PRAIRIE FIRES IN THE NORTH-WEST
by S. Raby

PRINCE ALBERT RIVER LOTS
by Lloyd Rodwell

WASCANA CREEK AND THE "PILE OF BONES"
by A. R. Turner
Contents

Prairie Fires in the North-West ........................................ S. Raby 81

Prince Albert River Lots .................................................. Lloyd Rodwell 100

Documents of Western History ........................................... A. R. Turner 111
  Wascana Creek and the “Pile o' Bones”

Book Reviews ........................................................................ 119
  Hébert, Les Débuts De Gravelbourg: By D. H. Bocking

Notes on Books Received .....................................................

Notes and Correspondence .................................................. 120

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Prairie Fires in the North-West

Prairie fires were a major hazard prevalent during the pioneer period of settlement of the North-West Territories. Especially was this true during the decade between 1885 and 1896. Prior to the mid-1880’s, the North-West had in general experienced a comparatively long period of favourable weather, with concomitant fair to good crops in the areas where agriculture was practised. However, a series of successive dry, hot years culminated in the summer of 1894 with large-scale abandonment of farms in the southern mixed prairie plains. In that year, William Pearce probably expressed the sentiments of many of the administrators and settlers in the Northwest when he stated that: “The destruction caused by fires exceeds that of any previous year, and the time has come when one begins to realize that very drastic measures are becoming necessary in order to prevent the extensive ranges from being burned off. . . .” On the 7th of February of the same year, J. G. Gordon, a Moose Jaw lawyer, wrote to a Member of the Territorial Executive Committee, calling upon him to take up the matter:

I at least have not the least doubt that it is to [prairie fires] and their influence upon the soil and climate that the present condition of the North West Territories is attributable chiefly. That they cause drought, no one will deny; and that they at least aggravate and intensify the warm winds which we might otherwise have and make them the scourging winds we had last summer I have no doubt. Mr. McKay of the Experimental Farm at Indian Head readily coincided with these views . . . legislation will be required at Ottawa . . . but the Government at Ottawa do not understand the matter and it may take some considerable dinging it into them before they will come to understand the matter and its need to make the country prosperous; but I am convinced that these extensive prairie fires must be put down before we will ever have continuous prosperity. 2

Another forcible statement of these views is contained in the Memorandum prepared in 1894 by the Moose Jaw Board of Trade for the Government of Canada on the subject of the “losses to the soil and climate of the country” since settlement of that area began in the early 1880’s. “If they [the prairie fires] are not speedily checked,” it said, “this whole stretch of country will in the near future be valueless, as the vegetable mould will all be burnt off it and nothing left but the sub-soil of sand and gravel.” 3 The then current drought and the volume and heat of the winds experienced were associated by the Board with the frequency and intensity of fires; the climate they found “unobjectionable”.

The chief burden of fire-control rested upon the North-West Mounted Police who tried to carry out the provisions of the Territorial Ordinances regarding fires. An Ordinance passed in 1879 4 levied a maximum fine of $100 or three months.

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1 Canada, Sessional Papers, 1895, Vol. 28, No. 13, p. 25.
3 Canada, Department of the Interior, File 123293.
4 Ordinances of the North-West Territories, 1879, No. 4, Ordinances were also passed in 1875 and 1877 but it is not clear whether the Ordinance of 1875 ever became law and the Ordinance of 1877 was ruled ultra vires.
imprisonment upon those who started fires except for camp or domestic purposes or to protect buildings and stacks in danger of being destroyed by running fires, or for clearing land between December and April inclusive. Fines not to exceed $50 were also applied where “effectual means” were not taken to prevent such fires from running at large.

It is extremely difficult, from available records, to ascertain the overall extent of responsibility of individual agents, whether railway trains, farmers, ranchers, bone-hunters, lightning or other causes, for starting fires, but the current state of the natural environment in forcing a fire out of hand was a critical instrument in determining the scale of fires experienced and the possibilities open to the settlers and police in controlling them. As was inevitable, generalizations made upon the problem at the times strongly reflect local experiences, especially upon such a question as the effect of increased settlement on the hazard. In general, it was realized that increased densities of population tended to augment the danger locally up to a point, though construction of roads to support settlers’ activities would at the same time limit the areas actually burnt over by fire.

At times, individual fires assumed vast proportions; in October, 1893, “a tremendous fire” was reported to have swept over the prairie south of the Canadian Pacific Railway, extending from a point on the Pasqua Branch line near Yellow Grass Marsh north-eastwards for some one hundred miles and measuring fifty miles across according to the North-West Mounted Police Report. In July, 1894, a fire started near Swift Current and swept south-eastwards through Wood Mountain and over the International Boundary. It burnt over an area estimated at some 6,000 square miles in southern Assiniboia and travelled “with frightful rapidity”. Much of the same area, with the exception of Wood Mountain itself, had been burnt over six years previously.

Damage to persons and their property could be severe. Several deaths and many injuries were reported by the Mounted Police. Pasture and hay supplies were frequently destroyed. The grass resources of many large areas were periodically fired, “materially reducing the grazing capacity to the great detriment of stockmen who tend to depend on these ranges for winter feed”. Costs also included the extra expense of fire patrols; in 1894, “B” Division of the North-West Mounted Police, responsible for what became southern Saskatchewan, maintained forty-five detachments in that district, and the fire stations were not called in until mid-November, after having been maintained for an average of one hundred days. Typical of the hardship occasioned by prairie fires is a case described in a police report. The fire was allegedly started by a Canadian Pacific Railway engine between Balgonie and McLean, immediately to the east of Regina. An inspector surveyed the affected area and visited the German settlements and reported that “The country for miles around was one mass of burnt bush and prairie. Three poor men with large families to support were standing in the only

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8 Canada, Sessional Papers, 1894, Vol. 27, No. 15, p. 46.
12 AS, AtG, G Seri, Governor, Septe
things they possessed viz their clothes... All... are hard working... settlers and what little hay and wheat they possessed they depended upon for their winter supply." A representative case involved losses of house and all the furniture, two stables, thirty-three bushels of wheat, fifty bushels of oats, twenty tons of hay, sleighs and implements.

The railway companies were undoubtedly responsible for many of the prairie fires experienced in the North-West during this period, although note should be taken of the views of the Vice-President of the Canadian Pacific Railway in his letter of August 13, 1886 to the Lieutenant Governor in Regina. He recognized that prairie fires had been a source of constant uneasiness and stated that he personally had seen that grass on each side of the railway was burnt very short, though the dry season had found this incomplete in some places. He concluded, "I have no doubt fires have been caused by our trains, but the evidence seems pretty clear that most of them have been set by the bone hunters. I was told on my last trip west that in order to keep out of trouble the bone hunters take care now to start their fires from near the railway track, and these fires are naturally attributed to us." In reply, the Lieutenant Governor said that his information regarding "Half Breeds burning the Prairie for the purpose of more easily gathering the Buffalo bones" was similar to that of his correspondent. Seven years later, the divisional police superintendent at Lethbridge in discussion of this question said, "Fortunately the buffalo bones have been pretty well gathered up by this time, so that this incentive to mischief will not exist much longer." Subsequent experience was most revealing upon this point. Before discussing it, comment about the role of the Indian population is warranted.

Only a few prairie fires in the period seem to have been begun by Indians, though previously, it was contended, "the Indian population were in the habit of setting fire to the prairie in order to celebrate occasions of jubilation and to convey signals." Palliser stressed their "wanton carelessness and mischief" in this matter, while Dawson, in his 1897 text on Manitoba and the North-West Territories says, "The object of the Indians usually was to burn up the old grass to make way for the young growth, and the early settlers imitated them, and used to set fire to the prairie in late fall or early spring." A further factor was stressed by the police inspector at Fort Saskatchewan in response to a circular issued by the Territorial Government. He considered that a very frequent cause of prairie fires was "the manner in which Indians hunting ducks reload their guns using rags and old wasps nests for wadding." It was thought that "this kind of wadding becomes ignited from the powder, and being left smouldering no doubt in many cases accounts for fires breaking out in out of the way places." But a contractor

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8 AS, AtG, G Series, File 513L, Inspector, Barracks, Regina to Commissioner, October 14, 1889.
10 Canada, Sessional Papers, 1894, Vol. 27, No. 15, p. 86.
11 Department of Agriculture of the North-West Territories, Annual Report, 1898, p. 82.
for the construction of the section of the Pacific Telegraph line between Swan River and Edmonton told the Select Standing Committee on Immigration and Colonization in April, 1877: “I do not think that the Indians set fire to the prairies as much as had been represented. . . . My observation has been that Indians are very careful in this respect. The Half-breeds, who travel in [cart] trains, and the white men, are very reckless; they think that it is the last time they will be over the route and that it does not matter.”

There is, however, evidence that the Indian population had made use of fire to counter the annual destruction of vast amounts of timber in parts of the area. Prior to the snow's melting in the timber they burned off the surrounding grass cover. They thus reduced the risk of lightning firing the grass during the summer and autumn, and of fire spreading into the adjacent timber. The Commissioner of Agriculture for the North-West Territories found some support for this contention in the Swift Current area in 1900. Early that spring the northern side of the railway was burnt; in that area no fire was reported to have been started by lightning during the subsequent autumn. In contrast, on the southern side “fire occurred in half a dozen places owing to the presence of three crops of grass on the ground.”

The hazard to timber stands from prairie fires was later substantially reduced with the extension of the forest ranging system over wider areas, but during the early period enormous quantities of timber were destroyed annually by fire. Of interest in Manitoba, which also suffered from prairie fires was the adoption of the Indians' practice by the Dominion Government officials of burning the grass along the boundaries of the reserves in springtime “after the snow had left the grass but before it was out of the wood”. In the year ending May, 1910 over ninety miles of guard were burned, most of it around Duck Mountain.

In 1890, the Commander of “E” Division, Calgary, of the North-West Mounted Police struck the consensus of police opinion on the question of the railways' responsibility for fires, an opinion shared by the Commissioner. The Commander considered that the only apparent remedy was to force the railway companies to maintain efficient fireguards by ploughing furrows on each side of the track and burning off the grass between them. While he recognized that this would mean considerable labour and expense every year, “until it is done large portions of country are bound to be burned over every season”, particularly adjacent to the Canadian Pacific Railway and Calgary and Edmonton Railway companies’ lines. The latter was then under construction. Stronger opinions were voiced on this matter, and the Commissioner himself expressed fear “that the extension of the railway through the ranching country, unless special precautions are taken, will in dry seasons, be found to be the complete ruin of the ranches”. In the south-west of the Territory it was reported that in 1893 there

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15 Department of Agriculture of the North-West Territories, Annual Report, 1900, p. 81.
18 Ibid., p. 13.
Prairie Fires in the North-West

was scarcely a day during the latter end of August that the fast passenger trains did not set a fire. Many of these were put out by settlers before damage was done.

It was not only a question of sparks from the locomotives themselves, as is shown, for example, by correspondence between the President of the Military Colonization Company of Canada, Strathmore, and the Territorial Government regarding the scope of the Prairie Fire Ordinances. The former stated in August, 1884 that in the previous spring orders had been issued to the men in charge of the Canadian Pacific Railway section houses to set fire to the prairie along the track, "I suppose with a view to prevent the spread of fires from the Engines or possibly to give the Country a more verdant appearance from the railroad the ensuing summer". In this case it was contended that insufficient men were available to control the fire, which got away and "burnt enormous tracts, an evil aggravated by the dry spring season". Three years later, a case was brought against a Canadian Pacific Railway section foreman of Grenfell for burning prairie along the railway's right of way to prevent the possibility of fire originating from sparks, but without providing the legal ploughed fireguard first. The Justice of the Peace at Summerberry, in reviewing the case, intimated that no distinction could be made between the company's burning to save its bridges and telegraph poles "for from the way the fires are burnt this is clearly the reason" and a settler's burning to save his property. It is of interest that as a result of this and similar cases, an amending Ordinance of 1887 clarified the rights of railway companies to burn along their rights of way to prevent prairie fires, though with the provisions that this should be carried out inside a ploughed break not less than ten feet wide and with a sufficient number of men present. Despite this change, the Ordinance was found by the Territorial Department of Agriculture "practically to prevent the railway companies from taking proper steps to confine prairie fires started by locomotives, owing to the stringent conditions imposed regarding the burning of fireguards." Important changes were made in 1898, especially as regards provisions dealing with fires set out by railway employees. Section 5 of the amended Ordinance read:

Nothing in this Ordinance shall prevent any railway company or its employees from burning over the land held by it under its right of way and the land adjoining the same to an extent not exceeding 300 feet in width on each side of the centre line of the railway.

