

It seems that those who come from the cities to live in Peace River are people who grew up here and moved away. Another kind of newcomer is the American expatriate: some ex-schoolteachers from the States live now on a communal farm near Dixonville. They are reportedly doing fine. At least, they survived last winter. There's a businessman in town who organizes the local theatre group and writes some of their plays. Slapstick comedy stuff. The RCMP headquarters for the region are in Peace River and smoking dope is still the worst thing you can do. If only the cops could find where the stuff is stashed. In the meantime, most of the busts are for illegal possession of booze.

Only a couple of miles out of Edmonton, on the road to Jasper, and you are already smack in the middle of the woody hills that press around the edges of the city. A kind of war at a standstill between the chaotic grassland and the civilized bankers with the soil-tillers caught in the middle. This is a region of the small family farm that the NDP and NFU* want to save from the clutches of big business, from the idea of farming as a corporate industry and not, as it is held to be by city kids, an art. What the farmers themselves believe their lives to be is more mysterious in the sense that they have never been asked. Just another one of those stories of a regional history superseded by the needs of a nation-state. All that I had to go on, speeding along Highway 16, was that, as the original wooden frame farmhouses collapsed unpainted, unfixed and still mortgaged, the families moved a few feet away into a new stucco house with a shingle roof. Stubbornly insisting that by anybody's definition a farmer lives on his land and works it.

Not much farther into the hills are the gas flames and the "donkeys" doggedly pumping up pure gold. Underneath the starving farms runs a billion dollars in oil and who is getting rich?

THE Coal Branch of Alberta lies south-west of Hinton along the tracks of ghost towns. Once they took millions of tons out of the belly of the Rocky Mountains and life in the coal towns, aside from the hours underground and the coal dust diseases, was all right. There was a theatre

*National Farmers Union.

and music lessons and a skating rink, good neighbours and a steady job, for when would the world run out of coal? Then the railroads switched to diesel engines and one by one the towns closed down with everybody scattering for better jobs in bigger towns.

Hinton is a company town. North West Pulp and Power. One hundred per cent American owned. Leasing 3,000 square miles plus reserve. There is a stench in the air that you eventually get used to. Some students say that the mill isn't a polluting agent. It's gas stations which dump oil and grease and it's Jasper, upstream, which dumps untreated sewage. In any case, it isn't the mill; and the Youth Action group's ecology projects are to pick up litter from the ditches by the highway, to clean up the woods after hunters and to organize a coffee house in a bowling alley. Someone wants to "blow this town apart" with theatre imported from Edmonton. Well, anything to get the kids into something more than drinking, trashing and walking the highway.

When I mentioned nationalization of North West Pulp, all the kids laughed. Everybody's job and/or security depends on the mill. "Listen, the mill isn't even talked about here. It's been around so long no one even notices it. Even the town council, if it isn't satisfied with pollution controls, can't do much. The company would say they've already spent 10 or 12 millions and, anyway, they are well within the guidelines set by the provincial government. They'd need a bigger threat than the town council to get them to do anything." "If you want to live well, you work at the mill." "If the union said to the mill, you've got to clean up the pollution or we'll strike, the company would close the mill and tell them to go to hell. There are hundreds to replace the workers here."

WESTERN separatism may or may not be the political wave of the future and, anyway, its future isn't nearly so interesting as its present. It is instructive to note that Maclean's+ thinks the West is girding itself for battle ("The West is Ready to Revolt"), Kildare Dobbs is amused by the idea and Donald Peacock, writing from Calgary, is worried that somebody Down East may take separatists seriously. It is instructive

+A national magazine published in Toronto.