

Chapter 2 - Theodore's First Settlers

Overcoming Challenges and Difficulties

Early Housing

Once the settler found his chosen quarter section, the first order of business was to erect some kind of shelter, however temporary or makeshift, to shield himself and his family from the elements. The literature on settlement on the Canadian prairies contains numerous accounts and photographs of settlers in Saskatchewan living in tents or under tarps stretched across a wagon box until a more permanent shelter could be constructed.

When T. C. Hansen, who had been renting land near Springside obtained his homestead in the Theodore area, he moved his family to the homestead, broke some land, and build a house. The family lived in a tent with the cook stove and cream separator standing out under the trees.¹ Because many of the settlers could not bring building materials or many tools with them, most of those first shelters were constructed from the materials found close at hand: sod, logs, and stone.

One type of early shelter found across the Canadian prairies was a simple dug-out shelter, and there are several accounts in *Theodore and District History* of people doing this. These could be either caves dug into the side of a hill or simple holes in the ground with a sod or lumber roof. Although these dug-out shelters were somewhat more permanent than a tent or a tarp thrown over a wagon box, they were never considered to be anything more than just a temporary arrangement, and they were replaced with something more permanent as soon as it was possible to do so. Unfortunately for some settlers, using these temporary shelters lasted for a long time. For example, John and Gafitza Bilokreli who arrived at Theodore in the spring of 1899 lived in

their first dugout shelter until 1902 when they took out another homestead. They then lived in a second dugout shelter until 1905.²

According to John Bachusky's article on Insinger, the Bilokreli family's experience was not unique, "Settlers lived in a hole dug about a metre deep in the ground and covered them with branches, sod, grass and any other materials immediately available."³ Also, the history of Theodore and the surrounding district published in 1985 contains several references to Ukrainian families living in this type of shelter for the first year or so after their arrival. It would be a huge mistake, however, to assume that dugout shelters was an experience unique to the Ukrainians settlers. Ole and Anna Frederickson, who are counted among the first settlers in the Theodore district spent their first two winters (1889 - 1891) living in a dug-out shelter with a sod roof supported by saplings located on the east side of Theodore Lake.⁴

Because most of these early shelters were often stripped of useful materials and then ploughed under, there is now little evidence of their existence. So far no photographs of dug-out shelters from the Theodore area have been found. However, in the mid 1970's two paintings of dug-out shelters, inscribed "Beresina, NWT, Oct 1889," were discovered in the Canadian Archives in Ottawa. Beresina was located about ten miles north-west of Langenburg.⁵ These paintings give the reader an idea of what these shelters looked like. Also, the only known surviving example of a dugout shelter in Saskatchewan is located near Blaine Lake. It was declared a National Historic Site in 2013. According to Parks Canada this dugout house was large enough (435 square feet) to shelter the nine different Doukhobor families who lived in it between the years 1899 and 1904.⁶

The Rev. H. C. Schmieder, a Lutheran Pastor who visited Beresina when these shelters were occupied described them as follows.

At the edge of a bit of bush two rooftops became visible, the remainder of the houses were completely underground and buried in the earth. One has to bend down and descend a few steps in order to reach the one and only room in the dwelling. At first I was inclined to consider these houses well suited to the purpose and practical because I felt they would be cool in summer and warm in winter. But now I am convinced that they are actually quite damp and unhealthy and that they are just as difficult to heat as log houses since the frost penetrated so deep into the ground. The only advantage that such a house has is that these people can construct them with an outlay of a mere \$3, for nails. Hinges, and two small windows. The beds, table, chairs, and benches are put together with inadequate tools by the people themselves.⁷



Beresina, T.N.-O. 1889 [46 KB, 640 X 278] Archives of Canada

Another and perhaps more familiar type of early shelter was the sod house. These simple structures were an integral part of settlement on the prairies before the first World War where there was a lack of trees. Like their counterparts on the open prairie some settlers in the Theodore area realized that the large blocks of topsoil they were turning over as they plowed their land could be used as building material because the soil was tightly held together by the matted grass

roots.⁸ Sod houses had the reputation of being uncomfortable, especially after a rain when water dripped from the ceiling. Another drawback to sod houses was that the walls deteriorated rapidly because of the weight of the sod roof. As with the dugout shelters, they were replaced with a wood-frame house as soon as the homesteader could afford the building materials.

Using photographs as a guide, the Western Development Museum in Saskatoon built a replica sod house typical of what one would have found on the prairies prior to 1914 when such structures were common. According to the museum's web site it took more than 350 sod blocks to build the 240 square foot house.⁹

Although houses made completely of sod were common in many parts of Saskatchewan, it appears that there were relatively few of them in the Theodore area. The history of Theodore and District reveals that a much more common practice was to resort to an old European custom of constructing a building with log walls and a sod roof. According to Wikimedia, such buildings were traditional in Scandinavia and used from prehistoric times until the nineteenth century.¹⁰ It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Scandinavian immigrants living in a community they once called New Denmark would have adopted these buildings as an early type of dwelling. The pictures that accompany the Wikimedia article show that the sods are green. Therefore, it would not have been unusual to see grass and flowers growing in the sod roofs in the Theodore area. The Theodore and District history book contains several accounts of settlers living in homes built of logs with a sod roof. In these cases the weight of the sod roof compressed the log walls of these structures, thereby making them much more stable than the simple sod walls found elsewhere on the prairies.



