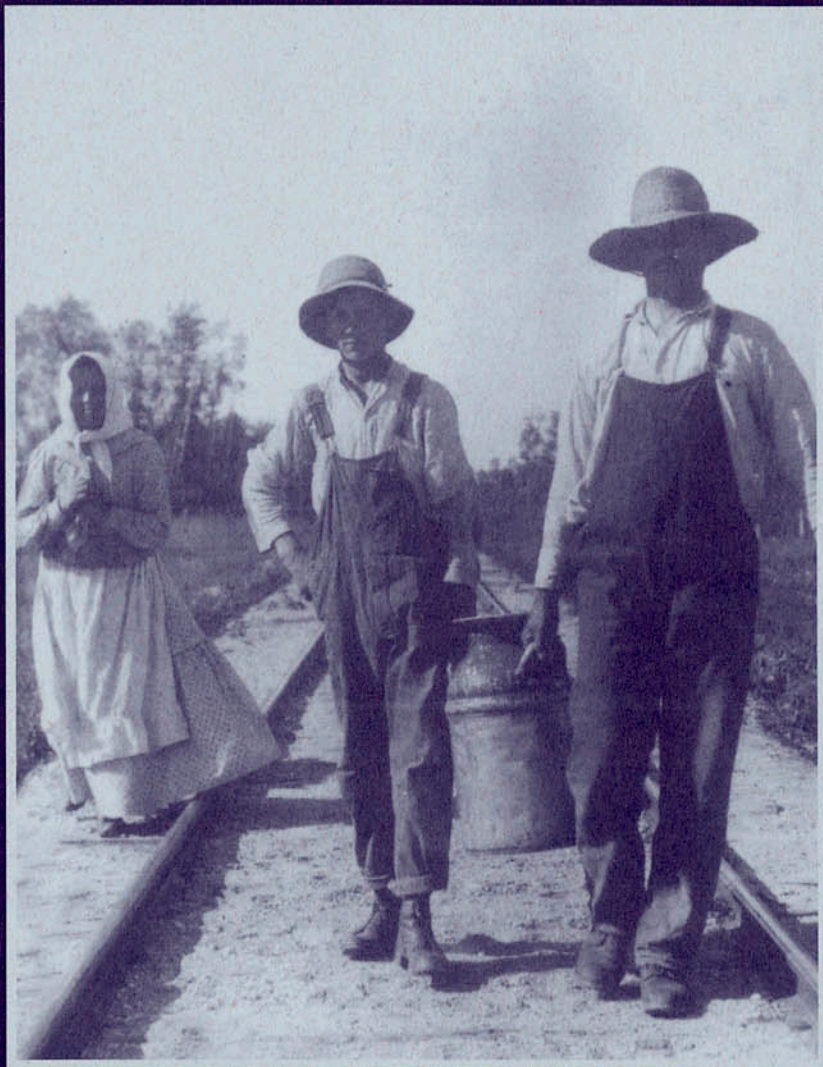


ETHNIC FARM CULTURE  
*in* WESTERN CANADA



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*Cover page illustration:*  
"Ukrainian farmer Martin Lepinski and son carrying cream can  
to the railway station at Malonton in Manitoba's Interlake district, 1915.  
The woman in the photo was not identified."

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ETHNIC FARM CULTURE  
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## ETHNIC FARM CULTURE IN WESTERN CANADA

### MARKING ETHNICITY

Southeastern Manitoba is one of the most ethnically diverse farm communities in Western Canada. Here Ukrainians farm in the Tolstoy and Sarto districts, Volhynian Germans in Friedensfeld, French Canadians in Ste.Anne, Ste.Agathe, and St.Jean, Low German Mennonites in Steinbach, Grunthal, and Blumenort, Anglo-Canadians in Dominion City and Morris; and Ojibwa natives at Roseau River. This is the region in which I grew up. As the son of a Mennonite farm family from Blumenort I had a strong sense of our region's division into ethnic enclaves. These districts carried ethnic names, their residents spoke Old World languages and their churches were graced with distinctive architectural forms. A local economy emerged from the constant interaction that took place among these farmers. Our immediate neighbours were Mennonites — Reimers, Penners, Loewens, Pletts — but Laing the Scotsman's land bordered ours, Therrien of La Broquerie bought our hay, Krentz the German-Lutheran baled our alfalfa, and Jablonski the Ukrainian inspected our turkeys at Blumenort Co-op Produce. These interactions, although carried out in the English language, served to remind us of our differences. Accents were an obvious ethnic sign, but any storytelling or talk of church, community, marriage, recreation and politics revealed different sets of values, cultural symbols and experiences. Part of the ethnic differentiation in the Southeast was confirmed in travelling its roads with my father who had an indelible love for the land. He also had a keen eye for distinct farming practices. While each of the ethnic groups raised the same selection of livestock and poultry, they seemed to grow different crops. It was as if ethnicity was marked by the colour of the field crops. The impression was that the white buckwheat fields to the south were Ukrainian, the blue flax fields north of Manitoba's Seine River were French, the golden wheat flats near the Red River were English, the granite-rock strewn pastures of the eastern parkland

were German, and the deep green colour of early barley fields belonged to us, the feedgrain-dependent Mennonites.

Some studies in both Canada and the United States made a connection between ethnicity and crop selection. In the United States such concepts as "latitudinal pull" and "cultural lag" have been advanced to account for these associations. In Canada, Andrew Hill Clark's study of agricultural patterns in Prince Edward Island (1959) stands as a classic example in this tradition. Clark's historic geography traced not only shifting farm practices over the centuries, but made unequivocal associations between specific crops and French Canadian, Irish, English and Scots settlers: as horse-lovers the French grew oats; the English specialized in dairy and thus maintained pastures; and the Irish cultivated potatoes. Informed by a wider and perhaps more scientific perspective, however, most Canadian studies now cast doubt on this subjective and anecdotal sense of rural ethnicity, suggesting in fact that crop selection was usually environmentally and not ethnically determined.

