

THE GENESIS OF THE DILEMMA:

OTTAWA ASSUMES EVERY QUARTER SECTION IS EQUALLY VIABLE FOR DRYLAND FARMING

By 1930, there were more than 150 municipalities scattered across Alberta. Their names reflected the events of WWI and the traditions of incoming homesteaders: Vimy, Lincoln, Waterloo, Flagstaff, Last West, Grizzly Bear, Ukrainia, Tomahawk, Pershing, and Liberty.

The region of the province that eventually became known as the Special Areas contained dozens of locally elected municipal governments. Then several things happened.

EARLY EXPERIENCES IN ALBERTA'S DRYLAND REGIONS

Early on there was a growing recognition that certain dryland regions of the prairies, though potentially productive, would not be able to sustain the same number of quarter-section farmers as in other parts of the prairies.

One of the first experiences with select dryland regions in Alberta occurred in the 1880s, when German-speaking homesteaders established a colony at Josephsberg, south of present-day Dunmore near Medicine Hat. The group also established other colonies in the region.

Unfortunately, the men who had served as scouts for the group had been fooled by the mild climate and the quality of the soil, but neither they, nor the immigration agents to whom they had spoken, considered the hot winds and scarcity of rain, which made farming without irrigation in the region virtually impossible.

The settlers arrived, built homes and barns, and broke ground. A reporter from the *Medicine Hat News* visited the Josephsberg colony. His ensuing news story stated: "This colony has 350 inhabitants. Wonderful progress has been made, and there are no grumblers."

Shortly thereafter, the *Times* reported that a man from the colony "tells the *Times* that late-sown grain is a complete failure." After multiple years of drought, members of the new colony at Josephsberg (as well as a second nearby colony and a third colony closer to Seven Persons) abandoned the region.

Reports of the settlers leaving *en masse* were initially denied. It was indicated that the group would "put in at least another crop." But that next crop didn't grow either.

Not long afterward, a number of these settlers made their way to the Saskatoon region where other Germanic settlements had been successfully established. Still others headed north, establishing a new community similarly named Josephsburg, located east of Fort Saskatchewan.

MANY AREAS WERE NOT SUITED TO DRYLAND FARMING

William Pearce, a central figure in the administration of what was then the North West Territories, repeatedly indicated that there were areas of southern Alberta and western Assiniboia that were arid expanses, ideal for ranching but too dry for farming.

Professor David Jones at the University of Calgary said of Pearce: "He was... an apostle of irrigation. From the mid 1800s until 1894 when the North West Irrigation Act was passed, he reported on irrigation, praised the Mormon expertise in the art, assisted the drafting of legislation, and concocted his own personal project. Behind the scenes and in the spotlight, he promoted 'artificial watering,' convinced it was the only means by which large tracts of the Territories could ever be settled."

When it came to understanding these very arid regions, Jones reports, the waters were muddied by men like John Macoun, an Ontario botanist who spent a good part of his life trying to refute the warnings of deficient moisture in some prairie regions. Macoun asserted that “the apparently arid lands were only so in appearance, and that all the land not covered with sand or gravel would ‘blossom like the rose.’”

As early as the 1880s, Jones says, it is likely that some settlers in the dry areas were converts of Macoun’s false news of glad tidings. Interestingly, the CPR at the time was seeking settlers to purchase land it had obtained from Ottawa. It wanted the expanded rail traffic settlers would bring; therefore, it claimed that the land in these arid regions would provide crop yields “as heavy as the gumbo of Manitoba.” Potential settlers were told that a fine crop could be expected the very first year, and that cereals, roots, and garden products could be successfully grown.

Despite these claims, Jones indicates, just a few years after the CPR’s southern Alberta line was built, it was reported that “in the Medicine Hat area for a radius of two hundred miles, there was not a hundred rods of wheat (a single acre).” It was further stated that it had not rained ten times in the previous five years, and that settlers who had entered the region since 1882 with money and clothing and hope, now had nothing.

In response to the dire situation, and the misrepresentation of the arid region as one of fertility, one newspaper wag wrote: “I ask in the name of humanity, is it not time for this sort of thing to stop?”

The federal government knew that regional deserts were in select parts of the prairies, yet continued to sacrifice unknowing settlers to the dry wilderness. In the early 1890s, the *Medicine Hat Times* noted that the region was one of the finest for ranching, yet “it would be almost criminal to bring settlers here to try to make a living out of straight farming.”

