

*Soldier Settlers*

it seemed to be the practice of many civilians at that time to soak the veteran the very highest price for any land he bought or any stock they sold him. As a result of that, and the fact that the prices of farm products fell very rapidly after the first war, soldier settlers very soon found themselves in a position where not only could they not make payments on principal, but they could not make their interest payments. The result was that interest charges accumulated on the overcapitalized value of the farms.

Finally, when the government saw that many of those soldier settlers were going to throw up the sponge, a reduction was given. But the reduction was too small. The interest had already accumulated, and the reduction did not bring the amounts owing by soldier settlers down to a level which bore a fair relationship to the value of the commodities they owned.

It has been pointed out that only 500 are left, and it is urged that this is not a bad record when one considers that originally there were 25,000. That, however, is not the case. It does not mean that only 500 of the 25,000 have not paid for their land, because a large percentage of that 25,000 simply quit. If we could say that they had all paid for their land, with the exception of 500, it would be a pleasing picture; unfortunately, however, a large percentage lost their land, and we cannot do anything about it now.

I went through the depression years as a soldier settler, and I know about many of the tragedies enacted in those years. I know of farmers who were trying to hang on, trying to get along on a shoe string, while at the same time pressure was being placed on them to make payments on their land. Those men were having tremendous difficulty in barely existing on their farms. That is why so many of them became discouraged and gave up.

As I say, we cannot do anything about that now. I appreciate what has been done in recent years in cutting down the amount of indebtedness of our older soldier settlers. Yet we must keep in mind that those few who remain are getting on in years. They are in a position now where they should be able to build up a reserve for their old age, and they should not have to continue to make payments on land. Let us keep in mind that the soldier settlement scheme was supposed to be a re-establishment scheme under which soldiers could become established within a period of 20 years. But now more than 30 years have gone by, and still they are not established.

[Mr. Quelch.]

The parliamentary assistant would admit, I am sure, that this situation has developed through no fault of these men. We recognize that in certain cases it was not possible for veterans to become established in 20 years, or in any length of time. Now we have 500 of them left, and it is 33 years since they first took up their land.

Surely we can very well write off the small amount that is left. The parliamentary assistant has suggested that this would be a bad example to the veterans settling under the new scheme. I think it would be just the opposite, because it would give those veterans who are settling today an assurance that if they play the game and if, in years to come, owing to conditions over which they have no control, they are unable to meet their obligations, the government will play fair with them and, if necessary, make a further reduction.

I can see the parliamentary assistant does not fully agree with what I am saying. But let me say that right today perhaps too much pressure is being placed on some of the veterans under the new scheme. I have heard that observation from some of the department's own field supervisors, who say the main point of consideration should not be how much money a veteran pays in, but rather to what extent he has improved the land; and that if certain improvements have been made the government should ease up on its collections. If certain farms are to become really productive, then a certain amount of money must be spent on them. If they are permitted to depreciate, to go downhill, they will suffer a loss of revenue.

I am quite satisfied that if we treat these 500 in such a way that we finally wipe off the debt it will not encourage veterans now settling on the land to say that they are not going to pay. I am sure they will not wait 20 years to have their debts reduced.

These old veterans have been on the land 30 years. While I appreciate what the department has done in recent years in cutting down the debt, I appreciate especially the work of the parliamentary assistant, because I feel that in the years he has served as chairman of the veterans affairs committee he had done everything within his power to see that the veterans get a fair deal, not only in regard to land but in regard to pensions and other matters connected with veterans affairs. He has done good work.

I suggest that at this time the government might very well say, "Well, there are only 500 of them. They have done their best. We will wipe the thing out."