In southeastern Manitoba, for example, buckwheat, flax, wheat, and hay grow on different soils. Ethnic groups chose to settle on particular kinds of soils because of the timing of settlement, relative wealth, distance from markets, claims of immigration pamphlets, and advice of immigration agents. These are not ethnic variables. A study of ethnicity and agriculture in southern Manitoba by the geographer W.J. Carlyle argued in 1981 that ethnic farm methods were dictated by soil types and local market conditions. Greater diversity existed between farmers of a particular ethnic group than among ethnic communities. According to Carlyle, Mennonite farmers who settled on well-drained clay loam soils west of the Red River in the 1870s grew wheat until the Depression when they turned to sunflowers and sugar beets. Mennonites located in parkland east of the Red first practised mixed farming and then, as roads improved, they responded to demands from nearby Winnipeg with dairy, poultry and swine production. Such observations are not new. C.A. Dawson's classic work, *Group Settlements in Western Canada* (1936) identified similar crops across

different ethnic groups and divergent crops within particular groups. German Catholic immigrants who established St. Joseph colony in 1906 in the open prairie of western Saskatchewan were wheat-producers, while those who founded St. Peter's in 1902 in the eastern parkland were mixed farmers. Dawson made similar observations regarding Canadian-born farmers distinguishing between the wheat-producing French Canadians in the fertile plain at St. Albert near Edmonton and those practising mixed farming on the marginal lands of Ste. Rose in central Manitoba. Farm practice and ethnicity, it would seem, are at best only tentatively associated.

How then should the ethnic farmer of western Canada be studied? Models for this enquiry can be found in studies of farm life in English and French speaking communities throughout Canada. These studies link cultural identity with inherited social and cultural practices. Regionally-specific histories by Gerald Friesen, Catherine Wilson, Donald Akenson, Gérard Bouchard, Rusty Bitterman, Ruth Sandwell and others have emphasized the importance of social and cultural arrangements — household economies, community boundaries, family networks, social hierarchies, corporate identities — in describing the cultural nature of rural societies. These studies have shown that the vehicles of cultural expression among various groups were often similar. Those vehicles are not identified with specific farm practices per se, that is, overt traits such as crop selection or cultivation patterns; but rather with social relations that are culturally informed. Each group has a subjective notion of belonging, a mythology that explains its new life in Canada, a commitment to a particular kind of social boundary, and an inherited view of appropriate gender relations. Such attitudes and behaviours are ethnically determined.

In its broadest sense, ethnicity can refer to any cultural group that possesses a well-defined sense of peoplehood, rooted in history and expressed in common social practice. In this study, however, the term is used more narrowly to designate minority immigrant or non-charter group farmers who came to Western Canada between 1870 when Manitoba, the first western province,

was established and 1930 when the Depression shut the door to prospective immigrants and the long process of rural depopulation began. These people usually arrived in Canada after the country's traditions had been set and its primary institutions established. Not possessing the critical mass of the charter groups, ethnic farmers were asked to adapt to the new land's ways, acquire its language, adopt its laws and land tenure system, and accept their position as members of minority groups. In most instances the cultural practices of the ethnic farm community were expected to change, and its separate identity was to be secured only through the voluntary commitment of its members. In all cases farmers were required to adapt to Canada's insistence that newcomers abide by its land tenure laws, especially the Dominion Lands Act of 1872 that introduced to the Canadian prairies the homestead system whereby each farm family was promised its own "quarter section" (160 acres or 64 hectares).

Given the evolving nature of Canada, however, the divide between charter and ethnic group was not always apparent. Despite their connection with Great Britain, Irish Catholic farmers had no desire to be identified with Orangemen and many certainly felt no direct tie to what English Canadians regarded as the Mother Country. Aboriginal groups, for their part, found it hard to turn their North American origin and special relationship to the Canadian state to their advantage or even to resist the pressures of assimilation. French-Canadian farmers in Western Canada whose linguistic and cultural rights were trampled by Anglo-dominated legislatures, often resembled a minority group whose cultural survival depended above all on voluntarism. Despite these ambiguities, farmers in Western Canada who were English-speaking (including the Irish), Aboriginal (including the Metis), and French (at least those with roots in Quebec and New England) experienced life differently from their immigrant counterparts who originated from northern, central, or eastern Europe and from Asia or who were African-American. Lacking constitutional recognition, the cultures of ethnic farmers were confronted with two alternatives, either absorption into or separation from charter societies. As immigrants who spoke little or no English, ethnic farmers focused on community cohesiveness and a certain permanence

of residence. Their access to power as measured by the ability to negotiate with the state apparatus and to represent themselves to the Canadian media was severely limited when contrasted to English-speaking farmers in all regions of Canada. The great national symbols in Canada, especially the triumphalistic connection to the British Empire, meant little to most of them, either positively or negatively.

Despite their minority status, ethnic rural residents of Western Canada were sufficiently numerous by 1911 to become a social and cultural reality, comprising 37.3% of the region's rural population compared to 8.2% in the five central and eastern provinces. The ethnic percentage of British Columbia's rural population (28.7%), although the lowest in the west, was twice as high as the most "ethnic" eastern province, Nova Scotia (13.3%). Further, a variety of groups in the west constituted at least 2% of its population, including Germans, Russians, Scandinavians, and Ukrainians in each of the prairie provinces, Austrians in Saskatchewan and Alberta, Hungarians in Saskatchewan, Poles in Manitoba, and Chinese, Japanese, Scandinavians, Italians, and Germans in British Columbia. Although by 1911 the total number of ethnic rural residents in the five eastern provinces was still substantial — 236,568, as against 390,539 in the four western provinces — significant new streams of ethnic farmers made their way to the west after 1911. By 1931 the number of ethnic rural residents in the east had risen only slightly to 261,858, but it had doubled to 757,275 in the west which now had three times the number of ethnic farmers than did central and eastern Canada. Moreover the region's ethnic groups now constituted 43.5% of its rural population, compared with 8.7% in central and eastern Canada.

Chart # 1: Percentage of rural residents in 1911 and 1931 who belonged to ethnic (non-English/non-French/non-Aboriginal) groups.

