

Chapter 2 - Theodore's First Settlers

Travelling to Theodore - Part 2

Settlers From the USA

It can probably be safe to assume that most settlers from the Eastern USA travelled by train to central Canada where they joined their European counterparts for the trip west on the CPR. It was also possible to travel from many States by rail from Minneapolis and St. Paul in Minnesota north to Winnipeg and then west to Yorkton. One report indicated that such a trip would take about eight days.¹ Some of the Americans who arrived in the Theodore and Sheho areas before 1891 likely travelled on foot using wagons pulled by horses or oxen to transport their belongings. The Silverthorn family who arrived in Regina after a five-week-long journey from South Dakota in 1890 is just one example of settlers from the USA making such a journey.



Second trainload of emigrants leaving Cottonwood County in Minnesota, USA, for Western Canada, dated 1902. Library and Archives Canada

Several of the early settlers in the Theodore area are known to have arrived in Yorkton by train with the wife and children riding in passenger cars while the husbands rode in the box cars with their belongings. Given the cost of a box car, its capacity, and the fact that many settlers did not possess many belongings, it is quite likely that two or more families would have shared the boxcar. A quick look at various railway maps, indicate that many Americans from the Midwestern states such as Minnesota, probably travelled to St. Paul, Minnesota on one of the many railroad lines that terminated in that city. From there they would have taken the St. Paul, Minneapolis & Manitoba Railway to Winnipeg Manitoba, and from Winnipeg they would have taken the M&NWR to Yorkton. Because Yorkton was at the end of the railway line during the 1890's, only the final leg of the journey, Yorkton to Theodore and beyond would have been by wagon.



American homesteaders leaving for Canada in covered wagons.
Saskatchewan Archives Reference #: R-A10085



Settlers from the United States crossing the western prairies heading for the wheat fields 1906.
Library and Archives Canada

It is interesting to note that among the settlers arriving from the United States there was a significant number of Canadians. Prior to the completion of the CPR in 1885, the only way to reach Western Canada from Central and Eastern Canada was through the USA, a very long and difficult journey, and many who started out ended their travels when they found opportunities on the way. Later, when circumstances their changed, they joining the throng headed for Canada. An article entitled “Canadians Return,” appeared in *The Yorkton Times* in mid April 1911 and stated that many of the settlers coming to Canada from the USA were Canadians coming back to their native land. The majority of them, it seems came from the state of North Dakota and had never

taken out American citizenship. It was reported they told Canadian immigrations, “We are Canadians coming home, and we are glad to be back again.”²

Travelling West on the Canadian Pacific Railway

Prior to the arrival of the railway in Yorkton in 1891 most of the earliest settlers in the Theodore area would have travelled west on the CPR as far as Whitewood, and then travelled the eighty miles north to Yorkton by stage coach, wagon, or on foot, and from there they would have travelled to Theodore the same way. A pamphlet put out by the York Farmers Colonization Company, the company responsible for the establishment of Yorkton, gave the following advice to people residing in eastern and central Canada and planning to settle in the Yorkton area:

See that your ticket reads to Whitewood, CPR, from which place the stage will run to the colony. At Whitewood the “York Colony House” kept by T. G. Lyons, (formerly of Brampton, Ont.) is the stopping place and starting point for the Colony. It is expected that a stage will leave this House every Tuesday morning and oftener if found necessary.

After the M&NWR arrived in 1891 settlers simply took the train all the way to Yorkton.

The increase in immigration during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century meant that large numbers of people had to be moved to their new homes as quickly and cheaply as possible. After being processed by the Canadian immigration authorities at the point of entry, the settlers bound for western Canada travelled west on what became known as colonist cars. These were special railway cars constructed for the sole purpose of transporting settlers to the west.

