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The Impact of the First World War on Saskatchewan's Farm Families

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1. Introduction

When the First World War broke out in Europe in the summer of 1914, Saskatchewan farmers were in an economic slump. Grain prices had dropped, the struggle against the protective tariff and transportation problems continued, and, after three consecutive years of drought and crop failures, homesteaders with only a quarter-section of land were facing hard times. Preoccupied with establishing their farms and isolated from European events, Saskatchewan farmers were surprised by news of the war. As the realization of the role Canada would be called upon to play sank in, there was a general hope in the West that the war would stimulate a world demand for wheat and other farm products.

The Saskatchewan recruits in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) were sent off to war with enthusiastic farewell ceremonies attended by hundreds of their families, friends and neighbours. "The people are blinded, absolutely blinded, as to what war means," wrote the Winnipeg labour weekly, *The Voice*, in August 1914. "Those of the great majority think that it is brass bands, braid and feathers, and the throwing out of the chest, but if you have ever seen the regiments of militia on parade you will notice that the stretcher-bearer section is there."¹

2. Saskatchewan Enlistment and Service Statistics

According to the findings of C.A. Sharpe, Saskatchewan ranked second last, just above Quebec, in the ranking of provinces by enlistment rates (see Appendix A).² Sharpe explains the low figure for the province by first pointing to the large numbers of central and east European immigrants in the province who, at the outset of the war, were prevented from enlisting. Eligibility criteria for enlistment in the CEF was administered in accordance with the Militia Act of 1904 which stated that only male inhabitants between the ages of 18 and 45, not exempt or disqualified by law, and being British subjects, could enlist. He provides figures which show that, of the total eligible male population of Saskatchewan in 1911 (158,907), a total of 48.7 percent, or 58,843 men, were foreign-born. He states "this requirement was strictly adhered to, as shown by the fact that 28 men were 'struck off strength' during the concentration of the First Contingent at Valcartier in September 1914 *because they were not British subjects.*"³

¹*The Voice*, August 1914, as quoted in John Herd Thompson, *The Harvests of War; The Prairie West, 1914-1918* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978), 24.

²Manitoba ranked first in terms of proportional contribution. C.A. Sharpe, "Enlistment in the Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1918: A Regional Analysis," in *Journal of Canadian Studies* (Vol. 18, No. 4, Winter 1983-84), 20.

³*Ibid*, 18-19. Author's emphasis. The Immigration Act of 1910 defined an "alien" as a "person who is not a British subject."

A second reason for Saskatchewan's low enlistment rate during the Great War, according to Sharpe, was the predominantly rural and agricultural character in the province. "The importance of agriculture to both the contemporary Canadian economy and the war effort," he writes, "made it imperative that an adequate work force be maintained in this sector of the economy." The need for food production, aided by the exemptions from conscription for farmers, reduced the rate of entry into the CEF in Saskatchewan.⁴

Sharpe found that Saskatchewan's enlisted overseas contingent suffered the highest casualty rate of all the provinces in Canada – 18.1 percent. "No more graphic example of the vagaries of war in the trenches can be found," he writes, pointing to the example of the 46th Infantry Battalion (South Saskatchewan) from Moose Jaw which had a 26.7 percent fatality rate. (4,917 soldiers of the total 5,374 who served in this battalion, or 91 percent, were either killed or wounded, earning it the name, "Suicide Battalion.")⁵

3. Changes in Saskatchewan Agriculture

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Major changes took place in Saskatchewan agriculture as a result of the First World War. As predicted, the Allies' demand for Canadian wheat was high, and farmers rushed to meet this demand. Production expanded dramatically. The harvest of 1915, for example, was the largest in Saskatchewan's short history. That year it was not uncommon for wheat to yield anywhere between 40 and 60 bushels per acre. "Luxuriant was the only word to describe the growth of grain crops...in Western Saskatchewan this year," the Dominion Department of Agriculture enthused in its *Agricultural War Book*. "If the Garden of Eden looked as enticing as did Saskatchewan this past summer, it is difficult to understand why the Garden of Eden was forsaken so soon."⁶