	PEI	NS	NB	Qu	On
1911	.98%	13.3%	3.5%	1.0%	14.6%
	775	40,807	8,852	10,624	175,510
1931	.94%	13.4%	2.8%	.92%	15.4%
	621	37,795	7,842	9,764	205,836

	MB	SK	AB	BC
1911	33.1%	42.9%	40.3%	28.7%
	86,296	154,780	95,316	54,147
1931	43.5%	51.8%	45.3%	25.0%
	160,817	326,988	198,255	73,215

Chart # 2: Number of Ethnic Rural Residents in all of Canada in 1931:

1) German	298,263	13) Czech/Slovak	17,705
2) Ukrainian	158,635	14) Belgian	17,356
3) Dutch	98,388	15) Romanian	16,089
4) Polish	77,742	16) Japanese	12,375
5) Norwegian	67,851	17) Icelandic	11,357
6) Russian	64,052	18) Chinese	8,006
7) Swedish	54,678	19) African-Am	7,623
8) Austrian	30,242	20) Yugoslav	7,199
9) Finnish	23,786	21) Hebrew	5,559
10) Hungarian	20,506	22) Lithuanian	1,591
11) Danish	20,494	23) Greek	913
12) Italian	18,110	24) Bulgarian	682

Note: Members of predominantly rural religious groups that were sometimes identified as separate ethnic groups in 1931 include the following: 1) Mennonites, 88,327; 2) Mormons, 22,041; 3) Doukhobors, 14,978.

Identifying transplanted agricultural methods in the Prairie provinces is especially problematic because significant adaptations to new physical factors were required by all immigrants. For many prairie ethnic farmers the shift was profound: from a six month to a three month growing period; from a precipitation regime of up to 100 centimetres, to one of only 25-50 centimetres; and from tiny holdings of less than 20 acres to 160-320 acre farms. Most settlers noted the extremes of the continental climate in Western Canada, with its bitter cold winter months and hot summer days. They also noted weather aberrations, unexpected early frosts, sudden summer hail, and unwelcome autumn rains. Paul Oscar Esterhazy, the leading Hungarian in the Canadian west, boasted that the prairie winter possessed a "peculiarly healthful, elastic, bracing atmosphere" that gave "buoyancy and vigour to mind and soul." But most memoirs expressed less delight with the northern continental climate. The comments by pioneer Marie Lafrenière-Webber of Prud'homme, Saskatchewan, was more typical of rural newcomers; "what stands out most in my mind," she recalled, "are days either of hot, scorching winds with no way to cool off but [with] a dip in the stagnant water of the slough...or bitterly cold blizzardy days that kept you indoors."

If the new climate demanded significant physical adaptation, the landscape, especially the vast open spaces of the prairie grasslands, required a fundamental mental reorientation. Sometimes the new immigrants responded to their new environments with despair, at other times with exuberance. Among the 1875 papers of the Manitoba Mennonite farm boy David Plett was a German poem of lament: "with tears I look upon this place/ that I have chosen as my home/.../ How forlorn am I in this world." But more representative was Austrian farmer Anton Stradecki's exclamation to his wife at finding their stake near Grenfell in the Saskatchewan district in 1903: "Sephie! Sephie! We are home. Isn't this wonderful. Look! There is land here as far as you can see! And 160 acres of it is ours!" In any case the frontier required an adaptation from groups that only those migrants who had come via the United States or those Germans who had come via the Russian Empire had experienced before.

In contrast to the experience in most of Western Canada, few adjustments were required of immigrant farmers who were able to find land in Central and Eastern Canada. South-German and Dutch farmers of the Maritimes and Ontario, for example, faced climatic conditions similar to those in Germany, Pennsylvania and the Netherlands. A traveller in southern Ontario observed in 1851 that "no portion of the province...bears so strong a resemblance to some well-wooded, picturesque section of the old countries as the Township of Waterloo." There were even instances when Ontario and Maritime land agents appealed to European farmers with promises of familiar topographies and climates. In 1913 Nova Scotia's government sent agents to Denmark, Ireland and the Netherlands to recruit farmers by promising that the intensive farming methods of these countries could be introduced to Maritime Canada. An even more overt attempt to lure farmers with promises of topographical familiarity was a 1932 Ontario plan to lure Dutch farmers to settle at Holland Marsh, a boggy area with rich black soil near Lake Simcoe. These schemes, however, failed to draw large numbers of farmers. Fertile and temperate southern Ontario which appealed to Western European farmers was so expensive and densely populated that few immigrant farmers located there after the 1860s. Dutch farmers, for example, were attracted to southern and southwestern Ontario, but as Herman Ganzevoort has argued, these immigrants often overpaid for marginal lands or could not expand their holdings to survive in a North American farm economy.

In Western Canada significant adaptations to an unfamiliar environment were required. This was true even for groups celebrated as transplanted. The sectarian Dutch Mennonites of Manitoba, noted for transferring their farm village and open field plans from German-speaking colonies on the Ukrainian steppe in the 1870s, nevertheless were compelled to adapt to Manitoba's moderately wet climate, short growing season, and high labour costs. Even the Icelanders who settled during the same decade on the familiar looking shores of Lake Winnipeg, represented a minority of Icelanders in North America, many of whom settled on open prairie in western Manitoba and in the Dakotas. Many other immigrant farmers deliberately chose to settle in unfamiliar topographies.

In the 1890s Ukrainians and Doukhobors often chose to settle in wooded parkland areas for the only reason that they had come from East European steppes where timber and firewood was scarce. Other farmers, especially those from the mountainous environs of Austria and Sweden chose open prairie as an environment because it promised freedom from small fields and high altitude pastures. Few farmers were as repelled by familiar topography as Italians. Author A.V. Spada suggests that they were so overwhelmed by "the enemy of the soil...of burned-out hills, of dead rocks, of the malevolent winds burning (their) crop" that in Canada they usually refused to consider settling on any kind of soil and chose life in small towns and cities instead.

### **THE DYNAMICS OF ETHNICITY**

During the settlement period, that is between 1870 and 1930, ethnicity was most apparent in the cultural aims, social boundaries, and household dynamics of immigrant farmers. It was as if ethnic culture regulated everyday life in rural Canada. Ethnic teachings, values and mythologies determined a family's understanding of the costly migration to rural Canada, its attitudes toward the new, strange land, and its aims for the children and youth following the difficult settlement phase. Cultural aims differed from one group to another, reflecting a mix of religious meaning, national identity and linguistic practice. But these life aims could also change for specific groups during the migration and settlement process. In fact the identity of each immigrant group was shaped by a different set of experiences in Canada. Class, national origin, race, religion, language, immigration patterns, and other factors intersected with Canadian physical and cultural realities to shape the lived experience of the immigrant farmers. In addition cultural traditions intersected with stereotypes propagated by Canadian media and federal officials to create specific sets of identities among the immigrants. No immigrant farmer lived in an unchanging ethnic island. Flux, adaptation, adjustment and invention marked the path of integration of all ethnic farmers.