Every person causing, commencing or in charge of such burning shall cause the same during the whole period of its continuance to be watched and guarded by at least four men provided with suitable appliances for extinguishing prairie fires.

It was also pointed out that this provision would not relieve anyone from liability if any fire so started should escape or run at large.

However, the Commissioner of the Department of Public Works for the North-West Territories was moved in 1901, a year of "some of the most extended

19 AS, AtG, G Series, File 149L, President, Military Colonization Company of Canada to Lieutenant Governor, August 8, 1884.
21 Ordinances of the North-West Territories, Annual Report, 1898, p. 83.
22 Ordinances of the North-West Territories, 1898, No. 38.
and disastrous fires experienced during many years”, to complain that the efforts of his Department had been practically nullified in some areas by the failure of the railway companies to provide an adequate system of fireguards along their lines. Prior to that date, the Territorial Government had spent a sizable portion of its revenue in the construction of fireguards, though lack of a systematic approach and insufficient maintenance had reduced their effectiveness. Further, “owing to rapid growth of weeds and bushes on these ploughed lands they are an added source of danger from fire.”

Despite attempts at developing an efficient fireguard burning machine, such as that of the Canniff Prairie Fire Guard Company of Winnipeg, ploughed guards comprised the major form of protection offered by the Department.

At the turn of the century, construction costs of the standard eight-furrow prairie fireguard averaged about $11 per mile, with annual backsetting costs attaining $6 per mile. A little more expensive were larger systems of two eight-furrow guards about thirty feet apart with burnt grass between them. As was pointed out to the railway companies, whose length in the Territories requiring protection was estimated at 1,400 miles in 1900, the overall capital cost of a proper sixteen-furrowed fireguard on each side of the lines was less than the damage caused during one severe fire. However, despite its being in the railway companies’ own interests to preserve property and encourage settlement, many unsuccessful attempts had to be made before the Department of Public Works was able to come to a satisfactory arrangement with them, since no legal provisions existed to compel them to provide and maintain adequate fireguard systems. At the same time, complaints were being levelled at the Canadian Pacific Railway for ploughing its fireguards too deeply, since it was alleged that this encouraged the growth of weeds.

The Department of Public Works of the North-West Territories Government had attempted to cope with the necessity for fireguards by planning a definite system of them; to this end, 376 miles were ploughed in 1899, and by 1902 this had been increased to almost 900 miles chiefly located in western Assiniboia and southern Alberta to protect the more valuable grazing areas. Over 1,750 miles of fireguard were also completed in the latter year under a contract between the Department and the Canadian Pacific Railway. No serious fires were started by sparks from locomotives, and this was taken as evidence that the system “will have a marked effect in reducing the list of fires started by railway locomotives,” though at the same time it was alleged that the company had neglected to burn out the grass thoroughly between the track and the guard before the fire season arrived.

Owing to rising labour costs the contract was cancelled in December, 1903, the companies themselves continuing the work of maintaining the prairie fireguards. A total of over 3,000 miles of fireguard were either constructed or maintained by the Department in the year before the contract was terminated. This included guards on both sides on the Canadian Pacific Railway Main Line between Calgary and the boundary of the municipality of Qu’Appelle. Efforts were generally successful, though in some cases fireguards were so near the width, though in others they were thirty feet apart to allow trees to grow between them.

The task was further complicated when the Department of Indian Affairs discarded or backset its prairie fireguards in arid south-western Saskatchewan. In these areas, double fireguards, roads, levees, specially constructed fireploughs for Saskatchewan, and the ploughing of the land were undertaken. The decreased annual income from the lands for this was noted in the Saskatchewan by:

An attempt to maintain a prairie fireguard was then possible with the twenty-four foot plough the following year. Works was “the only effective method to confine the winter ranges of cattle, to prevent the winter range being destroyed. Well-ploughed land was obtained in 1910 and 1911, although the soil was porous. Consequently, attempts were made to maintain natural fireploughs extensively in the south, and when they did not work, other methods were employed. The “prairie crown” of “good and sufficient fireguards” were maintained for over a thousand years. The Prairie Fire Guard Act was one of the most important pieces of legislation in the early development of the province. It was passed in 1911 and it provided for the establishment of a permanent fireguard system in the province. The act also provided for the establishment of a board of inquiry to investigate the cause of the prairie fires and to recommend steps to be taken to control them. The act was passed on the recommendation of the Select Committee on Agriculture, which was appointed by the Legislative Assembly of the province to investigate the causes of the prairie fires.

Not only the need for fireguards was important, but also the need for maintaining them. The act provided for the establishment of a board of inquiry to investigate the cause of the prairie fires and to recommend steps to be taken to control them. The act was passed on the recommendation of the Select Committee on Agriculture, which was appointed by the Legislative Assembly of the province to investigate the causes of the prairie fires.

Department of Public Works of the North-West Territories, Annual Report, 1898, p. 68.
Department of Public Works of the North-West Territories, Annual Report, 1902, p. 79.
were generally successful in bringing all the guards up to the standard sixteen-foot width, though in some cases two eight-foot guards were provided at some distance apart to allow the grass between to be burnt.

The task was continued by the provincial governments. Saskatchewan's Department of Public Works reached a maximum 1510 miles broken, reploughed, disced or backset in 1909. All of these fireguards were located within the semi-arid south-western portion of the province, and, excluding the Willow Bunch single fireguard, all were within 115 miles of Swift Current. Nearly 840 miles of these were double-guards, and effective use was made of railway and other private guards, roads, lakes and rivers. The few public fireguards existing in 1903 in Saskatchewan had a similar, if more limited, distribution, though two were ploughed to the north of Moose Mountain. After 1909 the mileage of guards was decreased annually since much of it was found to be unnecessary. The reasons for this are noted below. In all, only sixty-two miles were being maintained in Saskatchewan by the Department of Highways in 1919.

An attempt was made to locate new fireguards upon road allowances, since it was then possible to combine the fire-break with a graded road by ploughing twenty-four foot fireguards towards their centres, then grading them up in the following year. A major difficulty experienced by the Department of Public Works was "the indifference . . . displayed by the parties interested in securing reasonable tenders" for the provision of fireguards; in 1907, "neglect in this respect . . . resulted in several districts being swept by destructive prairie fires, the winter range being burned off and stacks of hay and even ranch buildings being destroyed. . . ."24 Tenders on a considerable number of grades could not be obtained in 1910 since that crop season was particularly favourable and prosperous. Consequently, settlers were loath to accept work on fireguards at times when they did not need supplementary income. Much progress had, however, been achieved in 1907 through an Order of the Board of Railway Commissioners regarding the provision of satisfactory ashpans and gutters, spark arresters, non-lignitic coals and inspections. The Order included special detailed provisions for the "prairie country" of Alberta and Saskatchewan regarding the construction of "good and sufficient fireguards" before August 1st of each year. All of these provisions were extremely welcome since the Supreme Court had that year quashed three prosecutions against the railway companies upon the argument that the Prairie Fire Ordinances were not applicable to companies holding Dominion charters. By 1913, some 3,900 miles of guards were being constructed or maintained by the railway companies in the three Prairie Provinces. In cases of cultivated lands adjacent to the railway judged liable to fires by their owners or occupiers the latter were to plough guards immediately after harvest and be paid $1.75 per lineal mile of four-foot guard by the railway company concerned. Elsewhere, onus was upon the Canadian Pacific Railway Company to show to the Board of Railway Commissioners where construction was either unnecessary or impracticable.

Not only were fires generated within the North-West Territories, but many

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23 Saskatchewan, Department of Public Works, Annual Report, 1907-08, p. 140.
came into the area from Manitoba and the United States. On August 30th, 1894, for instance, fire crossed the line from Dakota and burnt over an estimated 50,000 acres, “destroying ten stacks of wheat, besides all the pasture land over which it ran”. This and three similar occurrences in that year led to an observation by the Estevan police inspector that, “A fire guard along the boundary between us and the United States would have prevented considerable loss . . . during the past season.”

One example of the effects of individual carelessness, a constant problem, may be cited. A man pleaded guilty to starting a fire on October 28th, 1901 by throwing a lighted match to the ground after lighting his pipe. Beginning near Queenstown, Alberta,

The fire burnt south and then west with extraordinary rapidity; people who thought themselves safe and miles away from the fire would suddenly from a change in the wind find it right on them, travelling at the rate of some forty or even sixty miles an hour. Nothing could escape it, and horses, cattle and wild animals were burnt to death or left so injured that they died shortly after.

In all, the Superintendent of the North-West Mounted Police at Calgary estimated that it would cost some $30,000 to make up these losses. Drastic measures for protection were often required, such as a case in 1900 when about 9,000 sheep were saved from fire by the starting of a second fire in advance of the first, and by driving the animals onto the burnt ground. Less happy was the case of John Rowell who tried in 1886 to save a friend’s house from fire. He returned to his home to find “nought but Ashes and roasted Stock”. Through numerous convictions the police achieved close control of the practice of leaving camp fires burning, but consternation developed when it was found that an 1893 Ordinance deemed this an offence only when the fire came to be at large. The Commissioner was afraid that if this became generally known it would be impossible for his force to enforce the Ordinance.

Precautions were taken against fire damage by settlers and ranchers trying to protect their haystacks and other possessions, but this was by no means universal. In southern Assiniboia, hundreds of settlers in 1894 were said to have put up large stacks of hay and to have left them on the prairie without any form of fire-break. One police patrol reported passing from forty to fifty haystacks lying unprotected in the middle of the prairie between Fort Qu’Appelle and the File Hills one early August day in 1894. One man was found to have only about a foot of fire-break burnt around two- to three-hundred tons of hay, and even houses were standing unprotected. This report was forwarded to the Lieutenant-Governor by the Police Commissioner; the latter commented upon this “reprehensible negligence” shown by the settlers.

Ironically, by the Police Commissioner, disastrous fires “occupies a littlered by the use of fire in large areas was received increased control of fires from the beginning of September” or the case of the 165 conflagrations that occurred in the District alone in one year. The punishment imposed only nominally one fine of $50.

It was inevitable that settlers in such remote regions would be on their own in dealing with fires.

In connection with the fire in Assiniboia, the following note was sent to the local police:

In many cases, the police were asked by the makers of a fire as five miles north of the police superintend in securing conflagrations in the districts of the police “suffice” for other numerous.

The other overseers of local fire were.

27 Canada, Sessional Papers, 1902, Vol. 36, No. 28, p. 68.
29 AS, AtG, G Series, File 514 L, L. W. Herchmer to the Lieutenant-Governor, December 16, 1893.
30 AS, AtG, G Series, File 514L, Report from Sergeant, Fort Qu’Appelle to Officer Commanding B Division, August 6, 1894.
prairie fires in the north-west

Ironically, the practice of burning fireguards around haystacks was regarded by the Police Commissioner in 1898, as still one of the major causes of the most disastrous fires. The alternative, that is, ploughing fire-breaks round them, "occupies a little more time", so that "the shorter and dangerous plan of burning is preferred by most men".31 Burning of straw after threshing operations and use of fire in land clearing in wooded areas constituted additional hazards which received increased attention from the police in the later period, as did the risk of fires from traction threshing engines moving through ranching districts. Most of the 165 convictions secured under the Prairie Fire Ordinances in the year ending September 30, 1915 in southern Saskatchewan concerned settlers burning strawstacks or stubble without the necessary precautions. In Yorkton Sub-District alone all twenty-eight convictions pertained to farmers clearing their land under these circumstances. Much criticism was levied against justices who imposed only nominal fines for contraventions of the law, while in commenting upon one fine of $100 and costs, the Commissioner recorded that a "few deterrent sentences of this sort would stop the risk of fires".32

It was inevitable that settlers would acquire a false sense of security during the years when damage was minimal, and fail to provide adequate defences in subsequent years when extremely dry springs or autumns might increase the danger. In 1900, for example, wet seasons in which not many fires occurred tended to induce a luxuriant growth of both grass and weeds which provided large amounts of inflammable material. The settlers also attracted criticism for their generally apathetic attitude towards defending themselves. Relative to southern Assiniboia in the mid-1890's it was noted that:

In connection with prairie fires, it is proper here to give credit to the settlers in sparsely populated ranching districts; they turn out well, and there is no comparison between their work and that of the residents in thickly settled districts, who generally look to the police for manual help, or hope for a rain to put them out.33

In many cases, settlers were convicted for refusing to turn out for fire duty when asked by the police or other fire guardians to do so. The Ordinances had originally specified the limits within which a person could be called to assist in putting out a fire as five miles, but in 1893 this distance was doubled. The task of the police in securing convictions of persons suspected of initiating fires was made exceedingly difficult by refusals on the part of neighbours to provide evidence. The police superintendent at Battleford maintained that in the matter of prairie fires, the police "suffer more abuse from the unthinking settler than about any of their other numerous duties".34

The other ex officio fire guardians comprised all justices of the peace and overseers of local improvement districts. Fire guardians were also appointed by the Territorial Government, but when the Department of Agriculture of the

34 Ibid., p. 129.
North-West Territories was organized in 1897 it was found that no records had been kept of appointments to such posts. Over 500 persons were thought still to be on duty, but only 160 of those approached expressed willingness to continue.\textsuperscript{38} The fire guardian service, a wholly voluntary organization, did not prove too effective, and most of the convictions were secured through the efforts of the police force.

