

## **OLIVER LONGMAN, ARCHITECT AND FATHER OF THE SPECIAL AREAS**

*Part one of a ten-part series about Oliver Longman and the history of the Special Areas.*

If you live in the Special Areas, one man who has affected your life—whether you realize it or not—is Oliver Longman. In effect, Longman created the Special Areas. He developed the original plan for dealing with the drought and economic hardship of the 1920s and 30s.

In his early twenties, Longman graduated from university with an agricultural degree, then taught at the agricultural schools in Claresholm and Olds. A couple of years after marrying his sweetheart, Edith, he was approached by the Raymond School of Agriculture and asked to be the new principal. Longman taught at Raymond until the school's pending closure in 1931.

Longman then accepted a commission from the Alberta government to study drought conditions in southern Alberta and elsewhere, as well as the Canadian Pacific Railway's irrigation projects in southern Alberta. As he completed that project, the government then asked if he'd supervise what was becoming an exodus of settlers from the greater Hanna region.

At that time, Longman personally spoke with hundreds of drought-affected farmers and wrote down detailed recommendations that he would propose as a response by government. His report became known as the Berry Creek Report, and resulted in legislation called the Special Municipal Areas Act. It was a forerunner to the Special Areas Act, which was passed several years later yet bore many of the same features.

Speaking about his early experiences in the Special Areas, Longman said that he had "accumulated all the literature on countries that had drought problems, because [he] was trying to get a lead on what to do." His objective, he said, was to "solve the drought problem without upsetting the municipal [governance] setup..."

Longman also stated that: "We had to enlarge the operating unit... We had a lot of people on leased land and they were just as bad off as the people who owned land. We had to draft... new leasehold policy that would have all the incentive of private ownership."

At the time, vast numbers of farms had been abandoned, and due to unpaid taxes, enormous tracts of land had reverted back to municipal governments. These factors led Longman to propose lifelong land leases that would mature when the leaseholder turned 65. (A 30-year-old would thus sign a 35-year lease.) Early on, Longman wanted every lifelong lease to contain a purchase option that the leaseholder could exercise on his 65th birthday.

Longman believed that every leaseholder should pay annual lease fees and taxes into an interest bearing trust account, with the government withdrawing from that account what was owed each year.

He calculated that due to compounding interest, if the leaseholder paid double taxes into the trust each year, at age 65, there would be adequate funds to facilitate the purchase of the land (at a previously agreed to price) without any need for the leaseholder to incur debt, involve a bank or mortgage company. If the leaseholder decided not to buy the property, the cash and accumulated interest could be withdrawn and the leaseholder would have a retirement nest egg.

Unfortunately, once Longman's plans were placed in the hands of the provincial bureaucracy, some of his key proposals to help farmers seem to have been scuttled or ignored. The same holds true with recommendations he made in the 1950s. In future articles in this series, we'll explain how this happened.

*This commentary is produced by the editorial committee of the Hard Grass Landowners Council whose members include: Richard Bailey, Pat Rutledge, Mark Doolaege, and Jim Ness.*