A Homesteader's Log Shack Near Theodore in the 1890s
Courtesy Yorkton Archives

It appears that there was one major difference between the log houses with sod roofs found in Scandinavia and those constructed in the Theodore district that make the North American versions somewhat less than satisfactory. In Scandinavia the sod roofs were laid on top of a layer of birch bark which made them waterproof.¹¹ Unfortunately for the settlers in the Theodore area there was little, if any, birch bark and without this feature the sod roofs retained the major disadvantage of leaking during wet periods. When recounting the history of her grand parents, Irene Johnson wrote:

“Grandpa was a carpenter by trade, but he had to learn to build with logs and a sod roof. He thought he could improve the roof by giving it more pitch. Grandma was alone at home when a downpour of rain caused the sods to shift and the rain to leak through in many places. With true pioneer spirit she rose to the occasion, literally after quickly piling

as much of their food, clothing and bedding under the table and under the bed and on top of the beds, she perched on top of the pile protected by her large umbrella!”¹²

A similar experience is recounted in the story of Robert Quinton

“Dad’s new home was built of logs of large trees cut down in the woods with an axe, put together with a sod roof and the cracks were plastered with mud. It wasn’t very water proof and in rainy weather most of our clothing and bedding got soaked and was hung out to dry on a rail fence when the sun came out again.”¹³

When the settler could afford to build a more waterproof house, the old log house with its sod roof was often recycled into a shelter for the animals.



Ranger Griffiths Cabin on the Beaver Hills Forest Reserve Near Theodore in 1911
Saskatchewan Archives Board Reference #: R-A9689

News of new settlers erecting log buildings for various purposes was often reported by the Theodore correspondent to *The Yorkton Enterprise*. The following are examples of his reporting: “W. Pendlebury, one of the new settlers had a bee and raised his log house last week.”¹⁴ “Mr. Jos. Howartt, our last new settler, had a bee last week to haul logs for his house.”¹⁵ “Mr. D. Pinder is busy hauling his house logs this week, so we shall soon see the cage up and then for the bird.”¹⁶

(Apparently, Mr. Pinder was a bachelor at the time and was looking for a wife.) “The trustees of the Clear Creek have bought the logs and are building a stable for the benefit of the school. A bee to raise it has been fixed for next Tuesday.”¹⁷ “Bees for raising buildings have been quite common here these last two weeks, D. Pinder, J. Howartt, and Mr. Turner are all getting their log houses raised.”¹⁸

The final form of temporary housing commonly found in the Theodore district was very small house built of lumber. It appears that there were many different versions of the first lumber houses built on the prairies. In some cases the settler was able to quickly build a house out of the locally obtained, rough sawn poplar lumber that a few local people were producing. As mentioned previously there were saw mills operating in Theodore in the early twentieth century. With the arrival of the railway came the opening of local lumber yards in many communities, and finished lumber from a variety of trees became available to the settler. As the family prospered many of the first little houses were eventually replaced by larger and more elegant structures.

Many of these larger houses were ordered through the mail and arrived as kits with all the wood cut to the proper length, and labelled. The settler could either assemble the house himself or hire a local carpenter to do the job. There were a number of companies selling kits to build houses, schools, banks, stores, churches, etc. in Western Canada.

Herbert Gregory’s grandson, Jack Bylsma, writing in 1985, stated that his grandfather’s house was purchased from the Aladdin Company.¹⁹ The Aladdin Company was a pioneer in the pre-cut, mail order home industry. According to Wikipedia, the Aladdin Company began operations in Michigan 1906 and soon expanded into the Canadian market.²⁰ It ceased operations in 1987.²¹ Aladdin’s sales catalogues for the years 1908 - 1954 can be found on the internet.

Aladdin's primary competitor in Canada was the T. Eaton Company who sold at least 40 different kinds of houses between 1910 and 1932.²² Unlike Aladdin, who sold houses everywhere, Eaton's only sold their houses in western Canada and hundreds of them can be found across the prairies.²³ Both companies prided themselves for using only top quality material and sold houses of every size for every price range. Unfortunately, many of the smaller homes seem to have disappeared, but a great many of the larger homes still exist.

The history of the H. J. Gregory family provides a fine example of how a family's housing might evolve over time. According to grandson, Jack Bylsma, the family's first home on their homestead was a log building with a sod roof build in 1897.²⁴ In 1898 Herbert and Lucy Gregory met Oliver and Emma Adamson who had just arrived in the Beaver Hills and needed a place to live. According to the Adamson family history that appears in *Theodore and District History* the two families decided to built a house out of rough sawn lumber that was large enough so that, with a partition down the middle, both families could live in it.²⁵ The homestead records for H. J. Gregory's farm, dated 21 September, 1900, state that the house measured 24 feet by 18 feet and that there was an addition to it measuring 22 feet by 14 feet. Other buildings on the farm included two stables, a granary, and a pig sty. It is quite possible that one of the outbuildings might have been the original log house. A dozen years later the Creekside correspondent to the Yorkton Enterprise reported in 1913 that another addition was being built in 1913.²⁶ Finally, in 1926 the Gregory family began the construction of a new two story house. That house, according to grandson, Jack Bylsma, was bought from the Aladdin Company,²⁷ and the floor plan of the house listed in the 1927 Aladdin catalogue as "The Liberty," conformed to the Gregory house as Mr. Bylsma remembered it. According to the catalogue, "The Liberty" sold for \$959, freight included.

