

## The History of Agriculture in Manitoba (1812-2007)

Prepared by Morris Deveson - October 2007

Agricultural settlement and farming in Manitoba is really not very old, less than 200 years, and is young by world standards. Historians like Grant MacEwan, W.L. Morton, J.H. Ellis, E.S. Russenholt and many others have researched, documented and recorded development over the years. Two aspects of our agricultural development make history particularly interesting, first the rapid progress in technology and secondly the people who made it all happen.

The first recorded Agricultural immigrants in Manitoba were the Selkirk Settlers, also known as the Red River Settlers, who arrived in 1812 and settled near the junction of the Red and Assiniboine rivers, or The Forks, generally referred to as the District of Assiniboia. These first settlers arrived by boat via York Landing (Hudson Bay) and Lake Winnipeg with little more than the clothes on their backs. They were forced to live off the land, with some help from the fur traders and natives, who really did not make them very welcome. This was fur country. It is hard to believe, in 2007, that Lord Selkirk, who Grant MacEwan called the founder of agriculture in Western Canada, was repeatedly told by both foes and friends alike that his scheme to farm in Western Canada was an adventure in folly, assured only to failure. Fur traders said "This is fur country. What stupidity to expect settlers to succeed in this land of ice and snow. This country is doomed to external sterility." This was 1812, only 195 years ago.

Originally the only inhabitants of the Western Canadian Plains, including Manitoba, were various Indian tribes, who essentially lived off the land. They depended on the buffalo for food, clothing, shelter and fuel. When the buffalo failed, or when they failed to harvest buffalo, like crop failures, starvation was imminent. The only "white men" were fur traders and explorers. Names such as Henry Hudson, Radisson and Groseilliers, Jens Munck, Henry Kelsey and La Verendrye were among the early explorers in Canada.

The only industry in Western Canada before the arrival of the Selkirk Settlers was the fur trade. The Hudson Bay Fur Company began with a charter from King Charles of England in 1670. In 1761, about 90 years later, the North West Company, founded by men from Montreal, was established as a rival to the Hudson Bay Company. These two companies competed and fought with each other until they joined together in 1821. Trapping and selling furs became an industry for the Indians.

On his arrival in 1812, Lord Selkirk bought 116,000 square miles of land, or 74 million acres stretching over parts of what is now Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Ontario and Minnesota. Then, on October 20, 1818, English and Yankee negotiators agreed on a boundary from the Lake of the Woods to the Stony (Rocky) Mountains that would follow the 49th parallel. Thus Lord Selkirk lost 30 odd million acres. Because there was no "government" to manage settlement, the Hudson Bay Fur Company,

with headquarters in London, England essentially governed what is now Manitoba, many of the settlers became squatters and land changed hands regularly, either through sales, theft or abandonment. In 1835 ownership of the Lord Selkirk property reverted back to the Hudson Bay Company after the death of Lord Selkirk who died in 1820. Over the years many land speculators made, and some lost, lots of money.

While some of the original Selkirk Settlers did survive and persevere, farming progress was very slow for many years. The settlers of 1812 had 21 Merino sheep and some seeds with them. The sheep either died or were killed for food. In 1813 a bull and yearling heifer arrived from England, by boat and canoe, a journey that took 116 days traveling, plus days for rest. Later more cattle were imported from Europe and the Southern USA. In 1831 two stallions were brought over from England, again by boat and canoe, to be mated with native horses propagated by the Indian tribes. The Selkirk settlers grew small gardens, including potatoes and small plots of wheat and barley. All farming was done by hand with shovels and hoes, etc. Frost, floods, grasshoppers and fires were the biggest natural enemy in those days. Meat from buffalo and deer and fish probably kept these early settlers alive. Each year a few more settlers would arrive from Britain, or Canada (the East) with many marrying Indian wives, thus the many Métis, sometimes called hybrids or half-breeds, in the early population.