According to the Canadian census, 23,079 new farms appeared in Saskatchewan between 1911 and 1921. The average farm size in the province grew from 297 acres to 368 acres in the same ten-year period. Half-section farms became the norm, and three-quarter section farms were no longer unusual. Most importantly, the war intensified in Saskatchewan agriculture an almost exclusive reliance on one staple crop: wheat. In 1916, for example, 65 percent of all land seeded to crop was planted with wheat. Less than 30 percent of cropped land in the province was seeded to oats, grown to feed the horses needed to provide power on the farm. The remaining field crop acreage went to barley, flax and hay.

In the summer of 1917, when it appeared there would not be enough wheat to supply the needs of the Allies, there was a run on futures trading at Winnipeg. As a result, wheat prices jumped

⁴Ibid, 20-21.

⁵Ibid, 27.

⁶"Saskatchewan's Big Year," in *Production and Thrift; Agricultural War Book* (Canada. Department of Agriculture, 1916), 17-18.

from \$1.90 to \$3.00 a bushel. The federal government suspended futures trading and created a central marketing body, the Board of Grain Supervisors, to allocate domestic and foreign wheat requirements in 1917 and 1918. In 1919, this duty passed to the newly-created Canadian Wheat Board (CWB). This government body, established to assist transition to peace-time conditions after the war, marketed the prairie wheat crop in export markets in accordance with world price levels. To deal with the uncertainty of the final value of wheat sold on behalf of producers, the CWB implemented a two-payment system. Producers were given an initial, or part, payment when they delivered their wheat to elevators, and a final payment after determining financial results of the sale of the 1919 wheat crop. The first CWB was disbanded in 1920.⁷

The First World War was responsible for a dramatic rise in prices for agricultural products. By 1917 the price of wheat, fixed at \$2.21 a bushel, was three times the pre-war level. The costs of production increased along with the price of wheat. Farm machinery prices soared as a result of the war and the protective tariff. Nevertheless, in November 1917 the *Swift Current Sun* reported that “farm machinery companies in Saskatchewan are now experiencing the biggest boom for farm machinery recorded in this province for many years.”⁸

More seriously, wages for farm labourers more than doubled between the beginning and the end of the First World War. According to John Herd Thompson, wages for agricultural labour had been considered abnormally high in 1912 when they reached levels above \$40.00 per month. “By 1916 monthly wages in all three Western Provinces were over \$50.00 monthly,” Thompson writes, “and in 1917, with American entry into the war, began the jump that was to take them to \$100.00 a month by 1920.”⁹

Income tax was introduced as a temporary measure in the summer of 1917, at a time when the cost of the war to Canada had reached \$600 million. When the “War Tax Upon Income” bill was tabled in the House of Commons, the Conservative government of the day did not place any time limit upon the measure. Canadians are still paying income tax in the 21st century.

4. “Enemy Aliens”

The problem of high wages, combined with an acute shortage of agricultural labour, increased the hostility some English-Canadians felt towards “enemy aliens” – the Germans, Ukrainians, and Austrians who comprised the main source of regular farm labour in Saskatchewan during the First World War. An editorial in the August, 1917 issue of *The Saturday Press and Prairie Farm*, Saskatchewan’s agricultural weekly, reported on a “systematic attempt” by farm labourers of the province to form a union. As a majority of these workers were from “countries with which we are at war,” the editorial stated the following:

⁷“Beginnings,” Canadian Wheat Board web site (<www.cwb.ca/aboutcwb/cwbhist/>, 2001).

⁸*Swift Current Sun*, November 1917, as quoted in Thompson, 63.

⁹Thompson, 86.

