

A homesteader looks back

The following article by George Shepherd is from *Habitat*, Vol. 20, No. 3/4, 1977:

I was born on Castle Street, in Geoffrey Chaucer's cathedral city of Canterbury, England on March 20, 1890. England in 1890 was the heart of the largest and most powerful empire the world had yet known. The nation was rich, a commercial leader in a peaceful world under the shadow of British naval power. This was the Victorian Age at its zenith, yet the winds of change were blowing. It was also a time of rising international tension and sharpening domestic issues. England, leader of the industrial world, was losing her leadership.

My father was engaged in the butchering business and we handled English home-grown beef. But with the advent of refrigeration, the large American firms — such as Swift's and Armour's — entered world trade and our business was literally overrun by stampedes of Texas Longhorns. Yankee know-how devised better methods for storing and shipping frozen meat, and Texas and Kansas beef arrived in our seaport town of Ramsgate in as good condition as it had left Chicago. And it sold at less than half the price of English beef. Business declined and our future seemed uncertain.

Greener pastures

Emigration was in the air, and it offered a chance to better prospects. We studied the literature. Australia seemed so far away. Canada was closer, and we thought we could go back for holidays every few years even in those steamship days. (I might add that I didn't return to visit England for 60 years.)

The literature on Canada, I must admit, was a little on the optimistic side. Canada was said to have a healthful climate, guaranteed to be free of malaria, and this we found to be true. It was said that while the prairie summers were hot, the heat was delightfully invigorating. That in winter the cold was dry, and not unpleasant. I used to recall those glowing words while working in the harvest fields with the summer heat blazing to 96 degrees in the shade, or in winter as I ran behind a sleigh to keep from freezing in temperatures that were 30 degrees below zero.

The lodestone that drew people from all over the world to Western Canada was the offer of free homesteads — 160 acres

of land to any male 18 years of age or over.

Pictures were shown of a farmer sitting in a folding-top buggy beside a well with a full water trough, fed by a windmill that provided free power. Around the water trough horses and cattle were gathered. In the background stood an eight-room house and a large hip-roofed barn. Lured by these pictures, and ignorant of the fact that these free "homesteads" consisted of nothing but miles of grass, we decided to emigrate to Canada.

Journey begins

We called a family council and decided that my father and I should go first to secure a toe-hold in the land of milk and honey. Tickets were purchased. Dad and I were booked for passage on the *Empress of Ireland*. We were told that we would have to pass a physical examination as we boarded the ship. An officer stopped us at the head of the gangplank and in one breath said: "What's your name? Are you well? Hold out your tongue. All right. Go on." Our tickets were stamped and we hunted up our quarters. Our first day on the water was March 20, 1908 and I was 18 years of age.

After the eight-day ocean voyage filled

with the miseries of seasickness and homesickness, we landed at Saint John, New Brunswick. Our guidebook spoke of Saint John as the city of churches. We could hear the constant clamour of bells; surely every church bell in the city was welcoming us. We were soon disillusioned. It was only the yard engines signalling as they switched back and forth in the railway yards. This clanging sound was our welcome to Canada. It smelled of fish, of wood and pine trees. It was rugged, unkempt and slapdash. But it was Canada, our new home.

We disembarked from the steamship to the immigration shed. Right across from the shed was a waiting train with its long string of Colonist cars and its slatted wooden seats. We were soon on our way and in short order we found ourselves in the immigration hall at Winnipeg.

From there my father and I were booked through to Brandon where we were hired to a farmer to learn the rudiments of farming at a wage of \$10 a month each. After six weeks we moved further west to Girvin, a small town on the old Canadian National Railway, half way between Regina and Saskatoon. It was here that my mother, five brothers and sister arrived five months later.



To populate western Saskatchewan and Alberta, the Department of the Interior lured immigrants with posters, lectures and emigration offices in the European capitals.