In its publication *Farming and Ranching in Western Canada* the CPR stated that colonists from Europe were able to travel to their new homes in nearly as great comfort as first-class passengers.³ Pictures that show a first-class passenger car taken about 1890 and a passenger car

used to transport settlers to western Canada taken about 1891 clearly show that there was a great deal of difference between the two. The typical colonist car was made of wood and could be easily cleaned because there was no fabric upholstery as in the first-class cars. Colonist cars were equipped with only the basic necessities such as benches and shelves that converted into berths, water, washrooms, heaters, and stoves.⁴ Each colonist car had a number of third-class sections consisting of two bare wood benches and a pull down upper berth that could accommodate 56 people. There was also a small second-class section featuring upholstered leather benches and berth curtains that could accommodate another 16 people. At one end of the car there was a ladies' room and a kitchenette. There was also a men's room where smoking was permitted.⁵



Exterior of a Colonist Car. Saskatchewan Archives Board Reference #: R-B3274

An unnamed contributor to Barry Broadfoot's book *The Pioneer Years 1895-1914* described travelling in a colonist car as a "depressing experience," and stated that the nights were the worst because of crying babies and the lack of adequate bedding supplied by the railroad. This situation was made worse by the knowledge that their own bedding was inaccessible because it was packed in their trunks in the baggage car.⁶ This description differs significantly from the description of the sleeping accommodations on the colonist cars provided by the CPR in *Farming and Ranching in Western Canada* which stated that the colonist car which were convertible into sleeping cars at night, had upper and lower berths constructed on the same principle as those of the first-class sleeping cars and equally comfortable. While the CPR booklet states that the railway did not have an extra charge for the sleeping accommodation, it did say that there was a charge of \$2.50 or 10 shillings for a mattress, pillow, blanket, and curtains, if the settlers had not brought those items with them when they boarded the train. The curtains were to be hung around the berth in an attempt to provide privacy and men travelling alone are cut off from families by a partition across the car near its middle. Photographs of colonist cars reveal just how Spartan their interiors were. Typically Colonist Car provided only hard wooden seats, pull-down upper berths, and bed curtains that provided for minimal privacy while sleeping and dressing.

Many colonist cars were used well into the twentieth century, and some idea of what travel in them was like is provided by the well-known Canadian author Farley Mowat:

Colonist cars were designed to transport the impoverished at minimum cost. No effort had been spared to preclude anything smacking of comfort. The seats were made of hardwood slats. They faced each other in pairs and could be slid together in such a way that each pair formed a crowded sleeping platform for four people. There was no upholstery of any kind, no mattresses, and no cushions. Lighting was provided by oil lamps whose chimneys were dark with age and soot. Our car was heated by a coal stove upon which passengers could boil water for tea and washing, and do their cooking. Some colonist cars had flush toilets

of a sort but not ours. There was only a hole in the floor of the toilet cubicle through which one could watch the ties flicker past - an exercise that gave me vertigo.⁷

The CPR brochure also stated that, “the cars devoted to the use of colonists are taken upon the same fast trains with the first-class cars.”⁸ The truth, however, was that in many cases the colonist cars were made into special trains that were frequently sidetracked for other trains such as those carrying regular passenger and freight traffic.⁹ During these stops passengers who were willing to take the risk of being left behind were allowed to get out of the train and walk around.



Interior of a Colonist Car Saskatchewan Archives Board Reference #: R-B3275-1

In addition to the prospective settlers, the colonist cars also carried government appointed immigration agents. These agents had the responsibility shepherding the settlers to their various destinations by seeing that the immigrants were duly cared for on the journey, assuring that they arrived at their proper destinations and by providing necessary advice to them, including work opportunities. Another responsibility the agents had was to protect the immigrants from the fast talking swindlers who seemed to be everywhere and who tried to separate newcomers from their life savings.¹⁰



Colonist Car Interior Saskatchewan Archives Board Reference #: R-B3275-2

According to the CPR the trains carrying the settlers to the west would stop at stations where the settlers could purchase meals and refreshments at reasonable prices. According to some of the contributors to Broadfoot's book the passengers had two other options. First, they could do their own cooking using the stove in the colonist car, or they could buy food from the vendors who would meet the train at various stops and sell such items as bread, meat pies, milk for the babies, hard boiled eggs, and even candy or chocolates.¹¹

Finally, in spite of the claim by the CPR that "the baggage arrangements are the same as for first-class passengers, and every possible care is taken that the colonist does not go astray, lose his property or suffer impositions,"¹² one of the contributors to Broadfoot's book states that trunks and other baggage belonging to the passengers were not always on the same train as the passengers and that some people experienced long delays in getting their luggage. If there was any truth to the CPR claim that, "no other railway in America offers such good accommodation to second-class, or colonist passengers, as does the Canadian Pacific,"¹³ one has to wonder what conditions were like on the other railways.