The first statistics available are for 1831, when what is now Manitoba recorded having 2,152 cultivated acres, 460 families and a total population of 2,417 people. By 1856, 25 years later, Manitoba recorded 6,523 people, 1,082 families and 8,371 cultivated acres. Most of these people would live within what is now Winnipeg, Selkirk, and Headingley. There was a second settlement in the Portage la Prairie area, starting in 1853 when a group moved from Assiniboia to the Portage — High Bluff area. These settlers were primarily fur traders, not farmers.

During the period from 1812, when the first Selkirk Settlers arrived and about 1870 or 1871, agricultural development was slow and spasmodic. At first the fur trade dominated life on the Prairies, including what is now Manitoba. As more people arrived to live in Assiniboia, the spring buffalo hunt became important as a source of income to supply pemmican, tongues and robes. The fall hunt supplied fresh meat for winter. The majority of settlers would spend several months each year away from home on the buffalo hunt. For these hunters, farming came second. As an example of how important the buffalo hunt became to the settlers, by the 1860's millions of buffalo were being killed for the hides alone to make steam driven belts, the cheapest and best source of leather. However, the buffalo herd was gradually being depleted and the last recorded hunt by Manitobans, mainly by Métis, took place in 1882. By then the buffalo were further west than Manitoba and nearing extinction.

As more people arrived in both Western Canada and Minnesota freighting by Red River Ox Cart became big business, another source of income and occupied the time

of many settlers. There were literally hundreds of Red River Carts, in long trains, operating between The Forks (Winnipeg) and St. Paul, Minnesota and between The Forks and Fort Edmonton in the North West Territories (now Alberta). However, steamships on both the Red and Assiniboine Rivers gradually replaced the Ox carts for freighting both people and supplies during the late 1860's and 70's and the railway replaced the steamboats in the late 1870's and 1880's.

Probably Manitoba's first real farmers were those arriving from Ontario led by John McLean. On June 13, 1862 John McLean with his wife, mother and six children arrived at Portage la Prairie by Red River Cart. Anyone wanting to farm was most unpopular and not very welcome. Farming would destroy business for trappers and fur traders. He and his family fought off local Indians who stole his horses and tried to drive him off the land. John McLean persevered and became a real farm leader. He was an exhibiter at the first Portage agricultural fair in 1872.

Among those who followed John McLean from Ontario was Kenneth McKenzie, the first man to introduce purebred cattle to Manitoba, importing Shorthorns. He settled about 10 miles west of Portage at Rat Creek, around 1868. Kenneth McKenzie's son, Adam, followed his father to Manitoba and was planning to settle on land near his father at Rat Creek. When he arrived a squatter had taken his land so he kept on going west and became the first farmer on what is known as the Beautiful Plains, an area immediately west of the Arden Ridge in the Arden — Neepawa area, arriving in 1872. It was said in those days that a settler could claim all the land he could plow around in one day with a yoke of oxen. Grant MacEwan in his book "Between the Red and the Rockies" says "when Adam McKenzie, the biggest farm operator of his time, plowed around the land he was claiming, it may have been the longest furrow ever cut on the earth's crust." The Beautiful Plains were in the North West Territories in 1872.

Up until 1870, what is now Manitoba was known as Ruperts Land and was essentially owned, governed, or controlled and regulated by the Hudson Bay Company. In 1870, the Province of Manitoba was created and admitted into confederation. By way of interest, Manitoba's first boundaries created what was known as the "postage stamp province". The southern boundary is as now, the USA boarder. The western boundary ran north and south in a line though Crystal City, Bruxelles, Sidney and Keyes, just west of Gladstone. The north boundary ran east and west in a line north of Teulon but south of Gimli. The Eastern boundary was about half way between Winnipeg and the current Ontario — Manitoba border. In 1881 the provincial boundaries were extended on the west to the current Saskatchewan — Manitoba boarder, on the north to a line about half way between Swan River and The Pas. In 1884 the eastern boundary was extended to what we have today. It wasn't till 1912 that the northern border was extended to its present location, 60th parallel, by the federal government of the time, giving Manitoba a northern sea port at Churchill.