While all this was occurring in the arid regions of Alberta, the federal government had developed the practice of summer fallow at the Indian Head Experimental Farm east of Regina. It was asserted that plowing deeply and cultivating during the growing season would ensure a crop every year. Farmers were encouraged to leave the land black, cultivated, and idle.

Calgary’s Professor Jones explained the actions of the Alberta government and its impact upon these regions:

“The basic assumption of most dryland mentors was that one had only to know how to conserve moisture and that no crop would fail. When George Harcourt (an Alberta Deputy Minister) commented on the crop disaster of 1910, he did not mention the [paltry] 6.45 inches of rain for the year at Medicine Hat, nor the claims around Lomond and other centres that the wheat never came up until September.

“‘The difference,’ Harcourt declared, ‘lay in the intelligence with which the cultivation of the land had been done.’” (Lomond and the district around it would later become part of Special Areas Bow West.)

The hype with which Ottawa promoted these dry belt regions became intense. Sydney Fisher, the Canadian Minister of Agriculture, declared that the one thing about Alberta is that “the rain falls when it is needed.” Others went on to predict that the city of Medicine Hat would have a population of a half million by the time the city’s young men were middle aged. By 1911, the Medicine Hat Census District was the most populous in the province, boasting more than 70,000 residents.

Jones reports that across the dry belt, the 1914 crop was a total disaster. Farmers were broke and desperately needed a grubstake for the coming winter and the next spring’s crop. They appealed to the government for aid.

Federal aid to Alberta farmers reached \$408,000. In the Saskatchewan region of the dry belt, the amount was more than \$900,000.

The flagrant lies of promotion were coming home to roost. The emerging communities in these arid regions would have a very short time in the sun. By 1918, over 600 homesteaders north of the Red Deer River had abandoned their land. In 1921, the Sunnynook (south of Hanna) newspaper's advertising section began and ended with news that the Bank of Toronto was leaving the community. It was an indication that there was a powerful economic reality behind the rhetoric coming from the province, the federal government, and the CPR.

In 1917-18, a mere 72,000 bushels of grain was marketed through the elevators at Alderson. A year later, the number dropped to 14,000 bushels. The year after (1919-20), the number fell to 9,000.

In 1921, the Red Cross conducted a health survey from Lomond and Retlaw in the west to Bow Island and Winnifred in the east. They found that nearly two thirds of 638 school pupils suffered from malnutrition. In the irrigation areas around Purple Springs and Taber, things were much better.

As knowledge spread of the disaster associated with farming conditions in these arid regions, efforts were made by many—including governments—to keep things hush-hush. Jones reports that in Saskatchewan, meetings between government and farmers were kept out of the press. Any suggestions or rumours of a debt crisis were systematically quieted.

Alberta Agriculture Minister George Hoadley, who was referred to by Special Areas architect Oliver Longman as "indifferent" to sufferings in the rural regions, openly and publicly denied that there was a population exodus in southern Alberta.

In fact, Jones reports that between 1921 and 1926, after numerous consecutive crop failures, nearly a quarter of all townships in southeastern Alberta—a whopping 138 of them, covering 3.2 million acres—lost at least 55% of their population. These losses were never equaled even during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

To address the problem, federal and provincial aid poured into these regions. Yet as noted by Jones, "the relief programs kept farmers in place for several years, but it hamstrung the provinces and bankrupted the municipalities. Ultimately, [it became apparent that the] major assumption that all farmers needed was a little boost to float them off the shoals, was unfounded."

(Jones says that in the southernmost region of the province, thoughts became focused on a plausible solution to the problem—irrigation.)

Jones further reports that by the late winter of 1922, mortgage foreclosures in post-WWI Alberta had reached the mammoth amount of \$15 million in Edmonton and \$18 million in Calgary. Due to tax arrears, Edmonton citizens had surrendered 80,000 lots. In rural areas, the losses equaled that of Calgary and Edmonton combined. Through tax sales, 10,767 farms had been forfeited, comprising 1.65 million acres. Between the Red Deer and South Saskatchewan rivers, 450,000 of a total 784,000 acres was in the process of forfeiture.

POPULATION LOSS

The number of people affected by the government's attempt to settle homesteaders on land unsuitable for small dryland farms was staggering. In census divisions 4 and 8 in Saskatchewan, there were 190 townships comprising 4.37 million acres. Between 1921 and 1926, 102 townships lost at least 25% of their populations; 62 townships lost at least 35%; and 14 townships lost between 65-100% of their populations.

Between 1921 and 1926, in census divisions 1,3, and 5 in Alberta (from just north of Hanna to the U.S. border), the losses were even more acute. In Alberta, 268 townships (representing more than 6 million acres) lost at least 35% of their populations; 138 townships lost at least 55%; and 48 townships lost between 75-100% of their populations.

