



Many Canadian settlers came here to escape religious persecution. Among them were groups of European Jews who came to set up agricultural colonies on the Prairies.

Most of the Jews who came to set up agricultural colonies in western Canada were poor, like these photographed in 1908 at Oungre, 57 km west of Estevan, Sask. They also lacked the experience necessary to face the completely new way of life on Canadian farms.

When Jewish settlers farmed in Manitoba's Interlake area

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The first Jew to set foot in western Canada did so in 1732, but it was not until 1877, when a Jewish settler arrived in Qu'Appelle, Sask., that any permanent presence was recorded. The first organized Jewish agricul-

tural settlement dates from 1884. Thereafter, a series of agricultural

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settlements in various parts of the Canadian West were begun, mostly by Jewish farmers fleeing the first of Czarist Russia's periodic massacres; these communities met with varying degrees of success.



Top left: by 1926 the population served by this little schoolhouse was declining. Right: the students of 1915. Bottom left: the strassendorf was built along the main colonization road of the Interlake. Right: Frank Lavitt's garden in 1916.

That first agricultural venture took place at Hirsch, about 200 km southeast of Regina, near the U.S. border. A colony was established there in 1884 only to be overwhelmed by the devastatingly early frosts of 1885 and by the severe drought of 1886. The colonists struggled on for three years until a fire in late 1889 destroyed much of the stored hay, a disaster that led to the eventual collapse of the colony.

By that time, a second agricultural settlement had been established, and others soon followed. In 1888 a successful colony was begun near Wapella, approximately 120 km north-

east of the original settlement and very near the Manitoba border. Four years later Baron de Hirsch, a philanthropic German Jew*, generously provided funds for another colony

*Baron de Hirsch was a noted German philanthropist whose charities were principally, although not exclusively, directed towards Jews who existed in poverty and oppression throughout Europe and Asia. When his attempt to finance secular education for Jews in Russia was interfered with by the Czarist government, he resolved to found the Jewish Colonization Association, the headquarters of which was in London. The aim of the association was to see as many Jews as possible established in self-supporting agricultural colonies in countries that welcomed immigration.

near Oxbow, in the same region. Like the first group, those settlers encountered severe setbacks during the first five years, but the de Hirsch money enabled them to survive until the good crop years began in 1897.

Four other colonies were soon established in Saskatchewan, and one each in Alberta and Manitoba. Many others were planned, at least tentatively, but plans were shelved when Baron de Hirsch decided to invest in Argentinian settlements, withdrawing most of his support from western Canada.

A few scattered groups of Jewish farmers established themselves

independently in a number of districts on the prairies, but only in the area north and east of Winnipeg did large numbers of Jewish settlers accumulate. Many of these were, in fact, migrants from the other smaller and more dispersed communities.

The Manitoba settlement was Bender Hamlet, a planned agricultural village. Located in the Interlake (the area between lakes Winnipeg and Manitoba), Bender Hamlet lay about 80 km from Winnipeg, and was destined to grow and prosper for 20 years before it finally collapsed and disappeared.

The settlement was organized by a land speculator, Jacob Bender, who was then living in Teulon, somewhat south of the site chosen for the settlement. In February, 1902, he purchased 160 acres (one-quarter section) to serve as the centre of the colony, and that summer he visited Russia and England to discuss with potential immigrants the possibility of a village settlement, emphasizing the advantages of free land** the Canadian government was offering to interested settlers.

In England, he was so successful that Rabbi M.B. Dagutski wrote to the Dominion Land Office to give Bender the power of attorney for potential emigrant families from Manchester. In Russia, where Jews were not permitted to own land, the promise of free land was an even more powerful lure. Bender's idea of village settlement was particularly attractive to the Russians, all of whom traditionally lived in agricultural villages. Of the 19 families who arrived in 1902 most came from England and Russia, a few from Winnipeg, and one from Boston. As a Jew already living near the proposed settlement, Bender was quickly accepted as the leader.

The village was established in 1902, when the quarter-section was divided into 19 lots of roughly equal size: no official survey was made until 1907. The lots extended back from the government-constructed colonization road which ran along

the northern edge of the colony, and this permitted the development of a one-sided *strassendorf*, or street village, along the road.