Undoubtedly, fires were often started by lightning amongst the dry, inflammable vegetation. Borchert considers that the Grassland climates favour fire, just as they favour grass whether there are fires or not. "Fire," he says, "... would simply have been one part of the ecological complex of a region with the climate of the Grassland,"\textsuperscript{37} a view contrary to that of, for example, Sauer and Stewart who echo Macoun's views that:

The real cause of the absence of wood on every part of the region under consideration is undoubtedly prairie fires which sweep over almost every part of it year after year, destroying the seedling trees as long as there are any seeds left to germinate, and year by year killing the bushes until the capacity of the root to send up shoots dies out, and then even willows cease to grow.\textsuperscript{37}

But Stewart is wont to stress the importance of fire as a tool wielded by man, and discounts the efficacy of lightning as a cause.\textsuperscript{38} He agrees with Gleason who wrote in 1913 that he could find "no record of a prairie fire produced by lightning."\textsuperscript{39} Many instances of fires started by lightning were, however, reported by the North-West Mounted Police. Commenting upon such fires in Assinibola, the police inspector at Estevan reviewed the year's experience in 1894 and said, "Lightning could not of course be guarded against, but as it is generally followed by rain, very few fires would run from that cause."\textsuperscript{40} Ideas current in the latter part of the nineteenth century are discussed in the appended letter written in 1895 by John Macoun.

Despite the precautionary measures, even in this later, comparatively humid period the shortgrass plains underwent some serious fires. Many, for example, occurred in south-western Saskatchewan in 1916, notably in the Swift Current and Gull Lake areas. High winds accompanying fires during the threshing season caused much damage to property and stock; three deaths resulted from burns caused by the fires. And in "A" Division, Maple Creek, of the North-West Mounted Police, 125 convictions for contraventions of the Fire Ordinances were obtained.

\textsuperscript{33} Department of Agriculture of the North-West Territories, Annual Report, 1898, p. 83.
\textsuperscript{37} Macoun, J. Manitoba and the Great North West; the field for investment; the home of the emigrant; ... Guelph, 1882, p. 104.
\textsuperscript{40} Canada, Sessional Papers, 1895, Vol. 28, No. 15, p. 63.
PRAIRIE FIRES IN THE NORTH-WEST

Amongst other things, fires constituted an ever-present hazard to both rancher and farmer in the Northwest while settlement was under way. They were doubtless prevalent in earlier periods, especially when drought was severe but by the second decade of this century their severity was necessarily on the decrease in the farming areas peripheral to the shortgrass plains. In 1898, the police superintendent based on Fort Saskatchewan reported that:

In the northern part of the district where the settlement is thicker and the country filling up fast, fires do not run and do the damage they used to do, and the new roads being ploughed up and made have a great influence in checking the spread of these fires. . . .

Similarly from the inspector at Prince Albert in a later period:

Although possibly as many fires take place as heretofore, yet the extent of the area burned over is not so large. This is doubtfully due to the fact that whereas large tracts of land used to remain unbroken by road or fireguard, the country now is subdivided to such an extent that a fire is soon automatically stopped by its coming into contact with a road or similar obstruction.

Finally, with reference to the small mileage of fireguards ploughed in Saskatchewan in 1919, it was stated that, “With the setting up of these sections and construction of roads in these districts [in the south-west] the need for fireguards is disappearing. . . .”

In conclusion, prairie fires comprised a dangerous, recurrent element during the settlement of the parkland and prairie plains of the North-West. Despite manifold attempts to control them and their instigation, they often provoked hardship, and sometimes fatalities. These continued into later periods in the shortgrass ranching areas of south-western Saskatchewan and southern Alberta. The hazard lost its importance in more northerly regions owing to the reasons quoted above. Further, the prevalence and effects of prairie fires both in the grassland and the transitional woodland areas stimulated, and still provokes questions and speculations as to the place of fire as a primary factor influencing the distribution of the grasslands, not only in the North-West but throughout North America.

S. Raby

3 Saskatchewan, Department of Highways, Annual Report, 1919-20, p. 11.
APPENDIX

JOHN MACOUN ON PRAIRIE FIRES

The accompanying letter, dated January 31, 1895, was written in response to a request by the Dominion Minister of the Interior for information on the effect of prairie fires in the North-West Territories upon the soil and climate of the region.

John Macoun, writer of the letter, was at that time Assistant Director and Naturalist to the Geological Survey of Canada, a post he held until his death in 1920. Born in County Down in 1831, he emigrated to Canada in 1850 and while farming acquired some knowledge of botany and geology. Four years after his appointment to teach these two subjects at Albert College, Belleville, he participated as the botanist on Sanford Fleming's Expedition across the Prairies and Mountains to the Pacific in search of a route for the Canadian Pacific Railway. Although it was not published until 1874, he wrote in his report on this expedition about the lands between Manitoba and Edmonton:

A botanist is struck with the absence of mosses, and asks himself the cause. The answer comes at once. Moisture is evaporated too quickly. How shall we prevent this? Cover the land with trees, by stopping the annual fires. Three-fourths of our prairie is within the line of natural forest. The home of the Aspen in Canada is on dry, sandy or gravelly hills. The aspen is the sole forest timber of our interior plains, and was seen at intervals all the way across to Edmonton. Were the fires stopped most of the land would soon be covered with aspen and willows,— the former on the drier grounds, the latter in the marshy spots.

In 1879 he became an Explorer for the Canadian Government in the North-West Territories, spending the subsequent summers "in traversing the least known parts and investigating the flora, meteorology and physical phenomena of the country". His book, Manitoba and the Great North-West, was published in 1882 and derived from these experiences.

Macoun became Botanist to the Geological and Natural History Survey in 1881, and in the summer prior to his writing the letter had visited the Prairies to collect specimens for a proposed new museum. On his return to the east in July, 1894 after visiting Medicine Hat, Crane Lake and the Cypress Hills, he later noted, "At that time the grass was so dry on the prairie that I noticed eight fires starting from the sparks from the engine before we reached Swift Current." After the extremely dry season of 1894 much discussion was under way as to whether the North-West would burn up, the lakes would dry up, and the general belief was that the general belief was that the general belief was that the general belief was that the general belief was that the general belief was that the general belief was that the general belief was that the general belief was that the general belief was that the general belief was that the general belief was that the general belief was that the general belief was that the general belief was that the general belief was that the general belief was that the general belief was that the general belief was that the general belief was that the general belief was that the general belief was that the general belief was that

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1 Canada, Department of the Interior, File Number 123293, J. Macoun to Hon. T. M. Daly, November 21, 1889.
2 See Grant, G. M., Ocean to Ocean; Sanford Fleming's Expedition Through Canada in 1872, London, 1873.
3 Canadian Pacific Railway, Report of Progress on the Explorations and Surveys up to January 1874, Ottawa, 1874, p. 62. Italics in original.
4 Macoun, J. Manitoba and the Great North-West: the field for investment; the home of the emigrant... Guelph, 1882, p. vi.
5 See idem., Autobiography, Ottawa, 1922, p. 266.
6 Ibid., p. 267.
7 This text is not legible.
whether the North-West was not a failure after all "as the country was drying up, the lakes were disappearing and many of the settlers leaving the land".7 Macoun was then sent out with a small party in the summer of 1895 to see whether the general belief was founded on fact. In the subsequent winter he wrote a report of his trip, and explained "that the drought was broken and that there was every prospect of a prosperous year." 8

The complete letter draws heavily upon G. M. Dawson's Report of 1875,9 and also directly upon Macoun's own contribution to a Canadian Pacific Railway Report published five years later.10 Other sources include work by J. D. Dana11 and A. R. C. Selwyn.12 Only the extended quotation from Dawson has been excised from the original text. It is curious that Macoun does not mention Hurlbert's pamphlet on the question, which was published in 1872, since that writer discounted the influence of fires in favour of a climatic solution to the problem of the prairie vegetation: "The existence of forests over a region of 2,000 miles by 1,000 miles, and their failure where, and only where, the summer rains fail and the arid winds prevail, ought to have suggested the explanation." 13

Many questions are raised in the letter, not least amongst which is that of the origin and persistence of the grasslands, together with the associated subject of man's role in this environment. Thought on the problem has tended to replace categorical notions stressing human interference or the influence of the bison with an emphasis upon climatic factors.14 There are some, however, who would lay stress, with Sauer, upon man's activities. He states, "I know of no basis for a climatic grassland climax, but only of a fire grass 'climax' for soils permitting deep rooting." 15 Writers on Western Canada in the second half of the nineteenth century tended to follow Palliser's Report in regarding the parkland prairie as the remnant following the firing of heavily timbered country, as, for example, between Fort Carlton and Edmonton.16 In the conclusion to a detailed review of the question presented to the British Association in Cardiff in August, 1891, Christy contended:

that fire is the agency which has destroyed the forest-growth which once covered the prairies, and that, were the fires stopped once and for all,

8 Loc. cit.
10 Macoun, J., "General remarks on the land, wood and water of the North-West Territories, from the 102nd to the 115th meridian, and between the 51st and 53rd parallels of latitude, Appendix No. 14, Report and Documents in Reference to the Canadian Pacific Railway, 1880, Ottawa, p. 242.
trees in plenty would soon grow up in all parts. Had these fires been stopped some fifty years ago, it is not. I believe, too much to say that the whole of the true prairie region would now have been more or less thickly covered with light forests of deciduous trees, while the province of Manitoba, instead of being known as the “Prairie Province,” would better have merited the title of the “Sylvan Province.”

Despite this, he went on to deny that there are no subsidiary causes, for instance “The exceptional dryness of the North American climate.” And S. E. Dawson in his study on Canada and Newfoundland found that:

Much speculation has arisen concerning the treelessness of these plains, whether it was the result of a deficient rainfall or whether it is due to the custom of setting fire to the prairie, which has been practised by the Indians from time immemorial, as shown by the blackness of the surface soil.

It is not to be taken that burning has not had significant effects in restraining successions from grassland to woodland, but stress must be accorded both past and present climatic conditions. Fire and biotic agencies acted as brakes upon the southward re-advance of woodland species following a dry, late-postglacial period when the subsequently degraded black soils of the northern parkland were formed under grassland vegetation. Moss notes that prairie has tended to persist on hot, dry situations, especially where they are swept by drying winds.

Serious palaeoclimatological investigations did not, however, begin in North America as a whole until the 1920’s, but there is mounting evidence of a dry, warm Xerothermic Period associated with a more widespread distribution of both prairie grasslands and oak-hickory forests. This is thought to have been contemporaneous with the formation of many of the continent’s dune areas.

Hon. T. M. Daly,
Minister of the Interior
Ottawa.

Sir,

In compliance with your request, I beg to submit the following report on the effect of prairie fires in the North West Territories upon the soil and climate of the region.

