

Early Work and Workers in Saskatchewan: A Brief Historical Survey

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Introduction

As you have no doubt concluded by now, work is universal as an activity which is rewarded in some manner. The nature of the activity and attitudes toward it are shaped by the nature of the local economy and changing circumstances over time. At the same time, the nature of the work force affected the way the economy developed and Saskatchewan is no exception. This web site, created by the University of Saskatchewan Archives, attempts to introduce observers to the nature of work and those who did it in the “Wheat Province” since the 19th century by presenting visual and documentary materials created by, and drawn from, its rich and varied past.

These introductory comments are designed to draw the collections in this site together with an overarching historical structure

First, some observations about the site in general. A quick overview shows that the vast majority of the images presented date from the second half of the 20th century because until then photography was expensive, cumbersome and inconvenient. Moreover, to take a decent picture required that the subjects remain still for a period of time. Since work usually involved activity, few took the time to stand still long enough to leave a blur-free image. Therefore, lasting photos were usually taken of objects and people of interest to those with the financial wherewithal and thus were usually of building and other static objects or portraits taken very infrequently in studios when one dressed in one’s best clothes. Moreover, since the nature of one’s job was second only to the way one worshiped in defining a person’s identity, few workers considered things they did on a regular basis to be worthy of a photographic record. One of the few exceptions involved harvest work and a number of photos of threshing crews are presented which is reflective of the photo collections of most archives in the prairie region.

Agricultural Workers–Threshing Crews



[ca. 1890s]
[DB ID 36883](#)



1908
[DB ID 36471](#)



1912
[DB ID 36676](#)



[ca. 1910-1912]
[DB ID 36661](#)

To own and operate a threshing outfit indicated status in the rural community and professional photographers toured the region each autumn recording them for posterity, much like aerial photographers now capture farm homes and outbuildings from a plane for their proud owners.

Similar constraints reflect the sketchy nature of the historical record of Saskatchewan work and workers as researched and presented by historians. Until the development of what became known as social history as a branch of historical scholarship in the 1960s to describe the contribution of common Saskatchewan residents to the development of the province historical writing emphasized the activities of its elites, its “leaders” drawn from the worlds of politics, religion, business and the military. This all changed in 1964 when Dr. Eugene A. Forsey, an eminent Canadian scholar and Director of Research for the Canadian Labour Congress, hired a University of Saskatchewan graduate student to research and write a seminal history of the province’s labour movement along with other young scholars with similar initiatives in other parts of Canada. Since then a growing number of historians, sociologists, geographers and professional writers, supported by the province’s archivists and librarians, have become involved. Half-century later both the historical record, the province’s economy and the work force it spawned have been markedly transformed for the photographers, illustrators, and scholars to capture and interpret.

Just as the field of historical writing on Saskatchewan’s work and workers developed in tandem with developments elsewhere in the country and the continent, the nature of work in the province was profoundly affected by major political, economic, and social developments elsewhere. This introduction divides the past into a series of time periods to facilitate understanding. There are alternative organization structures using somewhat different criteria and they work just as well to make the comprehension of Saskatchewan’s past more manageable. A general knowledge of Saskatchewan’s and Canada’s histories is assumed.

Early Territorial Period to 1880

Characterized by:

- ***HBC workers***: Europeans, Métis and Aboriginals in the employ of the Hudson's Bay Company performing work at various fur trade posts associated with the acquisition, packaging and shipment of furs, and the warehousing and sale of trade goods.
- ***NWMP***: After 1874 the policing of the area to assure investors and potential settlers that the prairie region was safe.