It is conceivable that they would consider it a very patriotic thing to the land of their birth and affection, as well as a highly remunerative idea for themselves, to hold up the man who is providing the food supplies of the Allies. ... It must test the patriotism of any farmer to pay these undesirable citizens double the sum his own boys are getting for risking their lives in France to save the Empire and make it a safe place to live in for these foreign hordes.¹⁰

It is estimated that as many as ten thousand Ukrainians enlisted in the Canadian forces during the First World War. Nevertheless, discrimination against this particular group of immigrants to Western Canada was widespread. The Dominion Government inaugurated an enemy alien program at the outset of the war. Each enemy alien was required to register with a local magistrate, to report on a monthly basis, and to turn in all firearms. In October 1914, a system of internment camps was established under the authorization of an Order in Council. Over eight thousand persons were eventually interned. Once manpower came to be in short supply, however, all but a few of the internees were released.¹¹

Members of pacifist religious groups that had settled on the prairies – Mennonites and Doukhobors – were increasingly subjected to verbal abuse as the war progressed. These groups had been guaranteed exemption from military service, and that guarantee had been respected. Thompson points out that, much to the anger of English-Canadian settlers, the position of the immigrant farmer actually improved during the course of the First World War. He explains:

In general, his was a small operation. The farmer and his family provided most of the labour required; his sons did not usually enlist, nor were many conscripted for military service. These conditions removed the effects of the labour shortage which was driving up the cost of production. While many English-Canadian farmers found profits offset by increased costs, the smaller immigrant farmer received a significantly higher return. The immigrant farmer, Ukrainian, German, Mennonite, or Doukhobor, was able to turn his profit toward expansion, either by improving more of the land he owned or acquiring more land. ... The average farm size of the minority group farmer remained smaller than that of his English-Canadian counterpart, and smaller than the Prairie average, but in terms of total growth minority group farms showed greater increases in size, improved acreage, and field crop acreage between 1916 and 1921.¹²

The fact that immigrant farm labourers reaped economic benefits from the war in the form of high wages increased English-Canadian hostility during 1917 and 1918. Farmers' groups demanded "another form of conscription" for enemy aliens and pacifists. *The Farm and Ranch Review*, December 5, 1917 called for "the rounding up of all aliens...to help shoulder the brunt of

¹⁰"The Farm Labor Hold-Up," in *The Saturday Press and Prairie Farm* (Saskatoon: August 11, 1917), 1.

¹¹Thompson, 79.

¹²Ibid, 85-6.

food production. Have them placed on farms and ranches at a remuneration not to exceed that paid to our brave boys.”¹³ The federal government did not give in to this demand, however.

5. Conscription

Much has been said about the racial conflict between French and English Canadians as a result of the Conscription Crisis of 1917-1918. Less is known, however, about the fact that some Western Canadian farmers also resisted conscription during this period. In November of 1917, the Union Government (a coalition of Conservatives and Liberals) announced that farmers, farmers’ sons and farm workers were being exempted from conscription. Full page advertisements were placed in agricultural newspapers stating: “Farm help will not be drafted,”¹⁴ and farmers were issued exemption certificates.

The horrific casualty rates experienced by the Canadian forces during the early months of 1918, however, caused the government to rescind its policy of agricultural exemptions. On March 21, the German army launched a full-scale offensive, shattering the British and Canadian positions at the front. According to Thompson, “the casualty rate of the Canadian Corps became higher than the rate at which it could be reinforced.”¹⁵ The On April 20, 1918, the *Military Service Act* was amended to enable the conscription of men as young as nineteen, should it become necessary. Western farmers warned that the conscription of farm workers would severely handicap agricultural production at the very time that the Canada Food Board was launching its “Greater Production” campaign. It would be impossible for their sons and hired hands to serve simultaneously in the field and in the trenches. “Who is going to harvest the crop?” they asked. For the most part, however, few Saskatchewan farmers protested against the cancellation of exemptions; most quietly accepted their military duty. Only 6.7 percent of eligible Saskatchewan conscripts defaulted, compared with 9.3 percent in Ontario, 40.8 percent in Quebec, and 19.4 percent in Canada as a whole.¹⁶