An attempt is here made to summarize the opinions regarding the prairies of the North West held by competent observers from twenty to thirty years ago and the causes which, in their opinion, had produced and were producing them at that time. The same opinions were held then as now respecting prairie fires. They were believed to cause local disturbances and to intensify the droughts which tended to harden the soil so that the rain, which under ordinary conditions would penetrate it, ran off and collected in hollows or was otherwise lost. More attention has apparently been given to the influence of forests on rainfall and

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19 Moss, E. H., op. cit., p. 519.
PRAIRIE FIRES IN THE NORTH-WEST

The summer droughts are far reaching in their effects and are altogether outside of local causes, as they are not confined to one section of the continent, but more or less to all parts. In the summer of 1894 Nebraska, Kansas, Montana, Dakota and many other States suffered from drought, but these disturbances could not be charged to prairie fires in all parts, though they might in some. Yet to deny that fires have nothing to do with the drying up of the country would be to admit a mistake as to say that they were the one cause. The annually recurring fires are an enormous loss to the country and a permanent injury, and I have no hesitation in placing on record my most decided opinion that their repeated occurrence, during the last ten or more years, has lessened the value of the country at least twenty per cent. No one can pass over the unburnt country and that which has been fire scorched without seeing the painful evidence of the burnings in the shorter grass, the burnt-out sod and the general weakening of the vitality of the prairie vegetation. The evils of the repeated burnings are so apparent to the least observant traveller that it has been a matter of wonder that a strong and determined effort has not been made in the North West to put a stop to the evil that is so patent to every one. Dr. G. M. Dawson in 1875, in his report of the Geology and Resources of the Forty-Ninth Parallel drew attention to the evil effects of prairie fires at that time and cited cases from the United State's Geological Survey reports on an earlier date. In the report of my explorations in the Prairies in 1879 I called attention to the same subject and showed the great injury fire did then. These statements were true twenty years ago and with the lapse of time, instead of being laid away as the theories of scientific cranks, can now be produced and repeated with the addition that what was so apparent in certain parts of the country as early as 1875 is now a fixed condition over a large part of Western Assiniboia and Eastern Alberta. I will now quote the statements alluded to above, and will afterwards show how the present state of things can be altered and better conditions produced.

Prof. J. D. Dana in an article on the "Origin of Prairies", in the American Journal of Science for 1865, after discussing the various theories regarding their origin sums up with these words: "In view of the facts we believe we are safe in deducing the following conclusions:

1. A prevalence of moisture is connected directly with a prevalence of forests.
2. In a moist region soils of all kinds not under water may become forest covered, from the finest silt to the coarsest and loosest gravel, from the sourest marsh mud and drying peat swamp to the most fertile alluvium.

3. Grass-region may encroach on forest-regions, or the reverse, according to the dryness or moistness of the country.

4. If moistness, then, is especially favourable to the growth of forests, a change in the moistness of a region occasioned by geological events would be attended by a change in the adaptedness to such growth."

In taking up the first proposition where it applies to prairies he shows that no matter what the soil, trees grow where there is a sufficiency of moisture and instances "the slopes dividing the alluvial terraces of many prairie regions where outcropping layers bring moisture to the surface."

Speaking of the second statement, he shows that "loose gravel is quick to feel droughts; the clayey soil less so and the best vegetable mould still less so".

The third article is very important as it shows exactly how the foothills of the Rocky Mountains and a great part of the interior plateau of British Columbia appear at the present time and what they will be like when the present old trees disappear.

As early as 1873 Mr. Hayden, Director of the Geological Survey of the United States, called attention to the apparent change of climate going on in Dakota, for in his report of that year in speaking of the country along the Cheyenne River, he says:

"Not only did I find these dry lakes entirely devoid of water, but the surface of the sediment which had been deposited by the water was dry and powdery and strongly alkaline. Even the lakes which contain water appear to be getting lower and lower, if we judge by the water-lines along the shores. And this calls to mind another fact bearing upon the condition of the climate, indicated by the facts stated, and that is that all through this section of country I noticed numerous evidences of former swampy spots where the grass still is more luxuriant than that surrounding it, but the water has disappeared from the surface. For some time I supposed that these were points where water accumulated and remained longest in the spring of the year; although this explanation will suffice for the condition of many, yet there are some things connected therewith which I can only explain by the supposition that they are gradually growing drier."

In the writer's report to the Railway Department for the year 1879 and published in the report of the Canadian Pacific Railway for 1880 is the following paragraph:

"Let the sward be taken off by fire or any other means, and instead of rain penetrating into the soil it will run off into the hollows, and the land without grass will become drier. Clay soil that bakes without cracking, and land without sward will necessarily allow the rain water to run off, and small streams will be found in the hollows, and, eventually stream valleys will be the consequence. These we found at the Hand Hills under the above conditions. To receive the

water, then, the grass of the prairie necessary to prevent waters or at least to run the water to the streams.

Prairie Fires

fire that seed in last season, I am sure it was possible that the rain which has become cease, and where grass (or mulch) been so much that it is not retained by native fire had not be burnt over, but comparison to the loam and exposed dug into the soil as gravelly, where

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water, then, the surface must either be broken up or covered with a thick carpet of grass, which would act as a mulch; this it finds in the old grass. It is quite true that horses prefer the young grass to the old and young mixed together, but it is just as true that fires passing over the country where the rainfall is light prevent nearly all the grass from seedling that year, and it is only the second year after a fire that seed in any quantity can be obtained. When collecting grasses and carices last season, I always obtained my specimens on the unburnt ground. It is quite possible that the plain appears less arid now than when Palliser crossed it, as owing to the absence of the enormous herds of buffalo the grass now remains from year to year, if not burnt off. The term "short, crisp grass of the prairie," which has become a household phrase, will not be applicable as soon as the fires cease, and where the water runs off now it will pass into the soil through the old grass (or mulch). Three years without fires would change the growth of grass so much that many would think the rainfall had increased, when it was only retained by nature's own covering. On the prairie east of Long Lake, where the fire had not been, the grass was twice as long (July 4th) as where it had been burnt over, but the horses always went to the new grass, although quite short in comparison to the other. Here the frequent fires had gradually lessened the surface loam and exposed many of the little pebbles scattered through it, and had we not dug into the soil we would have done as others did before us, classified the soil as gravelly, whereas it contains very little of it."

"Wherever the grass was long the ground was soft, but the reverse was the case where the grass was short, from whatever cause. Mulching, then, is what the country wants, and it can never get this until stringent steps are taken to prevent prairie fires."

A careful perusal of the foregoing statements will show that the very earliest observers noticed the apparent drying up of the country and gave their reasons for it. All drew attention to the injury done by fires and showed their ill effects, but up to the present no serious attempt has been made to put a stop to them or lessen their annual occurrence.

All the verbal accounts which have reached us point to the same cause and all agree that the prairie area is being increased by annual fires. My own observations show that the constant burning of the grass prevents it seedling and the destruction of the sod and consequent extinction of the grass follow as a matter of course. Without any change in the rainfall it can be seen that in a series of years a region with a light rainfall may pass from forest to an arid prairie where even a permanent sod cannot form. That this has been the case in many places on our prairie can be shown as well as in the whole district of the Foothills south of Calgary.

That certain districts of western Assiniboia and southern Alberta are becoming drier and more arid every year by the constant burning of the grass is absolutely certain. That the general rainfall is lessened permanently by these fires however is quite a different matter. Without meteorological observations extending through a serious of years no absolutely accurate opinion can be given, but the writer is led to believe that there are cycles of dry years when the evap-
oration is much greater than the water received into the lakes and ponds, and in these years there is a constant drying up. On the other hand, there are facts to show that there are a series of years when the lakes fill up and many dry marshes become lakes.

From a careful perusal of the foregoing extracts, it will be seen that in the early seventies the prairie country was very dry, and both Dr. Selwyn and Dr. Dawson speak of the recent drying up of ponds and marshes. In 1879, 1880, 1881 I was on the prairie and found a different state of things. In 1879 the marshes, ponds and lakes were full, and in June of that year I ascended the Assiniboine to Fort Ellice on a steamboat and when exploring the region south of the Touchwood Hills reached Long Lake on an old road at least five miles from the head of the lake where it was a mile and a half wide. The road we were on had passed straight across the lake at a previous time, but now turned up the lake and passed round its head. In trying the crossing my assistant was nearly drowned, and we, too, passed around the northern end of the lake. In 1886 the water had shrunk so much that the old road was again used, though a year or two after it was again covered.

In 1881, on the western shore of Lake Manitoba, I sailed over the old wagon roads that had been used to take in supplies ten years before when the Canadian Pacific Railway supplies were being taken in, and the telegraph line erected on dry ground in 1874 was all afloat and had to be attended to by a man in a boat. This region, although out of the fire area, is now dry and settlers are living where thirteen years ago there was three feet of water.

These cases are cited to show that the present condition of the North West may be a temporary state and that a change of seasons may be looked for at any time. Believing that such a change is sure to come, and possibly very soon, I feel it a duty to urge on the government the adoption of remedial measures at once. In view of the expected increased rainfall and cooler summers, a stringent fire protection law should be passed at once so that the sward in the years of increased rainfall may cover the ground as a mulch and strengthen the grass and loosen the earth for the dry series which may be expected to follow. The only reasonable hope for the south-western part of the prairie region is to assist nature and she will do her work effectively.

The making of laws is no doubt a proper step towards protection, but it is a fact that laws have been made, but owing to the apathy of the settlers, the local press and the constituted municipal authorities, they have become almost, if not altogether, noneffective. Public opinion is only becoming roused now, but at the time the laws were made the government took effective steps to stop the then prevailing fires which were chiefly produced by Indians and travellers. The advent of railways and influx of settlers, together with non-administration of the fire laws, has intensified the situation so that year after year the fires crossing the prairie have burned off the grass, weakened the vitality of the roots and in many cases destroyed the sod completely and where the soil consists of humus have burned much of it off. Had the existing laws been enforced the immense damage caused by the fires would in great measure have been prevented.

As showing that last season of grass. In one that was burned by lightning storms in a week, the entire prairie was covered with grass. The amount of grass the fire would have killed, even if it reached the grass, would have been very much greater than it did. The writers recognize the fact and emphasized their statements accordingly.

Scarcely an incident in the history of the province for many years. Even the first fire in the northern section was caused by a man who was caught in a fire, and the fire did not spread except for the wind. A man who claimed to be the first to make a fire is shown to have been the first to make a fire for a purpose.

Along the railway, however, the fire protection has been carried on by the engines of the railway companies, and the house by the company.

Fires start from fires, as was seen last season, when the party setting up a fire in the prairie met with a fire. The fire was seen spreading, and the party setting it up was quick in extinguishing the fire. A few prompt acts of legislation were needed.

Geological Surv
Jan. 31, 1895.
PRAIRIE FIRES IN THE NORTH-WEST

As showing the increasing aridity of the soil caused by burnings, I may say that last season and in that of 1893 fires were caused by lightning setting fire to the grass. In one thunder storm last summer three fires were started at Crane Lake by lightning striking the prairie. It may be asked how such an occurrence could take place during a thunder storm. The answer is simple. Owing to the radiation of heat from the prairie, the rain from the storm cloud was really dissipated before it reached the ground. Had the ground been covered with old grass this could hardly have happened, as there would have been coolness in the soil and rain would have fallen before the storm centre reached that point. It is needless to multiply instances, a careful perusal of the quotations will show that all the writers recognized the injury done by fires and later observers have only emphasized their statements.

Scarcely any two individuals may have the same plan to put an effectual stop to these fires, but I may be permitted to suggest a few points as I have spoken so much of their occurrence.

HOW TO PREVENT PRAIRIE FIRES

Along the lines of railway, proper fireguards would do much toward prevention, but rigid rules holding section men responsible for all fires along lines of railway would do more. Section-men should be required by law to burn during the first week in July all the grass between the Railway and the fire-guard or as soon thereafter as the dryness of the grass will permit, and afterwards proceed to any smoke that may be seen rising near the railway within the limits of their section.

Some simple plan like this would prevent nearly all the fires that constantly occur along the Canadian Pacific and other railways as nearly all the fires set by the engines occur in the afternoon and could be reported at the first section house by the conductor of the train that either started the fire or saw it.

Fires started by travellers are more difficult to prevent or put out, but a few officials at various points could be instructed to proceed to any point where a smoke was seen and aid in putting out the fire and following up the party or parties who caused the fire. A law should be passed clearly defining the penalties for causing a prairie fire and making them very severe, except in the case where the party setting the fire remained by it and used his best efforts in preventing its extension or putting it out. In this case the penalty should be remitted and the fire recorded as purely accidental.

On account of the treelessness of the prairie the smoke of prairie fires can be seen for a very great distance and were there fire marshalls in the country, they could proceed to the fire and very easily locate the point where the fire started and afterwards follow up the party who caused it and bring him to justice. A few prompt convictions would do more to stop the fires than a volume of legislation.

I have the honour to be, Sir,
Your obedient servant,

John Macoun, Naturalist.