Family photos taken during and after construction indicate that the house the Gregorys bought was the somewhat upgraded “double construction” version that sold for \$1,092 and that they bought the optional front porch or veranda for an additional \$112.



John Hooe's House 1917

One type of early housing in the Theodore area that requires special consideration in this chapter is the traditional one or two room log house with a thatched roof built by many of the early Ukrainian settlers in this district. Although the Ukrainian log houses on the prairies have been researched and a great deal of information has been published elsewhere, the following summary compiled from a variety of sources is included for two principal reasons.

First, these homes were very common in the parts of western Canada settled by Ukrainians and Theodore was no exception. In the book *Theodore and District History* references are made by many of the descendants of the early Ukrainian settlers to the homes that their ancestors built here. It has also been estimated that in 1917 about two thirds of Ukrainian families in Alberta lived in a house of one or two rooms, and in some parts of that province the percentage of

Ukrainian families living in such houses was closer to eighty percent.²⁸ There is no reason to think that these statistics would be significantly different in Saskatchewan to anywhere else on the Canadian prairies.

Second, these houses were culturally specific, and it appears that only the Ukrainian settlers built this particular type of dwelling. These houses were common to the rural areas of Galicia and Bukovina, the two areas of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire from which many, if not most, of the settlers in the Theodore district came. Before World War I and continuing into the 1920's these log houses with their clay-plastered walls were the prevailing type of housing in Ukrainian settlements all across western Canada."²⁹ In the early twentieth century these houses, considered small by any modern standards, were seen as proof of prosperity.³⁰

A major advantage of the traditional Ukrainian log house was that all the materials needed for its construction were available on the settlers' homesteads. They included poplar logs which were usually cut in the winter, clay and limestone dug from the ground and used in the making of plaster, and rye straw grown specially for thatching. If rye straw was unavailable wild slough hay could be used. The only tools needed to construct a house were an axe, a saw, and an auger.

The construction of these houses was fairly basic and every Ukrainian settler would have known how to build one. First, a foundation of stones was laid out and the log walls were laid horizontally on top of them. The logs were joined at the corners by either notching or cutting dovetails. Sometimes holes were bored and the logs were pinned together by wooden pegs. To keep the logs dry and prevent them from rotting clay was piled against the side of the house and packed solidly to shed rainwater away from the house.

There were a variety of roof styles, and the pictures show that gable and hip roofs were used in the Theodore area. It has been suggested that sod roof might have been used as a first temporary measure, but the usual practise was to thatch the roof with rye straw or slough hay.

When Robert Reid of Theodore started to manufacture shingles from locally grown wood in 1903, a number of the settlers took timber to him to have their shingles made.³¹ It may safely be assumed, therefore, that many of the original roofs were later replaced with wooden shingles.

Both the interior and exterior doors usually measured about three feet by six feet. The outer door usually faced south. There were usually two windows on the east side of the front door and one on the west. A fourth window might be located in the western part of the north wall to allow those in the kitchen-living room to see the farmyard.

Most of the Ukrainian houses began with simple dirt floors which, when packed down and smoothed over with clay, became hard and glossy. The floors were maintained by coating them with a solution of cow-dung and water. Over time, as the farm prospered, wooden floors were added in most homes.

The walls of most Ukrainian homes were originally coated with a layer plaster made of clay and water, mixed with chopped straw. A second layer of plaster made of sand was often added before the final coat of lime and water was applied. Just as wooden shingles and floors gradually replaced the original materials, wood siding sometimes replaced the original clay plaster.

Ukrainian houses usually consisted of two or three rooms. A kitchen-living room in the west end of the house and a room reserved for special occasions in the east. Sometimes a narrow entrance hall separated the two rooms. The kitchen-living room often contained a large clay oven, a bed, a table, chairs, benches, and a trunk or shelves for storage. The eastern room was often

kept for formal occasions and the accommodation of guests although some families may have used it as a bedroom.



