearing of the Survey Board for Southern Alberta*, Minutes from Hanna, December 16, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43c (paraphrased testimony in original) p. 8.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- ⁴² *Report of the Public Hearing of the Survey Board for Southern Alberta*, Minutes from Jenner, December 21, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43c (paraphrased testimony in original) p. 2.

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- ⁴³ *Report of the Public Hearing of the Survey Board for Southern Alberta*, Minutes from Hanna, December 16, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43c (paraphrased testimony in original) p. 15.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, n.p.
- ⁴⁵ *Report of the Public Hearing of the Survey Board for Southern Alberta*, Minutes from Medicine Hat, November 29, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43c (paraphrased testimony in original) p. 5 and 7.
- ⁴⁶ *Report of the Public Hearing of the Survey Board for Southern Alberta*, Minutes from Macleod, December 13, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43c (paraphrased testimony in original) p. 10.
- ⁴⁷ *Report of the Public Hearing of the Survey Board for Southern Alberta*, Minutes from Youngstown, December 15, 1921, PAA 69.289 f43c (paraphrased testimony in original) p. 17.
- ⁴⁸ *Report of the Survey Board for Southern Alberta*, January 1922, p. 18, PAA 69.289 f43b
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- ⁵³ B. Russell and W. H. Snelson, *Report on the Southern Alberta Drought Area: Appendix 5: Suitability of Lands for Grazing*, (Canada: Department of the Interior, December 17, 1924). p. 3.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25–26.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- ⁶³ *Tilley East Commission Report*, December 8, 1926, p. 9
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- ⁷² Robert L. Reid, Sheerness, letter to the editor, *Farm and Ranch Review*, January 1932, p. 7.
- ⁷³ G. Roth, ed. *Prairie Crucible: A History of Atlee, Bingville, Iddesleigh, Jenner and Tide Lake*. (Medicine Hat: Prairie Sod History Book Society, 1991) p. 101.

⁷⁴ Gorman, *A Land Reclaimed*, p. 31.

⁷⁵ "Bow Island," *Medicine Hat Weekly News*, Thursday May 19, 1927, p. 7.

⁷⁶ E. Ellerman, ed. *Tilley Trails and Tales*, (Tilley: Tilley Historical Society, 1980), p. 14.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁷⁹ Gorman, *A Land Reclaimed*, p. 92.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 130-131.

CHAPTER 5

AN ARTIST'S LAMENT: THE LOIS VALLI STORY

Lois Valli was a ranch wife who lived eight miles south of Alderson. There she wrote poetry about her place in the sun, wind, and dust. Her journey through the crisis is a journey in self-discovery, strength, and courage. Through her poetry and later through her paintings, she found a way to survive. In some ways, Valli was representative of the area. She needed, like many others, to find either the inner or outer resources to survive the hardships. Some could not find the wherewithal and ended up admitted to psychiatric wards or finding peace only in death. Some found those resources in connection with others, in creating groups of like-minded individuals, joining community groups, and reaching out. Some, however, like Valli, found the resources within themselves. Isolated on the ranch, she found another avenue for strength, her artistic endeavors.

Valli wrote poetry on bits of paper and flour sack labels, focusing on the conditions of the area. She began to write poetry in school and, along with many others, memorized favourite poets. In 1991 and in 1993, her son Ted published these poems in two volumes, *Prairie Wool*¹ and *Prairie Winds*.² Very few of the poems indicate a date when she wrote them, but the first volume, *Prairie Wool*, spoke more to her life on the ranch. She wrote the poems in *Prairie Winds* with a strong sense of environmental awareness and protection. In the poems of both volumes, she wrote about what she knew and observed. As her son Ted reminisces in his preface to *Prairie Winds*,

Work, weather, animals and people have dominated her life on the prairie. All of these have combined to give her strength to survive the rigors of ranch life on the plains, the sensitivity to value all life and the sense of humour to appreciate the quality and sinew of the many characters who have eaten at her table over the years.³

In an interview with D. C. Jones in 1982, she observed,

I treasure those years because now you could not starve me to death in any way. I could go out onto the prairie and survive. And that's what it did to a lot of people. It grew me up and formed my character. Probably made me harder and tougher than I otherwise would have been if I'd stayed in town.⁴

Valli's poetry and paintings open a window into her perspective: they show us what she saw, thought, and felt through the crisis of the twenties and the thirties. The poetry reflects her daily triumphs and struggles. In analyzing Valli's poetry, a few predominant themes emerge. She wrote about what she knew, about her life, and about the characters—sheepherders, ranch hands, and others—who sometimes entered it. Valli made a series of choices in her writing, each determined, in part, by the choice that went before. The titles of her published works, *Prairie Wool* and *Prairie Wind*, are both indicative of the central features of living on the prairies. For Valli, it was the sheep and the never-ending wind that were constants in her life. As her son Ted observed in the preface to the book, *Prairie Wool*, “The Nine Bar Ranch era shows a strong preoccupation with the weather on which the survival of both man and animals depended.”⁵

In addition to writing poetry, throughout her lifetime, Valli painted and sketched hundreds of pictures, usually for her own enjoyment, but she also sold a few to friends. She did not date or title her sketches and paintings. Thus, pinpointing the exact dates when Lois completed these paintings is impossible. However, she painted most of them well after 1938 and through her later years. She painted and sketched what she knew and what she saw in her everyday life. From townscapes to landscapes, from portraits to still lifes, her skill as an amateur artist was remarkable. Her artistic talents allowed her to render trees, plants and

flowers, animals—family pets and farm animals, especially sheep—and portraits of those people who gathered around her table.

The Brooks Campus of the Medicine Hat College houses ten of her paintings, and, from time to time, they are put on display. In 1991, the Brooks Campus held a Lois Valli exhibit that included many of her works. The sizes of the paintings and sketches vary from greeting card size to larger 24" X 36" pictures. Each of the paintings and sketches offers a glimpse into what she thought and felt. For the most part, Lois approached her painting with a greater sense of hope and optimism than she did her poetry. Such optimism may have been a result of life changes for her. She painted in her elderly years—after she had left the ranch—and she seemed to celebrate life and the miracle of nature in her artwork.

Jones' sources for Valli's journey were largely oral—an interview with Buck in 1984, correspondence with Valli's son and daughters, and his long and valued communication with Valli herself. She also shared with Jones much of her poetry prior to its publication in *Prairie Wool* in 1991. Concerning the subject of her poetry and painting, the prairie, which she studied with sensitivity, Valli commented, "People who spend their lives on the Prairie develop a 'hate love' feeling for it. We know all her moods. If that everlasting wind stops we look at the sky and try to judge from the clouds what's in store. Each wind has a voice. Well, we know the whine, the moan, the shriek. Each strikes an accompanying chord within us—unspoken hope, fear, anger. We recognize the voice of THAT coyote giving vent to all the pent-up feelings we dare not express."⁶

My own sources for Valli were her collections of poetry and her paintings and, of course, Jones' work and the tapes of his interviews. I met her in her nursing home in Brooks in June of 2007, six months prior to her death when both her health and memory were fading.

Although I received no tangible information from her, I was pleased to meet such a strong and resourceful woman.

Lois Valli (nee Pinder) was born on a homestead near North Portal in southern Saskatchewan in 1908. Her early years on the homestead were happy times. Her father, Henry, and mother, Lydia, had emigrated from England following many others trying to make their dreams come true on the “rich” Canadian prairie. Henry was a wonderful father, and Lois held him in very high regard. She commented in an interview with Jones, “My father was a small, unassuming man, but to me he towered above almost all other humans. I never had an occasion to change that opinion. The love and care he gave us was always there, never wavering, never dulled by temper or emotion.”⁷ Lydia, her mother, however, had a more temperamental character. Later, Lois realized how spoiled her mother truly was. Despite her character, Lydia also did what she had to do. Jones commented, “The nearest doctor was twenty miles away in Estevan, so the women were undertakers and midwives and medicine-givers, as the need arose. For the sick they bought antacids, antiseptics, and ointments—ginger root, Minard’s Liniment, Carbolic acid, and Zam Buk. By degrees, Lydia responded to the demands put on her, and in crisis, her courage bloomed, and she comforted many.”⁸ However, Lois’ primary bond was with her father, about whom she said that she wanted to be “just like him.”⁹

Henry believed that women should not work outside of the house and because of this attitude, Lydia, Lois, and her sister did little on the homestead but domestic chores. This attitude, along with poor farming skills, made Henry a particularly unsuccessful farmer. Although he worked hard, he never found any particular success with building the homestead. Eventually, after twelve years, the family gave up on farming and dusty southeastern Saskatchewan and moved to the town of Redcliff. Redcliff, even drier and

dustier than southeastern Saskatchewan, at least provided services to the young family. Lois and her sister were thrilled to have running water in their house. As the story goes, Lois and her sister kept running to the taps to turn on and off the water until Lydia reprimanded them both for being wasteful.

In Redcliffe, Lois continued her schooling. She could recite poetry for hours and particularly enjoyed *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. She continued to recite poetry after her own children were born. In addition to having a love of poetry, she was a talented musician. As Jones commented, “Lois nurtured her considerable talents as a musician. The children were brought up on classical music, and brother Stanley played violin and later flute and piccolo with the Medicine Hat Symphony orchestra. Lois played the church organ for the Nazarenes, the piano for the itinerating evangelists and the junior and senior choir of the United Church. She was also the pianist for her brother’s local dance band and for Masonic, Robbie Burns, and other functions. At the tender age of fourteen she even played for the silent movies. Given a chart of the action and mood demands, she chose her own music. Her time in Redcliffe was a period of intense joy.”¹⁰

Reflecting this sense of musicality she had so ingrained, Lois varied the rhythm with each poem, mimicking the cadence of her life. In some cases, she used a particular beat, and in others, she offered a complete free verse. Her own ability to play the piano aided her in her quest for rhythm. She commented on her own method of writing poetry in her poem titled “Three Four Time”:

It is very easy to think in rhyme,
The words roll out in three four time.
Music and words go hand in hand,
Centuries of feet echoed by a band.
I hear a soprano reaching high C,
In the soaring trunk of the great elm tree,
Cymbals roll through the autumn sky,

When a flock of wild geese are passing by.
 Pagliacci's¹¹ broken heart will live on
 In the yearning cry of the Coyote song.
 Music and words - colour and rhyme,
 They all go together in three four time.¹²

Lois wrote poetry to the rhythm of music, and, in nature, she saw the music come alive.