The result was that rural ethnic identities could be developed or diluted, narrowed or broadened, separated from old religious identities or interwoven with new national affiliations. For some groups assimilation to an Anglo-Canadian culture came quickly. This was the case of the Icelanders of *Nya Islandi* (New Iceland) north of Winnipeg or the Dutch of *Nieuw Nijverdal* north of Lethbridge, Alberta. These immigrants learned English, joined corresponding North American churches, and their youth entered exogamous, that is ethnically-mixed marriages with English-speaking partners soon after arriving in Canada. In other groups an ethnic identity was not lost, but strengthened in distinctive ways with migration to Canada. In part this came from what immigration historians have identified as an almost inevitable yearning for the old "homeland" among immigrants and in part because of the harshly manipulative edge of Anglo-conformity that immigrants often faced in Canada. John Herd Thompson and others have concluded that Ukrainian farm families, for example, became much more self-consciously "Ukrainian" during the First World War than they had been when they first came to Western Canada during the 1890s. As settlers they were often members first of villages or clan groups, but after facing the anglicizing war-time "School Attendance Acts" in Manitoba and Saskatchewan and the disenfranchising "War-Time Elections Act" they began identifying with nationalistic movements that sought to establish a Ukrainian state.

For other groups feelings of ethnic cohesion arose simultaneously with feelings of affinity with Canada. The Saskatchewan Hungarian pastor Kovacsi Kalman thanked "Almighty God" for "this blessed land and...our new homes" but added quickly that "even in this far away land" the immigrants would "never forget...our dear fatherland, nor the glorious history of our compatriot Louis Kossuth, nor the beautiful capital...Budapest, [nor]...the sweet language of our forefathers." For some groups such as the Manitoba Mennonites, group identity reflected a wider cosmology that ordered these pacifist Anabaptists to pledge loyalty as subjects to a God-ordained crown; yet, the same sectarian thinking kept them from easily embracing citizenship in the nation state of Canada or

from identifying emotionally with the "imagined community" of a Canada from "sea to sea" or with an empire in which the "sun never sets." Ironically, the first Mennonite settlers of the 1870s would thank God for Queen Victoria's generous provisions for the possibility of separation from Anglo-Canadian society.

Ethnic bonds could at times be strengthened through contacts with kindred groups. Although provincial legislators attacked their culture as a whole and their schools in particular, French Canadian immigrants to Western Canada established new associations with French-speaking newcomers from France, Belgium, and Switzerland. As for German speakers it was in Western Canada that the *Reichsdeutsch* from Germany who came to Saskatchewan via Minnesota met the *Volksdeutsch* from the Volga River and the Black Sea, who came directly from Eastern Europe. Often the two groups built common educational and church institutions, Catholic, Lutheran or Baptist. In the aftermath of the First World War Germans capitalized on English-Canadian racial attitudes. Entry into mainstream society became possible simply by anglicizing surnames, joining established political parties (especially the Liberal Party), and adopting a symbolic ethnicity that relegated Old World food, dress and dance to specific seasonal weekend festivities.

In part these cultural changes resulted from the dynamic encounter each immigrant had with a wider and even global world. Ethnic farmers in Canada had usually begun adapting in some fashion to capitalism in the Old World. It can be argued that overseas migration was not so much a voyage to the New World, as one within a new world. Europeans and North Americans alike confronted demographic, social and political changes that accompanied the industrial revolution and its effects. This "new world," created by economic change, included greater life expectancy and soaring populations, and hence unanticipated land shortages. It included cheaper technologies, increased overseas trade, and declining rural household crafts that forced farm families to

migrate to industrial cities or become part of an international labour migration. Rising literacy rates threatened local custom. New mentalities gave greater credence to material gain and increased disparities in wealth. Historians of the Atlantic migrations have given different emphases to these characteristics of the capitalist world. The contrast is evident in two interpretations of the Ukrainian migration to western Canada. A structuralist argument forwarded by Orest Martynowych emphasizes macro-economics in which capitalist growth dislocates household craft producers and peasant farmers in one region and creates an internal European labour migration and a demand for household commodity production in the North American grasslands. A phenomenological explanation suggested by Stella Hryniuk emphasizes human agency, that is, the ability of ordinary people in everyday life to shape their own destinies. She presents the image of a peasant family that developed a gain-mentality within a modernizing Galician economy and then responded rationally to this new economic culture by embarking on a trans-oceanic migration. Such differing viewpoints can result in intense debates among historians. In the end both historians agree that the very act of migration involved far-reaching social and cultural changes.

Ethnic cultures also changed dramatically in Canada because, despite the oft-repeated image of the "ethnic island" in rural areas, migration did not result in complete social isolation. The fact was that the globalized wheat economy and the intrusive modern state worked in tandem to integrate immigrant farmers into a wider Canada. The homestead system, local markets, the structures of municipal government, and public school legislation, simply left social boundaries quite porous. The result was a high degree of inter-ethnic co-operation. Ethnic farm communities possessed simultaneous identities, their own particularistic Old World-based sense of peoplehood, an emerging sense of Canadian citizenship and a strong pull to a local or regional polyethnic culture. Though not emphasized by their Anglo-Canadian hosts or even by later historians, the rise of these localized cultures in the Canadian countryside proceeded with

remarkable speed. Ironically, today's emphasis on a multicultural Canada which has encouraged the writing of specific group histories has also de-emphasized border crossings, inter-ethnic relations, and common institutions within a pluralistic countryside.

Still, accounts of such inter-group relations, some friendly and others hostile, fill the literature. In Manitoba's Interlake, Cree natives confronted Icelandic settlers who came too close to native gardens. In Maidstone, Saskatchewan, Ukrainian school trustees opposed African American settlers seeking to establish their own public schools. In Star, Alberta, well-established German Lutheran farmers hired Ukrainian newcomers and provided many of them with their first food and lodging. In British Columbia's Fraser Valley Japanese berry farms created multi-racial marketing schemes. In Istvan, Saskatchewan, Hungarians leaders asked for land grants in order to keep Swedish settlers from invading their townships. In Hirsch, Saskatchewan, Jewish farmers hired Chinese cooks for festive occasions and Jewish farmwomen at Yorkton helped out their Doukhobor sisters in need. In the Fraser River Valley, Kanaka (Hawaiian) subsistence farm men married native women. In southeastern Manitoba French Catholic politicians transmitted Mennonite concerns about the possible loss of their parochial schools to the provincial legislature. Whatever the nature of these inter-ethnic relations, they created a common discourse that sustained sub-regional identities. They also ordered local economies, municipal politics, church structures, school boards, and marketing agencies. They created what U.S. historian Kathleen Neils Conzen has referred to as rural "localized" cultures that were "locally hegemonic." In Western Canada a vibrant polyethnic culture at the local level often operated alongside the high-profile institutions of provincial and federal governments.