6. Impact of the War on Farm Women

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Farm women in Saskatchewan bore much of the war’s suffering. They were left to carry on after their husbands, fathers or sons were fighting, killed or maimed on the battle fronts. “As wartime inflation doubled the cost of living,” Thompson tells us, “the task of caring for a family on the pittance provided by the Patriotic Fund to soldiers’ dependents became more and more difficult.”¹⁷ In addition to their regular daily chores, many Saskatchewan farm women took on the effort of outdoor farm work. “There are harder things than fighting – suspense is one – and

¹³*The Farm and Ranch Review*, December 5, 1917, as quoted in Thompson, 87.

¹⁴*Ibid*, 133.

¹⁵Thompson, 149.

¹⁶*Ibid*, 151.

¹⁷*Ibid*, 110.

so perhaps while we are waiting let us do our bit by farming," wrote "Topsy" to the *Grain Growers' Guide* in the summer of 1916. That same summer, another farm woman shared her idea with the readers of the *Guide* of a blue denim "overall dress" which she wore to do outdoor work. "It seems so suitable for resisting winds and does not tear easily," reported "MDK." "One dress lasts me almost two seasons."¹⁸

Saskatchewan women also assisted the war effort, raising funds through patriotic organizations. The *Public Service Monthly* reported in the fall of 1918 that the Saskatchewan Branch of the Red Cross Society had collected \$1,457,000 and sent out 4,800 cases of goods. The Independent Order of the Daughters of the Empire (I.O.D.E.) in Saskatchewan raised \$357,000 for war and relief work, and, in addition, sent socks and shirts valued at \$30,000 each year from Saskatchewan to England.¹⁹ Many women did not believe in the war, but the fact that their men were being wounded prompted them to "do their bit." In her book, *In Times Like These*, Nellie McLung wrote:

Since the war broke out women have done a great deal of knitting. ... It is the desire to help, to care for, to minister; it is the same spirit which inspires our nurses to go out and bind up the wounded and care for the dying. ... Men make wounds and women bind them up, and so the women, with their hearts filled with love and sorrow, sit in their quiet homes and knit.²⁰

7. Impact of the War on Farm Youth

The farm labour shortage that resulted from enlistment in the Canadian Expeditionary Force led to a national initiative introduced in February 1918, known as "Soldiers of the Soil," or SOS. This federal program, organized by the Canada Food Board and administered by the Canadian Standard Efficiency Training for Boys Program, actively sought out male volunteers between the ages of 15 and 19 to work on Canadian farms. Over 20,000 boys were enrolled in SOS across Canada, and were assigned to farms to assist with the production of wartime foodstuffs. In Saskatchewan, 1,765 boys were placed on farms. Bronze badges of honour were presented by the Canada Food Board to those boys who served three months in the program. As the "Boys to the Farm" poster shows, they even had an official uniform.

¹⁸Topsy, "Women for War Work," *Grain Grower's Guide* (July 12, 1916); MDK, "Practical Work Dress," *Grain Grower's Guide* (July 19, 1916), as quoted in *Great Movement Underway: Women and the Grain Growers' Guide, 1908-1928*, Barbara E. Kelcey and Angela E. Davis, eds. (Winnipeg: The Manitoba Record Society, 1997), 152-3.

¹⁹"What Saskatchewan Has Done Towards the War," in *Public Service Monthly* (Regina: Saskatchewan Department of Agriculture, 1918), 95.

²⁰Nellie McClung, *In Times Like These* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972 [1915]), 23.

