

1.0 Introduction

Using first person quotations and reminiscences from primary and secondary sources, the following pages provide a glimpse of what life was like for newcomers to Saskatchewan during the early settlement years of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In their own words, learn how new settlers faced the challenges of a harsh climate, how they relied on the bounty of the land to construct their first homes and put food on their tables, how they coped with loneliness and monotony, how they relied on local First Nations people for company and assistance, and how, for many, the reality of life in Saskatchewan did not always live up to expectations, which were fuelled by slick campaigns to lure people to the West. Be inspired by the strength and tenacity of these settlers who made a home in Saskatchewan, and forged a new chapter in our history.

2.0 Quotations about getting to the homestead:

Thursday August 24th [1882] Bill on driving the oxen today. One of his odd expressions is “Move on my firey untamed steeds”. They moved on very slowly. (Martin 1953:63)

We left the oxen [at the ferry on the Souris] and got a pony and came west. The way we did was this: Jim rode the pony on six or eight miles, then he would stop at a survey stake and drive it down with a heavy stone so as to make it fast; he would leave the pony hitched to the stake and walk on; there was no trail, but it was open prairie so we could follow the line of the survey stakes without much difficulty. I would walk and watch till I got up to the pony, overtake Jim and ride ahead of him, and when I thought I had got far enough I would hitch the pony to a stake and foot it. We looked at the sections as we came along. We got to Lyleton and picked out our land after which we returned with the pony to Sourisford, got our oxen and went back to Deloraine where we entered for our land.

(Woods 2002)

We found the S.W. corner of my land on a Sunday afternoon, I don't remember the date but I know it was in October. I will never forget the completely lost feeling I had as I stood there alongside all my worldly possessions on the baldheaded prairie and watched that team disappear through the hills. I was twenty years young, a green kid from the East, in the wilds of Saskatchewan and very much alone.

- Z. F. Cushing, 1909, Roseray, Sask.

(SAB memoir, quoted in Robertson 1974:29)

The day of our arrival here is the one experience that I remember most vividly. In the snow up to our knees, travelling nine miles on a sleigh drawn by two poor old horses, through a desolate looking country in which all we could see was bush and sloughs and only passing one small bachelor's shack in all that distance was a pretty discouraging experience to people coming from a big city.

-Mr. Albert F. Remach, Lestock, arrived from Belgium 1914 (Eager 1953:4)

After four long weary days they reached their destination. Then work really began. (Ruthig 1954:24)

Everyone was happy. We didn't have a care in the world. Our one aim was to get the land broke. My first crop was burnt to the ground and I went to work in the bush at Big River to get money for seed for the next year.

- Mr. H. F. Copeland (Eager 1953:2)

There were no roads or fences. All we had to go by were the surveyers [*sic*] stakes. When the surveyers [*sic*] went through, they put a stake at each corner of a section. They dug a hole about a foot square and a foot deep in each corner of a section where the four sections met. They threw the dirt in the centre to make a mound and planted a stake in the mound with a metal plate giving the numbers of section, township, and range. They also put a mound every half a mile on the section line, but you had to find the centre of the section yourself if you were dividing a section into quarters. There was a road allowance every two miles running east and west and one every mile north and south. The ranchers were very antihomesteader and used to pull up the stakes and throw them away, so you could not always find the stakes.

(Peacock n.d.:29-30)

3.0 Quotations about building and living in a shack:

April 21 [1902] - Awoke this morning to find everything under huge drifts of snow- furniture, chickens, and my greatest pride, my new cook stove.

April 22 [1902] - The lumber having arrived, Seward builds a shed for my cook stove. Three sides and a leaky roof, not much protection from the variable winds and rain.

(Mrs. St. John 1949a:26)

In the spring of '84 in March I had built my house, and just got up the first story. I was lying in bed and there was a terrific wind blowing; there was nothing between me and heaven but boards and tar paper. I thought to myself if the wind takes that roof off I shall be in a bad place, and no sooner said than done. The roof was taken away and a stone about 75 pounds rolled down on the bed. It was about four o'clock in the morning. The stone did not strike me. I left and went over to Bishop's. I had put that winter in with walls of bare stone and that roof of boards and paper over my head. I had seen the gravy freeze in front of the stove after I had fried the meat. I had an old-fashioned King stove which took a stove stick about three feet long. This stove was minus the high oven. I had been out of wood and I had to burn hay in it. The nearest wood was on the Souris river 20 miles off. We would haul coal from Roche Percee, from the Gow and Hazard Mines.

- W. I. Richardson, Shier Settlement (Hutchinson 2002)

As there were no trees in the vicinity, I attempted to put up a sod house. I had had no experience, with the result that I made a big mistake and ploughed up some gumbo from a slough for my sods. In one day I had walls up for a shack fourteen by sixteen feet but next morning I found that they had all caved in. The sod house being a failure, I bought a shack that had been abandoned six miles away. ... It was built of one-ply lumber and was not shingled. One night during a violent thunderstorm, the rain poured into the shack so that to keep dry my father and I had to stand in one corner under a twelve-inch board. (Hoffer 1952:29)

I had a sod roof shanty and when it rained for several days at a time the only dry place in the shanty was under the table which had an oilcloth on, and I put sugar, flour, etc., under it to keep dry.