### **ETHNIC VISIONS AND STATE POLICIES**

Localized cultures, however, were never immune to the machinations and interventions of the provincial and federal governments. Often the specific nature of farm immigrant adjustment resulted from a group's particular relations

with the Canadian state. All rural immigrants encountered federal policies ultimately bent on the creation of an amalgamated British-Canadian nation. However, each group came to Canada with its own goals and the host society itself responded to each differently. Federal financial aid policies, immigrant recruitment initiatives, health and school regulations, the homestead system, and racially based restrictions meant different things for different groups. The government imposed restrictions on some, but provided opportunities to others. Opportunities that were extended to one generation could, however, easily be withdrawn in the next. In this equation the religion, race, class and size of the immigrant group mattered and so did its stage of development. If we return to the metaphor of the "ethnic island" of rural Canada, the result was that some groups belonged to more developed "islands," sharper-edged and more resistant to the forces of erosion, than others. Adjustment was therefore asymmetrical.

In prairie Canada the most distinguishable of the ethnic farm communities were those that negotiated a special "Hamlet Clause" enabling them to flout the basic requirement of the homestead system. This provision allowed sectarian groups such as the Mennonites, Doukhobors and Hutterites to establish cohesive rural settlements. The Mennonites who came to Manitoba between 1874 and 1879 were granted land blocks — the East and West Reserves — where they established farm villages. Further, they superimposed their own medieval-originated open field system onto the square survey grid system of the homestead system. In this highly regulated Mennonite way, farm families created village societies that divided registered homesteads into communal pastures and individually operated narrow strips of land. These strips, distributed with an eye to equality and cohesiveness, ensured the survival of the village farm for at least a generation. The mystical and communalist Russian Doukhobors received similar privileges in 1899. Soon three land reserves north of Yorkton and one northwest of Saskatoon featured neat rows of distinctly crafted brick, chalet-styled houses. These in turn comprised exceptionally orderly villages all bearing such Russian names as Vosreszenovka, Blagodarenovka, and Osvosbozhdanie.

Government concessions allowed these highly visible so-called "transplanted communities" to become even more conservative and communitarian than the groups from which they sprang in the Old World. By the 1850s Mennonite agrarian society had been weakened on the Ukrainian steppe as high birth rates resulted in landlessness, as industrialization undermined household crafts, and as a modern, increasingly intrusive Russian bureaucracy threatened old boundaries. Mennonites used migration to secure farmland, but their church leaders also used it to keep modern bureaucracies at bay by placing education, mutual aid, and local government under church leadership. When he arrived in 1875 Bishop Johann Wiebe of the Old Colony Mennonite Church looked forward to "an entirely different order from the one [we] were accustomed to in Russia, [one in which we will] deal with everything according to the Gospel...." Settlement also intensified the communalist and mystical ways for the Doukhobors. These peaceful anarchists refused to register individual homesteads and resisted taking oaths of allegiance to the state because "the earth is God's creation...the earth is our common mother who feeds us, protects us, rejoices us and warms us with love from the moment we are born." A subsequent confrontation with Department of Interior officials increased the authority of Doukhobor leader Peter Verigin. The confrontation also led the most radical of the Doukhobors to acts of self-inflicted arson, nude marches, and a highly publicized relocation to private lands in the British Columbia's interior.

The objective of restoring Old Ways also guided the settlement of the more individualistic and oftentimes English-speaking German-Russian and German-American to the Canadian prairie who referred to visions of past communal harmony in their negotiations with the federal government. Previously, Germans had had a record of quick assimilation in Canada. Long before the shame they felt at Germany's role in the First World War, farmers in Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, and Berlin, Ontario, had begun to use the English language in everyday life and to leave their farms for towns and cities. Only in the Canadian prairie did German communities possess the critical mass to maintain their inherited language well into the twentieth century. Of the half million ethnic rural

residents in the prairies in 1914, 120,000 or about 25% of the continental European population claimed German or Austrian "racial origin." As chain migrants, or single families within a larger clan or community migrating in sequence, some of these Germans eventually created ethnic islands in the Leduc, Wetaskiwin and Camrose districts south of Edmonton. But as group migrants, or clans and communities migrating together, other German farmers were able to create the much more imposing block settlement of St. Peter's Colony in the vicinity of present-day Muenster and Humboldt, Saskatchewan, with the backing of the Dominion government and the support of Benedictine monks from Minnesota. Although a secular German American Land Company oversaw the logistics of settlement begun in 1902, leaders of the German American Catholic church, disappointed by the erosion of homogeneous German-speaking communities in the American Midwest, sought to re-give religious meaning to the new colony. In his 1902 survey of the site for the future colony Father Bruno Doerfler readily mixed love of the Lord with love of the land: "the gentle rolling plain, studded with beautiful groves and crystal lakes [with soil that] was deep black humus" was "'a pearl of great price "...to use Our Lord's words." Four years later another German Catholic settlement, St. Joseph's colony, was established in western Saskatchewan.

Other ethnic farm groups, from Jews who were the tiniest to Ukrainians who were the largest, met with ambivalent government policies. While paternalistic and accommodating, such policies also reflected the laissez faire foundation of the homestead system and its reliance on private benevolence. Between 1884 and 1911 some 2500 Jews created self-contained communities in Manitoba and Saskatchewan. As victims of pogroms in Russia, these immigrants were drawn by the Old World ideal of *Am Olam*, seeking "a new Eden for a distressed people" in the return to the soil. At first, Ottawa showed enthusiasm for the scheme, in part to secure the favour of potential European railroad financiers and in part simply to attract more farmers for the Northwest. Financial aid was sent and paternalistic land agents dispatched. But these agents became sceptical of Jewish farmers' ability to thrive in the countryside in the wake of bitter

conflicts that divided the new communities. Support then came from foreign-based Jewish benevolent organizations; but even this was barely sufficient to maintain viable farm settlements for people with little agricultural experience. In a relatively short time the Jewish *Am Olam* dwindled into obscurity.