Farm Buildings in Theodore District, University of Saskatchewan Morton Manuscripts Collection, MSS C555/1/8.12

Prairie Fires

Like almost all other settlements, one of the dangers that the early farms in the Theodore district faced was fire. Many of the fires were started by accident, but more than a few were deliberately set. It appears that some of the early settlers in the region believed that burning off the dead grass left from the previous year's hay crop was a sound agricultural practice. Others, however, questioned the practice as shown by the following: "Whether they improve the growth and quality of the grass is a question inasmuch as they consume the decaying vegetable mould and prevent it from enriching the earth."³²

One of the earliest reports of prairie fires in the Theodore area appeared in *The Leader*, published in Regina in the spring of 1894. The report states that several people were fined ten dollars and costs for kindling a prairie fire and letting it escape from them. One of the individuals involved thought that the fine was unjust and circulated a petition for a remission of the fine. There is no indication how many settlers may have signed the petition, but it is unlikely that the number was very high as many of the early settlers lost valuable property because of the prairie fires. When prairie fires were deliberately started, the consequences for such action were severe:

The following persons appeared before C. S. Willis, J. P., charged by the N.W.M.P. with setting prairie fires contrary to the ordinance: G. Whalley, N. Ekstrom, F. Gale and C. Gale. The case against the latter was dismissed. The three former were fined \$50.00 and costs. An attempt before another court to prove perjury against one of the witnesses in the Whalley case ended in a fizzle. The intention evidently was to so intimidate settlers that they will not inform when they know the person starting prairie fires.³³

When one considers the damage that a prairie fire could inflict on a community, it is hard to imagine why a homesteader would not inform the police when one or more of his neighbours started a fire. A report in *The Winnipeg Tribune* dated 14 August, 1894 stated that:

Grain ready to cut; haying advanced. This article is somewhat scarce, owing to the lack of rain and is being made scarcer still by prairie fires, the standing meadows being burnt. Willis Bros. have lost about thirty-five tons and others up through this section of the country have suffered seriously in this regard.

Another report in *The Leader* two years later stated that:

A terrible fire scourged this district last week. Starting at Wallace it burnt all to the north-east of the town.. Another one starting at the White-Sand district burnt all down west of the Beaver Hills. Thousands of tons of hay burnt whist some lost part of their crops and in a few instances others lost all their hay. Great praise is due Constable Pennycook who was indefatigable in his exertions to get people to assist in putting the fire out, beside working like a Trojan himself.³⁴

Yet another report on prairie fires occurred the following spring”

Prairie fires, the usual accompaniment of spring, are raging all round us. Several of our neighbours have suffered serious loss already. One, his large stable, another, his stable, horse, bull, cow, &c., and still another, 30 tons of hay. And no police around. Still, when persons will stand by and see law breakers start prairie fires, they don't deserve police help, no matter how much they suffer from such fires.³⁵

There was little sympathy for anyone who started a fire, even if it was accidental.

On Wednesday morning a prairie fire was started at a point about 10 miles north-west of the town and soon assumed alarming proportions. The police were early on the spot and called out the homesteaders to assist in putting it out. A gang of threshers under Mr. Newton were also requisitioned and all gladly lent their aid. The efforts of the people were at first chiefly directed to preventing the fire reaching the homesteads, and afterwards to saving the haystacks in the large hay meadow which traverses along its trend a distance of somewhere near 15 or 20 miles. Happily the homesteads were saved, although the danger was very great and with the exception of three stacks, all the meadow was also saved. Shortly after the fire was started a member of the police force was on the scene and tracked a hay wagon under the charge of a young man named John Paterson. The youth admitted having struck a match to light his pipe, and that while doing so the lighted head broke off, but he saw no fire occur therefrom. He was promptly arrested and tried next day before Mr. Hopkins, JP, who dismissed the case. Great indignation is felt in the district, the people feel sure that if the police had legal assistance a conviction would have been obtained. The police are highly commended for their action in the matter.³⁶

Although the Territorial Legislature did organize Local Improvement districts and fire districts in an attempt to deal with the fire problem, it appears that many of the local communities were left to address the problem of prairie fire on their own. One of the measures used to prevent the spread of prairie fires was to plow a fire guard around a community or an individual farm. The Yorkton correspondent to *The Leader* wrote”

It would be a great blessing if our Legislatures would lend us one of the new prairie fire-guard machines every fall or provide one for the district as hundreds of square miles of grazing ground has been lost and the face of the earth is as black as night.³⁷

Health Care

For the earliest settlers on the Canadian prairies medical services were either scarce or nonexistent. Prior to 1906 there was no doctor in Theodore. Many people, therefore, had to rely on the advice they found in some of the western newspapers. One newspaper, *The Regina Leader*, carried a weekly health column that gave its readers instructions on such topics as sewing up a cut finger using the finest sewing needle available and silk thread, disinfecting wounds and various article around the house, filtering water, and an article on the dangers of using cocaine.

When an illness or an accident did strike, the settlers may or may not have been able to do much about it except provide the patient with bed rest. As the Theodore correspondent to *The Leader* reported in 1896, “There is some sickness around here just now. Eulis Hansen returned from Yorkton and is at present bedfast. Mr. W. Spencer’s eldest boy is in a very weak condition through malaria fever. Young Peterson put a fork prong through his foot and is confined to the house.”³⁸ In 1901 Daff Pinder, who receives a kick from a horse, and Frank Walton who cut his knee with an axe, both were both laid up at home for a few days.³⁹

During these early years those needing surgery had to leave Theodore. This usually meant Travelling to Yorkton by horse and wagon and then taking the train to Winnipeg or some other point. In the late summer of 1900 George Farrell who worked on Richard Seeman’s farm at Theodore was sick for two weeks before he caught the train to Winnipeg where he underwent an operation for appendicitis.⁴⁰ Two months after leaving Theodore it was announced in the newspaper that, “George Farrell returned on Tuesday from Winnipeg, where he has been treated for appendicitis.” In the same way in 1913 Mr. and Mrs. D. C. Larson travelled to Minnesota where Mrs. Larson underwent an operation.⁴¹

By 1900 there was at least one doctor in Yorkton, Dr. Patrick, willing to travel to Theodore to see patients,⁴² and by 1903 a nurse from Yorkton would also travel to Theodore to treat patients.⁴³ In the fall of 1914 two dentists, Dr. R. W. Swindley and Dr. G..C. Caldwell advertised that they would treat patients in Theodore.