Later Territorial Period to 1905

Characterized by:

- ***Start of expansion:*** beginning of prosperity, optimism and hope for economic expansion, interrupted by uncertainty due to Northwest Resistance
- ***Central Canadian imperialism:*** The entire prairie region was the creation of Central Canada and particularly Ontario which was using the land acquired from the HBC as collateral for national development within a British Empire framework
- ***The land rush:*** The start of an unprecedented influx of people from the rest of Canada, Britain and Continental Europe drawn by cheap, plentiful land suitable for agriculture and the promise of plenty of work at good wages
- ***Construction:*** of railway main and branch lines required thousands of men willing to work under arduous conditions (navvies)

Optimistic expansion to 1912

Characterized by:

- ***Optimism continued:*** The heady atmosphere so evident before the achievement of provincial status continued and was amplified.
- ***Labour intensive agriculture:*** Even more rapid expansion of agriculture based on horse-drawn technology meant an insatiable demand for workers. The supply of sufficient skilled workers to meet demand became a serious problem, particularly for those involved in serious commercial agriculture. Most serious shortages occurred at spring planting and fall harvesting. Solved by a joint venture between governments and the railway companies to bring in thousands, and in some cases tens of thousands of harvesters from elsewhere in Canada, the U.S. and even Britain on short-term contract. The hope was also that these men, and some women would like what they saw and remain to take up land themselves and become permanent residents.
- ***The farm hand.*** For the remainder of the year farmers hired men on longer-term contract which provided pay plus room and board. The Saskatchewan Government issued a pamphlet entitled “Tips for the Hired Hand” set out what was expected: a respectful, enthusiastic, ambitious and eager learner who could eventually marry the farmer’s daughter or use the experience to acquire his own land to develop. In fact, hired labour was considered one of the most serious problems facing the farm owner-operator. Never sufficiently experienced or hard-working from the farmer’s perspective they were an expense which had to be endured. And when serious farming activities ceased in the fall the hand was another mouth to feed. Every effort was made to solve this problem by a variety of means.



“Freda and the Hired Man” 1918

[DB ID 36829](#)

Those interested in exploring this subject might want to read W.O. Mitchell collection of short stories entitled *Jake and the Kid* which describe the ideal relationship between the hand and employer and his family. However, the photo in this collection entitled “Freda and the Hired Man” better described the role of the employee in the relationship: an anonymous person seldom considered the equal of the family members no matter how versatile he was or how hard he worked.

- **Women farm workers:** Women were crucial to the farming operation as they turned their hands to anything which needed doing without regard to predefined gender roles. Not only did they successfully undertake field work but their production of milk, cream and butter for export often supplied the only cash available until the crop was sold.
- **Children's role:** Children were highly desirable for the work they provided through a hierarchy of chores preformed from a very early age. The demands were unrelenting especially when it came to the care of poultry and livestock. Although school attendance was compulsory parents often encouraged absenteeism, particularly at busy times of the year.
- **Mechanization:** adoption of more sophisticated technology to replace labour, one form being the internal combustion engine instead of horse-drawn technology.
- **The family farm:** While the province's *raison d'être* moved increasingly towards the development of a food-grains monoculture with the emphasis on export using an increasingly sophisticated transportation and marketing system, at the farm level the desired model was the diversified family farm which produced a variety of agriculture products in addition to grains for sale. [See the picture of the popular **Better Farming Train** designed to popularize and educate Saskatchewan farm residents on the merits of **agricultural diversification.**] On the family farm family members provided the bulk of the work supplemented by hired help when absolutely necessary.
- **Growth of urban labour-general:** There is little doubt that Saskatchewan's urban centres, cities and towns were structured to meet the needs of the agricultural economy. Numerous businesses emerged to serve the farming community in the various villages, towns and cities, all of them employing people in either retail sales or services such as banking.

You may wish to view the early NFB picture "The Drylanders" for a romantic interpretation of the evolution of a family farm by a family from Central Canada with little experience but lots of optimism and enthusiasm.



Bank tellers, Bank at Duval.
Note the fact that the tellers are men to give the impression that banking was staid and stable.

[DB ID 36807](#)

Still others processed farm products (flour mills, creameries, abattoirs, etc.) for export or local consumption.