The arrival of Ukrainian peasant farmers from Galicia and Bukovina in Eastern Europe also elicited an ambivalent response from the Dominion government. In part the ambivalence stemmed from the fact that as members of Greek Catholic (Uniate) or Greek Orthodox churches the newcomers had no religious affiliations within the Canadian host society. In part, too, the very size of the group, rising to 170,000 between 1891 and 1914, and boosted by the arrival of an additional 68,000 persons in the 1920s, created concerns among government officials that these immigrants would not assimilate quickly. Yet when in 1895 Joseph Oleskiw enquired about the possibility of relocating peasant farmers to the Canadian West the government had responded in a positive way. A former minister of the Interior, Clifford Sifton, welcomed the "stalwart peasant in a sheepskin coat, born on the soil, whose forefathers had been farmers for 10 generations, with a stout wife and half-a-dozen children." To ensure the smooth settlement of the Ukrainians, government officials sought to engineer the migration so that the newcomers would have the critical mass to find mutual support, yet it wanted them dispersed enough so that the individualizing intent of the homestead principle would be maintained. Such policies ensured that Ukrainian settlements would be shaped primarily by kin-directed chain migration. In the end the Ukrainians would establish numerous parkland-based settlements, including the highly visible communities of Stuartburn (Manitoba), Yorkton (Saskatchewan), and Star (Alberta).

The least cohesive rural ethnic groups were those situated at the extremes of the racial spectrum. At one end, there were Protestant Northern Europeans who drew great enthusiasm from government agents; at the other, Asians and African-Americans who faced the fearful restrictions of xenophobic officials. The architects of the Dominion Lands Act of 1872 had envisioned a landscape of

independent homesteaders linked by common capitalist enterprise and bound to be assimilated to the wider British-Canadian community. Despite the many criticisms levelled at the system, the ubiquitous "quarter section" did in fact leave the immigrant open to the centripetal forces of assimilation. Why were Icelanders, Dutch, Swedes and Norwegians particularly susceptible to such pressures? Historian Gerald Friesen argues that these blond-haired, literate, Protestant northern Europeans simply conformed to the Canadians' image of the ideal settler.

At the other end of the racial spectrum were African American and Japanese farmers who also "disappeared" from the rural landscape not because of assimilation, but out-migration caused by the hostile attitudes of the host society. The very first Black farmers in Western Canada, some twenty families originating from California, had settled in favourable conditions on British Columbia's Saltspring Island in 1863, but the community fragmented in the wake of three unsolved murders and by 1891 most had returned to the United States. A much larger group of African Americans established themselves in Saskatchewan. Faced with disenfranchisement in Oklahoma in 1911 they responded to Canadian advertisements of free land appearing in American newspapers. A vanguard of about 200 Blacks arrived that year with nine rail cars filled with stock and farm machinery at the Manitoba border where they were met with strident opposition. The Dominion government reacted with an order-in-council later that year declaring that "landing in Canada...is prohibited...to the Negro race, which race is deemed unsuitable to the climate...of Canada." A subsequent, successful newspaper campaign to dissuade African-American farmers from coming to Canada ensured that officials never had to enforce the overtly racist measure that was repealed two months after its passing. The number of African-American farmers in places such as Maidstone, Saskatchewan, and Breton, Alberta, was thus kept below 1000. Moreover, racial discrimination in local government and in district schools caused the vast majority of the children of these Black pioneers eventually to seek their livelihood in the city.

A much larger group, the rural Japanese of British Columbia, whose numbers grew remarkably from 3000 in 1901 to almost 12,000 in 1931, encountered an even greater barrier in establishing permanent settlements. Mankichi Iyemoto was the first Japanese to farm in the Fraser Valley in 1903. The xenophobia unleashed during the First World War made Japanese immigrants realize that they could maintain a low profile in berry farming. Ironically, their quiet diligence and disciplined hard work made them successful in a field that many British Columbians considered a sacred white domain. Phenomena such as *kenjinkai* (preferential association), *tanomoshi* (mutual financing) and "a remarkably integrated internal solidarity" only intensified what Pat Roy has called the "fear of Asian superiority" among whites. This cultural condition ultimately allowed the government forcibly to relocate the Japanese community to Alberta, Manitoba, and Ontario during the Second World War.

In the rural west most immigrant farmers faced neither cultural persistence nor uniform assimilation. A polyethnic rural culture developed as immigrants groups followed different Old World cultural agendas and confronted a state that had different policies for different groups.

### **FAMILY AND HOUSEHOLD**

Ethnic cultures were reflected in specific relationships with outside forces such as the state, but also in the most primary set of social relationships, those within the farm household and the kin group in which the household was situated. While it is true that many immigrants came without kin, great efforts had gone into convincing all members of the extended "peasant family" to migrate together. If such overtures failed, it was often because of lack of money, as Victor Turek's classic study of Poles has shown. Only as a last resort did the Polish peasant turn from kin group to parish, village and district to secure travel mates. Kinship networks thus shaped group migrations, even though as members of nuclear families, settlers were intent on becoming independent farm householders and turning individually owned "quarter sections" into commercial wheat production units or saleable farms.

Historical accounts of "group migrants" usually highlight the importance of transplanted Old World village networks in determining the nature of the immigrant community. A closer analysis, however, reveals that in this type of migration members of particular kin groups often travelled together and settled in close proximity to one another. The geographer John Lehr has observed that among Ukrainian settlers, kinship lines as well as village loyalties determined the nature of settlement clusters within the ethnic block. In Stuartburn, Manitoba, farmers from such villages as Lukivci and Postolivka in Bukovyna did settle in clusters, but these were composed of specific kin groups. Kossowan is the family name of thirteen of the thirty-six Lukivci settlers and Podolsky that of many settlers from Postolivka.