The lack of medical services in Theodore could, and did have some tragic consequences as the case of Peter Hanson illustrates.

Mr. Peter Hanson, a well known farmer living about seven miles from Theodore committed suicide about 6 o'clock on Tuesday morning July 8 by drowning himself in a well while crazed by strangulated hernia from which he had been suffering for several days.

[The] deceased had suffered with rupture sine infancy but had got used to the inconvenience and was working hard on Monday of last week when the hernia came down causing him severe pain in the abdomen, the cause of the pain he did not recognize. Late last Friday night he summoned a doctor from Yorkton who went up arriving at 5 o'clock Saturday morning and with some difficulty succeeded in reducing the hernia. Before leaving the doctor pointed out the danger of his condition to his patient and urged him should there be any return of the pain to go across to the hotel and wire for surgical aid as a surgical operation would be necessary. Before leaving the doctor gave him some morphine to control the pain incident to the 7 mile journey to Theodore.

Late Monday night the doctor was summoned to Theodore to attend him. As the Telegram called the doctor to Theodore and not to Hansen's residence seven miles away it was expected that he had been taken to Theodore as had been urged and that it was hoped that he would have been brought to Yorkton on Monday's special train from Sheho which arrived about midnight. As he did not arrive on Tuesday morning two doctors and a nurse went to Theodore to perform the operation but on their way across from Theodore to his home they learned that he had committed suicide by drowning himself in a well.

The well was only four feet deep and held sixteen inches of water. His wife stated that he got up about four o'clock that morning as went out, coming back wet saying he had fallen into the well. A neighbour named Jacobson was sent for and his cloths were changed and he was put to bed. Jacobson going home about six o'clock he go up again and as his wife found herself unable to restrain him he again went for Jacobson and when they returned they found him dead in the well.⁴⁴

A follow-up story about Mr. Hanson's funeral add a few more details that may help the modern reader understand those early conditions.

Theodore July 13 - The funeral of the late Jens Peter Hanson took place at Theodore on July 4 and was largely attended. Deceased came to Canada about a year and a half ago and was married last summer to Miss Hermanson. He had been suffering with rupture for some time and was not feeling very well. On the Wednesday before his death he was breaking when a storm came on. His horses took fright and ran away, dragging him some distance. When he regained his feet he found he was worse and went to bed. On Thursday a doctor was sent for who found him very low and left some morphine pills to take every two hours, instructing him to come to Yorkton on Tuesday's train. The pills were soon used and he was worse than ever Monday night. That evening at nine o'clock a doctor was telegraphed for again, but towards morning Mr. Hanson became crazed with pain, got out of bed, said he couldn't stand the heat and his wife finding she could not keep him in went out with him several times. She, however, had to return to her infant child and left him. In a few minutes he appeared in the door and told his wife he fell into the well as he could not see where he went. The fever seemed for a time to have left him as he commenced taking his wet cloths off. His wife helped him to bed and went for a neighbour, who finding him so well returned home saying if he was wanted to send for him. Shortly after this Mr Hanson again got up. His wife left him in care of the hired boy and went again after the neighbour. The boy states that he was asked for a drink and went in the house to get it. When he returned he found Mr. Hanson in the well and was unable to get him out. Much sympathy is felt for the young wife in her sad bereavement.⁴⁵

Prior to the arrival of Dr. Ekins in Theodore women had to rely on the services of a local midwife when giving birth. According to her grandson, Gordon Lewis, when she wasn't teaching, Mrs. A. C. Tracy served as one of Theodore's midwives and, she never charged anyone for this service. He also stated that she had lost count of the number of babies she had delivered..⁴⁶ A second midwife in Theodore was Mrs. P. F. Peterson.

Educating the Children at Theodore

In the early part of October, 1892 the settlers living in township 28, range 7, west of the second meridian voted unanimously to establish a public school in the area and elected Messrs O. C. Frederickson, J. C. Peterson and C. Peterson as the first trustees.⁴⁷ The first classes were held in a lean-to addition of the Viskstrom family home, located about a mile south of the present

village.⁴⁸ Although there were only eight students attending those first classes, there were many other children who needed an education and in the spring of the following year (1893) the trustees of Theodore school district decided to erect a school building.⁴⁹ It does not appear that any construction actually took place in 1893 as in November 1894 it was reported that, "The trustees of Theodore School District are erecting a new school house and expect to have a school open in the spring."⁵⁰ In the spring of 1895 the Theodore correspondent to *The Leader* wrote, "The trustees of this school district intend opening their school the first of June. The new building will not be ready before that date."⁵¹ One possible reason for the delayed construction of a school building may have been financial.