Whether it was the grand trees or geese flying overhead or the coyote's cry, there was a certain rhythm and musical quality to all she viewed in nature. Her method for writing poetry came from her ability to hear the musical value in all she saw. One of the great tragedies of Lois' life was that, after she married, she never played the piano again. As she commented to Jones in an interview, "The piano made me too popular and my husband didn't like it."¹³ That great joy she encountered during her time in Redcliff never appeared again in the playing of music but found its way into her poetry later.

Lois received her early education in Redcliff and then studied at the Garbutt's Business School in Medicine Hat, where she graduated as a stenographer in 1925. At the same time, the orchestra needed her in Brooks, and off she went, finding work with the Eastern Irrigation District, a project built by the Canadian Pacific Railway. It was in Brooks that she met Mario (Buck) Valli. Of Italian descent, Mario swept Lois off her feet in his charming way. They married at the Pinder home in Redcliff on January 4, 1928. Jones stated, "Lois wanted, perhaps even expected, a man like her father: she hoped for companionship and consideration, a mate more given to selflessness than self-service, more a partner than a manager, more accepting than directing, one who would see the world through warm eyes."¹⁴ What she wanted and what she got were two very different things.

Because Lois was a churchgoer and Buck was not, they agreed that a United Church minister might preside at the wedding. Jones remarked, "A couple of weeks later, a stern French priest appeared from Medicine Hat announcing that they were living in sin. Buck was

directed to confession, and Lois was handed a document to sign promising to bring up any children Catholic. The priest urged her swift conversion and shortly thereafter, he married the couple properly. The couple resided in Medicine Hat for a time, where they attended periodically, the Gothic cathedral of St. Patrick's. When they did go, the ceremony and incense impressed Lois, but the droning Gregorian chants did not. True to the promise, Gilda, the first-born was baptized at St. Patrick's."¹⁵

They then returned to Brooks, after Buck's attempt at selling insurance failed. When the time came to baptize their son Ted, in 1932, Buck announced that his wife would then join the church. Lois wanted more time, so Buck, in his characteristic fashion, set the date. When the baptismal contingent arrived—the priest and two lady members of the local congregation—Buck was nowhere to be found. Lois wished to wait until his return and so the contingent waited. And waited. Soon the ladies started to express their displeasure at having to wait for so long, and the priest was concerned as he had engagements back in Medicine Hat. So, reluctantly, Lois converted to Catholicism as a “very unwilling subject.”¹⁶ When Buck finally did return home, he found Lois in tears.

Afterward, the resident priest visited her weekly to address any concerns that Lois may have had. Lois was full of questions and exasperated the priest. She wanted to know about confession and the need for priests as mediators between women and God. Jones stated, “The poor priest had finally had enough of the reverse inquisition and told Lois that she had to FORCE herself to believe! This she would not do.”¹⁷

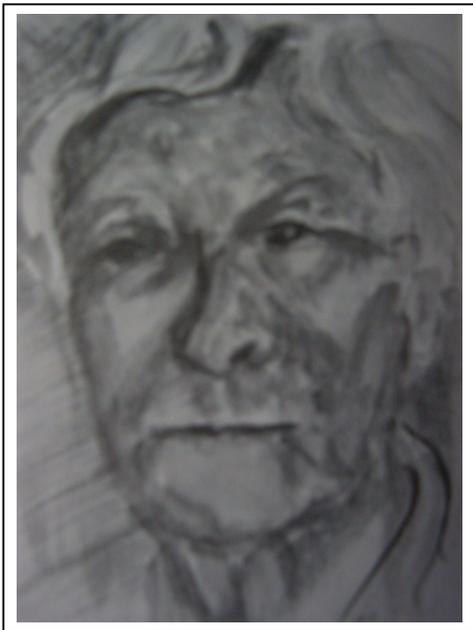
Lois and her husband could not have been more opposite in personality. Lois was shy and reserved, Buck, outgoing and gregarious. When they socialized, he did most of the talking, and at home, life centred on Buck. In some instances, he was quite abrupt with his wife. He controlled life at the ranch and made it known that he was the one in charge. Lois,

however, managed the children and the domestic duties on the ranch. Buck was swift to show his displeasure with both his wife and his children. His quick temper and violent explosions often left Lois and her children cowering in a corner. The poem “The Waitress” offered some insight into her personality. The waitress at the coffee shop was belligerent, but rather than fighting with her, Lois chose to acquiesce. She wrote,

She knew I was stupid, and I blushed in shame...
The ill-tempered waitress had conquered me.¹⁸

Maybe Lois reacted to her husband in the same fashion, giving in to his wishes in the early years because it was simply easier than fighting. Eventually, however, this meekness was overcome by a powerful sense of survival, self-respect, and self-dignity. She often saw herself as weak, as evidenced in the poem “The Waitress,” yet she was nothing of the sort. There is no question that Lois was a survivor. She stood up to Buck when many others would not and lived to be a hundred. She was tough and resilient and had plenty of reason to be. She survived the Great Depression, her life circumstances, and Buck.

Like many other artists, Mrs. Valli sketched a self-portrait. In her book *Prairie*



Wool, her sketches are placed on the opposing pages to her poetry, and in this volume, this self-portrait is found. It is difficult to determine which medium she used. There is little expression on her face, nothing to indicate happiness or sadness. There is, however, certain toughness. It just “is as it is,” a philosophy she carried most of her life. She drew only her head and a brief glimpse of her collar. Lois Valli, like most artists, could have chosen to sketch or paint herself in

several ways. She could have chosen a different medium or an emotional expression, yet there is little in her self-portrait to indicate any expression or mood. She was pragmatic, stoic, and modest, and these qualities are reflected in her self-portrait.

Angela, her youngest daughter, saw the inner reserves of her mother. Lois was physically tough with a terrific pain tolerance. Jones commented, “One morning, Lois stepped out onto the crumbling wooden step at the front door to shake a rug. The step collapsed, and she plunged four feet onto a metal stake anchoring an antenna. Her hip was badly injured, turned black, and the area swelled to the size of a grapefruit. Using a stock prod as a cane, she hobbled around for some days in sheer misery, but said nothing.”¹⁹

By contrast, Buck was loud in every way. Jones commented, “Against opponents, ridicule was his weapon, intolerance its origin. Brash, abrasive and assertive, he was bright but distinctly averse to self-criticism, especially from Lois. He believed that men were the ‘lords of creation,’ as he put it.”²⁰ It was thought that Buck was fearless, but this was not completely true. Jones also commented, “He feared disobedience and insubordination with a passion and he feared the uncertainties of life.”²¹

As a result of Lois’ forced conversion, she moved away from institutionalized religion, focusing on the values that nature possessed. Her consciousness of all life forms, she felt deeply. When she was five, the family moved from the homestead to a rented farm with a double row of poplars. Lois stated, “I had never before lived where there were trees, and I felt a kind of magic when I played under them.”²² “When I was a very young child,” she commented, “I got out of bed one morning and looked out the window. The sun was burning away the fog, and the ground was covered with crocuses and blossoms. I ran out of the house in my nightgown, without shoes and threw myself down in the wet grass to get close to the flowers. I could never forget that feeling of ecstasy. Another time, I found some wild lilies in

bloom. I sat on a rock and sang to them.”²³ Jones noted, “As a child, Lois possessed a sixth sense—a kinship with other orders of creation, with flowers and animals. She knew when the neighbour’s cat had died, and when other things were just not right.”²⁴

The most predominant theme in Valli’s poetry is her affinity with nature. Whether she was writing about the wind, the weather, animals, plants, or birds, her readers can tell that she cared for all the elements of nature. In her poem, “Nature’s Own,” she refers to an elm tree as “sister elm”²⁵ and in “I am the Prairie,” she mentions “my daughter, the coyote.”²⁶ Further, she seems to parallel Psalm 23 in “Nature’s Own” when she wrote,

I have no fear
I am one of nature’s own.

Tho winds shall blow and never cease
And all my branches tear,
Tho frost of fate shall chill my heart
And none be near to care,
The days be long and hours as days
Keep me prisoned here,
Yet I too be nature’s own. I too, shall
Have no fear.
My hope — — rest at last.²⁷

Lois may have seen the dry belt years as her time in “the valley of the shadow of death.”

She further developed the idea of the laws of nature in “Nature’s Law” and offered a parallel to the Biblical book of Ecclesiastes:

In the beginning, Nature, our Mother, gave to each
Creature the Gifts necessary for survival.
To the bison...
To the wolf...
To all, the intelligence to use the Gifts bestowed to
Obtain sustenance, to enjoy communion with his
kind, to react to the cry of his young, to exult at dawn in the gift of
existence.
To live, to procreate, and at last, to accept death
Without useless remorse.²⁸

Lois may have seen nature reflected in the Ecclesiastes sentiment: “To everything, there is a season, and a time to every purpose under Heaven.”²⁹ This poem not only recognizes her place in nature but also how, through adversity, nature has a course that is inevitable. She found greater solace in nature than in an institutionalized God. Little in her poetry showed she had a particularly strong faith in the Catholic Church; in fact, she had none, although there are references to Psalm 23 and Ecclesiastes in her poetry.

Through some of her poems, Lois also commented on how people should interact with nature. In “Nature’s Messenger,” she wrote about the wind as nature’s messenger and that people have a place living in harmony with their environment:

To know the burden of the wind
 We must be finely tuned.
 Each key in perfect harmony
 Each rebellious branch be pruned.