[See early photos under the categories **Abattoirs, Bakers and bakeries, Butchers, Agricultural processing—flour mills, Dairies and creameries, Food industry, Leather industry, etc.**] Moreover, all of them required space to operate with the result that construction boomed across the province. Similarly the provision of government services in health, education, and public administration absorbed numerous Saskatchewan residents with the necessary skills.

- ***The beginning of trade unions:*** Increasing interest in Saskatchewan workers from labour organization headquartered either in Britain or the United States. Workers operating and maintaining the railways in the province came with their own organizations to service their needs. Collective agreements negotiated nationally among all the railway's workers performing specialized functions. Meanwhile, skilled construction workers also organized along specialized trade lines (carpenters, bricklayers, plumbers, etc.) Government spending on facilities and infrastructure highly desirable to the unions because most such job sites were unionized, thus setting the standard for the entire construction industry throughout the province.



General Labourers Biggar, ca. 1910

An illustration of a typical urban work crew.

[DB ID 36935](#)

Note the portly gentleman in the centre-right who was possibly the contractor or the labour agent who provided the crew and took a cut of their wages for his efforts. Note also the implements being employed by the workers. The pick and shovel were almost symbolic of road and sidewalk construction. They required little skill but lots of strength and endurance.

Unskilled and semiskilled workers, however, received little attention as they faced the harsh reality of competition from newcomers seeking work on the one hand and a short working season on the other. Most unionists not working for the railways or in the printing trades faced lengthy periods of unemployment no matter how strong their organizations.

- ***Labour unity:*** Efforts by Saskatchewan unionists to establish their credibility through variety of measures designed to demonstrate unity and solidarity such as the creation of local trades and labour councils, the implementation of Union Label campaigns, the construction of labour “temples,” and the celebration of Labour Day.



[DB ID 36747](#)



[DB ID 36775](#)

“Labour Day” photos. Take note of the substantial buildings with considerable architectural detail already in place on Regina’s main thoroughfare before the war. The picture of the Mill Workers Union in Moose Jaw assembled for Labor Day in 1919 indicates the sheer number of unionists involved in this one industry and their importance to the community. Moose Jaw was a significant union city because of the powerful railway unions located in this CPR division point.

- ***Suspicion of immigration:*** Growing opposition by organized workers towards immigrants particularly from the Far East, despite the small numbers of people of Asian origin in the province. These campaigns usually originated with parent labour bodies located elsewhere in Canada or in the United States.

Depression, war and postwar uncertainty

Characterized by:

- ***Depression:*** The first serious economic downturn faced by Saskatchewan workers as the boom period ended in 1913 with the collapse of capital markets resulting in serious curtailment in development particularly in the cities and towns.
- ***Decline in Immigration:*** The economic downturn caused a marked decrease in immigration and a decline in union membership as urban dwellers faced deprivation.
- ***Renewed agricultural expansion:*** The depression's impact was short-lived as the outbreak of war in 1914 saw a return to significant economic expansion as grain for export for the imperial war effort became Saskatchewan's special contribution.
- ***Economic hardship for Saskatchewan workers:*** Control of the war effort by the national government resulted in rapid increase in the cost of living together with restrictions on expression, commodity prices, wages, etc. resulting in growing expressions of discontent from the labour movement, particularly in western Canada. Saskatchewan labour was no exception.
- ***Labour shortages:*** Many Saskatchewan workers were of British descent and they enlisted in the CEF with enthusiasm. However, this critically depleted the province's workforce especially in agriculture where wartime production was so vital. Increasingly agriculture turned to women, children, and urban dwellers at crucial times of the year. The situation was exacerbated with high number of casualties overseas led to the introduction of conscription in 1917 resulting in additional expressions of discontent by both rural and urban Saskatchewan residents. Unionists in league with other organized workers across Canada formed their own political party to fight the 1917 Federal Election. Needless to say, their campaign was unsuccessful.
- ***Labour protest:*** Growing protest by labour turned the Ottawa government paranoid and late in the war a policy of infiltration of suspect union bodies began. In 1919 when trade unionists particularly in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta expressed their dissatisfaction through a general strike in Winnipeg and the creation of an alternate working-class organization organized along industrial rather than craft lines (the One Big Union) the government passed legislation making their actions illegal. After several strike leaders were arrested further efforts at trade union reform from within were abandoned. Union membership declined as workers sought security any way they could.

