

# Experiences of a Homesteader

By JOHN WILSON

When I was a small boy, I read a book called "Cedar Creek." It was the story of two English lads who went to Canada, took up homesteads somewhere or other in that strange far away land, chopped down big trees in a "primeval forest," caught great trout in the creek, shot deer, worked hard, had a good time and by and by became rich and prosperous farmers. I made up my mind before I had read half way through that book, that one day I would go to Canada and do as they did. The only thing I did not like about those boys was that they made the hired man whom they took with them—the son of an old servant of their family, if I remember rightly—wait for his meals until they had finished. It seemed to me that he was the best man of the three. He could cook, and do lots of other useful things that they were not able to do, he saved them from all kinds of trouble, and I thought that he should have had a more prominent place in the story than they gave him.

As I have said, I was a small boy when the ambition to become a Canadian farmer first took possession of me, and though it was a dozen years or more before I bade farewell to my English home, that idea never left me. Mean while I finished my schooling, went to work in a printing office and became a newspaper reporter. This did not particularly fit me for chopping down big trees, but the boys of Cedar Creek had not done any hard work before they went to their Canadian homesteads and I thought that I could grow big muscles and learn to swing an axe just as they had done. Well, I haven't chopped down big trees in a "primeval forest" yet—there are none on my homestead—but I have grubbed willow roots and dug wells, which was just as good a muscle maker, though not nearly so romantic to read about.

## I Arrive at Winnipeg

I landed in Winnipeg on May 5, 1905. I was twenty-four years of age and had English money worth \$30.00 in my pocket. I have some of those English coins yet. I got off the train, as I shall always remember, on top of the C. P. R. subway, shortly before noon, and looked down at the gateway city of the great west I had come to seek my fortune in. A belated snow-storm had visited Winnipeg the night before, and Main Street, which badly needed a new pavement in those days, was a mass of black mud. So far as I knew, I had not a friend in the city and as I stood there wondering where I should go first, the prospect was not inviting.

## At the Immigration Hall

However, I had read about the immigration hall, how kindly immigrants were treated there, and what good jobs the officials found for people wanting work, so I went there. They couldn't give me a job just then, but would have one for me in a few days, they said, so I registered my name, previous occupation and so forth, and sat around awhile and talked to others who were situated like myself and to some who had been out on farms and had come back disappointed. Of course, those who were satisfied with the jobs that had been found them did not come back, so I was not much discouraged by the bad reports of the unsuccessful ones. The immigration hall did not look an inviting place to stay in—it has been improved since, I believe—so I went to a boarding house on Selkirk Avenue, the address of which I got from a dodger handed me outside the C. P. R. depot. This place was in the foreign part of the city and was no better than the immigration hall, but I did not find that out until I had paid a week's board in advance, so I stayed. The day I arrived in Winnipeg I met two old school mates from home, and you may be sure

it did my heart good to see them. They were both doing well; one had his parents and brothers and sisters with him, and I felt strongly tempted to try and secure a position in the city and stay with them.

But I had come to Canada to be a farmer, so I went to the immigration hall each day and looked for a job. After four days waiting, as I was sitting in the immigration hall I heard the official announce that a farmer wanted an inexperienced Englishman. He got one. Me. He lived at Carman, 57 miles out from Winnipeg. I was to get \$15.00 for the first month and after that we could make a new bargain if we were both satisfied. I went out with my new boss next day, but we were not satisfied, either of us. If I were to tell you all

this time to Union Point, Man., from where a shipmate had written saying he had a good job and could find me one near him.

## \$12 a Month

I got there at night, and the next morning started to work. I hadn't a very big idea of my own worth on a farm, and only asked for \$12.00 a month, which my new boss agreed to give me till the freeze up. I found out afterwards that I could have got better pay if I had asked for it, but I was well treated and learned a good deal about farming, how to care for horses, how to plow and seed and harrow, to pitch hay and build stooks and stacks, and also how to get up early and keep on working till late at night.

The rush for the Doukhobor lands was all that I expected. A crowd camped on the steps and sidewalk outside the land office at Prince Albert each afternoon, stayed there all night, and in the morning fought among themselves and against new comers to see who should be first at the counter to secure the choice locations. I watched the proceedings for ten days, during which time a strong board fence was built on the sidewalk enclosing a space about two feet wide and twenty feet long outside the land office, and then made my effort to get in the front rank. A party of us, strangers to each other before then but firm friends ever since, joined together and formed a line, with an experienced football scrimmager of 250 lbs. at our head, and after an hour's rib-cracking struggle forced our way between the wall of the land office and the crowd of 300 men who swarmed and sweated around the entrance to the enclosure. There we held our ground until 5 p.m., when we were admitted behind the fence.

## A Weary Vigil

Thus protected we stayed patiently—or impatiently—through the night, some sleeping unconcernedly on the concrete sidewalk, while the rest, myself included, sat on top of the fence or on improvised seats, sleepless and anxious for the morning. We filed on our homesteads at last, I being twelfth man at the counter out of forty who secured homesteads in one township that day. Although I filed in June, I did not enter into possession of my land until November. I was not ready, financially, to go on the land immediately, buy oxen or horses and start work, and by waiting till fall I was able to save some more money, and also to spend a whole year on the homestead and be putting in residence duties practically all the time, from December, 1907, to June, 1908, being the last six of my first homestead year, and from June, 1908, to December, 1908, the first six months of the second year.