In 1870, when our Province was created, towns, per se, were virtually non-existent and Winnipeg was merely a village of 100 people. The township plan of survey was adopted by Manitoba in 1871, creating square farms. Townships would be six miles square and comprise 36 sections of 640 acres each. The township plan replaced the original Red River survey based on the old Quebec system of long narrow river lots. Most of Southern Manitoba was surveyed in the early 1870's making for orderly settlement thereafter. In 1871, there were 12,288 people in the Red River Settlement and 25,228 in total in Manitoba. With a population of about 2,500, Winnipeg was given a city charter in 1873, while Emerson was incorporated in 1879. Selkirk, Portage la Prairie and Gladstone followed in 1880-81-82. The first full time minister of Agriculture for Manitoba was named in 1874, the Hon. Colin Inkster.

While what is now Winnipeg had a population of only 100 in 1870, it grew rather quickly thereafter. Census data for following years shows: in 1871 — 215; in 1872 — 1,467; in 1873 — 2500; in 1874 — 3,700; and in 1875 — some 5000 people. The City quickly became both a manufacturing area and retail and business area serving the needs of a now fast growing population. Some of the early industries were woolen mills, saw mills and lumber yards, flour milling, brick making and harness making. Business men like lawyers, bankers, real estate agents, journalists and merchants serving the needs of the population soon arrived. Farm implement dealers and grain merchants were soon in business. The rapid growth of Winnipeg can be explained by the fact that Winnipeg remained (or was) the seat of government and the centre of commerce for the whole Northwest. By 1881, Winnipeg's population was 8000.

To encourage agricultural settlement in Western Canada, the Government of Canada passed the Dominion Lands Act, assented to on April 14, 1872. This act created what is now known as the Homestead Act. Under this legislation a person was entitled to claim, for a \$10.00 fee, a quarter section (160 acres) on even numbered sections subject to specified conditions. The standard requirements were that the homesteader would reside on the land claimed for at least six months of the year, would establish a permanent residence and would break 40 acres over three years. A second adjacent quarter costing \$2.00 or \$2.50 per acre, could be reserved as a pre-emption, for a total of a half section or 320 acres. Thus many of the original farms in Manitoba were settled as Homesteads and were either 160 or 320 acres in size. The first homestead applied for was by John Sanderson, originally from Scotland, who arrived at Fort Garry on July 1, 1872. He filed on a homestead (N.E. 35-12-7), paid his \$10.00 and wondered how he would find the land. Sanderson bought a pair of oxen and drove west on the trail which was to become Manitoba's Highway No. 1, and after much searching, found the stakes which identified the first homestead in Manitoba. It was on the Portage Plains, good land, and Sanderson was there to stay.

The large influx of immigrants from Ontario lobbied the Manitoba government of the day for a Municipal form of government fashioned after the Ontario system. The outcome was the County Municipality Act of 1877, introducing the Ontario

Municipal system to Manitoba. This Act created a municipal government system based on square sections, townships and ranges. The first county municipality formed was Westbourne in 1877, followed by Portage la Prairie in 1878.

While most of the earliest settlers were of British origin, including many who came from Ontario, there were several other nationalities represented in our early history. After the settlement in the Portage area came the first Mennonites from Russia. On July 31, 1874, 65 Mennonite families arrived in Winnipeg and settled on land reserved in the Steinbach area. In 1876 a reserve was established west of the Red River in the Altona — Winkler area. In all, approximately 6000 Mennonites came to Manitoba between 1874 and 1879. 1875 saw French settlers arrive from Massachusetts and Quebec with the aid of the French Colonization Aid Society. They settled in St. Malo, St. Pierre Jolys, St. Jean, Ste. Anne, St. Agathe, Letellier and other communities, mainly along the Red and Rat Rivers. Also in 1875, a group of 285 Icelanders established a settlement at Gimli (meaning Paradise in Icelandic) where they were able to combine farming and fishing as a way of life. Another 1,226 Icelanders arrived in 1876 and 220 in 1878.