- Mr. A. W. Mawby of Wallwort, arrived 1912 (Eager 1953:7)

The sod house had 2 rooms – kitchen and bedroom. The bedroom was divided by a curtain making 2 bedrooms. The sod walls were 3 feet thick; the walls inside were plastered with mud. They put on building paper and then wallpaper. It was warm in the winter and stayed cool in the summer. The shack had 3 little windows. Dad also built a sod barn. The farmstead was situated on the bank of the Wood River. A little coal-oil lamp was used for light. When Dad got settled he had the whole sum of 10 cents left to do him all summer. (Shewan 1999)

Mrs F. Hardwicke {of Normanton, 1906} stresses the importance of using sods taken from a slough, as the grass roots were long and held the sod together better. (Turner 1955:45)

We only had enough money to last until we reached the homestead and from then on we had to live off the country. When you are forced to, you can do some funny things in order to survive. We always carried a shot gun with us and every jackrabbit we saw got in the soup pot. We used to grind enough wheat each night to make porridge in the morning. We did not have a grinder, so we ground it in the coffee grinder. ... We roasted wheat to make coffee. ...we used to boil wheat and eat it with milk and sugar. ... Somehow we survived. No one seemed to suffer from malnutrition. We were all healthy enough. (Peacock n.d.:31)

Newspapers covered the wall and made an interesting covering. (Brown 1976:2)

That night the wind howled loud and long trying to blow us out of the place, dust over everything. The grass floor is worn down so that the rains form islands from which we hop to the next. (Caswell 1964:82)

...it has been decided to build a black brick [house] of wiry prairie sod plowed from the edge of the slough... Mother tacked new rag carpet to the wall and a post to make bedrooms with sheets, bureau and cupboards dividing to make the living

room. We shall have no parlour. ... Father made a sundial on the floor so we will know the time of day. We have one outside, too. (Caswell 1964:92)

...we started building a sod shack, having the walls about four feet high when the snow came. So we put the roof on, one of poles and straw with sod on top. ... We now dug out the floors until we could stand up in the shack. (Coates 1955:18)

I have been building a house on my lot since I last wrote you. It is not yet finished but it is merely from want of material. We make them out of sods. Mine is 12 feet square outside and 8 feet square inside. (Brooks 1957:108)

Life on the homestead was good. ... The fourteen years in the sod shack were the happiest days of our lives. (Ruthig 1954:27)

When asked what he thought of our home, he replied, "It's all right inside but looks like Hell outside." (St. John 1949:25)

c. Quotations about farming, hauling supplies, lumber and coal, delivering grain:

Mr. R. A. Hill, who homesteaded at Westhope in 1904, started with a walking plow, three sections of diamond harrows and a disc. He seeded by hand until 1909. (Turner 1955:46)

It was a busy life. Seventy miles slow travel with horses to Morse for lumber and supplies. Twenty five miles to Wood Mountain, across country to the southeast. Coal was southeast too. People had to dig their own coal. (Ruthig 1954:24)

The greatest difficulty this district had in the early days was obtaining fuel. It had to be hauled from Last Mountain and Little Manitou Lake, both a distance of thirty-five miles. There was not coal available.

- Mr. K. J. Smith, Watertown, 1905 (Turner 1955:45)

I remember clearly one late fall when the men had gone for coal and wood with two teams. A blinding snowstorm came up, making it almost impossible to travel. The teams were unhitched and the loads were left. The men rode the horses and let them find the way home. Soon they neared a bend in Wood River and, as if by a miracle, the sky suddenly cleared. They were only a few feet from plunging over the river bank! (Ruthig 1954:26)

...all grain from the settlement had to be hauled to Estevan and most supplies bought there. The round trip... required two and one-half to three days and involved camping on the trail. ... During the first summer on the homestead we depended on buffalo bones and chips for fuel but with the coming of fall we began to haul coal from Estevan. (Hoffer 1952:29-30)

September 18 [1902] - Our slough goes dry. I take team and two barrels on a stone boat and go three miles for water. (Mrs. St. John 1949a:28)

It was so wet that summer [1911] that we could hardly get the summerfallow done. We were just doing it for the first time at exhibition week. By that time the weeds were so high that the horses could feed as they went along, without bending their necks when we were ploughing. (Peacock n.d.:17)

After the threshing, we had to get home a supply of wood. Coal was out of the question for it would have to be hauled from Maple Creek. (Peacock n.d.:31)

The [egg] yokes are very yellow, not because the fowl are pure Black Spanish but because of the many grasshoppers they feed on. The hoppers have eaten in about ten to 20 feet, at the edge it is eaten quite clean... (Caswell 1964:72)

During the first summer, however, we made several trips to the river for the poles for building purposes. We had to go 25 miles there and 25 miles back in order to get a load of poles, so that you see every load involved a trip of 50 miles. These poles we used for roofing purposes. Our stables and granaries were built of sod, the poles were necessary to carry the sod roofs. (Hostetter 2002)

There was a plentiful supply of limestone in places and we made lime; we got the limestone on the top of the river banks. We would pry out the boulders with crowbars, but there was also a lot of limestone boulders lying about loose, and we got the whole of the limestone for a kiln of lime within a radius of about two or three hundred yards. We noticed the limestone, and got the idea of making lime because we passed the spot when we were drawing wood. ... We burned our own lime. We had never burned a kiln of lime before and we made the kiln on the side of the Souris River. We camped there in a tent, three of us, in order to kiln the lime. We burned 380 bushels and we sold 200 bushels at 40c per bushel. We sold this lime to settlers, principally for plastering log houses along the Souris River. We had seen kilns dug and filled and burned, but we had no actual experience to guide us, nothing but observation. We had a first class 'burn'. (Hostetter 2002)

d. The dangers of prairie fires:

...one of the first things that early settlers had to do was to break up the prairie in the shape of a large square and then erect his tent and over his wagon and settlers effects, implements, feed, lumber, etc. into the centre of this square. It would not be safe to even leave a load of lumber on the prairie without having a fire guard around it, for a prairie fire might come along at any time and burn up everything... (Andrew 1955:68)

A neighbour... was caught by the fire and had his face and hands badly burned. ... I have seen prairie fires jump across the width of two road allowances -120 feet. ...

The loss of our crop left us very hard up so I went threshing My brother worked in the mines at Estevan. (Hoffer 1952:30)

After filing for my homestead on SE 22-5-12 in the spring of 1904, I started farming. The grass was so tall you couldn't see a rock until a prairie fire went through and then you got the shock of your life. (Horsman n.d.)

