

In spite of our assurances, the family brought with them a small arsenal of guns and a naval cutlass donated by a friendly sailor in England. Presumably these were for fighting the Indians at close quarters, and needless to say the weapons were never used for such purposes.

Homesteaders

During that first winter we were fortunate enough to be able to file on four quarter sections* of homestead land, 18 miles east of Girvin. In the spring we moved there, managed to put up a rough lumber shack, and bought four oxen. We were now homesteaders.

During the summer of 1909 my brother Charlie broke 90 acres of land with the four oxen. My brother Will and I hired ourselves out to two good farmers at \$20 a month, thus providing cash for the family operation.

The Homestead Act called for residence on the homestead for six months during each of three years, the breaking of ten acres of prairie each year, and the erection of a "habitable" house. The habitable house was vaguely defined. Families were allowed to live together if it was more convenient. At the end of three years you got clear title to the homestead with no strings attached.

The Act defined "residence" as sleeping on your land at night. What you did, or where you were during the rest of the day was nobody's business. One young homesteader I knew worked for a local rancher. As often as possible he would ride horseback the five miles to his homestead by night. He would fill a lamp with an egg cup full of coal oil, light it, place it in a window and go back to his job on the ranch. When the oil burned out, the lamp would go out, but anyone interested would suppose that "residence" duties were being performed, and that the young man was at home.

This was the day of the big steam threshing outfits that piled up mountainous straw piles. In a strictly grain-growing area, the straw piles were of no value, and to get them out of the way they were often burned to the ground the day they were threshed. Often from our vantage point on the crest of the Long Lake Valley we could count up to 50 or more

of these twinkling straw piles burning like stars in the night.

"Gopher eaters"

My brothers and I worked on the giant threshing machines to provide income for the family. We also worked on the railroad grade when it was being built in our locality. The regular railroad workers called us "gopher eaters" since homesteaders were accused of eating gophers. I personally knew only one who did. Never indulged in them myself; too much like eating rats.

Our stay on the homesteads in the Girvin country was educational and interesting. We had graduated from the 'Green Englishman' class to become real westerners. In 1913 we moved to new fields after acquiring a 1,000-acre spread 50 miles south of the old cow town of Maple Creek on the south slope of the Cypress Hills. This was the frontier all over again, although we were a little better equipped to handle it.

Schooling problems

We helped form the one-room country school district of West Plains. At one time there were over 5,000 of these country schools in Saskatchewan. As soon as settlement had progressed a schoolhouse would be built. Schoolhouses were initially log or sod, but a sod schoolhouse would be very temporary. When a school district was formed and debentures issued, the school had to conform to government standards and would be solidly built of lumber. They were heated by a pot-bellied stove which usually went out overnight, making teaching very difficult during the winter months. The teachers in these one-room schools might have 35 pupils or more, of all grades, ages and languages, with some of the pupils as big as the teacher herself. Many prominent Canadians received their early education in these country schools.

Dust, drought and depression

While on our land south of Maple Creek we became involved in that trauma that is often called the Dirty Thirties — the same decade that has become synonymous with the economic ills of the Depression. In 1931, the western prairies were swept by high winds and frightful dust storms, and for almost a decade Saskatchewan and southern Alberta suffered severe drought and gale-force winds. The Wheat Pool was near bankruptcy;

whole municipalities were in receivership; and for thousands relief was the order of the day. The situation was aptly summed up by a distressed Chinese café owner at Climax, Saskatchewan: "No wheat, no grass, no hay, no gardens, nothing of everything."

To escape those desperate days of dust, drought and depression I took flight into the heroic past. Whenever I could find the time, I dropped into the world of the western frontier. I became interested in the local history of the early North West Mounted Police and Fort Walsh. This was the first Mounted Police post, built in the Cypress Hills in what is now Saskatchewan, in 1875. This brought me into contact with the then commissioner of the RCMP, Stuart Taylor Wood, who became one of my most helpful and valued friends.

I contacted some of the pioneer cattlemen of the Cypress Hills. There was Bill Noland who had hunted buffalo with Buffalo Bill (William Cody) on the Kansas plains in the 1870s. My friend Tom Whitney had been brought up in Virginia City, Montana in the gold-rush days and his father was one of the Montana Vigilantes. There was Gabriel Lavallie, a Cypress Hills Métis, whose grandfather was a French officer who had been wounded at the battle of Waterloo. These men and many others enlarged my knowledge of the history of the early West.

New career

Circumstance has a long arm, and after 45 years events had come full circle. I began another career in 1953 as curator of the Western Development Museum at Saskatoon, and I felt right at home. Here were the familiars of my other life in the Thirties. Now I was to be an agent caring for machines, tools, and artifacts of frontier days, talking to the pioneers who had used them, interpreting the West of yesterday to the visitors of today. It's a long way from Canterbury Cathedral to the Western Development Museum at Saskatoon, but this is the way it all happened.

George Shepherd is one of the few remaining homesteaders who helped settle the Prairies in the early 1900s. He has written two books since 1965, *West of Yesterday* and *Brave Heritage*; continues to contribute articles on the early West to newspapers, magazines, and radio; and remains curator of the Western Development Museum. In 1974, University of Saskatchewan Chancellor John G. Diefenbaker conferred on him the degree of Honorary Doctor of Laws.

*My father and three elder brothers were able to file on a quarter section of 160 acres each, making one section of 640 acres all told.