- ***Economic adjustment:*** As wheat prices collapsed with war's end farmers who were highly indebted due to the wartime expansion were forced to maintain cash-flow by putting more and more land to crop. They sought to solve their labour requirement by several means. Gradually the tractor and other devices powered by internal combustion engines replaced horses and the men to manage and care for them. Some farms got bigger through consolidation and labour-intensive poultry and livestock were sacrificed. Meanwhile, with the help of the two levels of government, the railways and foreign governments with men on the dole Saskatchewan was flooded with thousands of migrant farm workers who had to alternate between seasonal farm labour and other activities, or face lengthy periods without work.
- ***Better roads:*** While railways remained the major arteries for communication and commerce improved roads between communities facilitated rural workers accessing urban jobs and vice versa. Consequently, for an increasing number of the province's workers the work year had two or more components. The expanding forest products industry and mines in the north and the well established coal mining operations in the south east corner of the province being favoured destinations.

The Dirty Thirties

Characterized by:

- ***An Economic “Perfect Storm”***: The Great Depression hit Saskatchewan the hardest of any province in the country. A combination of poor grain prices, a collapse in demand for farm products and a devastating drought which lasted for almost the entire decade almost brought the province to its knees.
- ***Widespread unemployment***: No single component of its work force was spared. Farms shed hired hands and family members alike for lack of resources and work and the victims joined thousands of others from all over the country and the continent “riding the rods” in search of work.
- ***Public works to create employment***: One of magnets for the out-of-work were rumoured projects considered necessary for urban infrastructure requiring many men such as the construction of the Broadway Bridge in Saskatoon.



[DB ID 36636](#)

There are several pictures in the collection which show men working on the bridge. Lots of pictures were taken because public authorities wanted to show that they were doing something to provide employment. See the photo of the construction of the Saskatoon Arena in 1937 in “Construction: Public Buildings.” This project likely had considerable public money for job-creation as well.

- ***Relief Camps***: Many unemployed fled to the towns and cities in search of work or assistance placing pressure on municipal institutions with a declining revenue base due to local unemployment. While “relief” became a fact of life for many without work those from elsewhere were not particularly welcome as they congregated in makeshift shelters on the outskirts of town. Eventually the province stepped in to create relief camps like the one at the Exhibition Grounds in Saskatoon. When the burden caused by the need to deal with unprecedented numbers of unemployed workers became too great the Federal Government stepped and established relief camps operated by the Dept. of National Defense far from urban areas where they could cause trouble. The one at Dundurn was Saskatchewan’s best known of these camps.



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See “labourers” PA Relief Camp 1931 for an example of provincial and municipal relief camp work involving the cutting of brush possibly on a road right-of-way far from public scrutiny, work anyone could do no matter how unskilled. Moreover, the workers would not be competing with people who were actually employed so taxpayers would not be irritated.

- ***Wage reductions:*** As a result of the economic tsunami even Saskatchewan residents who retained their jobs faced reduced wages and salaries, although to compensate, some commodities were cheaper as well. In some families women became the principal bread winners because they were often retained while men whose wages were higher lost their jobs.
- ***Union membership decline:*** Workers who did not belong to a union were often hired first for the little work that was available.. Even staunch trade unionists had to relent to the economic onslaught in spite of their principles.
- ***Radical organizations gain foothold:*** The only worker organizations that seemed to gain strength early in the Depression were those associated with the Communist Party of Canada affiliate Workers' Unity League. Pledged to confront capitalism with demonstrations demanding work and wages it faced off with police in Estevan leading to the deaths of three foreign-born miners in 1931. Another face-off between the On-to-Ottawa relief camp workers' union and the police in Regina in 1935 resulted in another death during widespread rioting.
- ***Change in public attitudes:*** The plight of the unemployed cast light on the legitimacy of the complaints made by opponents of "the system", the apparent conspiracy of business, governments and the police to prevent workers from achieving a living wage. This attitude change was reflected in legislative changes first in the United States and later in Canada which led to the legal right of organizations of workers to negotiate freely with their employers. As a consequence, a number of groups previously ignored like packinghouse workers and refinery workers established union locals of the industrially based CIO headquartered in the US. The trend continued into the next decade.
- ***Union turf wars:*** With increased competition between the new industrial organizations keen on organizing Saskatchewan's workers and the long-established craft unions the battle for adherents began at the shop gate, the picket line and the courts. The troubled coal fields in the southeastern corner of the province experienced some of this tension early on.