While settlement and growth had been slow up to the 1870's, the next fifteen years saw most of Southern Manitoba settled. W.L. Morton in his book "Manitoba, A History" writes "The Old Manitoba of 1870 has been engulfed in the new Manitoba of 1881. In one decade of swift change the province had seen the fur trade give way the grain trade, the cart brigade to the railway train. The Métis had withdrawn to the wooded river lots, or trekked to the plains of Saskatchewan to shoot down the last bands of buffalo". This was the time when Manitoba also saw the first explosion in the introduction of agricultural technology. The Ontario plow introduced by the earliest settlers was not good enough for the heavy Red River clay. While all the early breaking had been done by oxen, they were gradually replaced by horses when better quality fodder, like oats became available. The introduction of the mechanical drill, the sulky and gang plows with chilled steel mould boards, the self binding reaper, the steamed thrasher and barbed wire combined in the late 1870's to make prairie farming both possible and profitable. By 1878 — 79 all the new machinery and new cheap fencing material had appeared on Manitoba farms.

Much of what is now Southwest Manitoba was settled between 1878 and 1882, mostly by immigrants from Ontario and Britain. Some 58,000 immigrants arrived in Manitoba between 1879 and 1881, a three year period.

While what is now Winnipeg, originally known as the Forks, saw its first inhabitants in the early 1800's and Winnipeg only had a population of 100 in 1870, Brandon, Manitoba's second largest city grew fast. The Railway reached Brandon in 1881. At the end of 1881 Brandon's population did not exceed 100 people. By the end of 1882, one year later, Brandon had 21 hotels, nearly 200 businesses and a population of 3000, along with a city charter. The primary reason for such rapid growth was the fact that Brandon was surrounded by good farm land on all sides and hundreds of settlers. It was also far enough from Winnipeg to thrive on its own.

While most of Southern Manitoba was settled by 1881 — 82, life was not easy for these early pioneers. Some arrived on foot to stake a claim to land, some arrived with a team of oxen, some had a team of horses and not many other possessions. While the land had been surveyed and the survey had left room for road allowances, there were no roads, just trails, no bridges, no towns and no railways. The first priority after claiming land was to develop shelter for the coming winter and establish a food supply and a clean source of water. Some families spent the first summer living under a wagon box or in a makeshift tent while erecting a small log house in which to survive the winter. Some would need to travel several miles to secure logs for building homes and barns. Prairie fires started from lightning strikes prevented trees from growing on much of the prairie. Some, who could not locate logs, built sod shacks in which to live until lumber became available for permanent homes. To start with, crops and gardens and livestock were used for survival, not for sale.

Some towns developed fairly quickly after settlers arrived, but one major impediment to town development was uncertainty as to where, when or if, rail lines would be established. The CPR had been granted a monopoly on rail line development as an incentive to build a transcontinental rail line, and the CPR was not in a hurry to build branch lines. Once the Province was able to break the monopoly granted by the Government of Canada, branch lines eventually sprung up as did more towns. It took almost 20 years of negotiation with the federal government and various railway interests to get a branch line system in place in Manitoba. Towns tended to be about 10 miles apart which meant that settlers would be about five miles at most from a town or about 1 to 2 hours driving time by horse (or Oxen).

A rail line to Dauphin and west, in 1896, led to the settlement of the Dauphin area and west to Gilbert Plains, Grandview and Roblin soon after. The rail line continued north, arriving at Cowan in 1899 which quickly led to the settlement of the Swan River Valley.

After settlers had taken care of their personal survival needs, schools became a first priority, followed closely by churches and local government. Some form of local government was necessary to get roads and bridges and other community infrastructure underway. Various businesses soon became established in towns to look after the needs of early citizens. Agricultural societies were soon formed in most rural communities for the purpose of educating new farmers on improved farming methods and on showing and selecting superior livestock for improving livestock production.

