

FARM LIFE
in the
SELKIRK COLONY

R. G. MacBETH

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FARM LIFE IN THE SELKIRK COLONY

BY

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FARM LIFE IN THE SELKIRK COLONY

The colonists brought out from Scotland by Lord Selkirk

chose to settle along the banks of the Red River on narrow farms (the general width being ten chains frontage on the river) running back at right angles from it on the prairie. These farms extended back two miles as a freehold with an additional two miles as a hay privilege. Ultimately these outer two miles were given in fee simple to the owner of the frontage except in cases where others by actual occupation had secured possession of them in part, in which case the frontage owner got an equivalent elsewhere. These ten chain lots owned by the head of the family were frequently subdivided amongst the sons, so that when the Ontario people, accustomed to square farms, began to come amongst us, they were greatly amused at "our farming on lanes," and pointed out the disadvantages of having to go a distance of two miles or more to the cultivated plots at the outlying ends of these river strips. But there was much method in the madness of long, narrow farms; or, to be plainer, there were many good reasons to justify that plan of settlement. To begin with, the settlers, built along the river banks for convenience in obtaining water. Outside the swamps and sloughs, the river was practically the only source of water supply. Wells were little known, suction pumps were unheard of, and I remember that a "chain and wheel" pump which my father imported from "the States" was looked upon as one of the seven wonders of the time. Then again settlement by the river bank had food as well as water supply in view, for fish, from "gold eyes" to sturgeon, were then plentiful in the unpolluted stream, and afforded a provision by no means to be despised. As to the narrow lots, it can be readily seen that the colonists settled together for mutual defence and the advantages of social life as well as for church and school facilities, and if the sons, settling on subdivisions, seem lacking in ambition, it must be remembered that to go outside

the settlement in the early days was to go beyond the pale of defence, with such possibilities of social life and of church and school facilities as were in view.

From the beginning of actual settlement farming was the principal occupation of the colonists. The facilities for farming were not of the best. The implements (the spade and hoe for planting and sowing) were as primitive as well could be: but with these, by dint of great exertion, the settlers soon managed to make a livelihood. The reaping was done with the sickle and later on with the cradle. Then the age of machinery came in, and the hoe gave place to the old wooden plough whose oaken mouldboard was pointed with a rudely made iron share. The sickle and cradle gave way to the first cumbrous reaper, behind whose platform a stand was placed for the able bodied man who forked off the grain in sheaves as it fell, and to do this with regularity and neatness in heavy crops tested even the brawniest Highlander of them all. However the cutting of the wheat was only the first of a series of difficult processes through which finally bread was reached. The threshing was carried on first with flails and the use of great "fans" and winnowing riddles to separate the wheat from the chaff, a process that enables us to understand many scriptural figures. Shortly after this era of flails the two horse tread-mill was introduced, by which threshing became a comparatively easy, if somewhat slow process, varied only by the occasional fall backwards of a lazy horse or the flying off of the main band from the fly wheel. To get the wheat into flour was the next problem. First of all the "quern" was used, two flat round stones (the upper and the nether), the upper one, having a handle, turned the stone upon the wheat and brought it into some semblance of flour, not over white but in the best degree

a health-producing substance. Oriental customs may not have prevailed in the colony, but it was in view of such a scene as might be seen at these "querns" that our Lord spoke of identity in occupation and diversity of character in the swift separation "two women shall be grinding at the mill—the one shall be taken and the other left." In time the Hudson's bay sent out an expert and built a mill near Fort Douglas, and one of the settlers who was employed upon it took such careful observation of the process and such measurements that he was able to build one later on for himself and several at different points in the settlement. These did fair work, but in seasons of protracted calm flour famines had to be staved off by a general sharing up amongst neighbors. Next in order came water-mills, only partially successful, and finally the era of steam revolutionized old methods and gave the settlers the somewhat doubtful boon of flour excelling the old commodity in whiteness but not in wholesomeness.

Besides the raising of grain and root crops the settlers, as the years advanced, went into stock raising, and had horses, cattle, sheep and swine on their farms. In the days before the incoming of machinery they raised horses principally for the buffalo hunters from famous running stock imported originally from England. The "plain hunters" came in at certain seasons around Fort Garry, when the settlers would take to them such horses as they had to sell. Trials of speed followed, and the winning horses brought good prices in cash from the hunters who had just disposed of their buffalo meat, robes and furs to the Hudson's Bay Company. Oxen were used by the settlers very generally in the operations of the farm, and for the purposes of hay and wood hauling were hitched single in the Red River cart or sled, both of which in their primitive state

were made entirely of wood. Sheep were useful in the extreme as affording clothing in "hodden grey." The processes from sheep shearing to the home-made suit were slow and primitive enough in the light of to-day's machinery, but the article was good, as we can testify from personal experience. The spinning wheel, the weaver's loom, the "fulling" of the cloth by the kicking of it by bare-footed boys all stand out in the memory with many an incident grave and gay interwoven.

In the summer time the live stock of which we have spoken ran wild upon the prairie, horses especially being out of sight and sound for months, and we recall as a great constitution builder, days spent in the saddle in search of the wandering stock. In the long winter of course they must be housed, and so making hay while the sun shone was a great reality to us all. Hay cutting began on a certain day in July, and, except for the "outer two miles" above referred to (and on them only for a period), was done upon prairie that was free as air to everybody. The best hay meadows were located in good time before the date of commencement and on the night previous people were camped all round them. Each one knew pretty well the spot he was going to strike the next morning, and if more than one had their eyes on the same spot, it became the property of the one who got there first and made a "circle" by cutting around the field he wished to claim. When hay was scarce there was considerable rivalry, but there was a code of unwritten camp law that prevented difficulties, and mutual helpfulness rather than opposition was the rule. Occasionally prairie fires swept athwart the haystack of some unfortunate settler, but in such a case all the rest turned in and helped him out, and I recall how, when this happened in the case of an uncle of mine, the neighbors rallied around and put a hundred

cart loads of hay into his barn yard next day. The camp life during the time of hay making was a pleasant experience, with the tents grouped like a village and the huge camp-fires the centres of the social circles in the gathering night. On Saturday evenings the way homeward was taken with the younger men like a troop of cavalry and indulging in many a race by the way. Hay was never placed under cover but in long stacks in the hay-yard, and from these stacks we pulled the hay in the winter time with wooden hooks and carried it within the stables in our arms. By degrees implements and instruments of various kinds were imported from "the States" and elsewhere and were handed round from one to the other amongst the neighbors as if they were common property.

[The end of *Farm Life in the Selkirk Colony* by Roderick George Macbeth]