

640 ACRES—No MORE, *Maybe* LESS

NOT long ago I had a trip across a section of Saskatchewan with a land salesman. Not, of course, a unique experience that qualifies one to write travel articles or deliver lectures; but interesting because it gets one into closer contact with the land than the study of crop estimates in Eastern financial newspapers.

Right here let there be paid a small tribute to that unchronicled pathfinder and pioneer, the land salesman. After all the shouting and the tumult that accompany the birth, life (usually brief) and death of the brand new colonization scheme have died away—after all the captains and the kings of Imperialistic oratory have departed, generally a little disappointed, then in steps the blithe young land salesman to achieve the practical results. He it is who eventually takes out the "prospect," shows him what the prairie really is in comparison with what the far-distant orators have said of it, stifles his scepticism and converts it into enthusiasm akin to his own, steers him clear of rival concerns with land to sell, and "sells" him, consummating thereby the long drawn out and expensive advertising campaign that has brought the prospect there and playing a not unimportant part in the creation of the great new Empire that, etc., etc., in the Western, etc., etc. Land selling (don't make the common mistake of confusing it with a real estate agency) is a profession peculiar to the West, ex-haling Western optimism. Its young men are enthusiastic and exuberant—to some extent necessarily.

It is not an overcrowded profession; and having at various times seen salesmen of many kinds in action, having been sold to personally and proving an average refractory buyer—having, on occasion, tried to sell things myself—I am consumed with envy at the easy lot of these bright young men. It is, let me warn you, a highly specialized profession, in which you must know both agriculture and salesmanship before you get the signature on the dotted line; and although a good salesman is worth his weight in—well, new potatoes—to the fortunate concern that employs him, the business is restricted in size and not particularly highly remunerated. The envy referred to arises from the eagerness of the prospect to buy—which any salesman knows is the hardest thing in the world to find.

Most of the buying this year of grace, however, is being done not by new-comers, but by old-timers. You think immigration has ceased—well, during the fiscal year 1916-17, 75,395 immigrants entered Canada, of whom 61,389 came from the United States. But the biggest land buyer now is the farmer who is already there. He is taking this opportunity of getting more land while the getting is good. For three years, with war prices for everything that he produces, and with no excess profits tax, the Western farmer has been digging himself in, economically. He stands to-day upon a sounder footing than at any previous date—free of debts, all notes and chattel mortgages cleared off, land paid for, title deeds secured, and money in the bank. In hundreds of cases, a single crop has bought the land; in some,

CHARLES STOKES' Trip With a Land Salesman convinces him that Fashion in western farms runs to large sizes. The old song, "A little farm well tilled and a little wife well willed" is out of date on the prairies.

By CHARLES STOKES

it has bought it three or four times over. A farmer in that section with whom I had some conversation told me that a quarter-section that he bought in 1915 and cropped in 1916 for the first time paid him, net, \$60 per acre. It had cost \$24.

The streets of the small town where we stayed over-night—an ugly little prairie town marooned in an ocean of cool green wheat—were blocked for a whole day with grain waggons that had hauled grain in to the elevators from the surrounding country. Outside one livery stable I counted eighteen waggons, bivouacked there empty, their teams eating inside and their drivers upstreet at the Chinese table d'hôte. In itself, this demonstrates an economic change that will enter materially into the future grain situation. It was June, remember—not November. It was very easy for the amateur economist to hand out to the farmer the loquacious advice not to market grain in the fall, when the market was glutted; but the farmer never had any penchant for marketing grain in the fall. Only the pressure of his financial obligations—for notes and other instruments of torture matured then—led him to do so. Having caught up with his indebtedness, he now carries over his grain and distributes it in a rising market instead of a falling one. It is doubtful whether he will ever return to his old practice. The wheel of fortune may bring him bad years, but now that he is so securely established it is possible he may never have to incur credit again to anything like the same dangerous extent. High prices will prevail for nearly five years—Lloyd George's guaranteed minimum scale to British wheat growers insures that to Canadian wheat growers—and there is still plenty of time for the newcomer to get well and plenty into debt, and out of it again with the assistance of war prices.