History tells us that even though the early settlers were quickly able to grow good crops it was a while before the necessary infrastructure was in place to export grain, and when the necessary infrastructure like railways and grain elevators and grain merchants were in place, high shipping and handling costs and low grain prices kept

farmers from making much money. Crop failures and small profits put a blight on the boom years of settlement in the early 1880's. Farmers did not make much money from farming until the early 1900's when the situation improved some, but only for a short while. Farm families were able to produce most of their own food and thus were able to essentially live off the land, if and when, necessary.

In the fall of 1876, 857 and 1/6 bushels of "hard" Red Fife wheat were gathered in and consigned to Ontario for seed, with 1876 being the first year Manitoba had a surplus of grain. By 1885 Manitoba was regularly exporting high quality wheat and flour from Red Fife wheat. Red Fife had now replaced the "beaver" which had drawn the fur traders westward to begin Manitoba's history. Wheat remained the No.1 export commodity of Manitoba's Agriculture for many years.

As new land was settled in the west, it became necessary to find an earlier maturing wheat variety to replace Red Fife, which too often was damaged by frost. Canada's research program made Marquis wheat available to farmers in 1910, a variety of high quality but with earlier maturity. Following Marquis many new varieties have been developed which overcame problems like rust and other diseases, keeping Manitoba's wheat some of the best in the world.

Livestock was always deemed to be an essential part of farming, and starting with the Selkirk Settlers, horses, cattle (both dairy and beef), hogs, sheep and poultry were gradually introduced and increased. For many years livestock production was mainly for personal or local use — not exported from Manitoba.

Immigration and settlement continued and the late 1890's and early 1900's saw immigrants from the Ukraine enter Manitoba in large numbers. The first mass immigration began in 1896 and by 1914 over 30,000 Ukrainians had settled in Manitoba. The immigration of Polish people closely paralleled the Ukrainian settlement, joining the Ukrainian communities. For a couple reasons, the Ukrainians and Poles tended to settle in the park belt and wooded areas. Firstly, most of the prime farmland had been claimed by earlier settlers and secondly, they chose wooded land which could provide fuel and building materials.

One last group to be mentioned here is the Hutterites, a Protestant Christian sect committed to communal colony life. Manitoba's colonies are primarily agricultural and usually include both large livestock and grain operations. Steeped in tradition and dedicated to hard work, the number of colonies has grown from 6 in 1918, their start in Manitoba, to 115 colonies producing hogs in 2007. As an example of the Hutterites impact on agriculture in Manitoba, in 2007 the colonies produce approximately 30% of Manitoba's hogs, 42% of Manitoba's turkeys and 31% of our eggs.

The actual number of farms in Manitoba continued to grow until 1941 and peaked at 58,024 when the average farm size was 291 acres. The decline in numbers has been

relatively steady since 1941. In 2006, the most recent census year, there were 19,054 farms with an average size of 1,001 acres.

While Manitoba's earliest settlers arrived in this country with little more than a vision and a desire to succeed, the introduction and adoption of new technology has always been important to farmers and farming. Oxen quickly replaced hand labor and horses then replaced oxen as a source of power on farms. Steam engines were introduced in the 1870's being used mainly for threshing. Gas tractors were introduced around 1910, and even though a wide variety of tractors were produced, they only gradually replaced the horse as a means of power. Many farmers considered horses to be a cheaper form of power. Horses working in fields were a common sight till the end of the Second World War, 1945.

Since the Second World War, there have been many changes revolutionizing farming in general. Probably the most significant and important was the introduction of electricity to farms. Nothing did more to standardize farm and urban living than electricity. In 1941, only 480 farms had electricity (their own power plant) but by 1950 more than 20,000 farms were serviced with electric power through a program launched in 1946 by the Manitoba Power Commission aimed at bringing electricity to rural areas. By 1954 the aggressive program was nearly complete. Electricity made it possible to do many more things on the farm.