When we have listened well and learned
 We are part of the same fraternity.
 Our anxious spirits will be calmed
 And we can face eternity.³⁰

She cautioned people about nature’s way and the penalty of ignoring it. Nature would prove right and successful in the end. Living in harmony with it gave people a calmness of spirit. In “The First Dance,” she wrote, “If we listen and watch, she will teach you and me.”³¹ Lois believed that nature could teach people how to live together in the world.



Another of the subjects that Lois explored in her art was of both towns and landscapes. Again, there is no title or date on this painting, so it is hard to determine what town this is. It is, however, a prairie town, with the grain elevators in the foreground and the small number of houses and a church in the rear. This is an oil painting on canvas, approximately 24" X 36", housed at the Brooks campus. In this prairie landscape, the colours are vibrant, from the blue sky to the golden fields. In this painting, Mrs. Valli indicated the significance of the grain elevators and the church to life in a prairie town by giving them central importance in the painting. These two she saw as the foundations of life in a prairie town and important pieces in keeping the communities alive.

Lois took lessons about the cyclical character of life from nature. Her willingness to believe she was one part of nature's plan, no more or less than the trees or the stars, gave her solace in her life. She continued with the idea that people need to live in peace with the environment in "A Lesson from a Flower":

The earth is Mother to us all,
 The bug and you and me.
 You must respect all forms of life
 Tho humble they may be.³²

She also displayed a strong sense of environmental protection, not just environmental awareness. In “Two Farmers,” she wrote,

We can never replace the prairie sod
 Once insulted by the plow.
 If we care enough to heal the wounds,
 Nature can teach us how.³³

Moreover, in “To the Hunter,” she warned hunters to “Tread softly on the prairie”³⁴ and asked, “Why hunt and call it amusement – Why kill and call it fun?”³⁵ She felt as though a small part of her died every time a goose or antelope died at the hand of a hunter out for sport. There may have been a conflict between her disdain for guns and shooting of animals and her role as a sheep rancher for which the animals were killed anyway. This conflict shows the inconsistencies in her mind as she was searching for solace and peace.

Lois’ keen sense of her environment and feelings of oneness with that environment allowed her to survive the otherwise isolated and harsh conditions of living on the ranch. She appreciated all that nature had to offer and reached a level of communion that helped her overcome the difficulties. However, she lived under the same conditions as her neighbours during the disaster in the dry belt. The calamities of friends disappearing, of drought, and of devastation were never very far from her mind and her reality. Nevertheless, the solace she received from nature sometimes balanced the pain and loss.

These two landscapes painted in oil by Lois offer a different sense of the varied landscapes of the prairie. These two show lush vegetation and life that are not reminiscent of the prairie landscape. The predominant colour is green, a colour she seldom saw except in spring. Both of these paintings, approximately 24" X 36", are among the largest in her



collection and are oil on canvas in her characteristic style. Here, the brush strokes are broad, and the liberal use of paint offers a three-dimensional quality to the painting. This oil on canvas

painting (above), a stand of small trees and bushes, could be a picture of a coulee or reminiscent of a trip to the Red Deer River.



In the other oil on canvas, Lois painted a stand of poplar trees. Again, a heavy use of paint and vibrant colours shows the importance of the natural in her mind. In this painting,

however, she painted a strong poplar tree at the centre and, to the right of the tree, a path that leads towards the light. This is one of the dramatic and bold pieces of Lois Valli's collection.

Both Buck and Lois lived and worked at the Nine Bar Ranch, owned by J. J. Bowlen, from 1934 to 1938. The Nine Bar Ranch was a massive block of land including some 76 sections along the South Saskatchewan River, where Buck managed ranch hands and Lois cooked for them all.³⁶ For all intents and purposes, Lois was captive on this dry and desolate ranch. In "Empty Land," she brooded upon the desolation of the place:

...It holds my gaze, though it offers no solace
for my need.
The silence is broken only by the whine of the windmill.
... The dim unfriendliness reigns beyond.³⁷

There seems to be unease in Lois' frame of mind. Throughout this poem, she refers to this uneasy feeling and the negative powers of the wind. She refers to the wind as "savage" and reflects again with such questions as "Why must man pit his silly feeble wit against its elemental strength? Why am I in this merciless place?"³⁸ Yet she never seems to find the answers. She wrote, "The windmill is the only reply I hear."³⁹ Jones stated, "The silence oppressed her, and depression gripped her, and she fought a mortal battle for her own self-respect."⁴⁰

Jones remarked, "Lois rose at five in the morning to start the fire, which burned old railway ties by the cord. In lambing and shearing seasons, she fed twenty or more men, three times a day. She churned butter every day until Bowlen finally got her a larger churn, and she made bread by the batch for the ranch hands and for herders living in wagons on the range. An old-timer taught her to make sour dough hotcakes and scones; the sheep men gave her recipes for muffins and biscuits. Lois described washday as a 'holy horror.'⁴¹ Jones commented, "Lois had a copper tub for heating water, a scrub board, two galvanized

washtubs, and water so hard it curdled the soap. The hundredweight of water she lugged herself from the well, as Buck would not spare the men for housework.”⁴² Cleaning the house was impossible. “The wind blew in one door and out the other,” said Lois. “It filled with dirt, and I don’t mean dust, I mean dirt. You could shovel it under the windows. And the windowsills were piled with dirt.”⁴³ Because much of her life was lived in rural settings, she gained an experience with nature that those who lived in towns or cities may have missed. The lack of human company and the isolation of the ranch gave her the opportunity to focus on the wonders of nature.

However, Lois’ poetry also reflects the isolation and loneliness that she felt during her time at the Nine Bar Ranch. In her poem “Silence – Nine Bar Ranch,” Lois compared the weight of silence to steel:

The weight of silence is a crushing thing.
It is cold and hard – like steel.⁴⁴

Steel can also be strong and useful, like that in farm implements or the tip of a pen. In a way, silence is like steel because it is a tool that paradoxically helped her write even as it crushed her. In this poem, she continues exploring the notion of silence. Living a relatively isolated experience on the Nine Bar Ranch, away from any town activity, she experienced silence as a constant companion in her life.

But the weight of silence I feel.
It is almost like a tangible thing.
I try to push it back with my hand.
But it wraps its weight around me,
Like a great unbreakable band.⁴⁵

Another example of the prevailing silence occurs in her poem “Winter Camp”:

Quiet. Not a sound. As it gets colder I hear
The frost drawing on the nails in the boards.⁴⁶

Increasingly, for Lois, the disharmony of the land in which she lived and her husband's lack of a sympathetic or confiding temperament only increased the isolation she felt. It would be wrong to say that Lois played no part in her discomfort. Daughter Angela, born much later than the other two children, when Lois was forty-five, remembers relentless arguing. Buck tended to be "loud and adamant"⁴⁷ while Lois was "self-righteous and defensive."⁴⁸ Jones commented, "If there was a difference between Buck and Lois' experiences on the Nine Bar Ranch, it was that Buck was able to leave the ranch regularly; Lois was not. While he was off to Alderson or Tilley in slow times, or supervising herders, she found herself pinned down and isolated."⁴⁹

In some of her poems, there is a sense of pessimism and loss that indicated her feelings about living on the prairie in such difficult times. As Ted Valli wrote, "Her poetry captures the loneliness and mind deadening labour of her life as well as the colourful characters who worked at the ranch or treated it as a way station if they were riding through."⁵⁰ Her keen sense of nature offered some respite from the loneliness she apparently felt at the isolation of the ranch. As Ted continued,

Lois always had a keen appreciation of her environment. This is characterized in her work on "The Weather" in which her description of animals, both domestic and wild a number of which she has depicted in these pages, both in verse and by brush. Her appreciation for all life comes through in her feelings for the trees around her as well as for the predators who ate her garden.⁵¹

Another predominant theme in Lois' writing is survival. Given the circumstances in which she lived, the quest for the next meal or money enough to purchase coal to heat her home prevailed. She certainly personified the term *survivor*. One of her poems, aptly titled "The Survivor," describes the experience:

I used to raise horses when the range was free.
Not much of a life but it suited me.

Dad farmed the land till he was beat by the drought.
Then ma got sick and they had to get out.

When I finished school I stayed on with dad.
Some rode the boxcars and lost what they had.
I worked out for others whenever I could.
All kinds of jobs – I even chopped wood.

There was work in town for my team in the fall.
There was wood and water and coal to haul.
Dad traded horses round the countryside.
He broke some as teams and he broke some to ride.

We paid the land taxes every year.
So the farmland came down to me clear.
People around us kept going away,
But we always made just enough to stay.

There was a winter we scarcely survived.
We butchered a young horse to stay alive.
About the hardest thing we had to do.
We loved horses alive – not in a stew.

The horses grazed all the country around.
Once in a while they were put in the pound.
Finally horses weren't worth a dime.
Breaking them was just a waste of time.