## A 75 mile trek

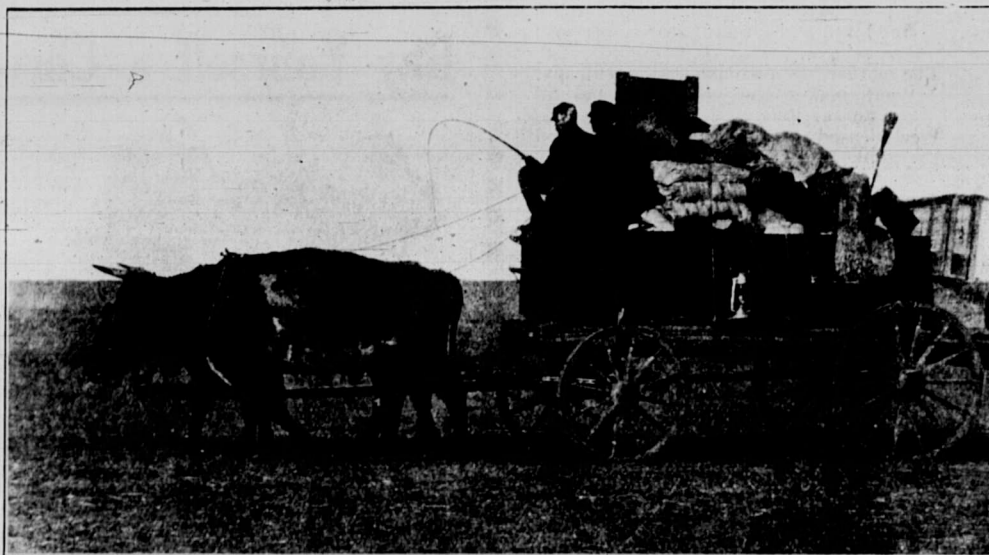
Three of my future neighbors were starting out at the same time, and as two of them had a team of horses each they doubled up and hauled out a big load of supplies for the party, filling a hay rack with tent, stoves, bedding, groceries, a little bit of furniture; doors, window sash, roofing and everything that was absolutely necessary to build and furnish our shacks except lumber, which we got from a portable saw mill which was working nearer to the homesteads. At that time my place was 35 miles from the nearest railway station, Duck Lake, and going from Prince Albert by trail we had a trip of about 75 miles to make. We travelled by the old Carlton and Battleford trail, stopped at a farmhouse the first night out, and if all had gone well should have camped near our future homes the following day.

## At the River

When we reached Carlton, where we had to cross the North Saskatchewan, however, we found so much ice in the river that the ferry could not run. There was nothing to do but wait till the river froze up, so we pitched the tent and camped near the crossing. It was no picnic watching the ice cakes grow larger and finally freeze up solid, but after six days the ice was strong enough to bear light loads and we then unloaded the wagon, carried our stuff across, lead the horses one at a time, and pushed the wagon over.

## Reaching the Promised Land

We camped that night on the homestead of my neighbor Shepley, the next quarter to my own, and in the morning two of us started to dig a cellar in the frozen ground while the other two went for lumber. The only lumber to be had

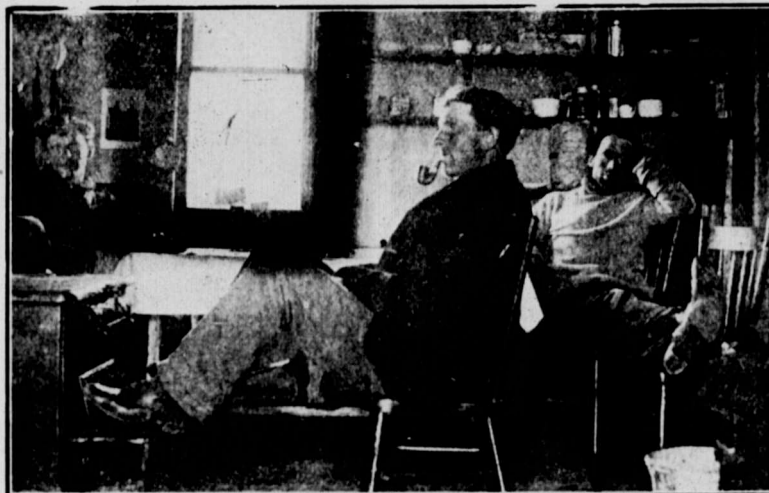


Homesteaders Trekking in Saskatchewan

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about that farmer, and how he treated me, the editor would probably be sued for criminal libel, so we will let that go, but after planting five acres of potatoes, digging I don't know how many acres of garden with a spade, and getting kicked by all his horses and cows, not to speak of losing all the skin off my hands, I returned to Winnipeg with \$7.50 for half

I stayed there till winter began and then went back to Winnipeg, without much money but a lot of experience, which I knew would be valuable when I took up my homestead. I worked in Winnipeg that winter and went to Prince Albert in the spring, wishing to get nearer the homestead country, but determined to stay in town till I had made enough



Winter on the Homestead

a month's work, and the belief that one Canadian farmer, at least, was not fit to have any man, white, black or yellow, working for him. He gave me one word of praise, though, which I must not forget. He saw me one noon-hour stretched luxuriously upon the manure pile and he remarked, "Well that Jack is the comfortabest refter I ever had around the place." I hope he will see this article, so that he will know I did not starve to death the first winter, as he predicted, and perhaps hoped, I should. However, I did not think the Canadian farmers could be all alike, and went out of Winnipeg the day after I arrived

to make a fairly good start when I should take up land.

## The Doukhobor Land Rush

In June, 1907, a large number of homesteads, which had been held by Doukhobors for about eight years, but had not been lived upon or cultivated by them, were thrown open to the public, and I thought this an excellent chance to get an extra good piece of land. I accordingly visited the locality and inspected the lands, making a list of the best sections in three townships, knowing from the number of people I saw on the same errand that it would be no easy matter to secure any particular quarter.