Despite their seeming enormity, these statistics understate the total impact of the decision to settle these arid regions on the same basis as productive dryland farming elsewhere on the prairies.

Two studies of the Tilley East region (between the Red Deer and South Saskatchewan rivers, from Tilley to the Saskatchewan border) provide a more complete context of what occurred. Surveys in 1924 determined that only 625 remained of 2,386 resident farmers. By 1926, fewer than 500 of the original 2,386 remained. It was a population loss exceeding 80% over a region comprising more than 1.5 million acres.

MOST DAMAGE OCCURRED PRIOR TO THE 1930s

Prior to the Great Depression of the 1930s, most of the damage done to the region that became known as the Special Areas had already occurred. In 1926 alone, there were over 10,000 abandoned farms comprising 2.3 million acres. Farm abandonment during the thirties would never reach what had occurred in 1926.

Professor Jones said the intensity of the problem in Alberta over a longer period of time is likely the best explanation for the creation of the Special Areas, and the reason that there was no similar agency in Saskatchewan.

Additionally, and importantly, many of the original Special Areas regions were created before the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA) began its fight to save so many regions. The PFRA was the federal government's response to widespread drought, farm abandonment, and land degradation. In the PFRA, farmers were able to see a new breed of agricultural experts who had their feet on the ground and their hearts in the communities they served.

The Tilley East Special Areas was created in 1927. The Berry Creek Special Areas was established in 1932. Together, they comprised nearly three million acres. By 1935, the year the PFRA was established, the Alberta government already controlled 80% of the land in Tilley East and 70% of the land in Berry Creek.

The Special Areas regions known as Sullivan Lake, Neutral Hills, and Sounding Creek were all created in the mid-30s. Then in 1937, these original regions were joined by Special Areas Bow West, which was a vast area located east and north of Lethbridge.

In 1938-39, the Special Areas Act was passed, which brought all these independent regions under one centrally managed provincial authority under the sole jurisdiction of a single cabinet minister.

THE SPECIAL AREAS COMMISSIONS AND INVESTIGATIONS

In 1953, roughly fifteen years after the Special Areas Act was passed, the province established a commission to investigate the status and future of the Special Areas region. It was chaired by Oliver Longman, then serving as the Deputy Minister of Agriculture. Interestingly, as the author of what was known as the original Berry Creek Report (written in the early 1930s), Longman had been a key part of the process that led to the creation of the Special Areas.

The first two recommendations of the 1953 Longman Commission's Report are as follows:

1. That it is in the interests of good citizenship that the residents of the Special Areas assume responsibility of self-government where feasible.
2. That local government be extended to the maximum area of the Special Areas, firstly by annexation to adjacent municipalities, and secondly by erection of a local governing unit within the Special Area.

Eight years after the report of the Longman Commission, the province initiated yet another investigation into the Special Areas. This second work is commonly referred to as the Hanson Commission, and its final report is titled "Report of the Special Areas Investigation Committee."

The Hanson Commission acknowledged that much of the hardship in the region that became the Special Areas had been brought about by "mistaken settlement policy."

The Commission also stated: *"It is unfortunate that the name 'Special Areas' was applied because the conditions which created the problem exist over much of southeastern Alberta..."*

The Hanson Report stated:

"...the government as set up under the [Special Areas] Act was well conceived to accomplish the job at hand and that the administration has generally been well carried out. However, this does not lead us to conclude that such government should be continued, unchanged, indefinitely. The Act was constructed to make possible the accomplishment of a specific purpose, that of bringing about agricultural and economic adjustment over the area. Once the purpose is accomplished then that form of government will need to be replaced."

In summary, the commission's recommendation was that "the same form of local self-government as is in practice elsewhere in Alberta" be established in the Special Areas.

STEP BY STEP: HISTORY OF THE SPECIAL AREAS

The Palliser Triangle is a roughly triangular-shaped area running along the 49th parallel (U.S. border) to Cartwright, Manitoba (in the east), connecting Lloydminster, Saskatchewan (in the north) with Calgary (in the west) and Cardston (in the south). The Palliser Triangle is the northernmost portion of the Great Plains. It's named after John Palliser, leader of the 1850s expedition that first conducted surveys in what is now Western Canada.

In the middle of the Palliser Triangle, straddling the Saskatchewan-Alberta border, is an even drier area simply referred to as the "Dry Belt."