World War II

Characterized by:

- ***Return to full employment:*** Recruitment, military bureaucracy, creation of military facilities like BCAT bases, the conversion of peacetime factories to armament production (like the GM plant in Regina) and general economic activity soon absorbed most of the depression's surplus labour.
- ***Rural depopulation:*** The prospect of jobs with decent working conditions and wages in an urban environment enticed even more young people off the farm creating a return to labour shortages on the province's farms. Fortunately, the demands of war were different this time as the emphasis was away from wheat and towards meat and dairy products for domestic and foreign consumption. Meanwhile, agriculture had become increasingly mechanized so the manpower demands were reduced.
- ***Women and war work:*** As elsewhere in Canada women stepped in to fill positions in industry and the military to free up men for active service overseas. To facilitate the change the federal government provided for child care, etc.
- ***Additional insurance of trade union legitimacy:*** To ensure industrial peace to maintain a high level of wartime productivity the Government of Canada regulated the workplace by intervening in relations between employers and organizations formed by workers to negotiate wages, working conditions and benefits on their behalf. The Saskatchewan CCF government elected late in the war emphasized a strong role for organized labour and backed this up with a Trade Union Act which further strengthened the policy directed at workers' right to organize.
- ***Planning for the post-war economy and society:*** Planning began midway through the war to shape the nature of the postwar economy and society and the emphasis was on using the state to reduce if not eliminate the insecurity experienced by all Canadians during the Depression, and worker security had a prominent place in the discussions which ensued in Saskatchewan and elsewhere.

Worker Security: The “Boomer” Years and Beyond

Characterized by:

- ***Desire for a “Normal World”:*** After six years of conflict following a decade of economic dislocation Saskatchewan workers, urban and rural, like all Canadians, wanted security before anything else. The result was the emergence of the ‘Welfare State.’
- ***Renewed immigration*** – people with industrial and technical skills, but also refugees fleeing the dislocation and uncertainty in postwar Europe. For example, the Hungarian Revolution 1956 resulted in a large number settling in Saskatchewan’s cities.



[DB ID 36707](#)

See picture under Clothing manufacturing, Waldman and Paul, 1951 showing immigrant women constructing clothes. They had to endure almost sweat-shop conditions to put bread on the table in the early years before they learned English and became established.

- ***Demise of the Walking City:*** Urban sprawl began as returned soldiers and residents sought to buy homes in the towns and cities and the result was a car-dependent society unable to get to work by walking or taking a street car. Suburbs sprang up in all of Saskatchewan’s principal communities with local shopping plazas and later suburban malls. This began a gradual decay of central core urban communities as older, smaller residences constructed on small lots earlier in the century were abandoned by the working class for more spacious dwellings, Regina’s North Central area being a stark example.
- ***Public service growth and unionization:*** The operation and administration of the welfare state meant a massive growth in the provincial and federal civil service at all levels but with a greater emphasis on trained professionals, most of whom became unionized members of PSAC or the SGEA.
- To meet the needs of the “Baby Boomers” born after the war the educational system received priority status. Massive amounts of money went into schools everywhere, followed by universities, colleges and trades training institutes. This coincided with the increasing dependence on technology in almost all industries with the result that the importance of unskilled pick-and-shovel workers declined as many work places required skilled technicians operating and maintaining sophisticated labour-saving machines. A similar trend took place with employees of schools and other educational institutions across the province.
- Attempt by provincial government to improve rural living conditions to retain rural communities–better facilities and services with electrification of farms and connection with phone service in part to stem the flow of young people to the cities. Many workers moved regularly between work in town in winter and farm work during the growing season.