The fire came during the night when many were in sound sleep, exhausted after a long hard day's journey. ... One can little realize the fear that must have seized up on them awakening to see the Western sky a mass of red blaze. (Ruthig 1954:23)

[Zehner District, fall of 1906] In the distance it at first looked like a golden thread, but as it came nearer we saw that the flame had spread into a vast sheet that was sweeping over the prairie bending ever forward by the force of the wind. It was a waving line of brilliant flame, sparks and burning embers were whirling in every direction. ... The wind now became stronger and ... myriads of bright embers and flakes of dry blazing grass were whipped up into the air and sent flying far beyond the main fire and they would settle down again in the dry grass to start up countless separate fires of their own... The roaring flames drowned even the howling of the wind. ... As this wall of flame came rushing... nearer and nearer... the three of us... took up our positions tense and alert with a wet sack in each hand. ... When the fire had... passed us... we went out to the nearest hill to have a look around. What a change where only a short time before there had been long grass and an abundance of feed. Now, as far as the eye could reach all was waste, a scene of desolation, not a weed or a blade of grass was left standing anywhere, all was black and dismal. (Andrew 1955:68-69)

3. First person interpretation of difficult and lonely life of settler

a. Loneliness

...if it [the grid survey system] had been done deliberately to devise a settlement plan to drive the farm women up the walls of their shacks it could hardly have proceeded differently. (Gray 1975:47)

Some of the pastimes [my little sister] Ella and I enjoyed were mud pies, drowning gophers, riding a long stick for a horse and of course simply getting into trouble! (Brown 1976:2)

So peace reigned supreme in this ageless, vastest, limitless, space. Sometimes we do get lonesome, Grandma. (Caswell 1964:76)

One bright blue noon we had just finished pulling the flax when we were surprised to hear an unusual deep loud whistle from the river. Off we scampered

just in time to see a streamboat going by down the river ... We were quite delighted to know that there was some life, that we were yet living alone, and not alone. (Caswell 1964:79)

... he... had to clip the wings of our tamed wild geese as they have shown a great longing to fly away. How lonely we should be without our companions! (Caswell 1964:93)

I worked at that shack for about two weeks and the only living thing I saw during that time was a gopher, the most appreciated friend I have ever had. He was a cocky little devil and I came to think a lot of him. - Z. F. Cushing, 1909, Roseray (SAB memoir, quoted in Robertson 1974:29)

Living as many of us do, on the bleak prairies, hundreds of miles from civilization, we welcome everything that tends to make our life more bright and cheerful... A little piece of poetry, or a friendly greeting from a neighbor; these seem trivial things, when we are surrounded by friends and plenty; but when we must leave all behind, and go where stern duty bids us, we learn to value little things. (Marie 1907, quoted in Lewis 1990:67)

So. Qu'Appelle 18th Aug. 1882 The mail arrived yesterday but the papers you so kindly sent me have not yet put in an appearance. We did not receive any letters either, in fact we have received letters but once since we left Winnipeg 2 months ago... (Brooks 1957:109)

Indian Head, 23 March, 1883 The fire burns brightly at my side and the wind howls outside but we are happy and snug. I am busy thinking of my *frau* and little lads far away, and expect they are in the land of dreams and happy too. (Brooks 1958a:30)

Indian Head Dec. 11, 1883 Papa wants to see his boys very much but cannot go home just now. You must learn all you can and be a real good boy at school as I am sure my Robbie will be. We see lots of little Indian boys here and the poor fellows don't have much clothing on and often very little to eat and no school of go to. I tell their Papas sometimes about my boys far away from here. With love for all my boys, Robbie, Harry, Allan and Ned. (Brooks 1958b:72)

Whether your host was a bachelor or benedict, or your hostess had to bear children, milk cows, bake bread, feed hens, make and mend clothes, wash and iron, they were generally speaking eager for a chat and to get some news from "outside." Suppose the settlement gossip exhausted, a whole week not a cat had kittened, a sow littered, or a new calf been produced, nobody's cattle had strayed into somebody else's crop, nobody had broken down on the trail with a load of poles, nobody had been to "town" and brought back jewels of conversation; in fact there had been nothing to relieve the daily round and common task. Then as

the day is closing a traveller appears almost from nowhere bringing novelty and news and companionship, to make a break in the sameness of things, and nine times out of ten to leave behind him a pleasant recollection, and something to talk and think about for a day at any rate, and may be a remembrance that will be recalled for years. (Hawkes 2002b)

A woman once told me that she sometimes had to think of something to think about. Fancy what it means to have to say to oneself, "What on earth is there I can think about next?" Imagine the paucity of incident it indicates, the monotony of the daily round, the solitariness of soul. Another woman said, "Oh, I wish something would happen." (Hawkes 2002b)

Sarah and Alfred planned to get married soon but when they applied for a marriage license they were told they would have to wait, due to so many pioneers getting married. They couldn't get a license for a while, in fact, not until December. (Shewan 1999)

When Mr. Groshong came to Ambrose to meet his wife in November of 1906, a blizzard which came up delayed them four days, during which time the animals in the barn were not fed, they had eaten all the straw and licked frost for water, and a new baby colt greeted Mr. Groshong's return to the homestead. (Eager 1953:5)

b. Some immigrants gave up and returned home

some came to stay: others were just trying it out. "Anyone who came in the early days had to stay, they had no money to go out with." - Mr. Charles Davis, Whitewood, arrived 1882. Others: "...by the time we could buy a ticket we had got used to it, and did not wish to leave our log shacks and sod dwellings." - Mr. Fred Baines, Saltcoats, arrived 1883. (Eager 1953:1)

Some of the earliest settlers wrote to relatives at home very seldom [because] there was no way of getting the letters to them. ... When Mrs. McManus wrote to her husband in 1906 to tell when she would arrive, he was on a homestead about 160 miles south-west of Saskatoon, with no way of getting mail except by neighbors. As a result, Mrs. McManus and her two small boys waited in the immigration hall for six weeks before her husband knew that they had arrived. (Eager 1953:9)

I had promised my father I would be back home in England by Christmas, 1902. The mosquitoes had planted the prairie atmosphere into my veins and I couldn't leave! -Mr. Arthur Tilford, Saskatoon, 1902. (Turner 1955:53)

c. The hope for and relief of spring

I shall never forget my first experience of hearing frogs singing in the spring. I had no idea that they made this noise and when I was passing a slough... I heard this peculiar noise - it scared me and I began to run.... On telling the Burroughs family about it, they laughed, and said, "the frogs were welcoming you to Canada." - Mrs. F. W. Wood, Saskatoon, arrived 1910 (Eager 1953:11)

March 28 [1903] - First spring shower - three antelope arrive and remain several days, one of them came in the yard and played with our calf.

