

Chapter 4 - Theodore's Agriculture Foundation

Problems Faced by Theodore's Early Farmers

One of the popular myths about our earliest settlers is that they were all rugged individuals who wrestled their livelihood from the soil without the help of anyone else. The truth of the matter is that Theodore's pioneers were highly interdependent with one another. They formed bees to raise buildings for each other. They helped each other out in times of sickness and tragedy. And, most importantly, they joined together in organizations for the mutual benefit on one another and to address the problems they all faced. Among the biggest problems faced by farmers at the beginning of the twentieth century were issues around the marketing of their grain.

Problems with the railway

The first and most obvious problem that Theodor's farmers had with the railways was the simple fact that there was no railway service until early January 1904. Even after the arrival of the railway, service was poor. For several years there was only one train a week, and later after more frequent service began there was often a severe shortage of railway cars to haul the grain. The following are typical of the many comments regarding the assignment of railway cars to the elevators at Theodore by the railway. In 1907, for example the Theodore correspondent to *The Yorkton Enterprise* complained that, "Spring seems to be near, but the grain cars do not come."¹ Then in 1908 the Great West Elevator reported that it had purchased nearly 50,000 bushels and paid out \$11,000, but was unable to get enough railway cars to ship it from Theodore.² Almost a

decade later the elevator men and the farmers at Theodore were calling loudly for railway cars, but only 30 had been placed in the village the previous month (January 1916).³

Even after years of hard work by farmers' organization to resolve the problem of finding sufficient cars in which to ship grain, problems sometimes arose. When in 1915, for example, the farmers in the Theodore district were blessed with an exceptionally large crop, the Theodore correspondent to *The Yorkton Enterprise* informed his readers that:

Grain is pouring in from all sides and elevators are working at full speed. Up to date about 200,000 bushels have been marketed and we expect Theodore will ship in the neighbourhood of one million bushels of this season's crop.⁴

In spite of this huge crop, the usual problems securing a sufficient number of railway cars to move the grain out of Theodore arose almost immediately. Before the year ended it was noted in the Theodore news that, "this years grain shipments greatly exceed last year's and great difficulty is being experienced in securing sufficient cars."⁵ The situation remained unchanged for the next few months, and in February of 1916 it was again reported that, "the elevator men and the farmers are calling loudly for cars, only 30 were placed here last month,"⁶

The lack of grain cars not only had a negative effect on the farmers, but on the local communities as well. In 1907 the Theodore correspondent to *The Yorkton Enterprise* wrote, "Owing to the grain blockade, business has been very dull lately."⁷ Insinger experienced a similar problem in 1912.⁸

Sometimes when freight cars were available those who chose to sell and load the cars themselves rather than use the elevators faced problems resulting from the inadequate size of the loading dock at Theodore. In 1923, for example, it was reported in the Theodore news that:

Eight cars of grain were being loaded at one time here last week, six of these from the ground, as the dinky little loading platform only accommodates two cars at once. Why the Grain Growers Association does not take action to secure proper loading facilities from the CPR is a mystery. An effort was recently made by the village council to secure a larger platform, but the request was refused for this year. However there is little doubt the farmers could secure it, if they made a united effort; a letter to the Board of Railway Commissioners might prove effective.⁹

Another problem that farmers in Theodore sometimes faced was the high cost of freight compared to the price they received for what they produced, as one story from 1924 illustrates.

Farming conditions may be improving, but the local farmers who sent a fine lot of Spring ducks and chickens to Yorkton and had them re-billed by express to Winnipeg, had reason to think otherwise. His shipment realized \$418.00 from which express charges of \$412 was deducted netting him the princely sum of six dollars or an average of 23 cents each for his ducks and 11c each for his chickens.¹⁰

Problems With the Grain Companies and Other Buyers

A second major problem area was a lack of competitions among the elevator companies. In 1899 the elevator companies operating in Winnipeg formed the North-West Line Elevator Association.¹¹ Within a few years this organization “controlled more than two thirds of the grain elevators on the prairies.”¹² With that much control over the grain industry it was not difficult for the Elevator Association to limit the competition among the elevator companies keeping grain prices low when buying. An item in the Theodore news column from the end of December 1907 stated:

Grain has been coming in very slowly during the past week, the elevator companies not paying a very high price being the chief cause of this. Most of the farmers are going to keep their grain until; the prices advance as it does not pay them to sell at present.¹³

A few weeks later it was reported that, “The elevator companies are paying better prices now for grain. Oats are 26 and wheat 29 cents per bushel.”¹⁴ Because it was closely associated with the

Grain Exchange in Winnipeg, the Elevator association appears to have had the ability to keep prices relatively high when selling grain and may have worked with the railways to see that the elevator companies that got preferential treatment over the farmers from the railways when it came to making railway cars available.