The district is feeling that the Council of Public Instruction is not treating them as well as some school districts near here are being treated. There are four or five which have received grants to help them erect school houses, but this district (though needy as any) could not obtain the grant of an abandoned school house, and now it is gone up in smoke, furniture, desks, and all. It would have been a great help to these poor people, but they could not get it.⁵²

When the school finally was completed it was a simple one-room, log building with a sod roof and floor, located east of the present village on land owned by W. P. Hopkins of Yorkton. The furnishings in the school were also simple. Three or four students sat on a bench that had been hewn out of locally cut logs and placed on posts driven into the earth floor, and their desks were made of wood with a slight slope and a ledge to keep material in place. Slate was used for the blackboards and the school provided each student with an English made slate and slate pencil.⁵³ Newspaper reports from the time indicated that some renovations to the building were made in 1903 and a stable was build for the benefit of the students who lived at a distance. After

the opening of a new school building in the village in, 1905 the old school building was sold to George Yemen for \$25 and moved to his homestead.⁵⁴

Like many other schools in other communities, the Theodore school was only open during the summer months, thereby solving the problems of heating the building and transporting students to it during the harsh winter weather. The opening date and the name of the teacher for the year was announced in the Theodore news columns of the newspapers serving the district.

Overcoming Isolation and Loneliness

One of the greatest challenges to the early settlers in the Theodore area was the simple fact that there were only a small handful of them. Consequently many settlers experienced a very strong sense of isolation and loneliness, and did what they could to make life more pleasant for one another. Church organization held services and events that not only provided for the spiritual care of the early settlers, but an important social outlet as well. Sports were an important part of summer life for many of Theodore's earliest residents, while dances and house parties were common in the winter.

The first mention of any church related activity dates from 1895 when the Theodore correspondent to *The Winnipeg Tribune* reported that, "The Methodists are about building a new church at this place. R. Gale has kindly offered a site upon which to place the building and the friends have already placed some logs upon the ground."⁵⁵ The Presbyterians were not far behind the Methodists and the two denominations each played major rolls in the spiritual lives of Theodore's earliest residents. Beginning in 1896 the activities of the various clergy were regularly reported in the Theodore news columns.

The representatives of the Methodist and Presbyterian churches here are alive just now. The former, Rev. Scott. Is about building a church at Round Plain, and the later, Rev. Wilson, is about building one here. They are both needed.⁵⁶

Although the Presbyterians were represented in the Theodore district by such missionaries as the Rev. Mr. Sutherland and J. Wilson, most of the news reports from the 1890's focussed on the work done by the Methodists. The Rev. Mr. Wright, the Methodist missionary, mentioned above, found that he could not reach all the points on Sunday and resorted to preaching in the afternoons on weekdays.⁵⁷ If that were not enough, he also offered a singing class in 1897.⁵⁸

One of the things that helped the Methodists succeed in their work among the settlers was their ability to recruit lay people to take an active part in the leadership of the church. Mr. H. J. Gregory, who arrived in the area 1896, took an active role in organizing and running the Sunday Schools in the area for the Methodist church. By the early fall of 1897 there were three Sunday Schools, including one for the Danish children under Mr. Gregory's care.⁵⁹ In 1900 the Methodist Sunday School became a Union Sunday School. The idea was that one Sunday School could meet the needs of both the Methodists and the Presbyterian denomination. The Union Sunday School met in the Theodore School.⁶⁰ The Union Sunday School marked the beginning of a long tradition of co-operation and ecumenism on the part of all denominations in the community.

Another important ecumenical effort among the churches in the Theodore area was the Organization of a Young People's Society of Christian Endeavour. In the spring of 1899 the Theodore correspondent to *The Leader* described the organization as follows:

The action of the CE here is worthy of all praise. It is composed of Presbyterians, Methodists and others. One of their most commendable features is their circulating library. Any person who subscribes 25 cents per year can have all the reading he wants week by week. This to the settlers these long winter nights has been a great help and we trust a blessing, as the circulation of good and pure reading matter must be a blessing.⁶¹

Although churches try to focus on attracting young people, most organizations for young people tend to have short lives. This seems to be true in the case of the Christian Endeavour, which is not mentioned in the newspapers again.

Then as now Christmas was a time for special gatherings in the community. In 1900 the ladies of the district organized a “Christmas Tree” and entertainment for the children which was held on Christmas eve at the home of Mr. Pinder.⁶² The event attracted many of the families in the district and there were presents for everyone.⁶³ As usual the ladies provided baskets full of food and people enjoyed themselves until early morning.⁶⁴

House parties were a common occurrence in the early days of settlement at Theodore. It appears that there were generally two kind of parties. First there were the open parties in which someone simply opened his or her house to the community and announced the date of the party. In some cases a line might appear in the Theodore news column such as the one that appeared in 1903 stating that, “Invitations are out for a party at P. Harper’s on Feb. 6th.”⁶⁵ Christmas and New Year’s Eve were then, as now, popular time for such parties, but they could occur at any time for any reason.