March 31 [1903] - Snows all gone. Meadow larks are singing. Hawks flying about, crocus in bloom, and the cows drink out of the slough. Men working in the field, the feeling of spring fills the air. (Mrs. St. John 1949b:26)

Another job that had to be done in the spring was to clip the horses and oil the harness. No respectable farmer would think of going to the field without having this done. (Peacock n.d.:16)

We welcomed the spring and warmer days. ...the creek filled up again and went tearing on its way to Goose Lake. Flocks of red-winged blackbirds came to sit in the branches of the maple trees, and to make the air ring with their chorus of singing. It delighted us to see them. (Brown 1976:6)

Much to our delight we found our first prairie crocus, or wind-flower father calls them. The calyx consists of numerous, slender, silvery furred stems enveloping five petals of bluish mauve, quite similar to the tulips in our front yard. Their odor is just earthy, as if you were digging fresh moist earth. (Caswell 1964:15)

d. Food, gardens

Mr. C. A. Atkinson, now of Brooksby, tells of taking four hundred pounds of fish from the Carrot River during the winters of 1908, 1909 and 1910.

(Rowles 1952:7)

The first gardens were not always successful, because seeds were often not suitable, and growing conditions differed from those the gardeners were used to. Gradually the settlers improved the garden crops by keeping their own seed potatoes, peas and beans, saving the first tomato that ripened and using it for seed, and adapting their methods of cultivation to the new conditions. (Rowles 1952:7)

"Our staple food supplies were flour, corn meal, sugar, syrup, tea, coffee and dried peas. We made butter and cheese and ate duck eggs secured from the numerous sloughs in the vicinity." (Hoffer 1952:29)

e. Co-operation

After 1910, beef rings became more popular:

“The ‘beef ring,’ an arrangement whereby neighbours took turns providing a carcass of beef to be shared among the members of the ring...” (Rowles 1952:7)

“...the kindly friendliness or helpfulness of everyone to each other, especially in the case of sickness or other adversities and the free social life...”

- Mr. Thomas Taylor, Hawarden, arrived 1904 (Eager 1953:11)

“Nobody had nothing and we all used it.”

- Mr. R. E. Ludlow, Assiniboia, arrived 1905 (Eager 1953:11)

“December 25 [1903] - Weather has hovered around 35° below all this month with raging blizzards [in Wilcox area]. Seward distributes Christmas boxes to neighbors.”

(Mrs. St. John 1949b:28)

There were quite a few people coming in at that time. They were going on to the Moose Mountain. There was a kind of a Moose Mountain fever which brought them in. Most of the people who came in would have their provisions getting low, and so we would help them out with the natural hospitality of the trail. On the 21st of May we had been out of grub for two days. We had nothing but biscuit left, and we had to do with this and the ducks we shot.

- W. I. Richardson, Shier Settlement (Hutchinson 2002)

f. Living in confined space for long period of time

...the unexpected was always happening. This applied to visitors who were constantly happening along. Plans would be made for the meal; the chairs were brought down from their high and mighty place, the wall, where from lack of space on the floor they hung from spikes driven into the timbers until their services were required. Floor space would not permit the use of a sizeable table so a few were seated at a time while the rest looked on and the cook prayed that the supply would be equal to the demand. (St. John 1949:24)

Dad used to say, “Sit in the centre of the room, face the stove and you’re in the kitchen, swing around and you’re in the dining room, again, and there’s the parlour, again- the bedroom, once more, back you are in the kitchen. However, we spent many happy hours in that room... (Anon.¹ quoted in Robertson 1974:36)

...it was hard on mother, always so tidy, struggling to keep clean and sane in a one-room shack. I have heard her say that many a time she felt like running out for miles and screaming. (Anon. quoted in Robertson 1974:84)

¹All references designated as anonymous in this compilation derive from essays submitted to a series of competitions sponsored by the Regain Women’s Canadian Club and are collected at the Saskatchewan Archives Board. Selected quotations are published in Robertson 1974. (Robertson 1974:224)

4. Day- To-Day Life

a. Daily life

We topped the turnips, gathered the vegetables, storing some in the hole under the floor for a cellar. (Caswell 1964:94)

May 19 [1902] - I am alone all day and do the chores at night.
(Mrs St John 1949a:26)

December 7 [1902] - A blizzard rages all day - do the chores and in the evening put paper on the inside of the shack, which is constructed of only one thickness of shiplap lumber and the heat from the cook stoves increases the size of the cracks every day; if it keeps on, it will soon be all cracks. (Mrs St John 1949a:28)

January 21 [1904] - John does chores, I bake bread, beans, pies, roast meat, make doughnuts. (Mrs St John 1949b:28)

...flax straw... burn[ed] well in a tin heater and made the house warm in no time, but it made quite a mess on the floor and also gave off a sickening odour. However, we used it to save having to go so far for wood. (Peacock n.d.:32)

Soon after my arrival here I laid the table and out a table napkin and ring before each place... Deadly silence followed this... but at least they put the napkins on their laps. After they had left I retrieved the napkins from the floor. They looked as if they had wiped their feet on them. ... Now Billie and I are the only ones who have napkins and the rest of the rings are carefully put away. ... I find that practically everybody out here has white oilcloth on their tables. ... I do wish I had learned a few more housekeeping accomplishments before I came out here, there are so many things I am absolutely ignorant about, but I did take *one* lesson in ironing before I was married.