Geological Survey of Canada
Jan. 31, 1895.
Prince Albert River Lots

The part of the Prince Albert Settlement which had been occupied in long lots by settlers on unsurveyed lands as early as 1868-1870 was designated by the Department of the Interior as the Prince Albert Special Survey. When the lots were first surveyed in 1878 they consisted of some 14,000 acres divided into eighty-three river lots varying in size from fifty-seven to 315 acres. At the time of the survey they were claimed by sixty-eight settlers, merchants, businessmen and church organizations. It was not until 1884 that the settlers were at last able to gain patents for their lands when the claims were investigated by William Pearce, Inspector of Dominion Lands. The investigation culminated a period in which repeated requests had been made by the settlers that the lands be surveyed, claims verified and patents issued. If these requests had reflected a genuine interest to gain permanent possession of farm lands, it would be expected that the settlers would have applied for patents as soon as possible, but such was not the case.

In 1884, thirteen patents were issued but nine of these were issued to the Hamilton Land Company, two were issued to businessmen and two were issued to farmers. In 1885, three were issued to the Bishop of Saskatchewan and one to D. H. Macdowall. In the period 1886-1889, fifteen lots were patented, twelve being issued to farmers but five of these were issued to Thomas Swanston, described in McPhillip's Saskatchewan Directory as a "capitalist" i.e. a businessman, so it could be inferred that he was interested in the land for speculative purposes. Of the remaining river lots, fifteen were patented in the period 1890-1899 and eighteen were not patented until after 1900. In this latter group, some lots were not patented until the 1920's but most were patented prior to 1910. The majority of those who received patents after 1900 had been resident in the Special Survey from the 1870's. These figures show that despite demands that the government speed up the process of issuing patents, the settlers themselves did not apply promptly for patents when they had the opportunity.

Delays in obtaining some patents were due to seed grain liens registered against the land. Poor crops in 1884 necessitated the provision of seed grain for the 1885 crop season. Administrative delays and the outbreak of the rebellion prevented the distribution of the seed grain and very few crops were harvested in 1885. When the government provided seed grain for 1886, liens were placed against the land to insure payment of the seed grain debts. Because liens had to be paid prior to issue of patent, the generally depressed economic conditions of the community in the mid 1880's would have prevented some settlers from discharging their debts. It is possible that lack of money also prevented settlers from being able to purchase lands awarded to them by the Dominion Lands Board. There would naturally be a shortage of money in the community because of the poor crops, the effects of the Rebellion on the economy of the North-West, and the collapse of the boom period in the Prince Albert Settlement when pro-

1 Unless otherwise indicated, information used in this article is based on the homestead records in the Archives of Saskatchewan.
2 For an account of the land claims problem, see Saskatchewan History, Volume XI X, No. 1, p. 1.
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pects of economic growth declined because of the isolation of the community from the expanding areas in the southern part of the Territories. In some cases delays in issue of patents resulted from mere neglect to file applications. It will be seen, when reference is made to specific lots, that some patents were delayed when only small sums were required from rather prosperous residents in order to obtain patents. It would appear that some of these lots were being held for speculative purposes.

A number of river lots changed hands during the period 1878-1882 and it is quite apparent that the 1878 claimants took advantage of the influx of immigrants to sell when they had a chance to make a profit. Although speculation cannot be ruled out as influencing these sales, a statement made by Bishop McLean helps to put such charges of speculation in their proper perspective:

In Prince Albert this summer [town] lots which were purchased for $30 and $50 have changed hands at from $100 all the way up to $300, and that, too, more for mercantile purposes than with a speculative object. As the country develops the price of both town lots and farm property must advance in value.*

One obvious case of speculation in farm lands was the sale of river lot 17. In 1878, Alexander Whitford claimed this lot consisting of some 315 acres, part of which he had bought from William Erasmus, the earliest occupant. On May 10, 1882, Whitford sold the land to Thomas McKay for $1,500, who in turn sold it on December 14 of the same year to James Isbister for $2,500. The improvements on the lot at this time were very small because in 1883 James Isbister claimed to have had twelve acres under cultivation. By 1886, despite limited opportunities to cultivate land during the rebellion, he had sixty acres cropped, indicating that the lot had greater potentialities than realized by the previous owners.

Although the sale of river lot 17 in 1882 was a clear case of speculation, sale of some lands seems to indicate that Bishop McLean's statement was correct. Patrick Anderson bought river lot 23 consisting of 229 acres from William Charles Anderson in the spring of 1880 and sold it to George Inkster in the spring of 1882. The cash value of the improvements on the lot was $600 and the lot was sold for $1,000 so there was not much speculation in this sale as the land would have been sold for less than $2 per acre. Similarly, river lot 41 of 181 acres was bought by John Turner for $300 in 1876. He lived on it until 1881 by which time he had made improvements amounting to $80 to $100. In 1881 he sold the land to R. Chisholm for $700 and this sale would not indicate an attempt at speculation on the part of John Turner. Chisholm might have engaged in speculation as he sold later in 1881 to the agent of the Hamilton Land Company. No selling price was given, but the Company usually paid from $1,200 to $1,800 for a claim.

Many of the farmers sold their lots and moved to the outlying parts of the Prince Albert Settlement. This is indicated by the fact that of the eighty-three river lots only twenty-two patents were ultimately issued to the original claimants or their heirs. Of these, sixteen were issued to eleven farmers, one was issued to

* Prince Albert Times, November 29, 1882.
Map showing some of the Prince Albert River Lots as surveyed in 1878.
the Presbyterian Church, two to the Anglican Bishop of Saskatchewan, and three were patented to persons who, although they carried on some farming, obtained their livelihood from other occupations. A few of the early settlers who left the river lots went into other work in the community and others went elsewhere in the Territories. Whatever their destination, their reasons for moving are not definitely known. The type of person who was not inclined to keep accurate business records, as William Pearce found in his investigations, would scarcely record his reasons for moving from one location to another. In two instances, settlers stated that they moved from the outlying districts to river lots so their children would be closer to schools but none gave reasons for moving away from the river lots. The typical frontier personality is generally accepted as being a person who moves into virgin territory when “civilization” presses around him. For this reason some settlers left Manitoba for the Territories and it is quite possible that settlers moved away from the river lots for the same reason. It is also possible that settlers sold their river lots to obtain money to settle on cheaper lands in the outlying parts of the Prince Albert Settlement. Other settlers left lots near the townsie because they found that farming them was unprofitable.

William Pearce claimed that lots adjacent to the townsie were abandoned for farming purposes because farmers’ crops were being destroyed by cattle kept by the town dwellers. High freight rates on barbed wire and the high cost of lumber combined to make the construction of strong fences too costly when compared to the value of produce grown in enclosed fields. Fences made of poplar poles were too weak to defend cultivated fields from the ravages of livestock in an area where pasturage was limited. Farmers therefore sold their claims and moved to other lands. Because of this effect of the townsie on adjacent farmlands, Pearce suggested that an area bounded by lot 82 on the east and lot 60 on the west might reasonably be abandoned as unfit for agriculture. Most of this area was either a part of the townsie when Pearce made his report or became part of the townsie when it was incorporated in 1885. The lands adjacent to the townsie were purchased, and ultimately patented, by persons who were known more for their business and real estate enterprises than for their agricultural pursuits. Besides much land being transferred from early settlers to these individuals, a number of lots were purchased by a land company, obviously for speculative purposes.

In 1882, the boom year of Prince Albert, the Hamilton Land Company, through its agents John Billings and Thomas McKay, claimed to have purchased a number of lots. By the end of 1884 it had received patents for nine lots and ultimately it obtained patents for two more, all the lots totalling some 2,000 acres. All but one were purchases for which it had to pay both the original occupant for his right to the land, and the government the amount determined by the Lands Board. The company purchased river lot 40 of some 200 acres which was about four miles from the townsie. The previous owner had bought it in 1877 for $100. When the company purchased it in 1882 for $1,800 there were improvements on the lot valued at $500. The settler made a good profit but the

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4 P.A.C. Department of the Interior. Lands Branch File 65366.
company, depending on whether the improvements were of any re-sale value, paid about $6.00 to $9.00 per acre. The payment to the government would have increased the price by approximately $1.00 per acre which meant that the land was relatively expensive when compared to the cheaper lands available in the neighboring sections, and with the boom passing its peak, it is probable that the Company was not able to realize much from its speculation.

It would appear that other speculators were equally unsuccessful in making a quick profit. For example, river lot 58 consisting of 226 acres was claimed by Oluff Olsen, one of the earliest settlers in the district. He and his wife had come to the district in 1865, remained a short time and then returned to reside permanently in 1869. The report of 1877 shows that not only did he claim this lot but that he also claimed 320 acres to the rear of it which he also partially cultivated. Like the other claimants who were on the land prior to 1870, he was allowed a free grant of 160 acres and the balance at $1.00 per acre. Before the decision was made final, Olsen had agreed to sell the land to Thomas McKay for $3,500. McKay was then able to get the land on the same terms which had been offered to Olsen but he did nothing to gain patent to the land. In 1901 the Department of the Interior advised him that since he had done nothing to avail himself of the Lands Board decision, he was to be allowed twenty days in which to determine whether he wanted the free grant to cover the northerly or southerly 160 acres, and to make immediate payment for the balance. When no answer was received by the Department, it issued a patent for the northerly 160 acres and the right to the balance reverted to the Crown. Before the patent was issued, the homestead inspector, reporting on the condition of the land in 1901, stated that part of it was very rough, broken with lakes and was not suitable for cultivation but that it might be useful for pasturage and some hay might be obtained from it in favorable years. The poor agricultural possibilities of the land might have been one of the reasons why McKay did not avail himself of the patent in 1884. The homestead inspector also reported that because the land was only three and a half miles from the town, it could possibly be sold for $3.00 per acre. However, in the depressed conditions of the settlement in the late 1880's and 1890's, a piece of land that distance from the town more than likely could not command that price, and Thomas McKay's investment did not really bring him a good return. The southerly sixty odd acres were ultimately purchased by the Crown for penitentiary purposes.

Thomas McKay lost his claim to a river lot because of his failure to purchase it in 1884. River lot 8 consisting of 146 acres was claimed by James Garson in 1878. In 1882 he sold it to Thomas McKay for $150 and in 1884 the Lands Board allowed McKay to purchase it from the government at $1.00 per acre. However he did nothing about it. In 1899 he was advised that he would be allowed thirty days in which to make payment. He did not act on this and his claim was cancelled. This delay is hardly in keeping with the fact that Thomas McKay was one of the leaders in the demands for surveys and issue of patents. It is worth noting that he was chairman of the October, 1881, meeting which requested that patents be issued by the government with as little delay as possible.
Fidler applied for the land as a homestead entry but was advised by the Department that river lots in the special survey were not available for free homestead entry unless the applicant could prove squating rights prior to the settlement of claims in 1884. The best offer the Department could make to him was that he could purchase the land at $1.00 per acre, the same price it had offered to McKay, and the purchase would be subject to homestead conditions. This offer was not satisfactory to Fidler and he bought other land. In 1904, John W. Pollock accepted the same terms and received patent for the land in 1908. This and other similar cases show that, despite a great lapse of time, the Department of the Interior did not alter the original conditions of sale if it felt that the conditions were just. These cases also show that the Department was quite generous in holding the offers open for the original claimant or his assignee as long as possible.

A lengthy delay occurred in the application for patent for lot 15 which was occupied by William Poch in 1877 who claimed he had purchased it from John Henry Anderson. Pocha was in actual residence on the land for only one year and then sold it to Edward Fidler. Nothing was done about getting the patent until 1906 when Fidler's son wrote to the Department to enquire about the patent. It appears that Edward Fidler, although able to obtain the patent in 1884 just did not bother applying for it until 1908. The Department issued the patent a few weeks after receiving the application.

Edward Fidler also claimed river lot 16 consisting of 174 acres, which was awarded to him by the Lands Board in 1884. He had previously lived in Manitoba on a claim at Headingley for which he had been given a free patent by the government as an old settler. After living on the Manitoba claim for about twenty years, he moved to Prince Albert and bought lot 16 from Edward Anderson in 1879. By 1884 his improvements consisted of a house worth $500, other buildings worth $300, an eighty-acre fenced field worth $200 and thirty acres of breaking valued at $150. All of his improvements totalled $1,150. Until 1896 he had an average of sixty acres cropped each year and also twenty-five head of cattle and six horses. The improvements and extent of farming compare favorably with other farms in the district and would indicate that it was not a matter of finances which prevented him from applying for patent. Fidler moved to Battleford in 1896 but later returned and then made application for the lot in 1903. By this time the value of the improvements had declined to $800. Before receiving patent for the land he sold his right to it to William John Miller for $600, in whose name the patent was issued in 1904. The long delay in applying for patent again indicates that the clamor for patents in the 1880's was partly unjustified.