The other popular type of party was the surprise party. Surprise parties occurred when a group of people simply showed up at someone’s door with the refreshments. One example of this occurred in early December 1900 when a group of about 40 people showed up at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Reed.⁶⁶ According to the Theodore news, the house was packed and a most enjoyable time was spent in singing, dancing, and games. The ladies brought a plentiful supply in their baskets and all indulged in a hearty supper and the guests dispersed in the early morning.⁶⁷ These surprise parties were so popular that by 1900 a committee was organized to schedule them. It is

not known how the committee kept the schedule secret from those it wished to surprise.

There were a few people, however, who did not like surprise parties. Theodore's correspondents to both *The Winnipeg Tribune* and *The Leader* reported a somewhat unusual event in 1895, "A large party made a visit the other evening to one of the neighbours, and upon reaching the door were informed by the good lady of the house that they had better return home at once, and closed the door. Moral - Be sure of your welcome before you attempt a surprise."⁶⁸

A second very popular type of entertainment were community dances. During the 1890's it appears that while most dances were held in private homes, they were often open to the whole community and were announced in the Theodore News. News reports indicate that these dances were usually well attended and that those who attended them had a good time. Local musicians provided the music and dancing often continued well past midnight. There are reports of dancing continuing as late as four o'clock in the morning when the revellers would have to go home, and change their cloths in order to tend to the morning chores on the farm.

Dances were often held following such events as the community picnic or sports day, or on New Years Eve. In 1901, for example, it was reported that

In spite of the cold weather on New Years Day, a large number of invited friends met at Mr. D. Pinder's. A very pleasant time was spent, dancing and singing until daylight when the party broke up, all wishing one another a happy and prosperous New Year."

Sports of one kind or another were an important aspect of the social and cultural life of every prairie community from their very beginnings, and Theodore was no different. While there does not appear to be any records of organized sports teams from the 1890's in the Theodore area, there are numerous references to people attending local picnics at which various sports were played and races run. Theodore's first picnic took place on Monday, July 30, 1894.⁶⁹ According

to the newspaper report it was well attended, that the people enjoyed themselves immensely, and that they looked forward to the next picnic.⁷⁰ Newspaper reports of these events also indicate that it was usual for people from one district to travel many miles to another district in order to attend a picnic where they would meet old friends and renew acquaintances.

A newspaper report dated 1902 describes what appears a typical picnic of that era. The picnic was held on Victoria Day. According to the report the day began with a nice steady rain and a promise of disappointment for the picnic folks, but goes on to say that after the weather cleared up, who assembled in the afternoon had a very enjoyable time.⁷¹ Fortunately, Theodore's correspondent to the *Yorkton Enterprise* recorded the winners of all the races that day, and it is, therefore, possible to get some idea of what an early picnic was like. The racing events were: 100 yards open, 75 yards boys under 16, Girls under 20, Girls under 14, Boys under 16, Girls under 10, Donkey race open, Running long jump. Married Woman's race, Running high jump, and Married men's race.

The transportation of goods and people in and out of Theodore was essential to the growth and development of the community. Without adequate transportation facilities a community, no matter how strong and vibrant it might have been at one time, often simply disappeared. The lack of transportation facilities to move people and goods from one place to another was, therefore, one of the first difficulties that the early settlers had to overcome.

Prior to the Dominion Land Survey and for a few years following it, settlers made do with the old trails that had served earlier generations. However, as more and more people arrived the need for properly built and maintained roads and bridges became more and more important. This need is illustrated by a report from the Yorkton correspondent to *The Leader* in Regina in which

it was stated that the rivers and creeks were flooded and a great deal damage had been done to property near the Whitesand River.⁷² Many of the bridges had been washed away and communication with those living north of Theodore had been cut off.

In the summer of 1893 the Yorkton correspondent to *The Leader*, praised R. F. Insinger, the local Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) for work done on the roads and bridges that year. The correspondent then stated that another road was required west of Yorkton, and expressed the hope that the road would be built either that year or the next.⁷³ By January 1894, it appeared that the road west of Yorkton would be built on the surveyed road allowance,⁷⁴ and a few months later tenders were invited for the erection of several bridges in the Yorkton area, including one over Clear Creek near Theodore.⁷⁵ Theodore now had a road to Yorkton.