Other studies suggest that kinship was also important among "chain migrants." The Westlings and the Weflens of Alberta provide typical illustrations of this phenomenon. As a Swedish-American immigrant to Lacombe, north of Calgary, Rosella Haverstock described her arrival in 1899 with reference to the extended Westling family: "Grandpa Erick and Grandma, Mother and Father, us five children, Aunt Hilda, and I think, some of my uncles...all sp[eaking] Swedish." The memoirs of Daisey Lucas, a Norwegian immigrant, recount how these kinship networks became the foundation of cohesive immigrant communities following the settlement phase. Lucas recalled how "most of the people of Crooked Lake district," near Wetaskiwin, Alberta, were related either by "blood or by marriage. My grandfather, Tosten Weflen, was an uncle or great uncle to many family heads and was almost like the patriarch of a clan."

The very fabric of ethnic life, however, was seen most clearly within the ethnically conscious farm households. This was the primary unit of economic production and hence the regulator of labour relations, consumption patterns and life-course events for most immigrant farmers. As rural historians Jeffrey Taylor and Ruth Sandwell have argued, household relations have not often been the subject of historical enquiries into Canadian farm society. The household

has usually been seen as natural, and hence as a depoliticized, social site. Local histories that most often focus on families invariably pay homage to the very large, hard-working and self-reliant pioneer families. Still, the few scholarly works that do mention the ethnic household, link its very survival to ethnically oriented family values. C.A. Dawson's findings of the 1930s suggested that Germans in Saskatchewan were more drawn to mixed farming, more reliant on household labour, and more likely to assume risky mortgages that required sacrifices from the entire family than their Anglo-Canadian neighbours. These were the tools that allowed them to pursue permanent land ownership, an intense cultural aim that English farmers in similar districts did not share.

A few recent works have highlighted transplanted inheritance practices. The standard image of the Anglo-Canadian family is one in which parents strove to keep the farm together by passing it on to the eldest son, in accordance with the principle of primogeniture. Studies of non-English groups suggest that a different, culturally informed strategy was often pursued. Immigrant families would often devise elaborate plans to achieve an orderly transfer of land to as many children as possible. One such study by Kenneth Sylvester on the French-speaking New England farmers in the rural municipality of Montcalm, along Manitoba's Red River, showed that land was passed on to each male child until the parents' retirement when the youngest son received the home place. This strategy, known as *inter vivos* giving, worked to secure the foundation of the French-speaking community in an English-dominated province. My own work on Manitoba Mennonites has used Sonya Salamon's model of patrimony in the American Midwest where communities are differentiated between those practising impartible and partible inheritance systems on the one hand, and primogeniture, ultimogeniture, and bilateral bequeathals on the other. Emulating centuries-old Dutch customs, Mennonites practised bilateral, partible inheritance, which meant that both sexes received equal portions of land. While this led to fragmentation, it also ensured a relatively high degree of community cohesiveness, a check on wealth differentiation, a resistance to urbanization,

and a legacy of sporadic secondary group migrations. Whether certain practices were more successful in maintaining household survival than others may be debatable. That ethnic values dictated these practices is more certain.

Inherited gender relations also shaped the social dynamics within ethnic households. Scholars have often concluded that immigrant women had difficult lives. Within rural households immigrant farm women were often isolated from the companionship of other women and from the dynamic culture of the wider society. Sometimes these women were chain migrants who suffered a traumatic uprooting from the cosy villages of the old homeland; sometimes they were group migrants, silent, peculiarly dressed, working hard and subjugated to communitarian patriarchal attitudes. Without a doubt, ethnic farmwomen spent more time than men within the farm household and less time in the marketplace and towns. The birth rate remained relatively high in the land-abundant prairie provinces longer than in other regions. This may not in itself have made these women more domestic than other women, but some studies suggest it certainly affected their mobility. It also meant that they were required to play significant roles as managers of the labour that all ethnic farm children provided for the household. The hearth and farmyard belonged to ethnic women. One indicator of this reality comes from the various studies — of Japanese, Swedish, Ukrainian and Mennonite households — which show that women spoke significantly less English than men. The 1901 census indicated that 83% of Mennonite women of Manitoba's East Reserve spoke no English compared to only 28% of the men. A 1917 study commissioned by Winnipeg social reformer J.S. Woodsworth found that over 90% of Ukrainian women in the Prince Albert and Hafford districts in Saskatchewan spoke no English. Anecdotal sources suggest that even as late as the 1950s among the most highly assimilated immigrant groups such as the Swedes of Alberta, women infrequently spoke English.

These statistics not only reveal a social inequality between immigrant men and women, but the domestic nature of immigrant women's influence in the making of ethnic communities. The French-Canadian communities subjected to the

assimilative laws of the English majority set an example of cultural preservation. As Marie-Anne Duperreault of Saskatchewan wrote in 1916, the French-Canadian woman's role in *la survivance* must be shaped by the fact that "men are responsible for the battle to save our precious heritage, we [women] must first save it in our homes where we are the principal protectors." This was the perspective too of ethnic women. Becky Kahn who lived in a Jewish community near Wapella, Saskatchewan, was the guardian of a highly regulated "domestic religion" made up of "rituals, holidays and observances in the home" that especially took root in isolated, rural Canadian communities where synagogue-based worship proved difficult. "As Jews," reported Kahn, "we had to have three sets of dishes: *flaishig* [meat], *milchig* [dairy], and *pesachdig* [Passover]." In her isolated sod hut, eight kilometres from the nearest neighbour, Saphie Stradecki of Grenfell, Saskatchewan, kept alive for her family the link between the Old World and the New by reading the few books that they had taken with them from Austria — *Rumpel Stiltzchen*, *Scheewitchen*, *Hänsel und Gretchen* —, singing national hymns, and retelling folktales including the Poltergeist, Pelzennickel and Sankt Nikolaus. Members of second and third generation communities often insisted that an important and lasting ethnic marker was food. A second-generation Polish girl from an unnamed Saskatchewan town said that she enjoyed visiting her grandparents' farm at Speers and receiving visits from her grandmother, her *Babcia*. Unlike "Mama [who] baked all kinds of English things for us," *Babcia* would "bake and cook *pierogi*, *gotąbki*, *paluszki*, *kapuśniak*, *barszcz*, *żur*, *galereta*, and *babka*." Foodways not only secured a sensual link with the past, they ensured the survival of key words even after spoken Old World languages fell into disuse.

