

INTRODUCTION

PERHAPS MORE THAN ANY other in Canada, Saskatchewan's provincial flag depicts the geographic realities of the province—a brilliant lower yellow band represents the southern prairies while the upper green background symbolizes Saskatchewan's boreal forest. A prairie lily seemingly connects the two regions. Likewise, the political geometry of Saskatchewan's mapped borders suggests an equally simple description—a near-rectangle situated squarely in the centre of western Canada, a place, at least according to the map, defined as much by longitude and latitude as by the reality of the sharply changing seasons. To most who have traveled the province, and even to most who live there today, the enduring image of Saskatchewan is that of vast grain fields slowly rusting to gold under cloudless summer skies. After all, the twentieth century was to be "Canada's Century," and that hope was firmly rooted in the southern grasslands and variably rich soil that made up the Canadian prairies. Once broken, the crops that would spring from the prairies would, it was believed, bring wealth those who toiled under those brilliant summer skies. For a while at least, the hope of those who settled the prairies was shared by the nation as a whole.

But there was another Saskatchewan. And there was, and remains another brand of speculator, another type of homesteader in Saskatchewan, and indeed in Canadian history. Not all who came to Saskatchewan in the early twentieth century came for the agricultural promise of the prairies. And of those who did come to farm, take up land, make a go of homesteading on the prairie, not all stayed to live out that dream.

The powerful forces of economics and environment drove many from the land in the 1920s and 1930s. And as some were driven out by hardship and crisis, others were lured away by a more northern promise of adventure, wealth, and independence.

Life on the prairies seemed limited by seasons and surveyed homesteads. The economic potential of the prairies was similarly fettered by inequitable freight rates and fluctuating commodity prices. At the same time, the mystery of the Canadian Shield, the myriad of unnamed rivers, rocky portages, and the seemingly unending muskeg were simply too great an attraction. The north seemed boundless, a wild space then undefined by grid roads and survey stakes. In the early twentieth century, indeed until well after the Second World War, Prince Albert marked the jumping off point for so many southerners, those newcomers drawn to the north by the promise of a boreal adventure. This, and the possibility of wealth that could be gained from the land and its resources—fish, furs, and possibly minerals—proved to be a powerful motivator for many. The lure of the north, the unknown, helped many overcome the agrarian inertia of settled life on a prairie homestead.

Olaf Hanson one of these northern newcomers. For him, the trip north to Prince Albert in the years after the First World War changed his world. Unwittingly and without any great scheme or plan, he became part of or larger pattern of newcomer experience that came to shape regions, to create a new and dynamic sense of place in northern Saskatchewan. He did not venture north with a clear intent to direct the change around him, but rather he came north for far more selfish reasons. His story, the narrative that follows, demonstrates how an ever-evolving and developing sense of place in the north worked to shape his perception of northern Saskatchewan. That perception is of lasting importance for us today as we struggle to learn more about the modern north, and how that region came to shape a province, and ultimately a nation.

This is not the story of a man's triumph over nature. Olaf Hanson did not conquer the seasons or tame the northern environment, but rather he came to understand and adapt in a place he came to call home. In doing so, Olaf Hanson became immortalized not by this narrative, but by the road which bears his name—the Hanson Lake Road—the Number 106 Highway that today connects southern Saskatchewan to Creighton and Flin Flon Manitoba, and then on through other numbered highways to the provincial norths of both Saskatchewan and Manitoba. On its southern end, the Hanson Lake Road connects with the Number 55

Highway, the northern-most east-west paved highway in Saskatchewan even today. These important routes serve as a demarcation line between Saskatchewan's north and south, between two separate environments, between two worlds really.

In the years that followed the Second World War, Saskatchewan's Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) government tried to define the modern region in terms of compulsory fish and fur marketing programs. When Hanson first arrived, however, the region was a much more independent place. Before the war, individual experience was shaped not by provincial programs or southern control of the north's vast places and resources, but rather by the more immediate contrast of seasons, the cycles of not only climate, but of the flora and fauna that defined the region. These elements drew him and so many other others to the north.

Olaf Hanson was by no means unique. Hundreds, if not thousands, of others like him were drawn to the region by the same promise of adventure, the hope of wealth, and the seemingly limitless forest and its accompanying maze of rivers. After the First World War it was not uncommon for Saskatchewan's Department of Natural Resources, and especially the Game Branch, to receive inquiries from adventure-seekers as far away as England and Scotland. Most wanted maps of the region, a description of the resources contained therein, and an explanation of the limits the provincial or federal government put on one's activities in the region. Was the trapping really as good as some made it out to be? Could one find land and forest products enough to make a cabin and establish a new life in northern Saskatchewan? How far north would potatoes grow? These were the questions upon which a northern life hinged, after all, and many wanted in on it.