Then came the year when the school shut down.
Not enough people left in the town.
The train went through without a stop.
No post office, and Sam closed the grocery shop.⁵²

In this poem, Lois refers to the exodus from the area. With no people in town, the school, stores, and railway station all closed. It would have been disheartening to see the fabric of town life slowly erode away, to watch the train fly by with no stop, carrying goods to far away places, leaving the people only imagining where the train headed, what it carried, and in what exotic destinations it would stop. In an interview with Jones, Lois commented, “I could hear the silk trains roaring through the main line of the CPR. They didn’t stop, and they went at a great fast rate, and they whistled frequently. It almost tore my heart out to have to

stand there to hear that train going. And there I was – no way to get away, and I was going crazy there almost by myself.”⁵³

Poets often use narrators, just as fiction writers do. Lois seems to be doing so in this poem. The idea that she must distance herself from the social devastation that is occurring to quell either the feelings of remorse or guilt in being a survivor is evident. “The Survivor” is a complex poem with various layers of meaning. Jones commented, “[Lois] survived because of an innate trust in her own inner resources. It was an ancient and effective mode of confronting adversity – turn the mind from what dejects and dispirits it, and dwell on what engages and invigorates it. Part of the process was the gradual discarding of her ‘poor me’ poetry. In her own way, she sensed that self-pity was a crutch in the hands of a whole person soon to be sick. Self-pity paralyzed the inner resources. It was . . . self-respect, dignity itself, which armed and mobilized these inner resources.”⁵⁴

The following sketch depicts an old building on the prairie with a false front. This picture mirrors many of the small towns, like Alderson and Winnifred at the time, of the last buildings standing before the elements or vandals destroyed what remained. In the sketch,



there is a certain level of detail. The building seems run down, barely withstanding the test of time. In the left corner of the picture stands an old plow, forgotten after some past usefulness. Some of her sketches

offer detail, yet others, like the ones published in the poetry volumes, are simply line drawings with simple features. The amount of time she had to complete the picture would

probably determine the level of detail. Those sketches at the ranch were simple and quick. There, she had little time to write or to draw. As her life unfolded and she found more leisure time, the detail in both her paintings and drawings increased.

In her poem “Nine Bar Ranch,” Lois became quite reflective. She wrote,

Why do I have to work like this
Just to stay alive?

The wind and the loneliness is hard to bear,
No wonder some go insane.
If I pause the wind drives me wild,
And the work and the wind never ends.⁵⁵

She commented on how close she was to going mad: “If I pause the wind drives me wild.”⁵⁶ Perhaps she did not spend much time pausing; perhaps she had no time to pause. Out of this loneliness and sadness emerged, at times, a sense of hopelessness and pessimism in Lois’ poetry. “My creativeness is crushed,” she wrote in “February 1988.”

In “Silver Lining – The Thirties,” she sounded resigned:

Perhaps we should not beg for rain,
Just patiently take what we get,
They say each cloud has a silver lining,
But no one has seen it yet.⁵⁷

She also commented on how people had resorted to begging Mother Nature to bring rain and change people’s fortunes in “The Sun”:

We beg for help, eyes turned above,
What do we expect – Mercy – Love?⁵⁸

One of the stages of grieving is begging. People grieved for the loss of their neighbours and friends. They grieved for the loss of their livelihood. They grieved for the loss of better times.

Rather than taking time to reflect on the circumstances, Lois chose to think about the immediate concerns of her family and her work at the ranch. Lois coped by trying to remain in the present. In “Nine Bar Ranch – 1935,” she wrote,

I must concentrate on the present
From now till I go to bed.”⁵⁹

Dwelling on a situation she was in no position to change would have created the conditions for insanity, so she chose to remain in the present.

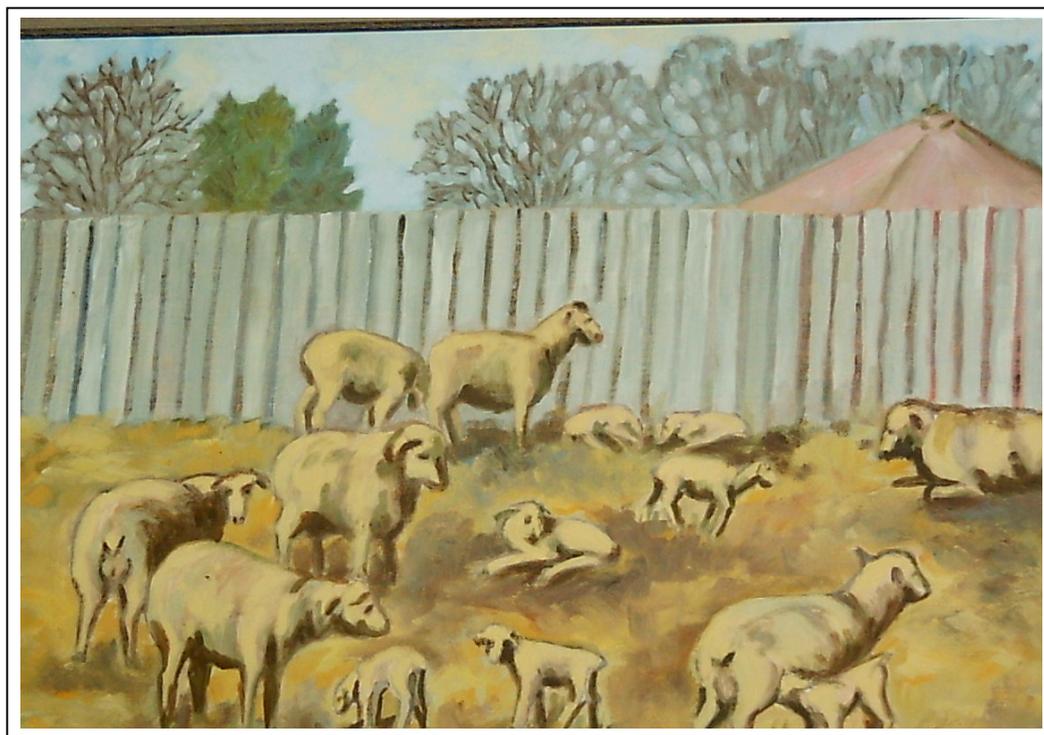
Despite all of the negative emotions she felt and expressed during the four years she lived on the Nine Bar Ranch, Lois was never very far from expressing a guarded optimism and hope. She looked for hope in a variety of places. In the poem “The Star,” she was optimistic:

I glanced at the window,
A light caught my eye.
A bright shining star
In the dark night sky.

I blinked in wonder
As I gazed at the star.
The light winked back at me,
A message from afar.

The light was so cheerful,
The message so clear
In the darkest night –
Hope is near.⁶⁰

Lois found her solace in the stars at night and in the plants and animals during the day. For example, sheep played an important role in Lois’ life for many years. They were the source of income and provided food and shelter to her family. They were also the centre of much care and nurturing, especially during lambing season. Lois Valli’s life revolved around sheep, and in many of her sketches in *Prairie Wool*, as in the next painting, the significance of sheep in her life is readily apparent. The continued renewal of life in both the lambs and a sleeping child may have given her additional hope for the future.



Most of her sketches appear in the poetry volumes, *Prairie Wool* and *Prairie Wind*, whose titles reflect the importance Lois placed on the wool and the wind in her life. These sketches, typically in pen and ink, present a variety of subjects. Again, Lois sketched what she knew, and the subjects for her, overwhelmingly, were animals. There are a number of sketches with sheep and lambs in corrals, grazing on open land, or next to sheep wagons. The picture here shows the gentleness of the sheep, one of the characteristics Lois loved the most. There are also a variety of sketches of rabbits—some domesticated and some wild, horses, dogs, and cats. Animals had a particular function on the ranch, and each had its particular place in nature’s cycle. In all of Lois’ paintings and sketches, her subjects were those things and people that she knew and loved. They were the things that were familiar to her, those things of which she had an intimate knowledge.

Spring always brought a sense of hope and a feeling that maybe that year would be the year for a plentiful crop and better things. In “Time’s Award,” Lois wrote,

My spirits rose in the springtime heat,
 I felt a foe had suffered defeat.
 Disregarding the date, my mind dwelt on seeds –
 I would do it again, undaunted by weeds.
 Each year is a jewel bestowed by Time,
 Another fifty two weeks are mine.⁶¹

Another poem written with an uplifting message was “Free Spirit.” In this poem, Lois contradicts her earlier writings about the loneliness and hopelessness. In this poem written in her later years, she may have been reflecting on how she survived those conditions and was able to take joy in what she now had.

I too am aged but no prisoner am I,
 All nature is my Domain.
 I soar in formation with the Canada Goose.
 No shackles my spirit restrains.

I float in freedom with the hunting Hawk,
 Give tongue with the Coyote at night.
 I am blessed and caressed by the lusty Chinook
 Never lonely, in my world, all's Right.⁶²

Lois expresses the value she places on the animals by capitalizing the names she gives. She had finally found hope and fulfillment in her life.

Another point Lois made through her poetry was the need for people to communicate. She may have seen a conflict in what she felt about communication and the lack thereof in her relationship with her husband, another inconsistency in her search for meaning, for she did see the value in socializing. In “Communication,” she wrote,

There are people we talk with,
 Some we laugh with,
 Some we take by the hand.

Some we don't like,
 Some we love,
 And some we don't understand.

We need to talk – commune with our kind
 It eases the heart.

Refreshes the mind.

We stand in a crowd yet feel alone.
A closeness of spirit we all require
To put heart in the flesh and the bone.⁶³

Lois thought that conversation was “what made life livable.”⁶⁴ What she found particularly entertaining was the stories of the men who dined at her table. Each one had a story to tell. She would listen to their stories of good times and bad and would sneak away to her room to record these stories on scraps of paper. Lois said, “I wrote funny expressions, strange to me, that I heard the men say. Their personal stories I stored in my mind, never being able to talk to the men openly. This was my fantasyland and nobody ever knew about the envelopes stuffed with bits of my soul, hidden in my dresser drawer.”⁶⁵ In reflecting on this, she commented, “If I hadn’t done that I think I would have gone insane.”⁶⁶ She recalled, “I didn’t stop using my brain.”⁶⁷ Whether she was reciting poetry, collecting stories, or creating characters for stories for her children, she kept her mind active in spite of the drudgery. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that she survived the calamity.

Lois also expressed some concern in the way she saw the area developing and the changes in values in people toward consumerism. She articulated her concern for the growing development of the area in “Not in My Time”:

Will our quest for space put an end to this peace?
Fill the night with the motor’s whine?
Will throb of commerce replace this quiet?
Please – not in my time – not in my time.⁶⁸

As much as she detested the silence and the loneliness she felt at the ranch, Lois was concerned about the development of the land and the encroachment on the peace and silence that she had learned to live with.