Arrival at Winnipeg

Eventually the colonist trains arrived at Winnipeg, where many of Theodore's earliest settlers would have passed through the CPR's first station in Winnipeg. Later settlers would have passed through, the second and larger station that was opened in 1905.

Winnipeg, according to Vineberg, was where about 150,000 immigrants chose their homesteads and moved on. It was also where many of those who were not ready to apply for a homestead, found their first jobs in Canada either in the city Winnipeg or a city farther west.¹⁴

According to the publication *Farming and Ranching in Western Canada*, colonists arriving in Winnipeg were met by the agents of both the railway and the Canadian government. Like the agents on the train, these agents were to give them the necessary assistance and advice that would be needed in establishing a new home.¹⁵ The publication goes on to say that settlers who had already decided upon a location, and had friends or relatives awaiting them were shown how to proceed directly to that community. Those who had not decided on a destination were given the necessary information. Because many settlers wished to see for themselves some of the land that was available for homesteading, the men were encouraged to go and look at the land while their families were provided with accommodation at the Immigration Hall for the few days they were away.

Just about every person who came to Western Canada between 1890 and the beginning of the First World War would have gotten off the train in Winnipeg. Here they had the opportunity to stay at the Immigration Hall for up to seven days while they made final arrangements to move on to their homesteads.¹⁶ Accommodation at the Winnipeg Immigration Hall was very important for those settlers wishing to travel west to Yorkton and then to Theodore. According to the Yorkton correspondent to *The Leader* in 1894 there was only one train from Winnipeg each week. It arrived in Yorkton early on Sunday and left immediately after midnight of the same day.¹⁷



CPR Station Winnipeg 1884 - Public Domain Media

The Winnipeg Immigration Hall

There were some situations in which the immigrant family lacked the money necessary to travel beyond Winnipeg and needed further help. The Canadian government established “societies representing almost all the nationalities of Europe”¹⁸ in Winnipeg, and entrusted them to welcome and care for needy immigrants. In addition, the Canadian government provided information about the local employment opportunities. The government would advertise the pending arrival of the colonist trains so that local business could find potential employees among the new arrivals. According to *Farming and Ranching in Western Canada*, farmers were generally looking for men and were willing to pay as much as \$20 (£5) per month plus board.¹⁹ The girls of a family could often find employment in Winnipeg and other towns as house maids, or mothers’ helpers.



Immigration Hall, Winnipeg, Manitoba, ca. 1900. Ridsdale, G.F. / Library and Archives Canada / PA-122676

The immigrant's first experience of Western Canada in general and of Winnipeg in particular has been compared to entering an international bazaar where the noise of a thousand voices in a dozen different tongues mingled with the sounds of construction, delivery wagons, vendors, and labour recruiters.²⁰ Just a block away, on Main Street, all manner of merchandise including fruits and vegetables, books and newspapers, coats and jackets were displayed by local merchants in a manner that was more European than North American and, therefore, more familiar to the new arrivals.²¹

The immigrant's second experience of Western Canada would have been that of the Winnipeg Immigration Hall. One of the aids to settlement not mentioned above was the establishment of Immigration Halls across Canada. These Halls provided a wide variety of services to the newly arrived immigrant, including temporary accommodation while they looked for suitable land or found work and other accommodation. By 1872 the Canadian government had established Immigration Halls at Québec, Montréal, Ottawa, Kingston, Toronto, and Hamilton. Construction of other Immigration halls at London and Winnipeg was underway. Eventually there would be as many as fifty Immigrations Halls in cities across Canada, many of them in the west such as the one built at Yorkton by the M&NWR.