Many of those who did visit, travel, or work in the region also recorded their experience. Sydney Augustus Keighley's *Trader-Tripper-Trapper: The Life of a Bay Man*, P.G. Downes' *Sleeping Island: A Journey to the Edge of the Barrens*, Sigurd Olson's *The Lonely Land*, and A.L. Karras's own *North to Cree Lake* are but a few of the other narratives which explain the early twentieth century north in terms of the adventure, opportunity, crisis, and hardship which defined place in northern Saskatchewan. Hanson's story must be contextualized in time and place. When combined with these other sub-regional narratives, a clearer picture of that opaque green section of Saskatchewan's flag begins to emerge.

Hanson never intended this story to be anything more than a narrative,

a winter-count, more or less, of his years roving the northern lakes, rivers, and forested muskeg of Saskatchewan. But his story leaves us with so much more than that. *Northern Rover* is as much a coming-of-age story for the author as it is for the province about which he writes. It chronicles a time in which the wealth of the provincial north became apparent, a time at which it was realized that Saskatchewan could be and was more than wheat fields and homesteads on a supposedly bountiful prairie. The fur, fish, timber, and minerals of the north, and the freedoms and challenges included therein, became apparent, not just to Hanson and other northern newcomers, but to the province as a whole. The CCF's marketing schemes, which were intended to bring economic and environmental stability to the once boom-and-bust cycles of the trade in northern staples, came with the inherent cost or coercion, or so northerners thought, of regulation and mandates. Thus Hanson's story becomes a metaphor for the costs and benefits of development in northern Saskatchewan. Just as so many were lured to the prairie west by the promise of wheat-grown wealth, Hanson and others were drawn to the north by similar, if more northern hopes. And there he, as did the province simultaneously, came of age in Canada's century.

Though Hanson's story is rich and diverse in terms of his own experience, it does not tell us as much about those who were there first. The Cree of northeastern Saskatchewan figured a larger part in Hanson's experience than we can begin to understand from his narrative. Though the interactions he does describe were at least cordial if not mutually supportive and beneficial, we cannot understand the ways in which Hanson's wilderness was pre-shaped by the native people who lived on and used the lands and waters of this story for so many generations before he and his cohort of rovers arrived in the north. None of this criticism intended to diminish the significance of his experience or his narrative, but rather it is hoped that a greater understanding of the sometimes parallel and often combined experience of adventurous newcomers and the region's contemporary native occupants will help readers understand the social and economic interaction that ushered northern Saskatchewan into the twentieth century. Here a few readable scholarly monographs will help fill in the details. F. Laurie Barron's *Walking in Indian Moccasins: The Native Policies of Tommy Douglas and the CCF* and David Quiring's *CCF Colonialism in Northern Saskatchewan: Battling Parish Priests, Bootleggers, and Fur Sharks* provide part of the context in which Hanson's story

emerges—a context to which Hanson was likely too close as he lived the story which follows.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of this story is the way in which Olaf Hanson weaves his own life's story into a narrative of the northern environment. We can begin to understand the sharpness of northern seasons made real by the urgency of the first October snows, which as often as not came in late September. We should be able to understand more clearly the larger and more immediate meaning of the emergence of a snow-skies on a western horizon; we can better understand that a crisp November morning on a steaming lake does not always warm into a splendid autumn day. There is more here than a description of the difficulty of drying out an outfit after overturning a canoe on a northern lake. Hanson provides us with the graphic reality that, as so eloquently argued by Aldo Leopold in his *Sand County Almanac*, food does not come from the grocery store just as heat does not come from the furnace. Each of these commodities, just as all those in Hanson's experience, has a much more visceral origin.

Northern Rover surveys some forty years of life, experience, and change in northern Saskatchewan. Olaf Hanson's colourful, encouraging, and at times tragic story teaches us valuable lessons yet today, nearly thirty years after A.L. Karras assembled this work from Hanson's own weathered notes and vibrant memory. *Northern Rover* is no doubt enriched by Karras' own intimate knowledge of similar experience and the realities of the region itself. It is not difficult to imagine afternoons which blurred into late evenings as the two sat and reminisced about a time, as any winter evening would demonstrate, distant in years though made closer by the realities of the same cycle of northern seasons. The seasons of a human life are presented against the backdrop of a pivotal time, and a wild space made common by personal appropriation. While the road to Creighton and Flin Flon may bear his name, Olaf Hanson has given us more than a place name to remember in *Northern Rover*, he and Karras have given us the detail necessary to help us understand more about that green portion of Saskatchewan's provincial flag, and the province it represents.

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