- Monica Hopkins, 1909 (Glenbow manuscript, "Log Cabin and We Two",
quoted in Robertson 1974:104)

After we had... shared a late supper we began to unload the wagons, stowing some goods under the beds, others on the loft of the ceiling to store, and also to prevent the boards from warping as they are not nailed. (Caswell 1964:96)

At milking time a number of cats gathered for their share of the booty. They sat in a semi-circle around waiting. If you were a good shot with the milk you wet their whiskers and paws with it. ...after awhile some of them became so expert that they opened their mouths... (Brown 1976:6)

We went to the river with mother to cut green willows to make baskets which we

would need to hold and carry things, and a large basket for Mabel's bed or cradle.
(Caswell 1964:46)

Mother showed Aunt Frankie how to make soap. She used a large kettle set on stones over a fire out from the house. They had run lye from a barrel of ashes but it was too weak so they put lye from a can, too, with bits of fat and grease in the water to boil, stirring it from time to time. While it was cooling they put in a cup of precious coal-oil, a piece of copperas. Then it looked like mottled castile soap.
(Caswell 1964:46)

We found some wild goose eggs about five miles west of us and have put them under a hen with the hope they will hatch - which three of them did and we made pets of them.
(Caswell 1964:57)

We are digging a well. Uncle Joe digs the blue clay from the well hole into a wooden bucket which hooks on from a long rope through a high pulley trip. The other end of the rope is attached to whiffle-trees on the oxharness traces. The ox pulls, father empties the bucket and backs the ox, thereby lowering the buckets to Joe who shouts, "Look out,"
(Caswell 1964:57)

We wear blue indigo denim dresses, sunbonnets and our measured, strongly handsewn shoes or boots, made in Palmerston [Ontario]. The wiry grass cuts into anything a bit fine or soft. The spear grass wiggles in to stay unless pulled out.
(Caswell 1964:62-63)

...we loaded the big iron pot, wash-tub, soiled clothes, pails and barrels with our lunch aboard and off we happily set to the foot of our place at the river to fish, wash and play. ... We helped wash the soiled clothes, and the sheep's wool for carding, later had a bath, hung the clothes to dry on the bushes...
(Caswell 1964:64-5)

The quilts take such a long time to dry thoroughly hanging on poles of the garden fence and this hot, golden sun burns and fades them very much.
(Caswell 1964:65)

Mother made a flail of two sticks... we beat wheat heads on to a sheet, cleaned it of chaff in the wind, washed it and then boiled it for a long time to eat with milk and a pinch of salt and sugar. It is very good.
(Caswell 1964:93)

We do the chores, cut or saw the wood into stove lengths and are glad that our stove fire-box is such a very long one.
(Caswell 1964:1020)

You wished to know what styles were out here. Well there is none that I can see. Almost all send for their dresses ready-made to Eaton's in Winnipeg...
- Annie, Ebor, Manitoba (quoted in Robertson 1964:106)

The first Thiessen barn at Herbert in 1905 was a sod one, replaced after two years by a small barn constructed of railroad ties. The sod barn did not stand up as the oxen tore the walls out with their thick horns. (Turner 1955:44-45)

[Dysart area] *April 14, 1885* Ploughed 1 ¼ acres of stubble for wheat. Frost at ploughing depth.

May 9, 1885 Ploughed 1½ acres 6 in. deep... Put in 3 kinds of cabbage and rhubarb seeds. (Gilchrist 1967:108)

b. Home remedies

For future use we gathered wormwood for use as poultices to reduce swellings, wild sage and onions for seasoning, anise with its long, purple licorice-odored spikes for cough medicine, tansy and yarrow for yeast, golden-rod for dye. (Caswell 964:68)

...when we heard the creak of freighters' outfits in the distance[,] Father sent me to the trail on the run to ask them if they had any liquor they could part with as mother was ill. Two of the men returned with me bringing some brandy, for which they accepted some eggs and father's gratitude for supplying our need. (Caswell 1964:80)

I shall never forget the joy of seeing a woman's face again. Upon my asking her what we were going to do if we needed a Doctor, she laughed and said, "Shure we'll have to dope each other," which we did on more than one occasion.

NAC, Saskatchewan Homesteading Experiences collection,
quoted in Rasmussen *et al.* 1980:68)

Dr Chevasse's Medical Book was her only reference to diagnose all the children's ailments. Her home remedies must have worked as she raised eleven of us. My youngest sister, who is a nurse, says she often finds herself recommending some of Mother's old home cures. (Allen 1963:11)

She used soda for bites and cold tea leaves for burns; salt in water to gargle a sore throat; senna tea for a laxative and ... sulphur and molasses for a spring tonic.... Although we were a healthy brood, there was many a night when she watched by our bedsides until a fever broke or some other minor crisis passed and many a prayer she breathed on our behalf. (Allen 1963:43)

So. Qu'Appelle 1st August 1882 Reached camp and mixed up a good and strong dose of Perry Davis' painkiller and took that. This soon warmed me up and I had a good sleep and felt alright the next day except for being stiff and lame.

(Brooks 1957:108)

The potentially dangerous but common folk view of castor oil as a cure-all:

...if I was ever in a state that I did not know what to do for a sick child and it was suffering and i could not get a doctor for perhaps hours, to give the child a good dose of castor oil as it would cool or check fever, and often cause a very sick child to sleep well. (Alexia 1910, quoted in Lewis 1990:74)

Childbirth was dangerous for both child and mother and anxious mothers-to-be often asked in the women's pages of in farm papers for advice.

I would like also to hear from members who have used roots or herbs before confinement. I was not told anything about such things and would be so thankful for advice on the subject. (Crocus 1912, quoted in Lewis 1990:76)

With the last two pregnancies I also used considerable slippery elm, always carrying a piece in my pocket and chewing a bit whenever I felt like eating between meals... (Grain Growers Guide, 21 January 1914)

Indian Head, 26th Feb., 1884 A lady named Mrs McClary working for the Bell Farming CO. gave birth to a little girl about ten days ago. Her husband was away down in Winnipeg and she did not receive very good care. The nurse allowed the fire to go out when the baby was but four days old, and the mother got a chill from which she never recovered. She died on Sunday. (Brooks 1958b:74)

Further references can be found in MacKenzie 2001.

c. Making furniture and other items

Beds were of poles driven into the ground, boards at one end, and side and bottom. We filled cotton ticks with prairie hay. Sheets for partition. Uncle Rob made a table and benches of poles in the ground and boards for the top, so with a stove and prairie grass for a carpet we established our homestead. (Caswell 1964:55)