When the first settlers arrived in the fall of 1902, they set to work at once to build houses. Although they hired some of the homesteaders already in the area to help in construction, only a few houses were built during the first year, and most of them held two or three families that winter. All families had their own houses, however, by the end of 1903.

Most of the houses were approximately 5.5 m x 7 m (the largest being 7 m x 11.5 m), and most of them had concrete footings with a basement constructed from local limestone. Logs squared by adze, dovetailed at the corners, drilled by hand auger, and spiked into place were used in the construction, and walls were chinked with a mixture of clay, manure, and straw. The peaked roofs were made of sawn lumber and covered with cedar shingles. The houses were whitewashed and decorated with the gingerbread trim that was popular at the time.

A total of 33.7 sq km of land was owned by Jewish settlers in and near the hamlet. The original 19 homesteaded and bought 23 quarter sections of land, all within 4 km of the hamlet.

In 1904, eight newcomers settled east of the hamlet on land they bought from Bender who had purchased it from the Canadian Northern Railway. Three more homesteaders took up the land south of the hamlet the same year; Joseph Livergant and his four sons homesteaded to the west in 1905; and three others moved onto adjacent land the next year.

Five more families took up land

**The Dominion Land Act (1872) provided that on payment of a small registration fee each settler was entitled to homestead a free quarter-section of land (160 acres). If the settler worked and improved the land, he could file for ownership within three years and furthermore had the option to buy any unoccupied quarter-section adjacent to his land.

in 1907 and 1908, as well as one each in 1909 and 1910, three in 1911 and three more by 1914. Some of the latecomers settled 11 km north of the hamlet, but all chose land as close to the village as possible.

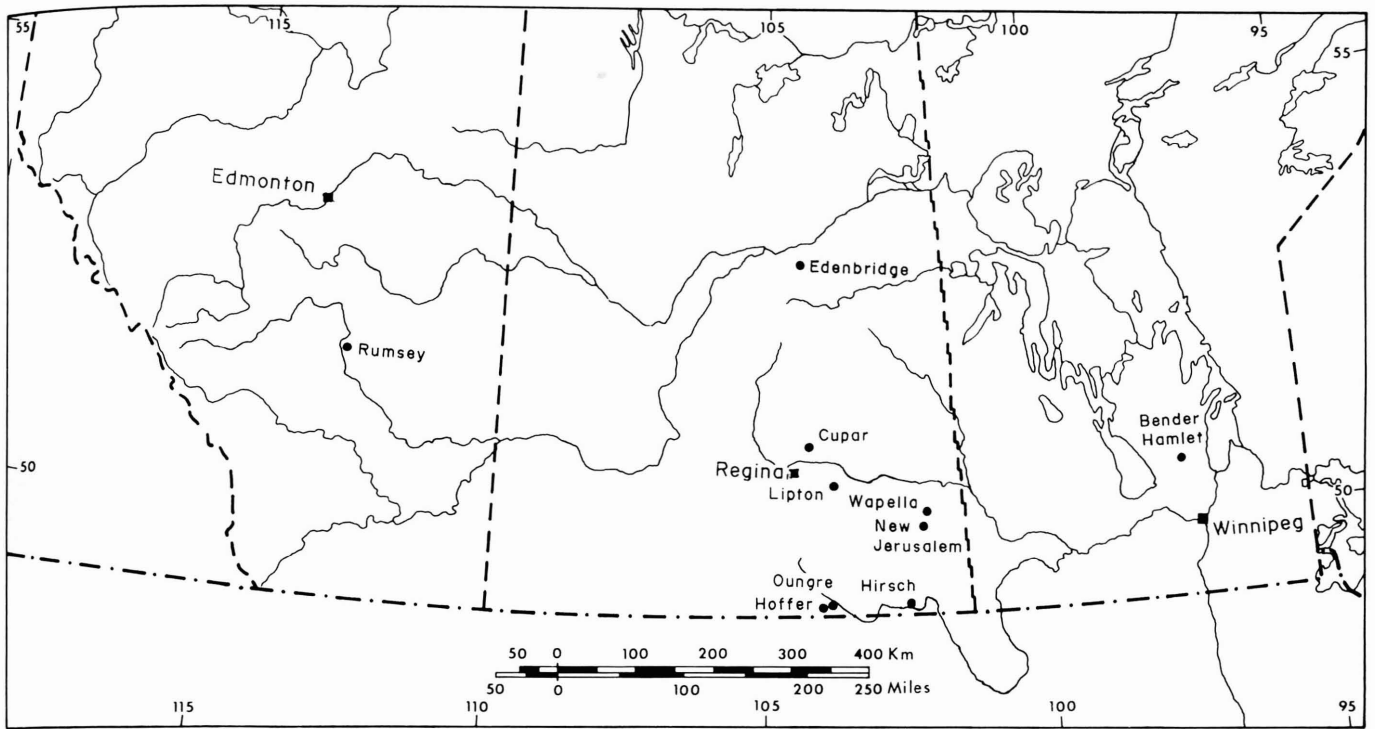
Agricultural preparations began almost as soon as the first settlers arrived, and most of the newcomers hired non-Jewish settlers in the area to assist them. The earliest work was generally carried out on a portion of the village lot, but at least three families cleared over 15 acres on their homesteads during the first year. Only 391 acres had been cleared by 1910, however, when two farmers jointly purchased a Case steam tractor with gang plow and harrows for breaking and preparing new land. P.R.A. Belanger, a surveyor who visited the hamlet the same year, considered it fortunate that one of the owners was a blacksmith as "he is in a position to repair his machine which is often wrecked on their stony land."

