



POPULATING THE PRARIES

Immigration and the Dominion Lands Act

Holly Durawa
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With the 1870 purchase and transfer of Rupert's Land and the North-West Territory into Confederation, Canada gained control of a massive, but largely unpopulated area of land. Westward expansion was deemed a necessity to secure the country's political and economic future. As well, Canada had promised British Columbia a national railroad to get them to join Confederation in 1871. Building such a rail system would be a highly expensive and labour-intensive process, but would be in vain if there were no people or towns between the East and BC to make the railway viable in the long term with passenger and commercial transport.

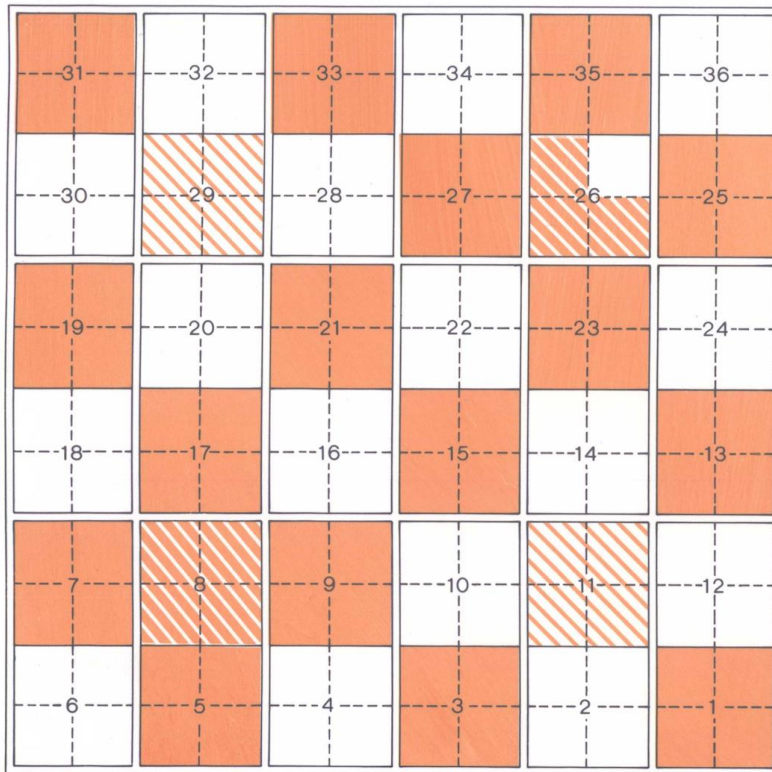
²The Dominion Lands Act of 1872 was passed by the federal government to bring people into the West. A grid survey was conducted and 80 million acres were parcelled out. The arable lands of the prairies were divided into square townships of 36 sections of 260 hectares each. The 36 sections were then further broken down into 65 hectare quarter-sections and made available as homesteads. As Rupert's Land had originally been owned by the Hudson's Bay Company, upon the sale to the government the HBC was entitled to retain possession of 1/20th of the land, or two quarter-sections in each township. Another two sections of each township were reserved for schools. Other parcels of land were reserved for the incoming railways, religious groups, Aboriginal reserves, and later, for the creation of National Parks (1883).







The Township System

¹ <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/north-west-territories-1870-1905>

² <https://www.isc.ca/About/History/LandSurveys/MeasuringLandSask/Pages/TownshipSystem.aspx>



Plan of a Township of thirty-six square miles

-  Free homestead lands (even numbered sections, except for 8 and three quarters of 26)
-  Railway lands (odd numbered sections reserved for selection as land grant)
-  School lands (sections 11 and 29)
-  Hudson's Bay Co. lands (sections 8 and three quarters of 26 and the whole of 26 in every fifth township)

Each section is bounded on three sides by a road allowance (66 feet)

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Canada had 1.25 million new homesteads and created fairly open eligibility requirements for any new potential settlers: any man who was over 18 years of age was eligible to be given a quarter section, or 65 hectares, or land.⁴

In return he would:

- pay a \$10 fee
- live on the land for a minimum of 6 months per year
- establish a habitable residence within 3 years of arrival
- clear the land for agricultural purposes
- cultivate a certain predetermined amount on the land yearly.

