

# CHOOSING A HOMESTEAD.

By W. D. ALBRIGHT.

Choosing a homestead is an important decision. To all, then, who may be contemplating a move to a new country, these few words of suggestion:

As among provinces and districts we shall not discriminate. The writer lives in the upper region of the Peace River Country and what follows has particular applicability to his own section.

Having selected a general locality in which to prospect, get in touch with Government bureaux from whom literature and official information may be obtained. Ascertain the whereabouts of the Land Office for the district and obtain from it upon arrival plot maps showing quarter sections open to entry. Make quiet inquiries for a competent guide.

Horseback is the landseeker's ideal mode of conveyance in a rough or partly timbered country. Thus mounted, one can penetrate bluffs, cross deep coulees, ford or swim streams and follow survey slash lines through timber. If the rider loses his way, the mount, given his head, may bring him safely out.

Autumn is a good time to inspect a country for one may then see the growth it produces. Also, he can judge by the effect of frost on wild vetch and other plants, the approximate liability of a certain aspect to frost injury—a point of prime importance. He can estimate the dependency of streams and other sources of open-water supply. But any month when the snow is off the ground will do. Selecting a farm under snow is like buying a pig in a poke. Only in rare cases is it warranted.

## Examine the Soil.

Without attempting to rate all factors in their order of importance, let us emphasize the land. It is the foundation upon which success is to be built. There is now and then a genius who will make a good farm out of a piece of poor land, but he is the distinct exception. Usually the prosperity of the homesteader and those who follow him through generations to come will depend rather largely upon his original judgment of soil values. It is easy to be deceived. Tenderfeet, I notice, are likely to be over-impressed by a rank growth of native peavine and vetch. Now, these wild legumes are very desirable plants for hay and pasture but as soil indicators they are not at all dependable. They thrive best in fresh brule, where, in addition to some wind-shelter and supports to climb upon, they are favored by plenty of potassium in the ash left by the fire. Also, just after a burn, they suffer less competition by grass, which as time passes crowds them pretty well out of the open prairie. You may find a veritable jungle of wild vetch and peavine on raw clay from which the humus has been stripped by a hard fire and which would be quite inferior for production of ordinary farm crops. Seek a good depth of black loam, five inches or more if possible, with a good, deep subsoil. Of course, for the sake of getting high land one may have to take soil with only three or four inches of loam, or even less than that, but plow-depth of black soil is very desirable. On old sod-bound prairie, you may find the best of soil clothed with a short, weedy,

shrub-spangled growth of grass. Rely not upon surface indications. Dig down.

Fortunately, few landseekers are so verdant as one I heard of last summer. He was a city man, accompanying a party who were inspecting a tract of ranch land. There was occasional mention of hard-burned soil, and the tenderfoot gathered a wrong impression. Kicking up a place where the loam was deep and dark, he observed sagely, "Pretty black. Must have burned hard here." And his friends had the laugh on him all the way back to Montreal.

## Poplar Marks Good Land.

Poplar is the best general indication I know of first-class agricultural land. The Saskatoon shrub is good too but is in itself objectionable from the standpoint of breaking. Spruce usually favors wet or very light land. Willow predominates in well-saturated "draws" and on raw-clay hillsides. The slope and elevation of these latter areas, however, often render them comparatively safe from frost and may thus compensate for some degree of inferiority in soil-quality. But the man who has to grapple with willow on clay land should be sure of considerable compensation, for the clearing of such land almost always involves labor and expense far in excess of expectation.

In the Peace River country there is a most amazing difference in the liability of different aspects to frost. High land bordering lakes ripens Marquis wheat safely in nearly every year. Low land removed from open water cannot be regularly depended upon to ripen oats. Other things being equal, elevation counts much. The writer lives near the crest of a hundred-foot slope at the foot of which is a slough. Bordering that slough there is a touch of frost about half the nights of each summer. At the head of the slope, tender garden stuff like beans and squash have a fair chance of maturing without artificial protection. From the standpoint of the settler's garden alone this is important. Elevation being equal, a western or south-western aspect is rather preferred to any other, but this rule will not always hold; and, moreover, it must be understood that frost does not always strike hardest in the same spots. Even old-timers are puzzled by its vagaries.

## Importance of Good Water.

The importance of an assured supply of good water can scarcely be over-emphasized. A strong spring may add a thousand dollars to the value of a homestead. Whilst in our neighbourhood water can usually be obtained by digging and always by drilling, yet, the element of uncertainty and the expense, first of getting the well, then of installing and using the pump, not to mention the hauling of water until the well is ready, are factors to be reckoned with. Seldom should one put up any expensive buildings without at least locating water with a test auger. Pioneering loses much of its hardship with a good water supply insured from the start.

The amount and kind of growth to be cleared off the land should be considered with great circumspection. Willow is the worst we have, especially where occurring on clay land. Poplar is serious enough but can be

dealt with economically in time, and if one has thirty acres of fairly open land to "prove up" on, he need not worry so much about some poplar on the rest, especially as the best grazing is usually found in thin scrub and the day is coming when poplar will be worth money for fuel, poles, etc. This subject is too big to treat fully just now, but allow us a parting hint. Much land that seems clear and open has trouble beneath the surface in the form of roots and rocks.

## Look Out for Rocks.

Be on the lookout for rocks. If many show on the surface, there are almost certain to be a far greater proportion at the bottom of the furrow. Easterners accustomed to stony land often under-rate the drawback of a few rocks but when they come to "break" they find that the wide-bottomed breaker lay is jarred much worse than the narrow lays with which they have probably broken "new ground" in the East. Besides, one does not move thousands of miles to root around in such rock heaps as are found in some countries of the Eastern Provinces.

Every practical farmer realises the importance of location as relating to railroads, schools, post office, church, etc. A poor location seriously discounts the best farm, while a good one makes a poor farm tolerable. The homesteader, as a rule, however, must take his chances on these points. Until railroads are built, market centres established, and highways constructed leading thereto, it is all a gamble. Trying to homestead near the route of a projected railroad is a risky business, for railroad companies often switch their projected routes for reasons best known to those on the "inside." The engineers who survey a route do not often know where the road will actually be built. They report; others decide. Besides, one railroad does not always determine the situation of the important towns. So it is seldom wise to sacrifice definite advantages of soil, water and so on for the problematical one of situation. Get a good quarter.

To sum up: select good land, as safe from frost as possible and with at least thirty acres easy to prepare for the plow. If there is not open water on the homestead that may be depended upon for a twelve months' supply, get a well before putting up any but the most temporary buildings. Do not take a poor quarter for the sake of present or prospective location. Until steel is actually laid there is no guarantee of existing facilities remaining as at present placed. Do not throw away substance for shadow.

Of course, those who homestead in a partially settled district can well afford to take land which the first comers, faced with the brunt of pioneering, were wise to shun. Then, too, individual requirements differ. The man going in for stock husbandry is not quite so particular about immunity from summer frost as one who wishes to raise some grain for sale. But even for stockmen, high land is at a premium. The foregoing hints are intended to be suggestive.

## HIS THIRST EXPLAINED.

Uncle Seaman—"When I come to the surgeon he says to me, 'I'm blooming sorry, mate, I don't know what I was thinking about,' he says, 'but there's a sponge mis-sin', and I believe it's inside yer."

"What's the odds?" I says. "Let it be." And there it is to this day. No, I don't feel no particular pain from it, but I do get most uncommonly thirsty."