While the accommodations at the Winnipeg Immigration Hall, were very basic and far from luxurious, they were reasonably comfortable for the times, and in many cases they were much less rustic than the living conditions the settlers would face on arrival at their homesteads. There are many accounts of homesteaders living in dugout shelters, tents, wagons, and various shacks until they were able to build their first house.

RULES FOR THE GUIDANCE OF IMMIGRANTS

WHILE IN THE IMMIGRATION HALL, WINNIPEG.

1. Immigrants on their arrival are required to report at the General Office for lodging accommodation, which is free to new arrivals for a period of 7 days. The Hall is opened at 6 a.m. and closed at 10 p.m.
2. All rules of Cleanliness must be strictly observed; all necessary sweeping and scrubbing in the rooms must be done by the occupants; cleansing utensils may be procured from the Caretaker who is responsible for the cleanliness of the hall; clothing must not be washed in the rooms or at the wash basins; a laundry has been provided in the basement; children must not be bathed at the wash basins, baths have been provided also. Lounging on beds during the day is strictly forbidden.
3. All cooking utensils must be properly cleaned after use and left in the kitchen; all slops or wash water must be emptied into the sink; and all solid refuse placed in cans provided for that use. Occupants of the hall are strictly forbidden to throw any refuse, either liquid or solid, out of the windows; newspapers, cloth or other refuse must not be put into the lavatory basins.
4. In order to guard against fire the greatest care must be taken in using the stoves which are required to be extinguished at 8 p.m. Immigrants must not interfere with the electric lights or lamps which will be under the direct supervision of the Night Watchman or Caretaker, who will attend to the lighting and extinguishing of all lights, which must be out at 10 p.m., except in case of emergency, when the Caretaker or Night Watchman will use their discretion. The use of oil lamps, candles, or smoking in the rooms, are forbidden.
5. Smoking is strictly forbidden on these premises, and drunkenness will not be tolerated. Objectionable characters will be handed over to the Police. Immigrants requiring employment will be accorded all reasonable assistance free, on application at the labor bureau in the General Office which is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Sundays and Holidays excepted.
6. Immigrants are allowed the privilege of having their letters come in care of the hall, where addresses may be left and letters will be forwarded. Information on Immigration matters, such as on, homesteading, R. R. tickets, time-tables, locations of stations, etc., will be given free at the General Office.
7. While the Department will use every precaution to protect the baggage or property of Immigrants, they assume no responsibility for loss by any source whatsoever. The issuing of baggage checks is for the purpose of more readily identifying the property of Immigrants, and does not impose any responsibility on the Department or its Officers. No charge will be made for storing or checking baggage.
8. Immigrants are requested to co-operate with the Officials and Employees in the observance of all sanitary rules, and to assist in preserving order and decorum in the hall, to refrain from loud talking, or other objectionable noises, or boisterous conduct, and to use reasonable care with all articles that have been provided for their use by the Department of Immigration.

J. C. DOWNIE,

Chief Caretaker.

The Immigration Halls appear to have been built following the same basic generalized plan. In the basement there would have been wash rooms, water closets, bathrooms and a laundry room for washing clothes. The first floor apparently held the public areas such as administrative offices, a waiting room, the kitchen, and a dining room. The upper storeys contained the private sleeping accommodations for both single immigrants and entire families. There was also a room for people who were sick.

According to Vineberg the first Immigration Hall in Winnipeg was built at the forks of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers and offered free temporary accommodation for 250 people who, at that time, would have arrived at Winnipeg by river steamer from the railhead at St. Paul, Minnesota.²² Within a year of its opening this facility was doubled in size to accommodate 500 people. Then, with the arrival of the CPR there was a need for further expansion. By the 1920's there were three Immigration Halls in Winnipeg. Two large immigration halls were located near the CPR station and a third hall was built for CNR passengers. Together these halls could accommodate more than 1,500 immigrants at a time.²³ The Immigration Halls not only provided the newly arrived settlers with a place to stay on their arrival, they were where the new settlers could receive a variety of necessary services.