The days are getting very short and to help our coal-oil eke out we have used a "witch-light" which is a rag on a button in a saucer with some tallow in it to burn... (Caswell 1964:103)

The home-made lounge had a covering of dark maroon canton flannel and was well supplied with patchwork cushions, crazy pattern of silks and satins, and two log cabins, one made of 'stuff' pieces, the other one of prints. (Mc Clung 1964:166-167)

d. Compare actual life with expectations

Next spring the settlers came out in force. I met one batch at Langenburg of

somewhere over a hundred; and I had an interesting time with them. Our Old Country agent, like the Churchbridge agent, thought he knew all about the West, but nobody knew all about it, for as a matter of fact it was an entire experiment with the most of us. However, he had filled the immigrants up with all kinds of glowing pictures, and when they had to face the reality, I was the agent on the spot and had to bear the brunt of their disillusionment. I was "'cussed" in broad Yorkshire, Northumbrian, Scotch, Gaelic and several other dialects; at least I took it for granted they were "cussing" from their general manner more than the words they used, because being a Canadian and knowing only English and a little French, I was not familiar with the words they used. However, we all got busy, and loaded up. It was a sight to see a high load of truck piled on a wagon, boxes far higher than was safe, as I informed them; but you know, I was only a "colonial," and they knew better than I did. On the top of all, the wife and kids reposed. It was a wonder some were not thrown off and badly hurt, if not killed. Generally on the wrong side of the ox-team, the Head of the Family solemnly stalked, leading the animals with a rope, much to the said animal's disapproval.

It was a lovely circus, and well worth the admittance fee. I think I knew my work, however, and gradually I got the confidence of the people, outside of a few that considered themselves defrauded, as they could find neither peach groves, trout streams, or even buffalo that they could shoot from the back door, and which they had expected to find almost, but not quite as good eating as roast beef. Most of the people were, however, O.K. after they had had a little more experience, but everything seemed to go against them. Crops froze; or gophers ate them. Prices were below par for produce, such as butter and eggs. We had the only real hot wind I ever felt in the west in 1889, and many left, where for, I do not know. Others stuck to it, and prospered fairly well; some did extremely well.

(MacNutt 2002)

Of course we had come to the west with the idea that it was the Garden of Canada flowing with milk and honey.

(Hostetter 2002)

Asked what induced him to leave Scotland for Canada, Mr. Henderson said: "It was the immigration literature."

(Hostetter 2002)

We had been nurtured on a diet of Ballantyne's books on the North West; we read every book on Canada the lending libraries had; we secured emigration literature and poured over it by the hour; lectures and moving pictures on the West we revelled in..... In our innocence we imagined Canadians wore a sort of shooting costume, jodhpurs with long riding boots, a belt which carried a holstered revolver and a knife to dress deer...

(Coates 1954:104)

I learned about the west through government information which painted Canada as a veritable garden of Eden, and told us we didn't need any agricultural experience. We had only to scratch the rich virgin soil to ensure good results.

- Mr John M. Allan, Battleford, arrived from Scotland 1906. (Eager 1953:2)

Until Canada has done justice to its own women, we will urge the women of England not to go there. We are told that Canada is a women's paradise. It is nothing of the kind. A woman's life in Canada is extremely hard, and lonely, and it is because of their loneliness that the asylums there are being filled with women, who are driven mad by the loneliness. They are caged in a 'shack' often miles from any populated district. Turn you back on Canada. (Wylie 1913)

Reports [in Nebraska] from Saskatchewan sounded pretty good. For \$10 you got 160 acres of land and after three years you got the title to it. They even showed the people some big red apples that were supposed to have been grown there. Not many people believed this. It turned out that after three years most of the settlers had a mortgage on their land for more than the land was worth, and there sure were no big red apples. (Huck n.d.)

e. Difficulties- frost, illness, injury

Cold was the enemy most feared; bitter, cracking cold that drained the last ounce of energy from man and beast. I can remember my brothers' "black" cheeks, caused by repeated frost bite with darkened the skin and caused it to peel off. It was accepted as the natural thing that the men's faces would be frozen from time to time during the winter months. (Allen 1963: foreword)

May 17 [1902] - There has descended upon us, like a bolt from a clear sky, the *plague* of pioneers - *Mosquitoes*. Never before has anything equalled it. There has been an absence of prairie fires for a number of years causing a heavy growth of old grass, this with the present rains provide ideal conditions for these demons of torture, which cover the horses so completely it is impossible to tell, at a distance, the color of the animals. We are compelled to keep a continuous smudge for the stock. As for ourselves, we have been compelled to cover the shacks with tar paper, fill all the crevices with mud and wear veils of netting at all hours. They relent somewhat from two to four in the morning and that is the only time we can work the horses in the field. *All our breaking is being done by moonlight.* (Mrs St John 1949a:26)

August 16 [1902] - Very hot day - at one o'clock in the night Seward is taken very sick. Jim rides one of the work horses to Milestone, 15 miles for the doctor - I hang out the lantern so he won't get lost - the Doctor comes on the morning train, Jim drives him back after dinner.

September 6 [1902] - ...we get bill from the doctor, \$12.00 for one call. (Mrs St John 1949a:27)

January 19 [1903] - The worst blizzard of the season rages. Can't see the barn. Seward goes to milk but fails to return when breakfast is ready. Fearing something may have happened to him, I bundle myself up and start for the cow shed, groping my way. Find the storm has drifted the door shut and he is imprisoned and no way to get out as the walls are frozen solid. I shovel him out

and we find our way back to the house. (Mrs St John 1949b:25)

[When the oxen wandered away and could not be found] Father was quite dismayed ... [and decided] to ride the blind, black pony to the north, while mother in the buckboard would drive west until she met father.... When informed mother had not returned his face reflected dire fear. We were shocked at the grievous situation that faced us.... Our mother, lost on the great lonely prairie with Henrietta station the only habitation in 100 miles. (Caswell 1964:58)