WHAT strikes you most at present is the lack of seriousness that accompanies the transaction of buying farm land. The general impression is—I confess I have had it myself—that the transfer of real property is the occasion for great solemnity, and the signing of the agreement of sale the necessity for calling in the whole family unto the fourth cousins. But on the contrary, the western farmer signs in a hasty, offhand way, and turns round to the things that really matter. Farm hands incur the responsibility of three or four thousand dollars' worth of land with nonchalance, if not with levity. "Signed in pencil?" said my land salesman. "Yes—lots like that, contracts for extra quarter or half-

sections signed in the field on the handle of a plow."

"It's getting to be," he went on, after a lengthy excursion into the strange jargon of section-township-range-meridian that they all talk, Dutch to the stranger, but a scientific geographical identification to the initiated, "it's getting to be that the man who's only got a half-section thinks himself a piker. Why, I remember the time when the average was a quarter-section, and a half-section man a king-pin; now, bless your eyes, they're none of 'em content with less than a full section. Great crops we can raise here, what?"

What has been said about land applies with equal force to some other commodities. The automobile has ceased to be a luxury; it is bought recklessly, and not always in the cheapest form so celebrated in song and story. The thousand and one delights that the advertising pages reveal, electric light systems and what not, compete with the thousand-dollar-up car in favour; in winter, Florida and California beckon the wheat-grower, and not in vain.

AT a not very distant date in the development of the West, farmers plunged too heavily in land, and became top-heavy. They were "land poor," in a terse phrase that implied that although they had hundreds of acres they had no ready cash. There seems little danger that there will be a repetition of this, because they are paying as they go; but the very ease with which prairie land is selling to-day suggests that the time is not unimaginable when it will all be sold. All available homestead land is already so far back from the railroads as to be impracticable except to real seekers for trouble, and until more railroads are built—to say which is to parallel Kathleen Mavourneen—the bulk of development must be near established centres. In other words, the Peace River country is all right, but a little ahead of the times. These exuberant young land salesmen are apt to sell themselves out of a job the very first thing they know, because, as they express it, prairie land is the cheapest thing on the American continent at this time.

However, if only one-tenth the land that has been sold in Western Canada, but has never yet been developed—land, that is, bought for speculative purposes—could be cropped, the result would be such as to render a Food Controller superfluous. The land speculator has been the greatest curse of the West, and, recalling the needs of Europe, it makes one's heart ache to drive for miles and see blocks of unused, unfenced, farm lands withheld from cultivation to get the unearned increment. The owners of this property are not always criminal. A variety of causes can be adduced to account for the non-development: hundreds of townspeople, for instance, bought farm land in Western Canada in the big boom four or five years back, as an investment, but have never been able to proceed with it. Farmers in the States who have bought in Canada have been unable to sell out at home and move up. But on the whole there are no excuses. The next thing to conscript is this undeveloped, unoccupied and useless farm land.

THE LESSER EVIL

(Continued from page 9.)

ness of railway track. A trolley car headed for the mills came whizzing along, with windows dazzling in the sun. He hailed it, and it stopped. He stepped aboard; the conductor saluted him. He went inside. There were a dozen passengers. One of these arose—a short, stout, bull-necked man, red of face.

"Lo, Conrad."

He recognized the Deputy-Sheriff, O'Conner. He felt a pang of regret that he was to be protected, but remembered then that every car was sentined.

The two sat down together.

"Hot day," muttered O'Conner.

Conrad nodded. The car was passing the mills. No mob was in sight, nor even straying labourers.

"Pretty quiet," said O'Conner.

Again Conrad nodded. What if the mob had dispersed? The car shot past the furthest mill, and its enclosing fence. Then it stopped sharply. The motorman opened the front doors and called in O'Conner.

"They've piled bricks on the track. There's a mob—look!"

"Sit still—all!" bellowed O'Conner.

He and Conrad arose. Out on the sun-stricken pavement before the corner saloon stood a mob of men—aliens, in undershirts and trousers and little caps on the back of their heads. Ominous and terrifying was the silence.

Three men boarded the car. The leader, a young man with tousled hair and a face as keen as a wolf's,

and as wildly beautiful, looked in. His voice crackled like a whip:

"Git de hell out of dis car—everybody!"

Conrad felt something hot in his breast, anger, defiance, fury. O'Conner bellowed:

"Keep your seats!"

The voice crackled sharper:

"Quick, git out—one, two, three—"

The passengers responded to the greater authority. They half-slid, half-slouched out, tumbling one over another, muttering crazily, utterly panic-stricken. Conrad and O'Conner were left alone.

Again the face appeared in the doorway.

"Git out ycu—and you, big coward, Mr. Conrad!"

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