The government felt that having such tasks would encourage long-term settlement in the West while discouraging rich people purchasing the land up on speculation, or buying it cheap in order to sell at a profit later. When government agents decided that a settler had made the appropriate amount of progress on his

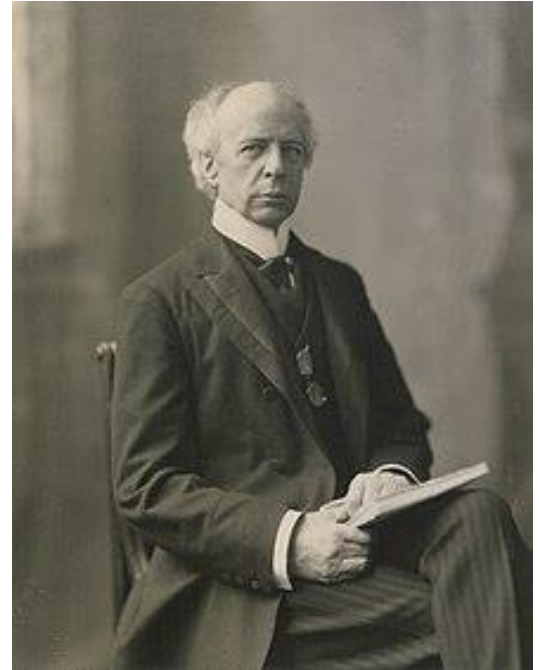
³ <http://saskhistoryonline.ca/exhibits/berry>, Plan for a Township of thirty-six square miles.

⁴ In 1876 women who were over 18 and the sole head of a family became eligible for a homestead, and in 1919 the Act expanded again to include women who were widows of war veterans.

homestead, the settler would then receive full ownership of the land and become eligible to purchase up to one full section of land (260 hectares) to expand his farm. Failing to meet the responsibilities would result in the government taking back the homestead and making it available to other settlers.

Despite all this, from 1870 to 1890 immigration remained slow, likely due to an extended international economic recession which lasted until 1896. In 1886, for instance, only 1,857 new homesteads were settled across the entire North-West Territory (today's Alberta, Saskatchewan, and northern Manitoba).

When Wilfred Laurier took office as Prime Minister in 1896, his Minister of the Interior, Clifford Sifton, aggressively began pursuing new immigrants for the country, abandoning the gentile tactics used by previous governments. Sifton began promoting Canada in new markets, primarily Central and Eastern Europe, and the United States. He wanted to fill western Canada with knowledgeable farmers who were used to hard work and a modest standard of living. In his mind, the premier settler for "Last, Best West" would be the "stalwart peasant in the sheep-skin coat, born on the soil, whose forefathers have been farmers for ten generations, with a stout wife and a half dozen children." The land would get properly farmed, the people would take little issue with the hard living conditions of the prairies, and the farmed land would get passed down to another farmer instead of being sold off and potentially laid to waste.