Despite any wariness she may have felt about the development of land, in 1938, Lois and Buck moved from the Nine Bar Ranch to a place just north of Brooks. She had had enough of that God-forsaken place, the Nine Bar Ranch. Lois gave Buck an ultimatum. She was moving to Brooks, with or without him. Reluctantly, Buck followed. She had found her voice. Lois had a way of letting nature have its way in the wild, but she was not of the same opinion when it came to her troubled relationship with Buck. There she took a stand.

Though she had escaped the barrens south of Alderson, Lois continued her poetry and began her career as an artist. She enjoyed being in town. She liked to socialize with women and to involve herself in the Royal Purple, the female section of the Elk's Lodge. She also took advantage of opportunities to learn new things. A painting instructor offered weekly classes, and Lois began to attend. Here, she learned her skill in painting. Her paintings portray her life, as she knew it, both at the Nine Bar and in town. She enjoyed painting portraits and sold many. Jones noted, "Gifted, she drew notice in time, an attention that Buck took to poorly. He feared, it seemed, the flowering of her personality. Ignored and belittled, Lois spent, she said, 'more than sixty years battling for position, never giving in . . . one Briton who never bent the knee to Caesar.'"⁶⁹

After her escape from the Ranch, Lois continued her poetry and began her painting career. Buck continued with the sheep and wool business often traveling for meetings. Both their lives were still centered around sheep but without the strain and discomfort (for Lois) of living on the Nine Bar Ranch.

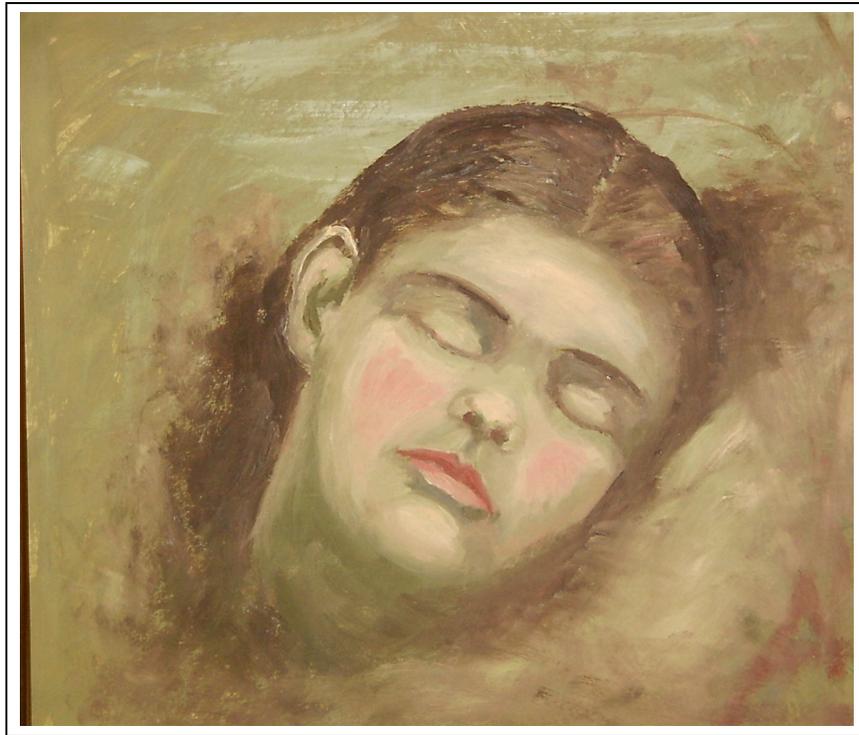
One of the drawings Lois completed is the only one she titled: *Shopping Downtown - Brooks, Alberta*. It is impossible to tell whether this is a sketch, a watercolour, or an oil painting because it is a reproduction in the volume *Prairie Wool*. There is a strong sense of movement in this picture, showing that downtown Brooks was a busy and vibrant place. The unique element to this picture, though, was that, rather than using human characters in the streets, she chose to draw chickens. There are chickens scurrying across the street, laden with parcels from a busy shopping day. There is also a chicken dancing or possibly jumping for



joy and an adult chicken accompanied by a young chick. There may have been a conflict in her mind because she could not stand the loneliness of the Ranch yet was uncomfortable with the busyness and seemingly meaningless activity in town. This picture not only indicates Lois' sense of humour but also what she thought of Brooks: too hectic and too urban for her liking.

The following portrait of a sleeping child is a beautiful example of her work, with subdued colours and soft brush strokes. It is hard to determine the gender of the child, but

whether boy or girl, this is a very peaceful and calm painting, seemingly painted with great love. It may have depicted her youngest daughter Angela or one of her grandchildren, but one cannot know for sure. This oil painting on canvas is approximately 18" X 24" and is stored at the Brooks Campus of the Medicine Hat College.



Jones noted, “Deep in the autumn of his life, stricken with Parkinson’s disease, but refusing to become institutionalized, Buck became an incredible burden for Lois.”⁷⁰ It became not only a mental strain but a physical one as well. “[Lois] sustained gall bladder attacks before entering Brooks hospital on December 3, 1978 with pancreatitis and double pneumonia. On January 2, 1979 she had gall bladder surgery. In the 1980s, Lois suffered more with her gall bladder, stayed at the Foothills Hospital in Calgary for a time, and had a brush with death.”⁷¹ In the poem “January 1988,” Lois presents another insight into nature’s law after overcoming this life-threatening illness:

Human or weed, the same law governs all
None wept for the weeds – none need weep for me.⁷²

Finally with Buck hospitalized, she was afforded the liberty she rarely found in her early adulthood. She visited her son Ted, by then a noted veterinarian at the University of Guelph in Ontario. While she was away, on September 25, 1988, Buck died. Although painful, her freedom was complete.

Through her poetry and her paintings, Lois Valli was able to express the feelings she had for both living on the prairie and living through one of Alberta's greatest tragedies. Her early years of adulthood were tough ones as she struggled with a demanding husband, a dwindling community, and a declining bank account. Each of these factors took a toll on her spirit, but through her poetry and painting, she found an outlet to express those feelings. Jones stated, "One might think it denial of reality, but it was really a focus on the sunlit aspects of a dreary life and a reshaping of her irrepressible artistic and creative impulses."⁷³ Lois found that freedom is given when one accepts what has been and what is. She sought solace in nature. She looked to nature where, despite its harshness, it is sometimes easier to accept the way things must be. One winter she fed pheasants, but the foxes ate them all. "Well, we can't have everything," she quipped, "I guess we'll have foxes."⁷⁴ She found her peace in the stories of others. By looking beyond herself, she survived the isolation and poverty. Jones commented, "By degrees, Lois recaptured a playful spirit and found meaning in the Nine Bar."⁷⁵ She outlived Buck, outlived the disaster, and possessed the resiliency, courage, and strength to move past it all.

5 An Artist's Lament: The Lois Valli Story

- ¹ L. Valli, *Prairie Wool*, ed. V. E. Valli (Champaign: privately printed, 1991).
- ² L. Valli, *Prairie Winds*, ed. V. E. Valli (Champaign: privately printed, 1993).
- ³ *Ibid.*, np.
- ⁴ D.C. Jones, *Feasting on Misfortune: Journeys of the Human Spirit in Alberta's Past* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1998), p. 258-259.
- ⁵ L. Valli, *Prairie Wool*, p. iii.
- ⁶ D. C. Jones, *Feasting on Misfortune: Journeys of the Human Spirit in Alberta's Past*, p. 258.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 57.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 57-58.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- ¹¹ *Pagliacci* (Clowns) is an opera consisting of a prologue and two acts written and composed by Ruggero Leoncavallo. It recounts the tragedy of a jealous husband in a *commedia dell'arte* troupe. Retrieved March 14, 2008, from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pagliacci>
- ¹² L. Valli, *Prairie Winds*, p. 47.
- ¹³ D. C. Jones interview with Lois Valli, July 10, 1989.
- ¹⁴ D. C. Jones, *Feasting on Misfortune: Journeys of the Human Spirit in Alberta's Past* p. 60.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 60-61.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 61.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 61.
- ¹⁸ L. Valli, *Prairie Winds*, p. 49.
- ¹⁹ D. C. Jones, *Feasting on Misfortune: Journeys of the Human Spirit in Alberta's Past*, p. 257.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 64.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 71.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 71.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 58.
- ²⁵ L. Valli, *Prairie Wool*, p. 53.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 87.
- ²⁹ Ecclesiastes 3:1 (King James Bible)
- ³⁰ L. Valli, *Prairie Wool*, p. 47.

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- ³¹ Ibid., p. 79.
- ³² L. Valli, *Prairie Wool*, p. 131.
- ³³ L. Valli, *Prairie Winds*, p. 37.
- ³⁴ Ibid., p. 11.
- ³⁵ Ibid., p. 11.
- ³⁶ D. C. Jones, *Feasting on Misfortune: Journeys of the Human Spirit in Alberta's Past*, p. 61.
- ³⁷ L. Valli, *Prairie Wool*, p. 9.
- ³⁸ Ibid., p. 9.
- ³⁹ Ibid., p. 9.
- ⁴⁰ D. C. Jones, *Feasting on Misfortune: Journeys of the Human Spirit in Alberta's Past*, p. 52.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., p. 63.
- ⁴² Ibid., p. 63.
- ⁴³ Ibid., p. 63.
- ⁴⁴ L. Valli, *Prairie Wool*, p. 11.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 11.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 39.
- ⁴⁷ D. C. Jones, *Feasting on Misfortune: Journeys of the Human Spirit in Alberta's Past*, p. 65-66.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 65-66.
- ⁴⁹ L. Valli, *Prairie Wool*, p. 66.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid, p. iii.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., p. v.
- ⁵² Ibid., p. 15.
- ⁵³ D. C. Jones, *Feasting on Misfortune: Journeys of the Human Spirit in Alberta's Past*, p. 53.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 67.
- ⁵⁵ L. Valli, *Prairie Wool*, p. 33.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 33.
- ⁵⁷ L. Valli, *Prairie Wool*, p. 55.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 57.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 45.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 59.
- ⁶¹ Ibid., p. 67.