8. Soldier Settlement

In anticipation of the end of the First World War and the accompanying problem of re-establishing thousands of service men returning from the battlefields of Europe, the Dominion government passed the *Soldier Settlement Act* of 1917. An agency called the Soldier Settlement Board was set up to help returning veterans to obtain a free homestead or Soldier Grant of 160 acres. The Act also provided for loans of up to \$2,500 which could be applied against improvements or purchases of land. Hundreds of thousands of acres of school land, Forest Reserves, Hudson's Bay Company land, Doukhobor lands near Yorkton, and uncultivated Indian Reserve land were acquired by the Board to facilitate agricultural settlement.

According to E.C. Morgan, the largest and "most distinctive" of the soldier settlements in Saskatchewan was Prairie River, located on part of the Porcupine Forest Reserve between Hudson Bay and Tisdale. In the summer of 1919 the area was surveyed, and approximately 200,000 acres were thrown open for entry. Quarter sections were allotted through a lottery process, and by the end of the year a substantial number of settlers had built shacks and purchased horses, wagons, and farm machinery to work their farms. The settlers, both soldiers and civilians, faced a formidable challenge. "The burning of brush, the breaking of land, and the drainage of swamps had to be undertaken before their holdings could yield cash crops," Morgan explains, "and hordes of mosquitoes and various strains of flies, together with a feeling of isolation had to be coped with."²¹ Despite these difficulties, by 1921 the community of Prairie River had established school districts, post offices, a Red Cross Outpost Hospital, churches, and a community hall.

The Soldier Settlement program was not without its problems. In 1920, the 4,927 soldier settlers on newly opened Saskatchewan farm land were facing post-war deflation which brought about a sharp drop in prices for agricultural produce. Many of the settlers became indebted to the Board and had a difficult time repaying their loans.²² *The Soldier Settlement Act* also had a devastating impact on Indian lands in Saskatchewan. Revisions to the Act in 1919 permitted the Soldier Settlement Board to purchase "idle" Indian Reserve lands for distribution to Euro-Canadian war veterans. Some 85,000 acres of land, mainly in Saskatchewan, were surrendered and sold for \$1 million.²³ Today, the Treaty Land Entitlement process is recovering some of these lands lost through surrenders to the Soldier Settlement Board – a process many now consider to have been a serious breach of Treaty by the "servants of the Crown" – the federal government.²⁴

²¹E.C. Morgan, "Soldier Settlement in the Prairie Provinces," in *Saskatchewan History* (Spring 1968), 53-4.

²²Ibid, 44.

²³L. James Dempsey, *Warriors of the King; Prairie Indians in World War I* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1999), 77.

²⁴"Indian Land Was Lost for Non-Indian Soldier Settlement," in *Saskatchewan Indian* (June 1988), 7.

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Appendix A:

Saskatchewan Enlistment and Service Statistics Canadian Expeditionary Force First World War

Total population of Saskatchewan in 1911:	492,432 (73.3% rural)
Voluntary enlistment in CEF:	30,997 (+70 Nursing Sisters)
Total number of conscripts:	10,622 (25.5% of enlistment)
Total number of volunteers and conscripts:	41,619
Enlistment as a percent of the total SK population:	4.1%
Voluntary enlistment as percent of the 1914 eligible population:	17.2%
Total enlistment as a percent of "revised" eligible population:	32%*
Number of Saskatchewan-born who enlisted in the CEF:	4,763
Number of men who enlisted within the province:	41,689**
Percentage of Saskatchewan men in the total CEF Overseas Force:	6.6 percent
Number of CEF fatal casualties from Saskatchewan:	4,961 (8.4% of total killed)
Percentage of CEF overseas fatal casualties from Saskatchewan:	18.1% – highest in Canada

*Revised eligible population excludes foreign-born men between 18 and 45 classed as "aliens."

**Sharpe does not account for the difference of 70 between this figure and the one for total volunteers and conscript enlistments given above. Nor does he attempt to determine how many of these men were from out of province, on harvest excursions, for example, in the fall of 1914.