This era also saw the introduction of chemicals for field crop weed control. One of the first chemicals discovered, and still used today in large amounts, is the chemical 2,4-D that was first registered in 1947 to kill broad-leaved weeds in cereal crops like wheat and barley. Since that time dozens of herbicides, insecticides and fungicides have been registered for very specific uses and nearly every weed, insect and disease problem can be controlled with the use these chemicals.

While wheat, barley and oats, along with some flax and hay for livestock, dominated Manitoba agriculture until the 1940's new crops like rapeseed (now named canola), sunflowers, buckwheat, field peas, lentils, edible beans, soy beans, potatoes, vegetables and hemp have become important cash crops for farmers. In fact, canola, an edible oil, has been such a Cinderella crop that dollar wise, canola has surpassed wheat as the crop producing the most income for Manitoba farmers.

Commercial fertilizers have continually grown in importance. The combination of soil testing, new fertilizer formulations and application methods combined with chemicals and crop rotations, has essentially eliminated summer fallow in Manitoba.

Since World War II, mechanization on farms has flourished. Tractors have continually increased in size, as have machines such as self-propelled combines, swathers, seeding and tillage equipment. Until the 1930's and early 1940's, a half section farm, 320 acres, was a full year of work for many farm families. In 2007 many farmers will seed a whole section, 640 acres, or more, in one day and combine (thrash) a half section in one day. In the 1930's and 1940's a threshing gang of six



men, with four stook teams, would thresh 1000 bushels of wheat in a day. Now the largest self propelled combines will thresh 1000 bushels of wheat in an hour, with a staff of two, one to operate the combine and one to haul grain to bins.

In some ways the most dramatic change in Manitoba's agriculture since the 1870's is the size and scope of our livestock operations. In 2007 we have hog farms producing 30,000 market hogs per year. We have one family farm with 800 milk cows, one with 600 and one with 500 and seven with 400 milk cows. One Manitoba farm has 125,000 laying hens and two farms each produce approximately 325,000 broilers per year. Manitoba is now a net exporter of most livestock and poultry products.

In conclusion, Agriculture is one of Manitoba's important industries, to many people, the most important industry. The gross farm receipts in 2005 were 4,073,912,921 dollars, just over 4 billion dollars. The total farm operating expenses in 2005 were 3,489,253,123 dollars or about 3.5 billion dollars. The total interest expenses on Manitoba farms in 2005 was 185,188,832 dollars. The 2006 total farm capital value was 17, 929,893,083 dollars, nearly 18 billion dollars.

Without highly skilled and dedicated farmers, such production figures would not be possible. While it would not be possible for people like Lord Selkirk or John McLean, Manitoba's first real farmer, to know what lied ahead for agriculture in Manitoba, during these 195 years, a combination of dedicated farm families, visionary farm leaders and skilled agricultural researchers have turned this "land of ice and snow" into one of the major food producing areas in the world.

#### References:

- 100 years of Agriculture in Manitoba — A Statistical Profile 1881-1980. Published by Manitoba Agriculture.
- Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives, Census data, 2006.
- Manitoba Producer Marketing Boards, Personal contacts.
- Ellis, J. H. - "The Ministry of Agriculture in Manitoba", Queen's Printer, Winnipeg, 1971.
- Hofer, John, - "The History of the Hutterites", D.W. Friesen & Sons, Altona, 1988.
- MacEwan, Grant, - "Between the Red and the Rockies", University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1952.
- MacEwan, Grant, "Cornerstone Colony, Selkirk's Contribution to the Canadian West", Modern Press, Saskatoon, 1977.
- MacEwan, Grant, - "Fifty Mighty Men", Modern Press, Saskatoon, 1963.
- MacEwan, Grant, - "Harvest of Bread", Modern Press, Saskatoon, 1969.
- Morton, W. L., - "Manitoba: A History", University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1967.
- Russenholt, E.S., - "The Heart of the Continent", MacFarlane Communication Services, Winnipeg, 1968.
- Wilson, Keith, - "Manitoba: Profile of a Province", Peguis Publishers Limited, Winnipeg, 1975.

October, 2007