⁶² Ibid., p. 91.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 97.

⁶⁴ D. C. Jones interview with Lois Valli, July 10, 1989.

⁶⁵ D. C. Jones, *Feasting on Misfortune: Journeys of the Human Spirit in Alberta's Past*, p. 67.

⁶⁶ D. C. Jones interview with Lois Valli, July 10, 1989.

⁶⁷ D. C. Jones interview with Lois Valli, July 10, 1989.

⁶⁸ L. Valli, *Prairie Winds*, p. 97.

⁶⁹ D. C. Jones, *Feasting on Misfortune: Journeys of the Human Spirit in Alberta's Past*, p. 256.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 257.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 257.

⁷² L. Valli, *Prairie Wool*, p. 109.

⁷³ D. C. Jones, *Feasting on Misfortune: Journeys of the Human Spirit in Alberta's Past*, p. 258.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 258.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 70.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION: WHEN ALL IS SAID AND DONE

This story of the women of the dry belt is one of hope and heartbreak. It is also one of defeat and resiliency. In the southeastern corner of Alberta from 1908 to 1936, women participated in the development, then dissolution, of their communities.

Summary

Chapter One, “Setting the Context,” outlined the background in which the story of the development and dissolution of women’s communities could be told. It provided the background information as to how and why the area was settled and women’s roles in that settlement. Chapter One also set this study in the context of the literature that has come before. Much has been written about women’s experiences on the Canadian Prairies, but this study extended this knowledge into a particular time and place.

As outlined in Chapter Two, “The Hope of Eden: Building Community in the Prairie Dry Belt, 1908–1917,” women provided a cornerstone of community development in this region of Alberta. They were nurses and nannies, builders and business owners. They were teachers and technicians, writers and registrars. They were also wives, sisters, mothers, and daughters. The roles women played in the community were as varied as the women themselves. An important contribution to community development that women made however was in the social sphere. They sought each other’s company, even when there were no other women close by. But as the population grew and villages and towns sprang up, it

was the women who often initiated social gatherings. The connections made between individual women branched out to collectives of women. Centred in church basements, front parlours, kitchens, and schoolhouses, women sought to build their communities together. They worked to build schools, churches, and libraries. They worked to improve the health of the people through sanitation and hospital care. They held teas and parties to welcome newcomers and newlyweds, and they offered their help and condolences in times of bereavement and loss. They agitated for better living and working conditions for their children and for others. Individually and collectively, they changed the way people lived and focused on the very things that made a community home. And for a time, in this dusty and desolate part of southern Alberta, they succeeded.

Chapter Three, “Hopes Dashed: The Abandonment of the Prairie Dryland 1918 to 1936,” outlined the development of the social sphere vanishing under the weight of mounting tensions. As the region moved further and further into economic and environmental calamity, the women of the area were unable to keep their community groups together. The growing abandonment of homesteads and businesses and the loss of people and of jobs fractured the tightly knit community groups. More often than wished, the women’s organizations held farewell parties for members of the declining community. Their focus switched from gain to loss. With as much as they had accomplished, many watched with sorrow the dismantling of what they had built. The organizations disbanded and then sometimes amalgamated, only to see the new group disbanded again. They simply ran out of people, resources, and time to keep these groups going. Although there was a great need, the activities of these organizations were limited in what they could do. The acts of kindness, still sought and delivered, only gave momentary solace to individuals.

Chapter Four, “Surveying the Calamity,” outlined the many attempts at resolving the crisis. Studies completed by the various levels of government into the abandonments and underlying poverty did little to resolve the problem. Although attempts were made to help the struggling settlers, often the help came too little, too late.

Individually, the calamity of the crisis affected women in a variety of ways. Some sought solace in each other, some in God, and some, like Lois Valli, sought solace in nature. Chapter Five, “An Artist’s Lament,” told the story of Mrs. Lois Valli. A poet and a painter, she expressed her thoughts and feelings of the dryland and her place in it, through her art. Her story is a story of self-discovery, of strength, and of resiliency. As a cornerstone to this thesis, Mrs. Valli’s life provided a case study of the life of one woman during the disaster.

The Rest of the Story

There were many reasons to abandon the area. Some women left, with their husbands in tow, as it was simply the best thing to do for the family’s survival. Some women left the area widowed, creating a new life for themselves elsewhere. Some women abandoned the area, and their sanity, escaping the stress through admittance to mental hospitals, or death itself. Whatever the reason for abandonment, most women left the region during the crisis.

Mrs. Thurza Trebble was one of many who left the area. Although for Thurza, it was not so much abandonment as the beginning of a new chapter in her life. Mrs. Trebble remained in Winnifred for a year after her husband, Tom, died in May of 1944. Winnifred, like Alderson, became just a skeleton of its former self and eventually vanished altogether. Thurza, much younger than Tom, remarried after his death, becoming Mrs. Bill Bryant and lived in Great Falls, Montana. From there, she disappears from the records.

Mrs. Charlotte Cotter also remained in Alderson only briefly after the death of her husband, Weymus, in 1935. Jones stated, “Badly shaken, Charlotte Cotter ceased her column for a time, visited her friends . . . and began to reorient her life around the fashionable circle in Medicine Hat.”¹ Like, Mrs. Trebble, Charlotte Cotter sought a new beginning, and a new life. It was not so much abandonment or giving up, but a necessity to move on with her life. Charlotte was reluctant to come to the Prairie in the first place and only after long and reassuring letters from her husband did she acquiesce.² In Medicine Hat she felt more at home in the refinement of city life. She was able to dress “properly” again and got her teeth fixed. When she moved to Medicine Hat, her life changed for the better. After a search of records, the whereabouts of Mrs. Cotter’s death and interment are unknown. She is neither buried in Medicine Hat, nor in her family’s plot in Toronto. Charlotte, like Lois Valli who did not remarry, was liberated in her husband’s demise. She did mourn for the loss of her husband, but with his death, she found the freedom to do as she pleased. Charlotte was the epitome of a socialite on the dry and dusty prairie. She had a better sense of what was happening in the community and elsewhere and kept in touch with many who had crossed her path. As the abandonments occurred, she, possibly more than most, felt the pain of losing trusted friends. What is a socialite to do, when there is no social life left?

Three of the women who experienced the development and abandonment of the region did not leave as many of their neighbours were forced to do. After her husband, George, died in 1948, Mrs. Margaret Calder, 74 at the time, remained in Bow Island. Given her age, it is unlikely that she remarried or left the area. Her youngest son, William (Bill), wrote a fiftieth anniversary pamphlet for the town in 1962, describing Bow Island’s beginnings and the settlers who made Bow Island home.³ We know at least part of the family (Bill) remained in Bow Island until 1962 with Bill’s publication. This publication offers little

information about his parents other than when they arrived in the area and who their children were. It does not however, mention anything about the deaths of his parents.

Mrs. Catherine Neil, who wrote about her early experiences as a young homesteader in the Grassy Lake area and was also a great advocate of the Women's Institutes, remained in the area. Subsequent generations of the Neil family continued with the sheep ranching business near Grassy Lake.

Mrs. Lois Valli stayed in and around Brooks for the remainder of her days. When she left the Nine Bar Ranch, she and Buck moved to a place just north of Brooks. It was not until her later years that she moved into Brooks itself. After all of the struggles she had living on the Nine Bar Ranch and with a husband like Buck, Lois, like Charlotte Cotter, found her freedom when her husband died. Gone were the constraints of living a married life. She too, could do what she wanted when she wanted. However, Lois resolved to stay on the dusty prairie anyway. For Lois, the prairie was her home. She had not lived in exotic places like Toronto or Glasgow. She was born a prairie girl and died a prairie girl. She died at the Brooks Nursing Home in January of 2008, just after her 100th birthday.

Each one of these ladies—Mrs. Trebble, Mrs. Calder, and Mrs. Cotter—wrote their columns for a variety of reasons. For each one of them, though, the crisis on the farms and the abandonments did not touch them as directly as they did others in the communities. All had husbands with government jobs, or they themselves had government jobs. They had stability. They had a regular paycheck coming in and were not forced into the same poverty that many of their neighbours experienced. Thus, in many ways, although they could sympathize with their neighbours, they never really felt the uncertainty and poverty that many in the region had experienced. From the post office, they were in the middle of the town's social life. They regularly visited as neighbours picked up mail. They heard all about the

struggles and frustrations but none of these ladies actually experienced it. Mrs. Trebble, from Winnifred, was able to express her feelings of joy and exasperation as the crisis unfolded. Mrs. Trebble, the most outspoken of all of the columnists, understood the devastation and despair and reflected this understanding in her column.

Mrs. Calder wrote her column as a testament to the people who lived and worked around Bow Island. Mrs. Calder too, understood the desperation and poverty. She lamented the fact that prominent members of the community were choosing to leave. Yet, she was almost optimistic and hopeful in many of her columns. She enjoyed the lovely parties and encouraged people to attend. Perhaps in some ways, life, as she reflected it in her column, was easier because she resided in Bow Island. Bow Island itself had greater stability and did not dry up and blow away like Winnifred and Alderson.

Mrs. Cotter felt it her duty, as one of the most educated people in the region, to use her skill as a socialite and writer to inform her neighbours of the social happenings of the region. She was the cog in the wheel around which all social events revolved, and she relished the attention. From her small home and the post office in Alderson, she understood too, the devastation and depression that occurred around her. She witnessed the town slowly disappearing one person at a time, one building at a time. Each one of these ladies had her own personal motivation for writing the weekly column for the *Medicine Hat News*, and each one approached her column in a way that reflected her personality.

