

Saskatchewan's Geography

The boundaries of Saskatchewan were drawn by man, not God, and they are as neat as a figure in a geometry class, a parallelogram, 750 miles high, narrower at the top than at the bottom.

The northern edge is rocky, semi-barren taiga, poor in vegetation, rich in lakes and uranium. Below, extending for more than half the province, is woodland, sparse in the northern part, thicker in the south—black spruce, jack pine, tamarack, aspen, black poplar, balsam and fir.

Below the forests is the Aspen Parkland, which combines prairie with groves of trees and shrubs. Between the Parkland and the United States border is the bald prairie, with its dark brown soil, the wheat basket of the country and, to an increasing degree, of the world. Rising in the middle of the prairie is an island of forest in a sea of wheat, the Cypress Hills, where cattle thrive on bluebunch fescue grasses.

Saskatchewan's Not-So-Quiet Revolution

Saskatchewan began with the Liberals in power. Led by Walter Scott, the first premier, they took sixteen of twenty-five legislative seats in 1905, the year the province entered Confederation. They stayed in power, more or less, through the 1940s.

For most of the time since then the province has been run by the social democratic Co-operative Commonwealth Federation and its successor, the New Democratic Party.

The CCF and the NDP evolved out of radical farmer movements that began at the turn of the century and bloomed during the dark days of the 1930s.

Most of the first settlers—farmers from eastern Canada, the Dakotas and Minnesota, non-farmers from Great Britain, nearly half a million people from central Europe, Doukhobors from Russia, and sizeable groups from Scandinavia and Germany—came in a rush in the early 1900s. They found that they had a lot in common—the harsh climate, hard work, the difficulties of providing food, water and shelter, and the overwhelming presence of the flat, wind-swept land. Adversity gave them a sense of unity. As historian John Archer has put it, they found that nationality was not the best test of character and hard work was not in itself enough to usher in the brave new world. They also found a common enemy, the “monied” forces that kept freight rates high and grain prices low.

They formed “non-partisan, non-political” action groups—the Saskatchewan Grain Growers Association (SGGA), the Society of Equity, the Farms Alliance, the Grange, the Patrons of



Industry and the United Farmers—and created the Grain Growers Grain Company to compete with the five grain companies that controlled wheat prices. They gained a seat on the Winnipeg Exchange.

They were united and effective but reluctant to form an actual political party. The powerful SGGA put its faith in the dominant Liberals, and the Liberals, regionally and nationally, did the best they could for the farmers. It wasn't, as it turned out, good enough.

In 1911 the Liberal party endorsed reciprocal trade with the United States, one of the farmers' basic goals, and, as a result, sustained a resounding defeat in the populous East.

The farmers learned a lesson, and a strong SGGA faction began campaigning for clearly defined objectives—tax reform, women's suffrage, proportional representation and social democracy