Documents concerning river lot 76 contain an indenture dated May 2, 1870, which for its very uniqueness should be mentioned. It is entirely possible that earlier indentures exist for lands in the Prince Albert Settlement as the Rev. James Nisbet could have sold land to some of the tenants on lot 78, claimed by the Presbyterian Mission, but the earliest indenture in the documents compiled by William Pearce in 1884 is for lot 76:

Agreement for the sale of House and Lands Articles of Agreement, made this twenty-second day of May, one thousand Eight Hundred and Seventy
—between Joseph Badger of Prince Albert of the first part and James
Dreaver of the same place, of the second part—witness—that Joseph
Badger of the first part, for, and in consideration of two horses to him
in hand delivered has agreed to sell, to James Dreaver of the second part,
his house and twelve chains of lands not long ago said lot being No. 3 from
P. Mission—and that J. Badger of the first part agrees to leave the fence
on the lot—also to give possession of the house &c to Mrs. Dreaver on
her return from the plains—say July 1st.

In witness whereof we have hereunto set our hands, the day and year above
written.

In 1873 Dreaver sold the lot to Samuel McKenzie for $1,000, at which time
Dreaver had about thirty acres cropped and improvements totalling $600. In
1877 it was reported by A. L. Russell, Dominion Lands Surveyor, that a good
large two-storied house was nearly completed on the lot. McKenzie's crop was
the only one described in detail. With forty-five acres under cultivation, he grew
“500 bushels of wheat, 300 bushels of barley, 70 bushels of onions, 100 bushels of
turnips, 10 bushels of carrots, 100 bushels of potatoes, 200 head of cabbage,
&c.”

Judging by the report, McKenzie was one of the more active farmers in the
special survey. In 1879 he was reported to have had about seventy acres under
crop and buildings on the farm worth about $1,300. McKenzie died in June, 1879,
and letters of administration were taken out by Thomas McKay and George
Tait. The Lands Board awarded the estate 160 acres free grant and the balance
of 110 acres at $1.00 per acre. Patent was issued to the administrators in 1892
when the youngest child of Samuel McKenzie had reached the age of eighteen.
The delay in issuing patent in this case was caused by legal reasons in connection
with the administration of the estate.

The information concerning river lots 81 and 82 is possibly the most detailed
and informative on a farm lot in the special survey. These lots,
consisting of 383 acres, were occupied by John MacDonald. He was born in
Kildonan, Manitoba, and came to the Prince Albert district in the service of the
Presbyterian Mission in 1868, at which time he marked out the lands which later
became known as river lots 81 and 82. When the Hudson's Bay reserve was
surveyed on the north-south system he ran his lines parallel to those of the
reserve. However, John and George McKay, on neighboring lots, ran their lines
at right angles to the river as was the custom in many river lot settlements laid
out by the squatters. These lines, running back for two miles at angles to adjacent
lots resulted in fields cultivated by the McKays being at the rear of MacDonald's
lots, and overlapping with lands which would have been his had all lines been
run on north-south lines. Despite MacDonald's protests, George McKay claimed
the lands. When the survey was made in 1878, some settlement had to be made
concerning the disputed ownership. This was done in the presence of Mr. Aldous,
Dominion Land Surveyor, and the decision was reached that George McKay
would use such lands as proved to be on lots 81 and 82 for three consecutive years,
1879-1881, at the end of which time they were to revert to John MacDonald as a
claim to right of purchase. It would appear that in 1881 MacDonald felt the need


In 1869 M. B. MacIntosh had a small store. It was not until 1870 that he set
up a proper store. The store was located on the twenty-fourth concession
of Township No. 11, at the junction of the North Saskatchewan River and the
Moose river. The store was well equipped with supplies and groceries and
was a store where the farmers and the settlers could get all that they
needed. The store was well known for its liberal condition. The store was
run by Mr. MacIntosh and his wife, and they were known for their
hospitality and friendly disposition. The store was a great success and
brought in a lot of business for the settlers. The store was a great
convenience to the settlers and became a part of their daily lives.

Although the store was a great success, it was not without its problems. The
store was located in a remote area and the farmers had to travel long distances
to get to the store. This was a great inconvenience for the settlers. The store
was also vulnerable to theft and vandalism. However, the store was well
protected and the settlers trusted Mr. MacIntosh and his wife to run the
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Prince Albert River Lots

...to protect his interest in these lots for he filed an affidavit on February 5th, stating that he was in possession of the lots and that he had not disposed of them to any person. Such an affidavit was, before the settlement of the land claims in the district, the customary way of placing prior claims before the Dominion Lands Agent. In February, 1884, MacDonald filed an affidavit with Mr. Pearce supporting his claims to the land by giving details of residence, cultivation and other improvements. Although similar details were requested of all claimants, those given by MacDonald are of greater interest than most as they show the gradual development of the farm into one of the more extensive in the special survey.

In 1869 MacDonald let out a contract to a person to break some land and haul out logs for buildings. This person did not fulfill the contract and it was not until 1872 that MacDonald was able to crop any land. In that year he cropped seven acres and in succeeding years, twenty-two acres, thirty acres, fifty acres, fifty acres, sixty acres, seventy acres, one hundred acres, one hundred and thirty acres, one hundred acres and fifty acres. In 1884 MacDonald claimed he had 240 acres broken which was valued at $1,200. The buildings on the lots consisted of a house worth $3,000; a store worth $1,200; a storehouse and granary, $800; milk house, $100; an ice house, $100; horse stables, $500 and cow byres, $500. MacDonald also had sixty head of cattle, nine working horses and 150 acres of cultivated fenced land. Although the possession of an ice house might not have been unique in the settlement, MacDonald was one of the few claimants to list such a building. The only building not owned by MacDonald on the lots was a store which he valued at $800.

Although MacDonald claimed he did not take up the land for speculative purposes, and as proof mentioned that he could have sold the lots to the agent of Martin Mossom Boyd for about $1,200, it was obvious that the expanding townsite would invariably include part of his lands. Proof that he was a bona fide settler was in the extensive improvements he made. By 1884, though, MacDonald had already started to subdivide his lots and had sold some, one of ten acres being sold for $3,000. When the Lands Board made its decisions, MacDonald's claim was in class 1 and he was allowed a free grant of 160 acres, another 160 acres at $1.00 per acre and the balance of twenty-three acres at $2.00 per acre. When reporting on the settlement of land claims, William Pearce stated that the most liberal construction had been placed on all land claims, and as a result, he felt that “the percentage of claimants who will be dissatisfied therewith will be very small—probably not 5 per cent,—and of these more than one-half will be only on the grounds that the claims have not had as liberal treatment as the claims of others.” Although the Prince Albert Times was one of the most vigorous critics of government delay in settling land claims, once they were settled it did not mention any reaction to the decisions of the Lands Board. Very few government files mention any dissatisfaction but John MacDonald was dissatisfied and he did not waste much time in letting the Minister of the Interior, D. L. MacPherson, know exactly how he felt. Most of the decisions of the Lands Board were signed

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* P.A.C. Department of the Interior. Lands Branch File 65366.
Map showing subdivisions of River Lots 81 and 82 made by John MacDonald in 1884. Wellington Avenue probably corresponds to present day 6 Avenue East and Sarah Street to 6 Street East.
and verified on April 14, 1884, and were made known shortly thereafter. In May MacDonald wrote to the Minister:

As this decision is directly the opposite of what I have been promised and led to expect by speeches made in the House and through the Country both by yourself and other members of the Government, I feel justified in appealing to you for a reversion of this decision. And I feel satisfied that if you would read the evidence taken by Mr. Pearce the gross injustice of the Land Board's decision would become instantly apparent and if you will further read the evidence taken in other cases and the decisions based thereon you will at once see that the Actual bona fide Settler in this case has not even been treated as well as the Speculative squatter.

... I received this land from the Indians and was exercising proprietary rights and making my living off it before the Government of Canada had any right title or claim to it.

You will also see by comparing the evidence taken in this case with that taken in other cases, that mine is the only claim that is in possession or has been continuously occupied and cultivated by the original occupant that the cultivation and improvement has been largely in excess of the requirements of the present or any past land regulations. I am a farmer and have always been so in the truest sense of the word living on my farm and by my farm. I have had all the difficulties incidental to pioneer life in the early days to contend with, for the use of a team from the Hudson's Bay Co for one day to break with I had to return three days labor. The cost of provisions, seed &c was exhorbitant and had to be paid for in labor 17½ days work for one bag of flour, &c. Through patient, honest, unremitting toil without any outside aid or encouragement I have succeeded in giving my place an intrinsic value not only to my own place but to the whole surrounding country, and yet the Land Board really compel me to pay for my own work. While dozens of others who came here long after who have taken up claim after claim merely to sell them again and yet these men are classed as farmers and receive their land on the same terms that I do. (I can supply you with names and dates of fifty cases) Were it not that all I have in the world is at stake on this farm the Land Boards decision would have caused me to try my fortunes on south side of the International Boundary. I am anxious for Emigrants to come into this country and I want to assist the Govt in their efforts to secure them. But I have waited patiently, hopefully for 14 years for a patent or some official recognition of my claim and if you sustain the decision of the Land Board, would you kindly inform me what answer I am to give to enquiries I receive weekly from Canada and the Old Country "Have the Govt treated you fairly" "How long do you have to wait for a patent" "Are the land laws as liberal as agents represent them to be" "Are the farmers of Manitoba doing right in advising people not to come" &c.

Subsequent correspondence indicates that Mr. MacDonald's request for more lenient purchase terms was not approved. The purchase price was not paid until 1887 and the patents for the lands were issued in June of that year.

John MacDonald was fortunate in the location of the lots he chose in 1868. Although obviously a bona fide farmer, he reaped the benefit of the enhanced value of his lands because of their proximity to the expanding townsite. This
advance in value is a good example of an increase arising from mercantile needs. Speculators were not always favored by such enhanced land values. Some speculators appeared unsuccessful and they delayed obtaining patents for their lands. Some delays were justified inasmuch as they resulted from depressed economic conditions. Unnecessary delays of both farmers and speculators would indicate that some of the agitation prior to 1884 for a speedy settlement of land claims was not justified. The Department of the Interior showed a great deal of forebearance in allowing lengthy delays in applications for patent.

Lloyd Rodwell
DOCUMENTS OF WESTERN HISTORY

Wascana Creek and the "Pile o' Bones"

In 1882 the site for the future city of Regina, capital of the North-West Territories and of the province of Saskatchewan, was selected at the point where the route of the Canadian Pacific Railway crossed a creek variously called Pile o' Bones, Tas d'Os, Manybones, and Bone Creek but officially confirmed as Wascana Creek. A few miles downstream, where its valley is more pronounced and numerous cutbanks occur, was the "Old Crossing," a ford on the historic cart trail from Fort Qu'Appelle to Wood Mountain and Cypress Hills. In that vicinity the buffalo bones had accumulated. The contemporary documents and reminiscences here presented shed light on the origin and significance of this fascinating place name. The Journal of the Anglican missionary, the Reverend J. Hillyer, 1854, and the Report of the British Exploring Expedition, headed by Captain John Palliser, 1857, contain the earliest recorded references to the creek. The item from the Regina Leader, 1883, attributable to its editor, Nicholas Flood Davin, and the excerpt from J. W. Powers' History of Regina, 1897, provide contemporary descriptions, augmented more precisely by the letter written by G. W. Brown, pioneer settler of the Regina district and later Lieutenant-Governor of Saskatchewan. The Davin-Russell correspondence documents the abandonment of "Pile o' Bones" in favour of the mellifluous "Wascana Creek" which, translated, results in the redundancy, "Bone Creek" Creek.

The story told by Dr. A. E. Porter, pioneer physician of Prince Albert, where he arrived in 1878, may provide an added dimension to the significance of the site. If the tradition he repeats is sound, Pile o' Bones was the site of an inter-tribal peace pact, involving at least Assiniboine, Cree, and Sioux Indians. Moreover, it is the burial spot of a noted Dakota chief. Our source material is insufficient to document the event, or the principals involved, although the much-eulogised Mistawasis is readily identifiable. Okimas, the narrator in the story, could be the Okemas, or Okinasis, who with his band settled upon the Beardy reserve, Duck Lake, in 1880. (Ref. Seasonal Papers of Canada, 1882, No. 6, p. 120.) It is hoped that the publication of this account may evoke critical comment from scholars familiar with this period.