Confirming and Extending the Research

In many ways, this study confirms the research that has come before, but it also breaks new ground. It confirms the existing research regarding women's experiences of

isolation in the new homesteading experience. However, it extends the existing knowledge of the nature and importance of women's social communities. As soon as they were able, with the increase in the female part of the population, women sought each other out to combat the isolation. The very social nature of women (and men for that matter) allowed these settler women to get together not only for social reasons but also for practical purposes. In working together, they created communities that supported the social, educational, and health-related needs of the people. The nature of the social networks, however, was tenuous. As the mounting economic and environmental crisis unfolded, these communities of women were no longer able to provide the level of support needed. This thesis extends the existing knowledge regarding women's social communities in that it not only describes the building of community but its dissolution as well.

Jones' work⁴ on this area is certainly the largest contributor to the existing knowledge surrounding the development and dissolution of the dry belt area in southeastern Alberta. In fact, his studies are the only ones to directly tell the narrative. Jones' examinations were my beginning point. This study enhances Jones' work in a variety of ways. First, I extended his studies by specifically examining women's experiences through the disaster. Beyond that focus, I described the nature of female communities in both their growth and dissolution. Although Jones introduced both Charlotte Cotter and Lois Valli, this thesis is different. As background on Mrs. Cotter, I used *Empire of Dust* and *Feasting on Misfortune*, but further, I was able to glean from her columns in the *Medicine Hat News* information that was not included in Jones' studies. Cotter's expressive column provided a commentary on the disaster as it was unfolding. Beyond the comments on the variety of social events and happenings in and around Alderson, Mrs. Cotter not only provided information about her feelings but also

conveyed a sense of her personality through her column. As well, I was able to look at other columnists' points of view, expanding the story to include Winnifred and Bow Island.

Further, although Jones' background information was invaluable in developing the story of Lois Valli, I was able to expand her story by extensively using her poetry and paintings. Jones commented on her poetry in his work, but I took the poetry and paintings and offered new insights into Mrs. Valli's hope and hardships. I specifically analyzed Mrs. Valli's published poetry and offered themes that emerged from the data. Also, I looked at her artwork in hopes of discovering, to a greater degree, what was important to her. Her artwork showed me the importance of nature and animals in her life. Both Lois' poetry and paintings allowed me to gain additional insights into Lois Valli's circumstances. Her crisis was not just in the abandonment and economic depression but also in the conflict she felt within herself and her relationship to her husband. She sought her solace in nature as her crisis unfolded around her and found a peace and strength that she would have been earlier surprised to find she had.

Another important way in which I extended Jones' studies of the dryland disaster was through the extensive use of the *Medicine Hat News* and specifically, the local gossip columns. Although Norah Lewis put together a collection of letters from the women's pages of various magazines like *The Farmer's Advocate* and *The Grain Growers' Guide* in her book, *Dear Editor and Friends*,⁵ this is the first time that anyone has brought together and placed in historical context the newspaper correspondence from women in the small towns in this area. These gossip columns, primarily written by women, provided unique insights into the lives of people during the disaster. Beyond information of the who's who in society life—who was doing what, who was hospitalized or died, who was traveling where and with whom, and who was entertaining visitors—the information in the columns also provided a

commentary on the feelings of their authors. They displayed hope and frustration. These women found a way to have their voices heard. In the *Medicine Hat News*, anywhere from eight to fifteen women offered their insights into what was going on in their small communities on a weekly basis. After reading hundreds of newspapers, I chose the writers from Bow Island and Winnifred because their writing seemed to be the most expressive and detailed. Mrs. Margaret Calder of Bow Island and Mrs. Thurza Trebble of Winnifred also extend the existing knowledge regarding the drybelt disaster. Their voices, along with Mrs. Cotter and Mrs. Neil, added understanding of the nature of women's communities and the communities' struggle to survive.

All of the work that has come before allowed me to create this narrative. Each of the sources, both primary and secondary, created the pieces into which this puzzle and story has grown. They provided a broad understanding in some cases, of what life was like for men and women at another time and another place. Also, some of the literature, Jones in particular, has given me a more specific understanding of what life was like in the dry belt of Alberta itself. The literature has created a place in the existing knowledge for me to fit this tale. But this is simply a narrative of what happened to particular women at a particular moment in time and in a particular place. Our knowledge of the lives of women in the drybelt is enhanced through this work but it does not claim any grand narratives of all women at all times. Like the women in this story, I aim to be pragmatic: it is, as it is.

When all is said and done

So what conclusions can I make of a tale of hope and heartbreak? Each woman (or man for that matter) starts their lives with a hope to fulfill dreams. They have an expectation

of what their lives will become and set in motion a series of events to realize their dream. Those dreams evolved over time as marriages, births and deaths, altered the initial vision. Most of the women, who set about creating their lives in the harsh Alberta drybelt, came with a hope and optimism for a better life for themselves and their growing families. Some women found their place within a community that nurtured and supported their dreams. They socialized outside the family circle and created better living conditions for all who called this dry and dusty place home. Although much was accomplished in building better lives, the nature of these groups was also isolating. There were expectations as to how to behave and who could belong and that created divisions within the community. Certainly Mrs. Cotter and Mrs. Calder expected certain behaviours from the women in their social circle. It was that sense of noblesse oblige, so ingrained in many of the women who settled the west that perpetuated class and racial divisions.

Women could and did make choices in dealing with the harsh realities of economic and spiritual depression. Although it has been suggested that women were subservient to men, and in many cases this is true, women made choices for themselves. Whether that choice was the one like Mrs. Bolosky who murdered her children and then committed suicide in a desperate act of poverty and hopelessness⁶ or like the many others, who fell insane and were committed to the Ponoka Psychiatric hospital, these women made choices and took control of their lives. However, not all made such desperate choices.

What does it take for a woman to finally take a stand for herself? What does it take, for her to finally say, enough is enough? With great courage, Lois Valli gave Buck an ultimatum. "I'm leaving this desert with you, Buck, or without you." Also, James Roebuck wrote in a letter quoted earlier, "and now my wife says this is her last year on this desert."⁷ These two women decided it was time to take a stand. Each was going to leave the

devastation and drought, with or without their husbands. They had simply had enough. Sometimes, it requires a catastrophe to finally awaken a woman's duty to herself. Given the subservience of women to men especially within marital bonds, women needed to be confronted with a situation that exposed her need for self-preservation. It became a fight or flight response. Some women chose the flight response, as in the examples earlier, by either going insane, or in more desperate cases, choosing death.

There is a saying that man's calamity is God's opportunity. However, in this case, the saying may be rephrased as women's calamity is the self's opportunity. For some women, the flight option was not an option. Instead, they chose to fight. They fought for their self-respect. They fought for their dignity. They fought for their own survival. This struggle for self-expression and survival was forced out during the crisis. Therein lies the benefit of seeming disasters. By standing and fighting, enormous personal and spiritual growth can occur in the harshest of circumstances. This growth occurs in the moment that a woman accepts responsibility for herself, the moment she takes a stand for herself, and the moment she expresses herself and determines to act. That moment is the moment of choice. She either chooses flight or fight. In choosing to fight, she fights for her dignity and self-respect. She fights for her survival. And in that fight, her personal growth becomes evident. Lois Valli came through this disaster more self-assured, confident, enriched and empowered. The advantage of living through a disaster is finding oneself, finding one's soul, finding one's voice.

The more time that has passed since the culmination of the crisis, the more the pain and sorrow seem to have lessened. Mrs. Janet (Jennet) Stewart Sparks quoted in *Prairie Crucible* commented, "Perhaps time has softened the memories of some of the sterner trials of pioneer life" ⁸ As I searched the various local histories of the region, I discovered that

very little time and energy had gone into describing the crisis. The authors simply chose not to reveal the underbelly of a demon. Their communities were lost, the people were fractured, and they chose not to focus on the negative. These women were pragmatists. They understood that there was little they could do to change the situation and dwelling on it certainly would not make it any better.

In the end, I find that this study was as much a discovery of the potential for human growth as it was about the attachment and dissolution of women's communities. Some women struggled to keep their sanity intact. Some failed, and yet many more succeeded. They found a strength and forbearance that they themselves would have been surprised to find. They found their voices in the wind and the dust.

6 Conclusion: When all is said and done

- ¹ D. C. Jones, *Empire of dust: Settling and abandoning the prairie dry belt*. (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1987) p. 243.
- ² Letters from Weymus Cotter to Charlotte Cotter, 1908-1909, PAA 91.86, f3.
- ³ B. Calder, *Bow Island, 1912-1962, 50th anniversary: The story of the beginning*. Retrieved February 7, 2009, from <http://www.ourroots.ca/e/toc.aspx?id=7572>
- ⁴ D. C. Jones, *Empire of dust: Settling and abandoning the prairie dry belt*. (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1987) and *Feasting on Misfortune: Journeys of the Human Spirit in Alberta's Past*. (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1998)
- ⁵ N.L. Lewis, *Dear Editor and Friends: Letters from Rural Women of the North -West, 1900 - 1920*, (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1988).
- ⁶ D. C. Jones, *Empire of Dust: Settling and Abandoning the Prairie Dry Belt*. (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1987), p. 115.
- ⁷ Letter from James Roebuck to Premier Greenfield, July 1922, PAA, 69.289 f5a.
- ⁸ Janet Stewart Sparks, *Prairie Crucible*, p. 18.