The situation faced by Theodore's farmers during the early years of the twentieth century with regard to moving their grain to market can be summed up in the words on Theodore's correspondent to *The Yorkton Enterprise*, who in 1912 wrote:

Those who worked and voted for reciprocities are more than ever of the opinion that it would have solved the problem of a market for our feed grain. Conditions here as at dozens of other points are, to say the least, discouraging for the farmer. It is cold satisfaction to him to sit down and compare our local prices with those in Minneapolis and elsewhere. Lack of cars and danger of losing hundreds of dollars should warm whether set in before his grain is marketed, do not add to his peace of mind.¹⁵

By the time those words were written, however, many farmers in Saskatchewan had learned that by organizing and working together for their common good, it was possible to exert considerable political and economic power, and improve their situation.

A final problem that Theodore farmers had with the grain companies was the fact that the grain companies paid more for the grain they bought in some communities than they did in others.

Great dissatisfaction is expressed by business men here over the fact that thousands of bushels of grain are being marketed in Springside and Willowbrook, which under right conditions would be delivered here. In some cases farmers living five and six miles west of Theodore, are hauling right past the town and selling in Springside, while practically all of the Beaverdale crop is going there. There is certainly good reason for this and five to ten cents per bushel on grain in favour of Springside market would seem to be the best explanation offered. Why Theodore elevators cannot equal price paid at outside points is a question many would like answered. There is no doubt that local business men have suffered heavily on this account, Both as regards the sales and collections of accounts.¹⁶

The grain companies were not the only buyers with whom Theodore's farmers were unhappy. The wholesalers in Yorkton who bought much of Theodore's egg production were also a source of dissatisfaction as illustrated by the following"

The egg marketing item in your last issue has not cleared up the situation as regards local shippers. No objection has been taken to dockage for rotten eggs, but that dockage for 54½ dozen racked eggs from 5 cases shipped to Yorkton by express, still requires some explanation, and it might be noted that local dealers are acting on the advice of Yorkton houses and are shipping to Winnipeg. Strange that breakage should be so much larger in a 25 mile haul, than a 300 mile journey. Let your experts make another attempt to explain this. Provided your desire to be just exceeds your enthusiasm to boost Yorkton.¹⁷

Labour Shortages

Farming in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was very labour intensive. As early as 1893 Richard Seaman was presenting schemes to the Canadian government to bring English farmers and farm labourers to Canada.¹⁸ Indeed, many of Theodore's early settlers began their lives in their new country as farm labourers or servants who often worked for as little as \$150 per year. An advertisement taken out by A. C. Tracy of Theodore in 1904 stated that a servant girl could earn \$13 per month working for a family in Portage La Prairie.¹⁹

One of the first ways to alleviate the general labour shortage on Canadian farms during the later nineteenth and early twentieth century was to bring orphaned, abandoned, and pauper children from England to work as cheap and domestic help. The program had mixed results. Some children were poorly treated and abused, while others experienced a better life in Canada than if they had remained in England.²⁰

Other attempts to solve the labour shortage on prairie farms during the fall was the annual harvest excursions. According to *The Canadian Encyclopedia* harvest excursion trains brought

workers west to help with the harvest. One-way tickets cost about \$15, and a return ticket was about \$20. The work paid between \$1.75 and 2.25 for a 10-12-hour day with board included.²¹

A third solution to the general labour shortage during World War I was the fact that the Canadian government believed that production of food was considered to be so important to the war effort that when conscription was eventually introduced, there were exemptions for farmers, farmers' sons, and even farm labour.

The labour shortage was especially acute during the harvest season when anyone who needed work could usually get it. In 1923, for example, it was reported that the farm labour problem in the Theodore district had been partially solved by using all available help in the village, and that there were very few unemployed people to be found.²²

At a representative meeting of farmers in the Saskatoon district in 1922 it was decided that a uniform wage would be paid all farm labourers that year. It was agreed by those present that the sum of \$35 plus board per month would be paid from the opening of spring work until the fall when a new scale for work and threshing would be set.²³ It is very likely that this agreement would have influenced the wages paid for farm labour across the province.

Rust

The low prices for wheat and other grains during the 1930's together with the drought of 1931 were just two of the major problems that farmers in the Theodore area faced during the great depression. A third problem was rust.

Rust, a fungal infection of wheat and other cereal crops that greatly reduced the quality of the grain, is first mentioned as a problem in September, 1921 when it was reported that although the

crops were infected with rust, they were turning out to be better than expected.²⁴ Because there was nothing in the way of effective fungicides and rust resistant strains were only just being developed, there was little the farmers could do about the problem.