The only group which did little to improve the land was the one which bought land from Bender in 1904. The men from this settlement worked in Winnipeg, leaving their families in the hamlet until about 1910 when they moved to the city.

The main source of income in the settlements originally was animal products, but even these were not very profitable until a railway was built through the area in 1914. The station was at Narcisse, only 4 km west of the village, and the line improved market access. It made it possible, for example, to ship wood for pulp and fuel to Winnipeg and provided a new and important source of revenue.

Hyman Winogratsky, one of the 1907 settlers, had concentrated on raising horses, which he now could ship as far as Montreal. The leading dairy farm was that of Joseph Livergant who, with his sons, had a milking herd of 60 cows.

The accompanying table (based on reports to the Hebrew Benevolent Society) shows the overall progress



The locations of Jewish agricultural settlements in western Canada are indicated by dots.

of the colony between 1910 and 1923. It illustrates in particular the rapid increase in animal numbers and the continued expansion of cropland from about 1914 to 1920. Although agricultural growth then slowed, the colony certainly appeared prosperous. Nonetheless, within 10 years the colony virtually was abandoned.

What caused the sudden collapse? For one thing, agricultural prices rose dramatically around 1916, only to fall back after 1920 to pre-1916 levels; this was a minor factor. More important was the suicide of one of the leaders in 1923 and crop failures over the next three years. Some settlers had begun to leave by 1915, but the loss was more than made up for by that time by new arrivals and by sons taking over farms; after 1923 newcomers ceased to compensate for losses.

Many of those leaving were young people who found the community too small. Once a number of settlers had left, the colony became less attractive to the remainder, and the abandonment was cumulative and rapid. The majority went to Winnipeg, while a few opened stores in

small towns of the Interlake. Most sold out, but some merely abandoned the land. The last Jewish family left the area in 1932, although one family retains its homestead.

Little remains today to mark the site of the former hamlet. The buildings gradually were destroyed by grass fires, the last one being burnt in 1949, and only basements remain to mark the former size and location of the houses. Even the cemetery has fallen into disrepair, with only a concrete fence and one tombstone

still standing. The entire quarter-section on which the hamlet was located was bought by a local farmer who consolidated the land into one field for use as a cattle pasture.

The individual house-lot boundaries of what was once a thriving settlement only can be seen now as a change in vegetation pattern, most visible when viewed from the air. These, and the basement mounds, testify mutely that this was once the site of Manitoba's only Jewish agricultural village.

Agricultural Progress at Bender Hamlet 1910-1923

Year	1910	1912	1915	1918	1921	1923
Farmers	18	21	23	24	24	27
Acres owned	4,040	4,750	5,466	7,216	7,500	8,100
Acres cultivated	391	568	610	900	1,100	1,500
Wheat (bu.)	1,100	1,500	2,600	4,000	5,500	6,000
Oats (bu.)	1,500	2,200	2,900	3,000	5,000	6,000
Horses	38	85	171	257	310	321
Cows	64	110	240	360	391	410
Poultry	427	610	1,015	2,100	3,400	5,000