**APPENDIX A: Report on the Southern Alberta Drought Area, Russell and
Snelson (1924): Department of the Interior**

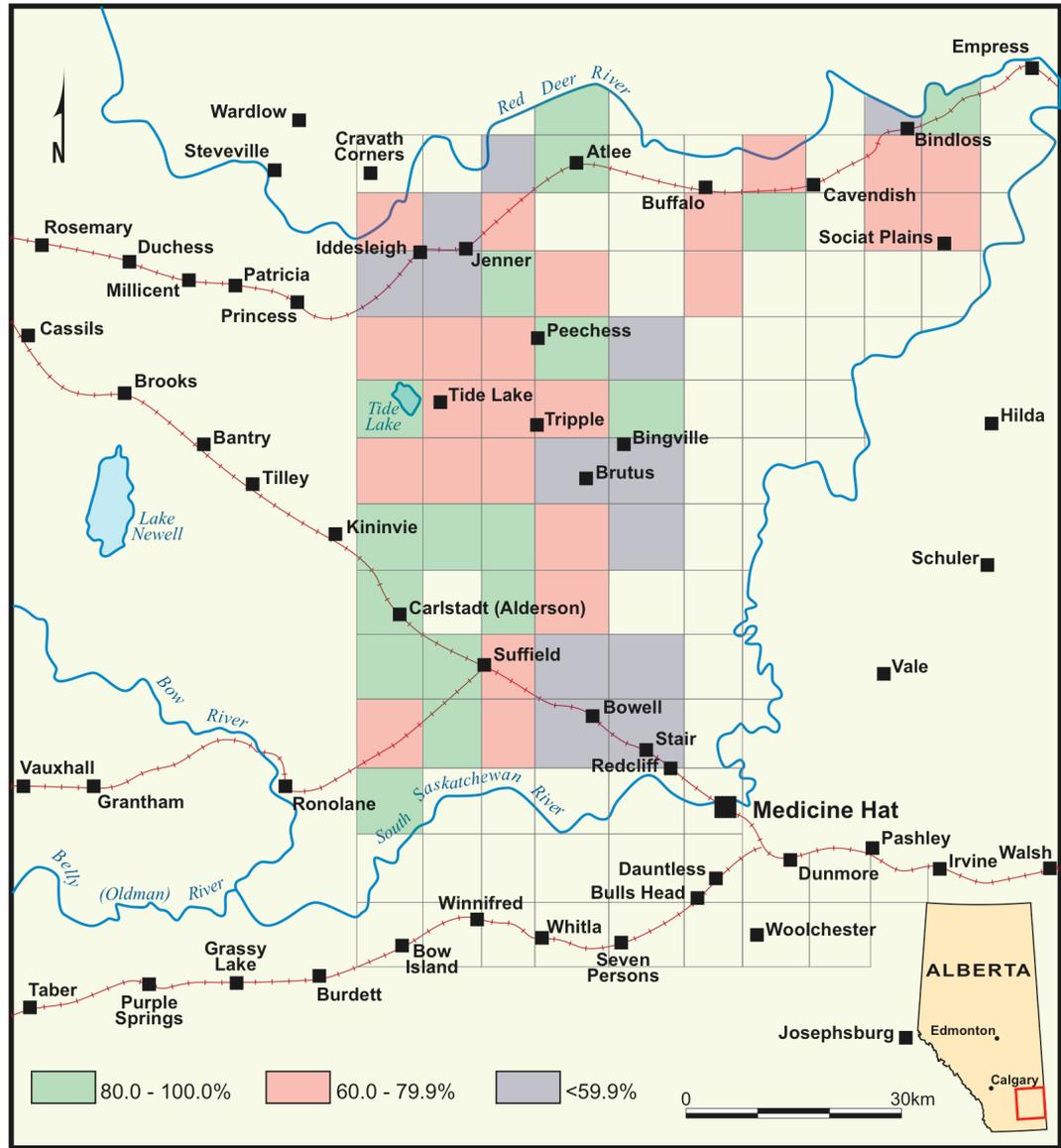
Township #	Range #	Improvements	Settlement Numbers	% of Settlement lost
11	13	None	N/A	N/A
11	12	None	None	N/A
12	12	None	None	N/A
13	12	None	No settlement by farmers	N/A
11	11	Only 200 acres broken at the Home Ranch of the Canadian Land and Irrigation Co.	N/A	N/A
12	11	No cultivation, no fencing	No settlement	N/A
13	11	None	No settlement	N/A
12	10	800 acres broken 2 quarter sections fenced	11 to 2	81.8
13	10	7400 acres broken 23 sections fenced	56 to 16	71.4
14	10	3900 acres broken 7 sections fenced	40 to 2	95.0
15	10	9000 acres broken 15 sections fenced	65 to 11	83.1
16	10	6200 acres broken 14 sections fenced	90 to 7	92.2
17	10	7000 acres broken 14 sections fenced	55 to 14	74.5
18	10	5600 acres broken 15 sections fenced	50 to 10	80.0
19	10	6600 acres broken 33 sections fenced	71 to 23	70.7
20	10	6800 acres broken 33 sections fenced	78 to 34	56.4
21	10	3000 acres broken 16 acres fenced	29 to 10	65.5
22	10	No improvements	No settlement	N/A
13	9	4500 acres broken 13 sections fences	43 to 6	86.0
14	9	1000 acres broken 1 quarter section fenced *Includes Suffield	13 to 1	92.3
15	9	4000 acres broken	No resident farmers	N/A
16	9	5500 acres broken 8 sections fenced	75 to 12	84.0
17	9	6200 acres broken 50 sections fenced	60 to 14	76.7
18	9	7800 acres broken	64 to 15	76.5

		67 sections fenced		
19	9	8400 acres broken 33 sections fenced	67 to 25	62.7
20	9	6900 acres broken 30 sections fenced	73 to 31	57.5
21	9	4200 acres broken 20 sections fenced	58 to 24	58.6
22	9	No improvements	1 resident in township	N/A
16	8	2900 acres broken 15 quarter sections fenced	40 to only a few remaining	95.0
17	8	8300 acres broken 90 quarter sections fenced	60 to 20	66.7
12	8	N/A	N/A	N/A
13	8	6000 acres broken 65 quarter sections fenced	50 to 11	78.0
14	8	2000 acres broken 37 quarter sections fenced	15 to 6	60.0
15	8	4000 acres broken 22 quarter sections fenced	55 to 8	85.5
18	8	6800 acres broken 59 quarter sections fenced	56 to 18	67.9
19	8	6500 acres broken 20 sections fenced	79 to 23 In 1917 practically every quarter section with the exception of school and Hudson Bay lands was under cultivation	70.8
20	8	1300 acres broken 28 sections fenced	66 to 8	87.9
21	8	5300 acres broken 15 sections fenced	48 to 15	68.8
22	8	1200 acres broken 8 sections fenced	17 to 11	35.2
12	7	N/A	N/A	N/A
13	7	2000 acres broken 61 quarter sections fenced	20 to 12	40.0
14	7	1200 to 1800 acres broken 8 quarter sections fenced	18 to 11	38.9
15	7	1000 acres broken 9 quarter sections fenced	11 to 4	63.6
16	7	1200 to 1800 acres broken 20 quarter sections fenced	24 to 5	79.2
17	7	3800 acres broken 21 quarter sections fenced	20 to 14	30.0
18	7	4000 acres broken 45 quarter sections fenced	55 to 19	65.5
19	7	1650 acres broken 23 quarter sections fenced	34 to 3	91.2
20	7	2000 acres broken 27 quarter sections fenced	21 to 5	76.2
21	7	233 acres broken 8 quarter sections fenced	5 to 3	40.0
22	7	6200 acres broken 82 quarter sections fenced	95 to 10	89.5
23	7	160 acres broken 4 quarter sections fenced	5 to 1	80.0
12	6	No improvement	No settlement	N/A
13	6	800 acres broken	8 to 6	25.0

		18 quarter sections fenced		
14	6	2500 to 3000 acres broken 62 quarter sections fenced	25 to 11	56.0
15	6	2000 acres broken 25 quarter sections fenced	17 to 6	64.7
16	6	2000 acres broken 22 quarter sections fenced	14 to 6	57.1
17	6	1000 to 1500 acres broken 10 quarter sections fenced	15 to 7	53.3
18	6	500 acres broken none fenced	5 to 1	80.0
19	6	Land is raw 5 quarter sections fenced	3 to 2	33.3
20	6	No land broken 2 quarter sections fenced	No settlement	N/A
21	6	No land broken 2 quarter sections fenced	No settlement	N/A
22	6	No land broken 15 quarter sections fenced	No settlement	N/A
12	5	*Includes the City of Medicine Hat	No resident farmers	N/A
13	5	Practically no lands have been broken or fenced	N/A	N/A
14	5	Very little land broken and only a few quarter sections fenced	N/A	N/A
15	5	N/A	N/A	N/A
16	5	Most of the lands are raw pasture 6 quarter sections fenced	N/A	N/A
17	5	N/A	N/A	N/A
18	5	300 acres broken	N/A	N/A
19	5	No improvement	No settlement, practically all land is under lease	N/A
20	5	2550 acres broken 40 quarter sections fenced	30 to 10	67.7
21	5	5800 acres broken 64 quarter sections fenced	54 to 13	75.9
22	5	No improvements	No settlement	N/A
17	4	Practically no improvements	No settlement	N/A
18	4	No improvements	No settlement	N/A
19	4	Practically no cultivation or fencing	Practically no settlement	N/A
20	4	3000 acres broken 63 quarter sections fenced	54 to 8	85.2
21	4	8100 acres broken 1100 quarter sections fenced	111 to 8	92.8
22	4	3200 acres broken 32 quarter sections fenced	20 to 7	65.0
23	4	No improvements	No settlement	N/A
17	3	No improvements	No settlement	N/A
18	3	No improvements	No settlement	N/A
19	3	Raw unbroken prairie 1 quarter section fenced	No settlement	N/A
20	3	No improvements	No settlement	N/A

21	3	N/A	N/A	N/A
21	2	14500 acres broken 187 quarter sections fenced	74 to 33	55.4
22	2	11600 acres broken 98 quarter sections fenced	53 to 21	60.4
23	2	355 acres broken 5 quarter sections fenced	3 to 2	33.3
20	1	480 acres broken 8 quarter sections fenced	2	N/A
21	1	1500 acres broken	28 to 9	67.9
22	1	9300 acres broken 68 quarter sections fenced	45 to 17	62.2
23	1	2400 acres broken 20 quarter sections fenced	31 to 4	87.1

APPENDIX B: Depopulation Map based on Russell and Snelson's figures (1924)
(Robin Poitras cartographer – University of Calgary)



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