Rust was briefly mentioned as infecting the late-sown grain in 1930, but within just a few years had infected most, if not all fields.²⁵ During the late summer of 1935 the effect of rust on the wheat crop at Theodore was described as follows:

The wheat crop in this district is practically ruined, as a result of black rust which has entirely changed the prospects in the past three or four weeks. What promised to be one of the finest crops ever grown here has deteriorated to the extent that much of it will never be cut, and what has been harvested will barely pay the costs of twine and threshing. This represents the worst blow that this district has yet received, and will prove disastrous to those who have placed their all in the growing of wheat.²⁶

Because of the rust many fields were yielding only 6 to 8 bushels of feed grain which was worth about 23 cents per bushel.²⁷ As the spring of 1936 approached it was reported in the Theodore news that few if any local farmers were willing to take a chance by planting the previous years wheat, and while some had their own supplies of rust-free seed, those farmers who lacked the funds to buy new seed were being supplied with rust-free seed by the different rural municipalities.²⁸

Although rust continued to be a problem for Saskatchewan farmers over the next few years it seems to have been ignored by the press.

For some unknown reason, newspapers seem to have a desire to minimize the damage done to wheat in this eastern part of Saskatchewan by rust, thereby holding down the price that should be much higher than it is. We do not know the extent of rust damage in areas to the south, but we do know that much of the non rust-resistant wheat in this and surrounding districts, and as far west as Foam Lake, will not be half a crop. It is hard to understand how conditions either east or south can be much better, but newspapers in that area give little attention to the matter, or if mentioned at all, the statement is usually made that damage is not as great as was at first thought. Those who are in a position to judge,

are of the opinion that much of the Marquis wheat for miles around this town, will scarcely pay for harvest costs. Rust-resistant wheats are standing up well, and oats and barley are good, but little can be expected from non rust resistant varieties this year. There is one consolation, and that is the fact that sufficient rust-resistant grain has been sown this year to provide seed of variety for everybody next year, so why sow anything else?²⁹

Marquis wheat which had been the mainstay in western Canada, and was the major variety grown at Theodore was not resistant to rust. A news report from the late summer of 1938 stated that the fields planted to Marquis wheat and which accounted for about 85% of the total wheat crop were so badly infected that they were not worth cutting.³⁰ By early September thousands of acres of Marquis wheat in the Theodore and surrounding districts were being burned on, and many farmers were sorely pressed to finance farm operations for another year.³¹ Unfortunately for Theodore's farmers, the coarse grains such as barley, oats, and rye also received considerable damage from rust in 1938.³²

In the early spring of 1939 it was reported that there was likely to be a sufficient amount of rust resistant seed in the Theodore area to supply the local demands. One farmer was said to have on hand some 2,500 bushels of Thatcher wheat, and many others had lesser quantities of Thatcher and Renown, both of which were resistant to rust. The major difficulty it seemed was finding the necessary funds with which to secure supplies, and it became evident that a considerable acreage of Marquis would again be sown again.³³ By the end of April, 1939, much of the wheat crop had been planted and it was practically all rust resistant seed that had been sown.³⁴

Notes:

1. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 14 March, 1907.
2. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 8 October, 1908.
3. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 3 February, 1916.
4. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 11 November, 1915.
5. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. On 16 December, 1915.
6. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. On 3 February, 1916.
7. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 21 March, 1907.
8. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 1 February.,1912.
9. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 6 November, 1923.
10. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 5 September, 1924.
11. "North-West Line Elevator Association," *Archives of the Agricultural Experience University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections*, retrieved from <http://www.umanitoba.ca/libraries/archives/exhibit>
12. "Territorial Grain Growers' Association" *Wikipedia The Free Encyclopedia* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Territorial_Grain_Growers'_Association
13. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 5 December, 1907.
14. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 9 January, 1908.
15. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 1 February, 1912.
16. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 3 November, 1922.
17. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 21 July, 1921.
18. "The Reportorial Round," *The Winnipeg Tribune*. 12 December, 1893.
19. *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 16 June, 1904.
20. "Home Children, 1869-1932" *Library and Archives Canada*. Retrieved 24 December 2017 from <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca>

21. Harvest Excursions "*The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 24 December 2017 from <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/harvest-excursions/>
22. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 4 September, 1923.
23. "Fix Farm Wages," *The Theodore Tattler*. 4 February, 1922.
24. "The Local News" *The Theodore Tattler*. 3 September 1921 p. 8.
25. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 8 August, 1930.
26. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 22 August, 1935.
27. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 5 September, 1935.
28. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 27 February, 1936.
29. Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 4 August, 1938.
30. Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 25 August, 1938.
31. Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 1 September, 1938.
32. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 15 September, 1938.
33. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 23 March, 1939.
34. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 27 April, 1939.