We have been down along the river for miles, scanning and searching for the body of little Harry Molloy, but did not find it. ... Evidently he was too close to the water-edge for his footprints showed where he had slipped into a large hole. We are very sorry for them. Also for the drowning of the nice Prendergast boy off the scow at Saskatoon. (Caswell 1964:69)

The storm of hail broke in mad fury... When we arrived at camp, father was minus his hat, with a red handkerchief tied under his whiskers, two large lumps on his head from the hail, my sunbonnet battered to pulp and a bruised shoulder; a sorry sight we were, yet we laughed and gathered large hail stones to eke out our water supply... (Caswell 1964:74-75)

It seems strange that in all the long twisted miles of the Saskatchewan river these cattle had to choose this one quicksand spot for a drink and coolness from mosquitoes, big flies, and gnats, although if you rubbed underneath them your hand dripped blood. (Caswell 1964:81)

In June 1886 Mr Kline was plowing with one horse when an electrical storm came up and he and the horse were both killed. ... Just north of Moose Jaw, a shack was blown across the prairie with a man in it. Such were some of the trials of the early settlers. - Grandma Bellamy (SAB memoir, quoted in Robertson 1974:80)

Many times I led the oxen while my mother held the breaking plow. Willow scrub and stones made breaking the land a slow and difficult job even for a strong man. One day... the plow struck a stone and mother was thrown very forcibly a good distance away. As she was lying on the ground my brother and I rushed to her and started to cry. Mother embraced us and asked us not to cry for she was not hurt. We sat there for some time and then mother told us that we should go home. We did, my brother and I drove the oxen and mother limped slowly behind. I remember her limping for several days, but she never complained and told no one about her troubles.

- George Dragan, Ukrainian pioneer (Manitoba Archives interview in the papers of W.J. Sisler, quoted in Robertson 1974:84)

We often had trouble with lost horses and cattle. We had ridden after lost horses four and five hundred miles into Montana, but we always got our horses. There was a gang of horse thieves around in 1884 and 1885 who was supposed to have

its headquarters in Moose Mountain. We slept in the stables for two summers with gun in hand to protect our horses; some farmers had their horses taken right out of the plough by the thieves. I was ploughing one day when a well-mounted man with two horse pistols and a rifle rode up to me in the field and demanded the horses; I had a gun and pulled my gun and said: 'You son of a jack, don't touch anything or I will blow your brains out'. I was brought up to fire arms; he never said a word just got. If he had got that team from me he would have made a pretty good haul for we had refused \$600 for the team I was ploughing with.

(Hostetter 2002)

“...a terror of a time.”

Thursday August 24th [1882]...they noticed a real lizzard on the blanket.he was about 6 inches long and as big around as my finger and of a dark mottled green colour - clammy and cold. Can run like sixty; eyes as sharp as a trap. ... We killed and dragged him out of doors. ... Everything was quiet when Alex gave a desperate jump and exclaimed: “There’s another of those darned lizzards”, and so it was, a darned measly lizzard - and had been crawling up Alex’s leg - he was killed.... Bill got out his big knife and inside of 15 minutes killed seven. Golly our blood ran cold.

(Martin 1953:63-64)

Mosquitoes

In order to hold the walking plow I used a cheese cloth hood and machine-oiled my hands, and had to make blankets out of jute sacks for the oxen.

- Mr . R. Carson, Bladworth, 1905. (Turner 1955:53)

Our tobacco ran out, but we had a few cigars which we used to smoke to keep the mosquitoes off when they got too bad. The mosquitoes and black flies were terrible for about two weeks; so bad that one man who was travelling through came near dying; he was all swelled up and in a bad state. He was bodily ill and was laid up for a couple of days.

- William Greer, Alameda (Greer 2002)

f. Relations with local First Nations people

One Indian is almost a daily visitor, and often brings along with him his squaw and papooses. My children have become so friendly with this family that when they see them coming they run and meet them and shake hands with them, and are fast acquiring their language. ... The family frequently stay over the night with us.

-William Gibson, Wolseley district, 1884 (Gibson 1961:98)

[The Indians have] ...been displaying a little taste in the erection of their houses which are built with logs. Those they live in during the winter; but in summer they prefer... [to] live in tents... ..I was over with a load of lime to them to whitewash their houses before they went into them for the winter.

-William Gibson, Wolseley district, 1887 (Gibson 1961:108)

These Indians [from the Whitecap Reserve] were quite interested watching mother as she walked back and forth spinning the carded wool we need for yarn for stockings and mitts. ... The papoose... in a moss-filled bag on a board... rode on its mother's back. Mother gave it a pair of Mabel's stockings. When they return we hope they will have bead work to trade. ... Then... a tall Indian walked in without knocking with a string of prairie chickens. He spoke Cree and wanted flour in exchange for the chickens. (Caswell 1964:100-101)

Mr Fred Baines of Saltcoats, who arrived in 1883, said that his
“first sight of North American Indians was at the ferry crossing the Qu'Appelle River. A tall, blanketed moccasined representative carrying the inevitable muzzle loader met us, and upon payment of the usual fee ourselves, wagons and belongings were ferried across the stream. (Eager 1953:6)

Mr Harry Kinash of Edam, who arrived in 1902 from Austria remembers being taken home by Indians once when he was lost. (Eager 1953:6)

Mr Joseph Wegren of Bradwell, who arrived in 1904, regarded the Indians of the Whitecap Reserve as friends. They worked at picking rocks and threshing for him. (Eager 1953:6)

Mrs Emma MacDougall of Kisbey, who arrived in 1889, recalls Indians bringing berries in small wooden pails to trade for butter, lard and other goods. (Eager 1953:6)

...when it's cold he wears a buckskin coat that he got from a Stony Indian. It's beautifully warm and light to wear. Billie has ordered one for me from Peter Bear's Paw with gauntlet gloves to match.