It was at the Immigration Hall that many of the settlers who did not have a specific destination in mind were given the opportunity to choose their final destination and receive further information on Immigration matters, homesteading, and transportation, including information on railway tickets, timetable, and locations of stations.²⁴ Immigrants could also have their letters sent to them in care of the Winnipeg Immigration Hall and the letters would be sent to them at their new homes. Information on Immigration matters, such as, homesteading requirements, railway

tickets and timetable, the locations of stations, and so on would have been available at the Immigration Hall's General Office.



Men's Room at the Winnipeg Immigration Hall Library and Archives Canada

Arriving in Yorkton

Because there was no daily train running west from Yorkton for several years after the railway line was completed those settlers whose destination was Theodore would have had to disembark at the Yorkton station and stay at the Yorkton Immigration Hall. The photograph on page 130 depicts the CPR station at Yorkton in 1913. Alma Austin Edmonds described the scene

at the CPR station in Yorkton when she arrived there in late April 1903.

When we looked toward the station we saw very interesting sights for there were people of many different nationalities dressed in their native costumes - Doukhobors, Ukrainians, Swedes, Scottish, English, and American among others coming and going about. Many had just unloaded "settlers' cars" containing horses, cattle, poultry, machinery and household furniture, and even baby carriages, and bird cages with the birds inside. I should also have included dogs of many sizes and kinds. Oftentimes there was a dog watching his master's hayrack load of movables. All these things made a very interesting sight for along distance around the station.²⁵

To say that the accommodation for the newly arrived settlers in Yorkton was sparse would be an understatement as Mrs. Edmonds soon discovered.

When we enquired, we learned that there was only one hotel in Yorkton, the Balmoral, and with so many people arriving daily to take up homesteads it was impossible to obtain a single bedroom. We had to sleep in a double bedroom with another couple. In the morning when we started to go down for breakfast, we found that we had to walk around many people sleeping on the hallway floors, wrapped in blankets. It all seemed strange to us, but we found that many travellers found it impossible to get rooms and were thankful to obtain any shelter so it was quite common to take a blanket and sleep on the floor.²⁶



The first Canadian Pacific Railway depot in Yorkton about 1900
Saskatchewan Archives R-A4349

The Yorkton Immigration Hall

Settlers who were unable to find accommodation at the hotel in Yorkton had to resort to yet another Immigration Hall offering similar services to the one in Winnipeg. According to an item in *The Regina Leader*, it appears that the first immigration hall at Yorkton could accommodate about 100 immigrants. It was constructed by the M.&N.W.R at about the same time as it reached Yorkton in 1891.²⁷ The location of the Yorkton Immigration Hall, however, was not ideal because Yorkton, like so many other communities established by the railway, and been built in a slough.²⁸ In the spring of 1893 there was an outbreak of typhoid fever among a group of newly arrived Dutch immigrants who were staying at the Immigration Hall,²⁹ and it was believed that the spring run off had contaminated Yorkton's water supply. *The Regina Leader* predicted that if Yorkton did not improve its sanitation or persuade the M&NWR to change the site of the village, it could expect more trouble in the future.³⁰

Yorkton's first Immigration Hall soon proved to be inadequate in meeting the needs of the ever increasing tide of settlers coming into the area and a second Immigration Hall was built on South Front Street, between Tupper and Second Avenue in 1897. It offered services similar to those offered in Winnipeg and was under the direction of James S. Crerar the Dominion Immigration Agent. The labour for the second hall was provided by a group of newly arrived immigrants from Bukovynia who had refused to leave the immigration hall at Winnipeg and were forcibly sent to the Yorkton area where some were immediately located on homesteads while others were detained to build the Immigration Hall.³¹

Henderson's North West Directories and Gazetteer for the years 1899 to 1904, shows that there were at least four interpreters on staff in Yorkton to assist the immigrants. The Russian

interpreters were A. Almanafaky and Miss De Caroussa, Frank Konyhs interpreted for the Hungarian settlers and Joseph Botzer was also listed as an interpreter, but no language is given for him.³² Other sources indicate that Fred Leonhardt, Sr., who was later a resident of Theodore, and who spoke both German and Russian in addition to English, acted as a translator for the Doukhobors when they moved from Russia to Yorkton.³³ John Bilokreli, another resident of Theodore who spoke fluent German, served as an interpreter for many settlers when they arrived at Theodore.³⁴ As in Winnipeg, immigrants were directed to the Immigration Hall upon arrival and stayed there until they were ready to go to their homesteads.

