WHEAT

"Love, Cruelty, Fear, and God in the Movement of Grain"

Wheat — 20 million acres of wheat. Wheat has traditionally been a magic word for Canada and Canadian politics — and its aura lingers on, though its first name is no longer King.

When wheat farmers complain, Canadian governments listen, for wheat has meant riches for all of Canada in its best years, and economic tribulation for much of Canada when crops or markets went bad.

When times are good and the western wheat farmer buys a new car, or a truck, a tractor, or a combine, the impact is felt all the way to the eastern banks. A big export year means jobs in railroading, seaway shipping, seaport terminal elevators, and grain handling. A drought or a strike on the seaway or at the port of Vancouver can spark three days debate or more in the House of Commons.

Pulp and paper are bigger exports now, but wheat is still a one-word description of a way of life, and today it's at the heart of a revolution in Canadian farm policy.

The first wheat grown on the prairies and shipped to market in eastern Canada was a shipment of 857 bushels in 1876 of a variety called Red Fife. It was the first hardy wheat to survive the arid climate and short growing seasons.

For the first few decades the typical wheat farmer homesteaded a quarter section (160 acres). He kept cows, pigs, chickens, and grew oats and barley for feed.

Then three developments gave a major boost to the pioneer prairie economy. In 1896 the price of wheat went up on the English market in Liverpool. And by 1900 transportation costs had come down enough to make large-scale farming profitable, and the dry-land farming technique had been developed. That means growing wheat one year, and leaving the land in summer fallow the next to build up moisture.

For the next half century Canada's wheat production grew, save for years of drought or depression, because bakers everywhere required a high percentage of hard wheat, mostly Canadian-grown in the tough prairie climate, to maintain their bread quality. The Canadian wheat farmer probably hit his peak years during the 1920's when wheat provided almost forty percent of total Canadian farm cash income, wheat exports accounted for up to one third of Canada's export earnings, and thousands of Eastern Canadians rode primitive harvest special trains to help bring in the crop and at the same time gain a feeling of participation in "King Wheat."

Wheat production continued to expand. From 1962 to 1969 production averaged more than 650 million bushels per year—encouraged by a unique combination of exceptional commercial demand and disastrous drought in the Indian sub-continent.

But long term factors were also working to reduce the demand for Canadian wheat. In 1960 the Chorleywood baking process started to come into use. It permits the use of more low protein wheat in the grist without sacrifice of quality — to the obvious detriment of Canada's high protein Manitobas. At the same time scientists were concentrating on the development of new high yielding dwarf wheats well suited to hot dry climates — the major facet of the so-called "Green Revolution." The Common Agricultural Policy of the EEC raised wheat prices for French wheat producers and production, and French exports increased. Production in Australia also increased, particularly of high protein varieties.

Thus after the bonanza of 1966-67 when Canadian production and exports peaked at 827 million bushels and 545 million bushels respectively, there was a drastic decline in world demand. Exports reached only about 300 million bushels in 1968-69 and the carry-over rose to excessive levels.

Grain farmers on the Canadian prairies have long shown, however, that they can adapt. As early as 1906 they were trying to solve their problems through collectives (cooperation or joint action). That year, dissatisfied with their treatment by grain merchants and others flocking to the developing wheatlands, they formed their first farmer-owned grain company and went into the business of selling grain on a commission basis. In the early 1920's they established cooperatives that evolved into producer-owned wheat "pools" in each of the three prairie provinces. The "pools" derive their name from their marketing method — all members' wheat is "pooled" and return to each farmer is the same for each grade regardless of when it is delivered during the year.

The economic collapse of 1929 bankrupted the pools because world prices dropped far below the "initial price" they had paid for the 1929 crop.

However, faith in the pooling system and the desire for some stability of income led to the establishment by Parliament in 1935 of the Canadian Wheat Board, a Crown Corporation which is now the sole marketing agency for all prairie grown wheat, oats, and barley, and which regulates deliveries of all grains in that area. The