THE INFUX OF MIGRANTS

Alberta had an immense surge in its Dry Belt population in the early years of the twentieth century. Between 1901 and 1916, the population of the Alberta portion of the Dry Belt had an annual average increase of 21% a year. Governments promoting settlement failed to make important distinctions or advise people regarding the inability of various land parcels and regions to support small scale dryland farming.

BLACK SUMMER FALLOW

One of the contributing factors to the severity of Alberta's Dust Bowl was the agricultural practice known as black summer fallow. Summer fallow became so well established that many farmers regarded it as "a religion" and "looked with contempt on those who would ever be satisfied with less than a black summer fallow." (*Men Against the Desert*, Gray 1978, p. 188)

THE DRY YEARS BEGIN

The drought began in 1917, lasted until 1927, then returned and lasted until 1938. From 1914 to 1924, the average rainfall during the growing season in this part of Alberta was 162 mm (6.4 in.); between 1917 and 1922, it fell to only 105 mm (4.1 in.).

As a result of the hot dry weather and the extensive use of black summer fallow, soil erosion and dust storms began occurring in south central Alberta.

DEPOPULATION

These environmental conditions would be aggravated by economic conditions emerging after 1929. Alberta, along with the rest of the world, plunged into the Great Depression. The economic conditions would make whatever meager crops that could be produced, virtually worthless.

THE TILLEY EAST COMMISSION AND THE TILLEY EAST ACT

Many point to the Tilley East Area as the beginning of the Special Areas. It was likely the most drought-stricken area in Alberta. The region stretches south from the Red Deer River, through the town of Tilley, to the South Saskatchewan River and all of the lands between, right up to the Saskatchewan border.

An *Act Respecting the Tilley East Area* was passed in 1927. This Act provided for the appointment of individuals to a board, along with persons appointed by the federal government, to manage this block of land. The legislation included appointees by the federal government because Ottawa still owned all public lands in Alberta at the time.

THE BERRY CREEK COMMISSION AND THE BERRY CREEK ACT

In 1931, the provincial Department of Agriculture asked Oliver Longman to go to the Hanna area and supervise the exodus. This constituted the beginning of the Berry Creek Commission, whose report was submitted just prior to the closing of the 1932 legislature.

THE MERGER OF TILLEY EAST AND BERRY CREEK

In 1934, the Tilley East Area and the Berry Creek Area were merged with the passage of *The Tilley East and Berry Creek Areas Act*. Then, a year later, *The Tilley East and Berry Creek Areas Act* was amended. This new statute indicated that the short title of the new law would be *The Special Municipal Areas Act*.

THE 1938 CONSOLIDATION STATUTE

In 1938, an *Act to Amend and Consolidate the Special Areas Act* was passed. It consolidated all six of the Special Areas (Tilley East, Berry Creek, Sounding Creek, Neutral Hills, Sullivan Lake, and Bow West) into one body, under uniform legislation, subject to control by one board, and under the control of the Minister of Lands and Mines (which was changed in 1948 to the Minister of Municipal Affairs).

1953 LONGMAN COMMISSION CALLS FOR RESTORED MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT

In 1953, the government of Alberta created a commission to report on and make recommendations regarding the Special Areas. A recommendation of return to municipal district status was made. The commission was chaired by Oliver Longman, the man who had originally written the Berry Creek Report, and the individual often called the architect of the Special Areas.

SELF-GOVERNMENT RESTORED TO PARTS OF SPECIAL AREAS

In the early 1950s, Special Area Bow West was judged as rehabilitated. As suggested in the report of the Longman Commission, it was divided, becoming part of Vulcan County, Lethbridge County, and the MD of Taber. In 1985, the Minister of Municipal Affairs determined that the vast region between Medicine Hat and just south of the Red Deer River, which had been part of Special Areas Tilley East at one time, should become part of Cypress County. According to many, this is the region that had been hardest hit of all the Special Areas regions.

1961 HANSON COMMISSION CALLS FOR RESTORED MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT

In 1960, the government of Alberta created a second commission to report on and make recommendations regarding, the Special Areas. Like the earlier Longman Commission, this commission also recommended a return to municipal district status.

Recommended reading and background sources:

A Land Reclaimed: The Story of Alberta's Special Areas by Jack Gorman, published by Gorman & Gorman.

Empire of Dust, by David C. Jones, published by the University of Alberta Press.

Men Against the Desert, By James H, Gray, published by Fifth House Publishers.

We'll All Be Buried Down Here: The Prairie Dryland Disaster 1917-1926, by David C. Jones, published by the Historical Society of Alberta.