Wilfred Laurier

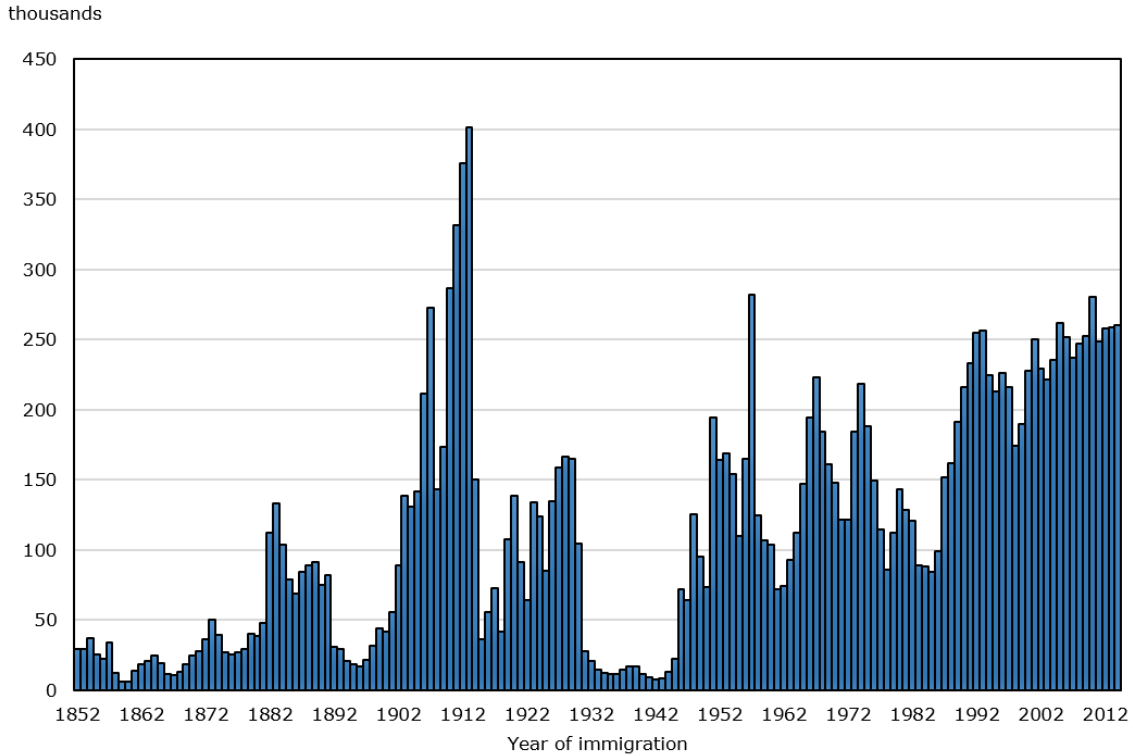


Clifford Sifton

Sifton worried that urban, labourer immigrants would settle in towns and cities instead of on the land and attempted to move away from selected them, on paper at least. In reality, immigrants were still often selected based on their nationality rather than their occupation. Keeping Canada Anglo-Saxon was still a large concern for many, and as a result Brits and Americans were often prioritized, along with Germans and Scandinavians. Many of the American immigrants had already been farmers in that country (and often had also been immigrants to the USA first) and so had already had a decent reserve of capital to build from. The Germans and Northern Europeans also managed to become decent farmers on the prairies, but the British as a group were never largely successful farmers, since so many of them had been labourers previously.

Sifton's policies experienced their challenges but resulted in massive success. During his tenure as Minister of the Interior from 1896 to 1905, Canadian immigration expanded from 16,835 to 141,465, with 30,819 new homesteads allotted in 1905 alone. Sifton's replacement in 1905, Frank Oliver, imposed stricter controls on immigration and was seen as being more "restrictive, exclusive and selective" than Clifton. After peaking in 1913, immigration began to fall off until the boom which followed the Second World War (see chart next page). The Dominion Lands Act issued roughly 650,000 homestead land patents between 1870 and 1930, when the act was finally repealed and the lands and resources of the affected provinces were transferred from federal to provincial authorities.

Chart 1
Number of immigrants who landed annually in Canada, 1852 to 2014



Sources: From 1852 to 1979—Employment and Immigration Canada, 1982. For 1980—Immigration Statistics, Immigration and Demographic Policy Group, Catalogue no. MP22-1/1980. From 1980 to 2014—Immigration Refugees Citizenship Canada.

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Other Sources Consulted:

<https://pier21.ca/research/immigration-history/settling-the-west-immigration-to-the-prairies-from-1867-to-1914>

<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/dominion-lands-policy>

⁵ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-630-x/2016006/c-g/c-g01-eng.png>