One of the more ambitious plans to meet the transportation needs of the people at Theodore was developed and presented by Richard Seeman. When Seeman purchased his large tract of land from the M.&N.W.R. in 1892, he believed that the railway would be extending its line west from Yorkton within a few years, and in 1894 he intimated to his agent that he had arranged with the railway company for the line to be extended from Yorkton to Theodore.⁷⁶ However, when the railway failed to extend the line as Seeman had hoped, he announced a plan to build a graded road from Yorkton to Theodore. In reporting this plan on the front page of its 8 January 1895 edition *The Winnipeg Tribune* stated:

His [Seeman's] object is two-fold, first to find employment for the settlers which are already here; second, to induce settlement by making the land easy to access by this graded road. Most of the settlers are in accord with him in this matter. Some think, however, that the road had better be made along the M.&N.W.R. survey for two reasons: First, when the M.&N.W.R. are prepared to extent their line to this place they will find it already graded. Second when the railway reaches here a separate graded road will scarcely be needed as all the traffic will be to the different stations and not to Yorkton, the present

terminus; and further, the railway and a graded road through a settlers homestead will be a serious matter, and will no doubt meet with strong opposition from the settlers whose homesteads are affected. Mr Seeman has assurances of help from both the Dominion and Northwest governments.”⁷⁷

A resolution passed by New Denmark Lodge of Patrons of Industry and reported in the Winnipeg Tribune on 6 February 1895 states that while Seeman’s proposed graded road from Yorkton to Theodore would be an acceptable temporary alternative to the extension of the railway, the Patrons would continue to support the completion of the railway extension. The resolution passed by the Patrons of Industry also recognized the fact that many of the settlers already living in the Theodore area were having financial difficulties, and some settlers were barely making a living. In supporting the proposed graded road, the Patrons’ Lodge hoped that the work of building the road be given to settlers already living in the area, and that it not be used as just another immigration scheme.

In spite of the interest, the notion of the graded road generated when it was announced, it soon disappeared as a topic of conversation. The Theodore correspondent to the Winnipeg Tribune noted some weeks later that “We do not hear anything about the Seeman straight graded road from Yorkton to this place these days.”

It is interesting to note that, like the railway extension, the graded road between Theodore and Yorkton was not built until some years later, and when it was built, it did not follow the railway right-of way but rather was built on the road allowances provided for in the original survey of the territories. It was designated as Saskatchewan Highway 14, and it was not until the early 1950s that the highway was rebuilt parallel to the railway line. Some years later it was renumbered as Saskatchewan Highway 16 and designated the Yellow Head Highway.

Early Departures

In spite of what now appears to be fairly easy requirements for obtaining a homestead, many early settlers in the Canadian west were unable to obtain a patent on their chosen land. It has been estimated that as many as forty percent of the homestead application were cancelled between the years 1871 and 1930.⁷⁸

There were probably as many reasons why people left their homesteads and abandoned their dreams as there were people who did so. Some left their homesteads because of the debt they had been encouraged to take out in order to finance their homesteading ventures. As the Theodore correspondent to *The Leader* pointed out”

The loans they took a few years ago are driving them out. They cannot live under them. There were badly advised when they took them. It is a great mistake to handicap yourself with such loans. But these poor fellows did not know any better.⁷⁹

Another reason were the fires mentioned above. A report in *The Leader* dated 16 August, 1894 stated that some settlers in the Theodore area had lost so much hay and grass to fire that they considered leaving the area.

By the end of the 1890's newly arrived homesteaders in the Theodore area sometimes discovered that the land they had chosen as their future home had originally been chosen by someone else several years earlier and that those early claims to the land had to be cleared away before a new application could proceed. On 24 April 1901, for example, J. P. K. Jensen applied for a homestead and discovered that the original applicant for a homestead on this property had been Soren Hanson who had made his application on 13 January 1892. The original homestead application was cancelled on 11 April 1899, and the homestead documents on this property show

that with the exception of a shanty which is listed as having no value in 1901, Mr. Hanson had not made any improvements on the land.

In the spring of the year 1896 the Theodore correspondent to *The Leader* wrote several times about the number of people who left or were planning to leave the Theodore area. On one occasion he reported that some of the immigrants from Iceland were planning to leave for the United States on 26 March 1896.⁸⁰ Two months later he wrote, "Quite a number of settlers are making preparations for leaving these parts."⁸¹ Naturally, the departures of homesteaders from the Theodore area had a direct and negative effect on the community which was noted by *The Leader's* correspondent.

The school District here held their annual meeting and elected C. Erickson trustee for three years. While the settlers have left these parts to such an extent that average of six scholars in attendance cannot be obtained, there is a little money in the Treasury. It was decided to commence school about the middle of March.⁸²

Not all of the settlers who left their homesteads in the Theodore area went to far off places such as the United States. Uless Hansen, for example moved to Fishing Lake,⁸³ C. Erskin moved to Yorkton and started a business making monuments and tombstones,⁸⁴ and C. Helgeson took his family to Foam Lake.⁸⁵

Among the factors that caused some people to give up homesteading was the high cost of getting their products to market and the low prices that they received for them. Many of the homesteaders simply could not make a living by farming. The following letter from William Wilson of Beaverdale to *The Winnipeg Tribune* illustrates the homesteaders' predicament:

Dear Sir - In answer to your call for information concerning prices obtained by farmers for their beef cattle last fall, I beg to submit to you the prices in this district: for steers, 1,200 pounds and over, 3 cents per pound; heifers, fit to ship 2½ cents; calves 2¼ cents. These latter they say can only be sold for soup making and you can scarcely sell them at all.

Steers under 1,200, only 2½ cents.

Dressing hogs at Theodore, our nearest market, 8 cents per pound, in trade.

Yours truly

Wm. Wilson⁸⁶

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