A. R. TURNER.

I. From the Journal of the Rev. J. Hillyer, who proceeded westward from Fort Ellice on July 25, 1854:

"Wed. [August] 2. [1854] Reached 'Where the bones are lying', 1 p.m. but found no camp. J's Cameron thought he saw some tents at a distance & went with the boy to reconnoitre, I started with them but found myself too weary to proceed. I had ridden 4 or 5 miles out of the way in the morning to what looked like tents, but it turned out to be the sandy bank of the river's valley wh. assumes this appearance. They brought me back word that there were 3 tents & 4 men with their families, but that he J's C. thought they were horse thieves for they had already begun to ask for my horse. That there was a camp of 21 tents 3 days Journey from where they were. I at once determined to go to them in the morning." (Records of the Church Missionary Society, Series C 1/0, microfilm copy in Public Archives of Canada.)

II. From the Journal of the British Exploring Expedition, for the season 1857:

"September 15th.—Off at 4.30 a.m., and halted for breakfast at 10 o'clock beside a small lake; from this we had an extensive view of the Prairie Coteau, extending away to the north-west. Our Indian guide, the peace-maker, to whom we had given the name of Nichiwa, or friend, counselled us to cut wood and bring it along in our carts, as he said it was the last we should see to-day; there is now no more wood except in the valleys of the rivers. Our course was due west, and as far as the eye can reach nothing but desolate plains meet the view; at noon reached a small creek called "The Creek before where the Bones lie;" here we found water and some little grass, also a few
willows and cherry bushes, but no wood fit for fuel. This creek rises from a small lake about 8 miles to the south of the Qu'Appelle Lakes, into which it ultimately flows. Two Indian lodges are here, containing an old man with some women and children; the young men are away in all directions in strong parties hunting buffalo. In the evening reached the Creek where the Bones lie, where we found water and very little grass; a few willows also grew here but no wood fit for fuel.

“September 16th.—Were detained this morning by a thunderstorm, after which we started; arrived early in the afternoon at Moose Jaw Creek; here, at some distance from our camp, we found a considerable number of Indian tents, inhabited altogether by women and children; the men were all away after buffalo; the women were very communicative, asked leave to come and see our wives, and expressed considerable surprise when we told them that we had none. In the centre of their tents was their large medicine lodge, the exterior of which was covered with hieroglyphical characters, birds and animals of various designs.” (Great Britain. Journals, Detailed Reports, etc. relative to the Exploration... of British North America, London, 1863. Note that on the map accompanying this report the stream is labelled “Marybone Creek”.)

III. “The origin of Wascana—which would have been a first rate name for a town or city—was this: About eight miles down the creek there was an immense pile of bones. It was a great place for making pemican (sic). Of the buffalo bones the Indians made a ring about forty feet in diameter.” (Leader, Regina, June 14, 1883.)

IV. From J. W. Powers, History of Regina (Regina, 1887), Ch. I:

“A few miles down the creek from the site of the North-west Mounted Police buildings, stands a small hill or butte which some years ago bore on its modest crest a collection or “pile” of buffalo bones. In the buffalo hunting days hunters usually camped at this crossing of the stream, killing and preparing for Winter the bison captured in the Fall hunt. The rich and vast prairie for miles round the “pile” was a favorite haunt of the buffalo, and where could a hunter’s camp and pemmican factory be more conveniently established than contiguous to the bute aforesaid? That great essential, water, was at hand; poles were to be had for drying-scaffolds; the adjacent grounds were level as billiard tables for the stretching and drying of the skins, and above all, the spot lay in the centre of a region abounding in choice game. Every season contributed its quota of bones to the “pile”, and the red man’s nomenclature, which is of a piece with his entire surroundings, readily furnished a name to the meandering creek which drained that section of country. Oskana in the Cree language means bones, and from this word is derived the more mellifluous and dignified Wascana. And the tortuous stream, which has its marshy source fifteen miles South-west of the Hurricane Hills and meanders Northwestwards along a dozen townships until it reaches the Qu’Appelle River some twenty miles from Regina, is now known to the map of Moose Jaw Creek.

“Old Lime” Hill, on which the city of Regina is built, was raised by the voids left by the bones of countless buffalo. The bones lay side by side in the ground, and when stripped of their flesh and fat, were bleached by the sun and wind. The breeze from this hill is not a fossilized wind, as some have thought, but is the by-product of the earlier windfall from the great bones. As long as there is a ring of bones visible around the hill, the wind will continue to blow. Our half-built city has been built on top of the old buffalo bones, and the bones were the bones of the future. Our history is the history of our bones.”

V. G. W. Birthday, 1918.

“. . . I am in Regina now, but as I do not know 100 per cent. of the town, I laid out a map of it. Since I have been here, the town has grown by leaps and bounds.”

The only high piece of ground was towards the west, but a high piece of ground about nine miles south of the city, which is in the ear of the Indians, was the only high piece of ground about ten miles south of the town. The Indians, who were all small men, would have been high enough to stand on the town, while the town was not much more than five feet high. The town was a half-mile long, lying scattered in the woods, and the Indians, a
WASCANA CREEK AND THE "PILE o' BONES" 113

to the map-makers and world in general, as the Wascana, or Pile of Bones Creek.

In the neighborhood of a quarter of a century ago this pile of buffalo bones stood six feet high, cylinder-shaped, and boasted a diameter of forty feet at its base. In justice to the pile-builders, it will be admitted that the bleached materials were laid with artistic skill and taste, shin and other bones radiating from a centre with that grace characteristic of the rude children of Nature.

Opposite the "pile", and on the east side, was situated the "pond" or "pound" into which were driven the decoyed bison. The bute itself served as a signal station for the sentry, whose duty it was to give notice of the approach of buffalo from the east. We all know Pilot Bute. The Creeks called this hill Ota-sa-wa-pa-win, or "Indian Outlook", and an admirable signal-station it made, standing as it did in a splendid tract of country, from which the roving herds could be observed for miles in all directions.

Old Indian folks had their superstitious failings like other people, and one of these appears to have been, that live buffalo were very loath to abandon a locality which contained the bones of their slain comrades. This belief raised the "pile". Until very recently ample proofs existed of the immense numbers of buffalo that roamed this part of the country. Whitened bones and skeletons paved the prairie, clearly demonstrating that the choice herbage of our lands was dearly loved by the lordly bison. But the bones have recently become an article of commerce, being used in the east as fertilizers. Our half-breeds, as well as those unbelieving Indians who do not expect a sudden re-appearance of the bison while white men rule the Northwest, have been sufficiently unsentimental to collect these bones and carry them to the railroad where they command a ready sale at a few dollars a ton. Fifteen hundred dollars' worth of the bleached bones left Regina alone during 1886.

V. G. W. Brown, Regina, to William Trant, Victoria, B.C., November 26, 1918.

"... I am afraid that you will think that I have been very slow in answering, but as I did not know the exact land that the Pile o' Bones Hill is situated on, I laid your letter aside and the matter was overlooked. However I have since secured the location which you can depend upon as being right.

The original Pile o' Bones Hill is very small, but it is situated on a very high piece of land, which commands a view of the whole country especially towards the south-west. It is situated on the banks of the Wascana Creek about nine or ten miles from Regina, overlooking a very pretty valley, where, in the early days, the Indians, when buffalo hunting, were accustomed to camp. There are large expansions of the creek, some of them quite deep, while the banks, which are, in many cases, sheer up and down, fifty or sixty feet high, are clothed with poplar, which often made an ideal camp for the Indians, as the high banks protected both them and their ponies from the
winds. From the hill they were able to locate the buffalo as far as the eye could reach, and being able to camp in the valley, they did not attract the attention of the buffalo.

When I saw the Pile o' Bones Hill first, which was in 1883, there were about two or three cart loads of the thigh bone of the buffalo piled on the top of it. The Indians were accustomed, from time to time, to visit the place and arrange the pile of bones. I think it was in 1885 that the bones were nearly all carted away by white men who, in those years, were accustomed to gather the bones off the prairie for sale at the railway stations. These bones, at that time, brought about Seven Dollars per ton and were shipped to Minneapolis to be used in connection with making filters for the sugar refineries.

I am not positive that the Indians regarded the Pile o' Bones particularly from a religious standpoint, but the early settlers, who lived in the neighborhood, assured me that they did. One thing is sure that, until the pile was commercialized, as above stated, they visited it frequently and camped in its neighborhood.

J. W. Powers, in his History of Regina, states that Pilot Butte, about nine miles east of Regina, is the original Pile o' Bones Hill, but in this he is completely astray. No doubt it was used by the Indians in connection with their buffalo hunting, as a look-out, but there never was any tradition connected with it such as is connected with the Pile o' Bones here on the banks of the Wascana.

The hill is situated about the centre of the north half of section 2, township 18, range 21, west of the 2nd, and on it is now built the house of Mr. Forbes, one of our most successful and prominent farmers.

VI. From Records of the Department of the Interior, Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa:

The Queen's, Toronto,
Dec. 18, 1882.

Lindsay Russel, Esq.,
Deputy Minister,
Interior.

Dear Sir,

I hope you will not think me officious if I write to say that in conversation with Sir Jno Macdonald he said in all future maps the Pile of Bones Creek would be called Wascana River. He made a note of it. I am to verify its accuracy of which I believe there can be no doubt.

I am

Dear Sir,

Yours truly

N. Flood Davin
Interior,
Ottawa, 27th Dec/82.

Wascana Creek

My dear Mr. Flood Davin,

Please respecting the

The word simply "Butte" in the

There is no map number.

N. Flood Davin
at the

VI. Account with the

"The following is from the history of the early Indian tribes independent of the treaty, the main to Indian events happen date, but Christendom from a great pock. The disease as a result was natural more peril to the tribes of Regina did its origin in sanctity, is a "great ch found with his fad Okimasis r
WASCANA CREEK AND THE “PILE O’ BONES”

My dear Mr. Davin,

Please accept my apology for this tardy answer to your note of the 18th respecting the Indian name “Wascana River” for “Pile of Bones Creek”.

The word is sufficiently near in meaning to be applicable. It means simply “Bone” River.

There is nothing about “Pile” in it; but I fancy that for the purposes of map nomenclature the omission is trivial.

Yours very truly,

(signed)

Lindsay Russell.

N. Flood Davin, Esq.,

at the Queen’s Hotel.

Toronto, Ont.

VII. Account written by Dr. A. E. Porter, Edmonton, September 26, 1939:

“The following account of what was perhaps the most important event in the history of Indians in the North American Continent, was gained during the early life of the writer in the “70’s” while practising as the only independent physician west of the Manitoba Boundary line. The exact date of the treaty between the tribes aiming at peace and brotherhood, which is the main topic of this account of tribal tradition, cannot possibly be set; all events happening in the lives of the tribes were, naturally, not computed by date, but by sequence with other events. Thus, while the calendar of Christendom begins presumably with its Founder’s birth, many of the Indian tribes began what authentic history and experience they possessed, from a great plague which almost wiped out the tribes, and which was smallpox. The death of many of the chroniclers and best informed tribal leaders, as a result of the plague, evidently broke the link of history or so weakened it that a fresh start had to be made in the compilation of tribal lore, which was naturally transmitted from one member to another by recital, a mode more perishable than that of the recording of the white man’s history. Among the tribes other means undoubtedly existed than the recital onomatopoetic, but that was the main form of relating, and it was by such means that the writer learned of the account while on an errand of mercy to a tribal encampment near “Pile o’ Bones”, the present site of Saskatchewan’s modern capital and at one time the seat of the North-West Territories. The first residents of Regina did not take kindly to the Indian appellation, but when the story of its origin is unfolded, an importance and dignity as well as reverence and sanctity, is invested in the name, which should not be lost to the residents of that modern western city.” [Dr. Porter presents the story of Okimasis, a “great chief of the Stoney”, who describes his wanderings as a young man with his father. They visited the Red Pipe Stone Quarry in Minnesota, where Okimasis met Wenonah, daughter of “Wabla-dota Tonka-Okimaw” of the
Dacotahs, and a year later married her on the Rio Grande where they lived for four years. Then the band, following a battle with whiskey traders, proceeded northward. Okimasis continues:

"I remember the day we arrived at Wascana, buffalo herds moved to and fro, the sky a purple glow. The chickens had danced and were now resting again on the plain. Frogs croaked in the lake, birds on the wing. The earth was awake for it was spring. Roses and prairie lilies in bloom; but instead of joy and gladness, there was sadness and gloom. All the northern tribes were there in red paint and feathers, defending the way to the Hunting Ground of their fathers and declaring war without quarter. All the tribes on both sides were uneasy.