These highly visible contributions of immigrant women to community identity should not obscure differences between groups of women. Ethnicity determined the particular nature of gender relations, a position that some Canadian women's historians such as Veronica Strong Boag have questioned. They maintain instead that ethnicity was of minimal importance in a farm woman's life where broadly based gender roles held status and power in check. Still,

evidence suggests that gender relations were in fact affected by racial barriers, religious teaching, inheritance systems, household commodification, degree of isolation, distance from urban centres, Old World mythologies, marriage practices, linguistic assimilation and inherited concepts of mothering, all ethnically specific variables. Common images describe the rural immigrant woman's work. Each faced an unrelenting cycle of food preparation, gardening, child care, barnyard chores and field work. But the fact is that women responded differently to this daily drudgery and each group gave different meaning to this toil. One factor that differentiated minority women like the French-Canadians in Western Canada from their ethnic neighbours was that they lived relatively close to their sending societies. Unlike ethnic women, they could simply abandon the difficult homestead life. Saskatchewan resident Rachel Périgny-Desmarais's neighbour left her husband to return to Quebec declaring "you can keep your Saskatchewan, I've had enough!" Only occasionally could immigrant women of other groups exercise the same autonomy. When they did abandon husband and farm, their destination was the city. In 1923 a Jewish woman of Edenbridge, Saskatchewan left the difficult prairie with her children and travelled to St. Louis, forcing her beleaguered husband, a South African Orthodox Jew, Herschel Wolfovitch to race after her. In 1914 the wife of Japanese farmer Kiyoko Tanaka-Goto of Salt Spring Island, British Columbia, left her husband for Vancouver only four years after arriving as a "picture bride." In the city she found freedom by purchasing a bawdy house with three other Japanese women.

For many immigrant women, hard work on the pioneer farm was palatable because of specific ethnic beliefs. Doukhobor women, for example, gave an ethnically specific mythological property to the meaning of work. A provocative, widely circulated early photograph portraying a team of Doukhobor women hitched to a plough was justified by some historians who argued that these were not "beasts of burden", but persons of the Doukhobor faith who were participating in a "mystique of peace and useful toil" in the absence of husbands working on the railroad. This work's meaning and status was further

emphasized when these women also "managed" the building of the farm villages, organized mystical marches, and even ran for ecclesiastical office. Historians of Ukrainian women who laboured amidst the stones, trees and fields of pioneer settlements, maintain that their subjects possessed an ethnically based female status. They exercised a legendary power over fertility within the household, determining both the quantity and quality of the harvest. It was a power that stirred fear in men. Ukrainian men, asserts Frances Swyripa, boasted that their peasant wives were stronger, healthier and simpler persons than Anglo women. They even romanticized their barefooted wives' place on the farm which reflected a romantic Tolstoian association with nature.

If women's toil on the farm was made bearable by a variety of ethnic interpretations, it was still performed within patriarchal structures. Subordination seemed almost universal for immigrant farmwomen. But just like work, patriarchal family relations were subject to different meanings. Catholic and Japanese households, for example, created the illusion of patriarchy's natural state, using dramatically different symbols. Monsignor Camille Roy's statement in 1931 "the woman must remember that she is by virtue of her creation an auxiliary to man and that....subordination is the equality of nature by design of God" was a view rooted in biblical language that was common among Catholic immigrant groups. The 1906 marriage sermon by Mennonite Peter R. Dueck of Steinbach, Manitoba, echoed this line: "The husband develops like a tree, with fine boughs and many branches; the wife is like a vine, bearing and nourishing its little grapes." In the Japanese prescription of *ryosia kenbo*, female obedience to males was intrinsically associated with the women's role as "the stable core of family and society." Even within the most liberal of immigrant farm groups the prescription that men and not women should be community leaders was thought to be ordained by natural law. Swedish evangelical women in Saskatchewan may have assumed an unprecedented role as leaders of local congregations and writers of their statements of faith, but it is important to note the men granted women the permission to lead. Moreover, many men and

women considered such a development to be an abrogation of male religious commitment. Clearly patriarchy permeated the culture of the community and was not merely an occasion for power-hungry men to wield influence.

In Canada, Harriet Friedmann and others have argued that the independent farm household was supported by a capitalist economy dependent on the commodities that only those social units which were self-sufficient in labour and committed to a landed existence, could produce. Certainly the homestead system encouraged the establishment of immigrants in independent households. Within this social sphere the lives of farm men and women intersected. The fact that this conjugal relationship was shaped by pioneering experiences should not overshadow the way in which inherited ethnic values and practices were woven into the gender relations on the farm.

## CONCLUSION

History is written by the victor. For years the history of farm life in Canada was written from the national perspective, documenting the rise of a great wheat-exporting nation, a British-oriented Canada. At the same time ethnic writers were documenting the determined cultural persistence and contributions of their group. In the process the distinctive voice of the immigrant farmers was sometimes lost. A pluralistic history of ethnic farmers suggests instead that neither straightforward assimilation, the dream of the Anglo-Canadian nation builders, nor cultural persistence, the boast of ethnic historians, describes the history of immigrant agriculture. The fact is that groups of immigrant farmers had different experiences. Each created a specific set of community and household strategies. Each elaborated a set of myths by which to order life. Each made specific demands of the state, and in spite of overarching policies such as the homestead system, the government developed policies that varied from group to group. As well, ethnically specific gender relations shaped each community of ethnic farm households.

The story of immigrant farmers can be told as a simple narrative. Groups of migrants came at specific moments from identifiable places, often following leaders of considerable public profile. But such a version ignores the migrants' uncertain worlds and shifting dreams. Just as crop types reveal less about immigrants' inherited values, life goals, and world views than about the specific soil type to which fate led them, migration stories often expose the nationally-oriented or filiopietistic interests of researchers more than the worlds of the ethnic farmers. All farmers in Western Canada were asked to make sweeping changes to their old ways. Sometimes those changes severed farm families from the deep traditions and cohesiveness of Old World village society, sometimes the changes entrenched old customs threatened by a modernizing world. Sectarian boundaries, linguistic continuity, kin-based land holdings, and Old World mythologies were features of ethnic farm history that flourished in the valleys of British Columbia and on the vast uncultivated plains and parklands of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. Ethnic farmers were not

simply immigrants who came bearing a national identity that could be located in a single column of a census taker's questionnaire. They were farmers who saw in rurality the promise of a set of cultural understandings. In pursuing those goals ethnic farmers wove together the possibilities and restrictions of Canada's physical features, the understandings of inherited cultural values, and the dynamics of a Canadian cultural milieu.

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