An exchange recorded in a 1907 enquiry into the functioning of the Canadian Civil Service indicates that other services were provided at the Yorkton Immigration Halls.³⁵ It appears, for example, that there was an agent or a voluntary correspondent at each station that could direct the new immigrants to his land or the family with who he was staying temporarily. One of the people who guided newly arrived settlers to their allotted homesteads in the Beaver Hills area south and west of Theodore was Robert Lawrie whose farm was located at NW-6-28-7-W2 between communities that would later become Theodore and Insinger.³⁶

If a family was in need of help it appears that they could contact the Immigration Hall. During the brutal winter of 1907 men were sent out from the immigration halls to discover if any of the settlers was in need or distress.

Just prior to World War I the number of immigrants arriving in Yorkton declined significantly and the Immigration Hall was converted into the Yorkton Armouries. For a number of years it was home to the 75 men of "B" Squadron of the 16th Light Horse.³⁷



Immigration hall and railway buildings Yorkton about 1900
Saskatchewan Archives R-A7084



The Yorkton Immigration Hall
became the home of B Squadron
of the 16th light Horse Regiment
During the Great War 1914- 1918
City of Yorkton Archives

Arriving at Theodore

Prior to the completion of the railway line to Sheho in 1903 and the running of the first train in January 1904 settlers in the Theodore area made the final leg of their journey on foot or in carts pulled by horses or oxen. There was a well-marked trail from Yorkton to Theodore that went past the home of George Seatter in Orcadia.³⁸ According to the history of the George Seatter family, so many settlers would stop and ask to spend the night that George eventually grew tired of the imposition and moved the trail.³⁹ In later years travellers between Theodore and Yorkton would follow the route using the road allowances.

On their arrival in the Theodore area settlers who arrived after 1896 would very likely stay with one or the other of the Tracy brothers who had established homesteads that year. According to daughter Gladys McVey, meals were available at A. C. Tracy's and lodging could be found in the big tent that the government had provided for this purpose.⁴⁰ A. C. Tracy's Brother, Alan D. Tracy, also offered meals and accommodation.

In her unpublished memoir, Alma Austin Edmonds states that while the CPR had already started building west of Yorkton, it had not reached Theodore in the spring of 1903, when she arrived, and settlers heading west considered themselves lucky if they could reach Theodore on their first night out of Yorkton. In 1903 Alan Tracy's home was on the main trail west of Yorkton and became a stopping house for the settlers. Alan had a small store and sold groceries and dry goods. He also provided meals for unexpected, hungry travellers and never knew how many people would have to be fed, or how many might want to stay overnight. No one was turned away or made to wait. Mrs. Edmonds recalls that on one occasions there were thirty people at the breakfast table.⁴¹

Settlers who chose to stay in the Theodore district, would have found that while various kinds of assistance was less formally organized than at the Immigration Halls, help and information was usually available from those who had already arrived, and were in the process of establishing themselves in their new home, as evidenced by the following account:

“We visited three stock ranches, two near the Beaver Hills, and one at Theodore. At each of these we saw very fine horses and cattle, especially the cattle. They were as good as I ever saw in Scotland. We spent the night whilst we were out driving, with an enterprising young Scotchman and his hospitable sister, who gave us much information about the country. They were prosperous and love their home in Assiniboia, and would gladly communicate with and be of service to anyone looking for a home in their part of the country. We had the pleasure of singing some of the old Scotch songs so dear to the heart of a Scotchman wherever you find him. Address, George Ferlie, Theodore, Assiniboia.”⁴²

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