We raised our lodge Meta-Win* on the banks of Wascana. There was good grass for our horses, and plenty of water. Then Mistawasis came from the West, from Nipawin, travelling east on some secret mission, came to our lodge seeking admission. After passing the test he was raised on a dias and seated beside Wabla-Dota and me. Then he rose, saying, "Brother Meta-Win, the whole earth is a kin and every man a brother. Manitou sent us buffalo for our food, raiment and shelter, there is enough for all, great and small, and it is a sin to kill one another, I am against war. I move an agreement of peace." Then every man in the great assembly rose with a shout and stood—

"Hail Mistawasis, it is good! It is good! We will sign. We will sign." Then he selected Wabla-Dota as scribe, who on parchment drew up the charter, Peace, Brotherhood of Man. They all signed in their own blood.

Then he said, "Go ye, all to your own tribe, let no one forbid and tell what we have done".

They did as they were bid. There were great shouts of joy, and at the sound of the drum, peace flags were unfurled and the great dispensation, the great charter, Peace, Brotherhood of Man, was proclaimed to the world. Then old men and young ones gathered wood and buffalo chips which they put in piles on the prairie. Men, and their wives, with hunting knives cut great roasts which they placed on these pyres, flavored with savoury herbs and mint, smothered in onions. Now it was time for the barbecue fires. The smell of cooking was sweet to the hungry hosts, sweeter by far than sweet grass and roses after a rain. The odor was wafted over the prairie to the border of Saskatchewan. When the great roasts were cooked and done, there was great noise. On every tongue you would hear "Astum, Astum" (Come, come and eat), "Mewasin mange, mewasin an sue," "pemi pem washtay" (the pemmican is good, come and eat). Then fair maidens in braids faces painted with carmine, buckskin dresses trimmed with otter, and beaded moccasins, served the great hosts, on platters of wood, great roasts of pemmican. The men all seated themselves on the ground.

Mistawasis passed the Peace Pipe around. While Smoke ascended to the sky, he thanked Manitou with the All-seeing Eye for the gifts of the buffalo, there was plenty for all, great and small. Now he said, "Eat your fill." After they had eaten their fill, young men made a drink of herbs which they knew. They made a brew for toasts, a stimulant for toasts.

*Meta-Win is defined by Dr. Porter as a "society of all the medicine men and leading chiefs of all the tribes. . . . The members were the doctors, teachers and chroniclers for all."
Now Mistawasis, the host, gave his toast. He referred to Wabla-Dota, Okimaw, Minnesota, for the great work he had done in drawing the Charter, in the great work of Peace and Brotherhood of Man. He also referred in sympathy, to the loss of his son and his brother.

Wabla-Dota had been ill. He sat very still during the ceremony. He had eaten nothing. He tried to rise but was very weak. Mistawasis took his hand and assisted him to stand. He thanked Mistawasis for his great sympathy on the loss of his brother and son. He said, “Now, I am an old man. In Minnesota I fought many years for Peace that our tribes might have peace, but the settlers came upon us. We had to fight for peace. Then the Government gave us a reservation, taws our lands, no longer were we wanderers on the plain. We built houses to keep warm in winter, we cultivated the soil, grew potatoes, tobacco, corn and grain. Then came the Chimoka man (American soldiers) knives on their guns, like an avenging angel with fetid breath in their wrath. They killed all my brothers, my sisters, my wife, and I lost seven sons in war. Now not a drop of Wabla-Dota’s blood runs in any human being, but Wenonah my daughter, who by a miracle escaped the Slaughter, that whirlwind of death. They burned our houses and we perished from cold in the winter. They destroyed our warehouses where we had tobacco, potatoes and corn for food. They deauuchaed our women. Many died of lingering diseases. They polluted a river where we got fish and water, and whole tribes died of the fever. They destroyed our timber where we got wood. They set fire to the prairie, killed the buffalo, and many died of starvation. Then I left Minnesota, in search of peace and travelled until I reached the Rio Grande, but Okimasis will tell you that story. I am very old, my race nearly run. The threads of my life are as finely spun as the web of a spider, and so weak it might break any time. Wenonah has a boy, my grandson, who will carry on when I have gone nepow(?). There is so much to do and so little I have done.”

He made a move to sit down, collapsed and fell to the ground. Then, a silence profound, for all thought he was dead. He tried to get up, so weak; Mistawasis took his hand and assisted him to stand. Then that solemn broke with a warwhoop, “Hail, hail to Okimaw Dacotaha, Washtay, washtay, Tonka Okimaw Minnesota, carry on, carry on, it is good.”

That ended the evening and the great Powwow. Then Mistawasis took him by the arm and took him to his own tent, where he was made a tea of herbs of the prairie in hot water, which he knew was a stimulant. He made him a brew and gave him to drink. Mistawasis as well as the chief was a great Muskewi-weenew, a great doctor. Now, Wabla-Dota said to Mistawasis, “You are a good doctor, washtay pashyu to u chasta.”

Wenonah heard her father was ill. She came to take him by the hand—“Oh, Wenonah, Wenonah, my only daughter, the last of my blood, oh, oh. You have a boy, Wenonah, my grandson, to him be good, he will carry on when I am gone.” Then he began to wander, he was now in the shadows, kept repeating “charter, charter—peace, peace, Gitche Manitou.” Grew weaker and weaker he was now in shadowland, for only a whisper—“peace, peace, charter, Gitche Manitou.” Then his spirit flew to the blue, guided by Gitche Manitou to the Happy Hunting Ground in the Sky, the Hereafter.

He died just the day after the Powwow and signing of the Charter of Peace, Brotherhood of Man, and was buried with Grand Meta-Win
honors near “Pile o’ Bones” on the banks of Wascana. Now prairie roses
and lilies grow on his unmarked grave.

After Okimasis finished telling this story he was much affected, but he
continued: “Many years after, I heard Mistawasis was ill. I hastened
to see him, saw him die, in his own tent near Nipawin, where his Cree
Braves Guarded Saskatchewan, the Hunting Ground of his Fathers.
He was buried with Grand Meta-Win honors on a sloping hill far above
the river near Nepawin. The forest weeps over the place he sleeps, and
Keewaydin, the Northwest wind blows in winter, and in summer prairie
flowers grow over his unmarked grave.”

Now you all want to know, what became of Okimasis. I was told he
lived to be an old man and when at a great age, Okimasis, made his last
pilgrimage, and like Moses of old on Mount Nebo, died and was buried, at a
spot where nobody knows to this day. His spirit just flew into the blue. He
was the last to sign the Charter, but Gitche Manitou with the All-seeing Eye,
no doubt would see him to the Happy Hunting Ground in the Sky, Here-
after.

I saw “Pile o’ Bones” in 1878, and have sat on Wabla-Dota’s grave, it
was a place of good view. Much of the pile had fallen, but there were places
30 or 40 feet high, I am sure, and it covered two or more acres of ground.
The story was told by an old Cree pioneer Meta-Win.”

LES DÉBUTS D’UNE COLONIE.

JUDGE GEORGES HÉBERT.

Débuts de Colonie dans la partie southerne de la Saskatchewan, reliant avec
à l’histoire des premiers Blancs en la région. 1909. $2.00.

Father Gravel told me that Okimasis, he took up residence in the
region in 1837. In 1849 he settled in a town near the mouth of the
North Saskatchewan River, after which he became the first Catholic
priest of that region, until his death in 1857. He went to the
Northwest to spread the Gospel among the Indians who were his
relatives who emigrated there from the south.

Judge Hébert, who is well acquainted with the history of the
region, has written a thorough account of the development of the
province and gives a detailed history of the various settlements in the
area. He is a man of wide knowledge of the history of the
region.

ALONG THE ORCHARDS.

By W. S. McClenahan. Illus. $8.50.

This book which, when co
Book Review

LES DÉBUTS DE GRAVELBOURG. By Georges Hébert. Author, 159 pp. Illus. $2.00.

Judge Georges Hébert, a distinguished resident of Gravelbourg, has in Les DÉBUTS DE GRAVELBOURG told the story of the founding and development of this southern Saskatchewan center. The history of Gravelbourg is intimately linked with the Gravel family and in particular with the life of Father Louis Pierre Gravel.

Father Gravel was born and raised in Quebec. After being ordained a priest he took up parish work in New York city where he remained for a period of fourteen years. In 1906 Father Gravel, at the call of Archbishop Langevin, agreed to come to Canada to help establish a French-Canadian colony in southern Saskatchewan. Part of the object of the colony was to bring back to Canada French-Canadians who had emigrated to the United States. For the next twenty years until his death in 1926 Father Gravel devoted himself to the task of building the colony near Gravelbourg. In his task Father Gravel was joined by a number of his relatives who each contributed to the development of the settlement.

Judge Hébert, who married a sister of Father Gravel, is thoroughly acquainted with the history of the settlement. His book is an attempt to set down an accurate account of the history of Gravelbourg. To help him tell the story Judge Hébert has drawn upon reminiscences, newspaper articles, testimonials, biographical details and other histories of the area. Obviously this is at once a history and a testimonial to the dedicated pioneers who founded the French-Canadian settlement in the area around Gravelbourg. It will be of particular interest to those who have at sometime lived in the area, but it should be of interest to a much wider group of readers. Most of the booklet is written in French so a reading knowledge of that language is essential to anyone wishing to read this history.

D. H. Bocking

Notes on Books Received


This is the story of a pioneer settlement in the south eastern portion of Manitoba which was originally published serially in The Western Producer. The first part of the book tells how the pioneers established homes and community life in the area. The final portion of the book called “This I Remember Best” is reminiscences of the pioneers who settled in the area. This later part of the book is an excellent account of typical pioneer life and is applicable to the whole area of the prairies.


This book is another one of the volumes in the Canadian Centenary Series, which, when completed, will be a seventeen volume history of Canada. Each
volume in the series is written by a leading Canadian historian. The author of this book, W. S. MacNutt, now Dean of Arts at the University of New Brunswick, is an authority on the history of the Atlantic provinces.

The fisheries off the Atlantic provinces attracted Europeans as early as the sixteenth century and by 1712 they were one of the great industries of the European economy. Newfoundland was settled in spite of imperial policy while Nova Scotia was deliberately established as a royal colony. The American war of independence brought extensive development to the colonies and the Loyalist immigration following the war strengthened the colonies and brought about the separation of New Brunswick from Nova Scotia. The struggle for responsible government developed slowly in the Atlantic provinces gaining strength in the 1830's. Economic conditions indicated a need for wider links either with Canada or the United States. Throughout this history the sea is shown as the basic factor in the history of the Maritimes. From it has come wealth and unifying forces but it has also brought poverty and division.

Notes and Correspondence

The Saskatchewan History and Folklore Society held its annual meeting at Weyburn on the weekend of September 10 and 11, 1966. New officers elected for 1966-67 were President Mrs. W. B. Chipsham, Regina, Vice-President Mrs. F. C. Eaglesham, Weyburn and Secretary-Treasurer Mrs. Ethel Clarke, Regina. The Society was welcomed to Weyburn by Alderwoman Isabelle Butlers, Mr. M. B. Sharpe, President of the Soo Line Historical Society spoke on Weyburn’s Early History and Professor K. Sutherland, of the College of Education, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, gave a talk on “Teaching of History in Our Schools.”

On Sunday members of the Society drove to Estevan to see the Wood End Mounted Police Post which has been moved there to become a museum. They also visited a spot where the Boundary Commission trail crosses Long Creek, and the famous Roche Perce. On the way back to Weyburn the group visited Main-prize Park near Midale and the badlands and oil fields in the Weyburn-Halbrite area.

Correction. Volume XIX, Number 2, 1966, page 42, line 10. The amount of money to be expended should be $600,000.

Contributors

S. Raby is Assistant Professor of Geography, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon.
LLOYD RODWELL is Archival Assistant in the Saskatchewan Archives Office, Saskatoon.
A. R. TURNER is Provincial Archivist of Saskatchewan.
The author of
New Brunswick,

as early as
industries of the
material policy while
American war
and the Loyalist
ought about the
strength in the
with Canada
the basic factor
ifying forces but

The annual meeting
officers elected
President Mrs.
Clarke, Regina.
Butlers, Mr.
Weyburn's
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History in Our

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Long Creek, and
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