- Monica Hopkins, 1909 (Glenbow manuscript, “Log Cabin and We Two”,
quoted in Robertson 1974:104)

Mother and Dad thought kindly of the Cree Indians as they were in those early days. They found them kindly, reliable and honest. They were little removed from the savage and were greatly interested in all the white man's goods. My mother has told us how they would finger her dresses and pick up the household utensils and carefully examine them. They never tapped on the door, but would just walk in. Whenever she heard anything derogatory about the Indians my mother, who passed away in 1955, would say, “Well, they were a fine people before the white man spoiled them.” She had Indian women look after her when her children were born and to help her in the house. (Allen 1963:2-3)

Our special pet was an old Indian man whom we called “Moosoom” which means grandfather. He wasn't exactly hired help... Off and on for years he practically lived with us, sleeping in the back kitchen... In winter he would keep the fires going in the stoves at night and keep an eye on things in general. When he slept in his own little house on the reserve, we children would fill his handkerchief with tea and sugar or some special tidbit when he left for the night. How we loved him! ... A gentle soul but strict with us children as befitted his position as the

shepherd of Mother's flock.

(Allen 1963:3)

Now Moosoom would clear a spot for a fire to boil his tea and around this small campfire the young lads listened to many a tale of the olden days and of what We-sa-ka-jack had done in the days when he roamed the earth. ... In winter Moosoom and the boys set snares for rabbits...

(Allen 1963:23)

Broadview 275 miles from Winnipeg, Sunday Aug. 20, 1882 I take a good wash in a slough, head and feet. Returning, find a friendly old Indian visiting our camp. He was wrapped in a big Buffalo skin, had yellow beads in his hair, couldn't speak a word of English. He sat down near the stove watching our pot boil. Soon after eight or nine squaws in paint and beads, with youngsters came round and picked up the heads of some duck (Alex and Martin shot yesterday).

(Martin 1953:61)

Indian Head, January 22nd, 1884 ...I had the honor to-day of having dinner with [Chief Piapot]. ... I like the old fellow first-rate. He has a pretty hard name in this country, but I believe Governor Dewdney and such rascals have done their best to cheat him and lied to him so often that he is suspicious of white men. If the Governor would have used him half decently I don't doubt but what he would be as good a citizen as anyone could desire. He is shrewd business fellow and not very easily cheated, and a good worker too. His band are in now to receive pay for chopped eight hundred cords of wood. ... They are a dandy lot to have anything to do with.

(Brooks 1958b:73)

In 1882 we put in some oats and wheat on breaking; we broke it shallow with one plough, and then followed behind in the furrows with another plough turning up earth over the sod; we learned that from the half-breeds. (Hostetter 2002)

The Indian himself is one of the most hospitable men in the world. When he asks for food he is only asking you to do for him what he would do for you if he had it and you needed it. He shares his last bite with his hungry fellow tribesmen. Why should not the white man do the same with him? He has no sense of being a mendicant and a cadger. In speaking of the hospitality of the plains that of the Indian deserves a place of honor.

(Hawkes 2002b)

I was awake one broad moonlight night in camp when I heard the crack of a rifle in those remote woods. Next day an Indian appeared carrying a solitary duck. Nodding made signs to him and said "shunia" and "quack, quack." The Indian never blinked; said nothing, but after the Englishman had done "quack, quacking" and produced a quarter the Indian handed over the duck, still without a word. Then Nodding wanted to know if the Indian's gun was "good gun." "Oh, yes," said the Indian as languidly and easily as if he were in Pall Mall, "Oh, yes, it's a pretty good gun; I shot a deer with it last night." You see he had been a Touchwood Indian school boy. In the Indian schools they have not only to learn English, but talk it exclusively and Nodding could have spared himself a good deal of

“quacking” if he had only known.

(Hawkes 2002b)

g. Other

In 1910 we started planting trees obtained from the Dominion Forestry Farm at Indian head. Some of these died during the drought, but most have continued to grow so that now we have a shelterbelt of caragana, willows, maples, ash, cottonwood, Russian poplars, and some evergreens. (Hoffer 1952:31)

June 28 [1902] - Our first experience with Canadian cut worms - took most of our garden last night.

August 29 [1902] - Frost ruins what the cutworms left of our garden and flowers.
(Mrs St John 1949a:26-7)

April 14 [1903] - Last night we could read a newspaper by the reflection in the sky, from the prairie fire which is still raging... 30 miles from us. It is a fearful sight.
(Mrs St John 1949b:26)

Mother says, “an active, whistling girl and jumping sheep are the best stock a farmer can keep” though father does not approve of girls whistling.

(Caswell 1964:48)

Johnny called us to see the pretty back and white kittens he had found. The bog ones came in view waving black and white plumes, and having heard of their perfume we sped away as best we could. (Caswell 1964:48)

[For the Saskatoon fair] I [painted] a scene of the pony feeding on the river bank and a cart nearby, using the bluebag, dandelion coloring, beet-juice and some spinach green from the garden. (Caswell 1964:87)

We met the Hunter girls sitting on some calves to warm themselves...

(Caswell 1964:87)

Ethnocentricity

There was an air of romance over the first settlers that has now passed. Prosaic enough in all seeming, the fact that they had embarked on the great adventure of a new world must have had an influence even if it was seldom acknowledged. They had, I think, more background, because they had other standards of comparison, and they took life more casually because they had, many of them, lived to maturity in a world of larger affairs. They brought with them their great contribution to the life of the Canadian West, the one thing that kept the country so unlike the American new land, a respect for law and order, and a matter-of-fact decision to carry British traditions of decent citizenship into the new life. (Willey 2002)

Of the Galicians there is this to say, -we would have been better with Northern people- there is too wide a gap for easy assimilation, but be it remembered that

they settled on rough land miles then from a railway, which had lain vacant, ready for settlement, since the opening up of the west. They worked nobly, under poor conditions, often breaking up land with a spade, and cutting with a sickle. They have added thousands of dollars to the wealth of the west. (Willey 2002)

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Images

Maria and George Raddysh, ca. 1903, Maria in typical costume, in Radison 1987.

Metro and Elena Penteluk, ca. 1930, Elena in typical costume, in Radison 1987.

Cabin interior NAC: C-007785

Pioneer house - eastern European immigrants: women in kerchiefs up on ladders against house whitewashing sod[?] house. SAB S-A 129

WDM has photos of the shack excavation, move to Yorkton, and its arrival there. In binder.