



A Brief History of Agriculture in Saskatchewan

First Crop

It is thought that the first wheat planted in what is now Saskatchewan was sown in the Carrot River Valley in the 1750s, however it would be well over a hundred years before agriculture really began to take root in the province.

The National Policy

Prime Minister John A. Macdonald's plan for Canada called for massive immigration to the West. The transcontinental railway would bring settlers to the prairies and transport agricultural products to the east. Western Canada would provide markets for eastern manufactured goods which benefitted from tariff protection. Settlement was slow at first, but by the mid 1890s, settlers began to pour into the prairies. This massive influx would last until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914.

The Homestead System

The Dominion Lands Act of 1872 and the survey system divided the prairie provinces into townships, sections (640 acres) and quarter sections (160 acres). A homesteader could claim a quarter section for ten dollars provided he met certain conditions. Breaking land was a tough job often done by a team of oxen or horses and a single-furrow walking plow. Farmers with money could buy a steam or gas engine and a gang plow. Some American immigrants brought their machinery with them by rail. After their own land was plowed, they might do custom work. Wheat was the main crop. Oats was grown for animal feed.

The development of earlier-ripening Marquis wheat was crucial for western farmers. Marquis was tested at the Dominion Experimental Farm in Indian Head and released to farmers in 1909. When Rosthern area farmer Seager Wheeler won first prize with Marquis at the New York Land Show in 1911, the agricultural world took notice. Saskatchewan's future as a grain-growing province was bright.

The Twenties

By the 1920s, most of the available agricultural land was occupied and the land broken. Many farmers bought more land and more farmers were able to afford a small gasoline or kerosene-powered tractor. Crops were harvested with binders and threshing machines, the threshing crew of 20 or more men moving from farm to farm. The first combines arrived in western Canada in the mid to late 1920s. With a combine, fewer men were needed to bring in the crop. Wheat was king and horses were still a necessity for farm work.



There was a push during the 1920s towards improved livestock herds with an emphasis on purebred animals. Cattle, horses, hogs, sheep and poultry were exhibited at agricultural fairs across the province. Most farmers ran a mixed operation, raising livestock and growing grain.

The 1920s also saw farmers look to new solutions for their marketing problems. The Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, a farmer-owned marketing co-operative, was created in 1924. The Pool built or bought hundreds of country elevators in Saskatchewan.

The Great Depression

A decade of drought combined with economic collapse during the 1930s brought most of Saskatchewan to its knees. Farm practices of the 1920s had pulverized the soil causing it to blow away in the hot, dry winds of the 1930s. There was little feed for cattle; crops and gardens withered and died. Insect plagues and an outbreak of western equine encephalitis or sleeping sickness devastated the horse population.

Experimental farms, the University of Saskatchewan and farmers themselves experimented with different farm practices and machines designed to minimize soil degradation. Leaving a trash cover, planting shelterbelts, strip farming, and seeding crested wheat grass helped to hold the soil in place.

Second World War

Rains returned to the prairies by the end of the 1930s. The War effort helped to bring about economic recovery. Farmers were urged to raise hogs for Britain. Mechanization on farms increased but was hampered by an emphasis on war production by Canada's manufacturing sector.

The Fifties and Beyond

The prosperous post-war years saw more money in the hands of the farming community. The uses of horses for farm work declined. New machinery like rubber-tired tractors, cultivators, discers, swathers, self-propelled combines and trucks made it possible for one farmer to farm more land. Farms grew bigger. Chemicals to control insects and weeds and fertilizers to improve yields made farms more productive but more expensive to operate.

Where previously farmers depended almost exclusively on machinery manufactured in eastern Canada or the United States, a western agricultural machinery industry began to develop. At the University of Saskatchewan new crop varieties better able to withstand Saskatchewan weather conditions were developed.



Toward the 21st Century

A revolution in the kinds of crops grown on western farms began with the introduction of a new crop - canola - in the 1970s. Developed from rapeseed by scientists at the Universities of Saskatchewan and Manitoba, canola was welcomed by western farmers. Other crops, like lentils, field peas, and chickpeas were proven to thrive on the prairies. Acreage previously seeded almost exclusively to wheat now grew a host of different crops.

In the livestock industry, farmers imported new breeds of cattle. They also began to raise bison, elk, llamas and even ostriches as a way to diversify their operations. Hog production saw the growth of intensive livestock operations.

Farm practices changed radically as the shift to direct seeding, minimum or zero tillage replaced the old practice of summerfallow. Air seeding systems developed and perfected in Saskatchewan along with other innovations like the application of Global Positioning System (GPS) technology to guide power units changed the way farmers planted and harvested. A few farmers began to raise organic crops, catering to health-conscious consumers.

The trend to larger farms increased as bigger, more automated machinery made it possible. The country elevator system virtually disappeared as grain was trucked to inland terminals. Many rural communities disappeared as rail lines were abandoned. At its peak in 1936, Saskatchewan boasted some 142,000 farms; by 2006, that number had shrunk to just over 44,000.

Farming Today

Twenty-first century Saskatchewan farmers are some of the most productive in the world. They operate sophisticated businesses with innovative but more expensive equipment on bigger and bigger farms. But they are still at the mercy of the weather, world markets, agricultural subsidies abroad, and a transportation system they do not control. Making a living from farming has become increasingly difficult. More than half of Saskatchewan farms now depend on off-farm income.

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