- ***Family farm in decline:*** The number of family farms declined after the war as rural consolidation through purchase of adjoining farms by remaining farmers escalated. Larger farms meant greater use of larger, more expensive and more efficient machinery. Result was less need for permanent workers. Meanwhile, speciality enterprises emphasizing livestock, poultry, etc. emerged to take advantage of the economies of scale. At about the same time consolidation of grain storage and agricultural product processing kept pace.
- ***Commercial consolidation:*** Local businesses serving local people in a community were eventually absorbed by large national and international conglomerates. The small general merchant and local retailer gave way to larger retailers offering a wider range of goods at better prices. Such enterprises vigorously resisted union organization efforts, the recent failed organization campaign at Walmart stores being an example. The same trend towards consolidation occurred in manufacturing as well. For example, most local breweries making beer for the relatively small provincial market, like the Saskatoon Brewing Company [see “**Breweries**”] were absorbed by Labatts, Molsons or Carling-O’keefe.
- ***Union membership increased:*** As a result of the relatively friendly legislative atmosphere unionist numbers advanced both among the skilled trades constructing new facilities for the expanding governmental, industrial and commercial enterprises. Residential housing construction continued to lack union organization, however. Together with the growth of public sector unions overall numbers in the province increased, and the movement took on a decidedly Canadian flavour.
- ***Friction between unionists:*** Animosity and suspicion between crafts unions and the industrial unions grew based on differences of opinion on several issues such as political and social action. Meanwhile, interest in such traditional labour solidarity symbols like union label campaigns, Labour Day, etc. declined.



[DB ID 36747](#)

“11th Avenue Looking West...During a Labour Day Parade,” which reflects the fact that the annual holiday was taken far more seriously in the past.

- ***Mining expansion:*** Mining activity was no longer confined to the coal fields of the Estevan-Bienfait area. Uranium mining in the north in the 1950s showed some promise of becoming a major employer of workers and a saviour of the Métis population despite the health and safety concerns expressed at the time. Potash mining, meanwhile, became a mainstay of the province’s economy with many employees throughout the province, some organized, some not. The expansion of the oil industry in the southeastern corner of the province followed, but it maintained the industry’s cultural dislike of unions of any kind.

General Question for Consideration

Some writers have described Saskatchewan's economy and society before the middle of the 20th century as pre-industrial. What did they mean? How did this affect the nature of the province's work force and its behaviour?

If you had the opportunity to examine a similar set of pictures from another province, say Ontario, how would the subject matter of the photos and illustrations differ? Nova Scotia?

What is unique about the Saskatchewan work force? How did its unique nature shape its development? Did the fact that rural and urban residents of the province interacted on a regular basis contribute to an enhanced understanding of each others' circumstances? Has the situation changed in the last couple of decades?

Industrial relations scholar Stuart Jamieson once wrote that Canada's close proximity to the frontier reduced labour tension because it served as an escape valve for urban frustrations. Does this argument have any validity when considering the general lack of industrial unrest in the province in the 20th century?

Did Saskatchewan's close proximity to Alberta and the north-central US have a role in shaping the nature and attitudes of its workers? How?

Saskatchewan's agricultural industry progressed through a series of stages from subsistence farming to mixed farming based on the production of a variety of commodities, to massive capital intensive operations concentrating on the production of food products for export. Consider the changes in the work force that each stage involved and their desirability as a career option for youth of school-leaving age. Is a career in agriculture more desirable now than it was a century ago? Why, or why not?

Imagine yourself as a young farm hand on a Saskatchewan mixed farm in the 1920s. Construct your average work day during a typical summer day.

Most young people living in urban communities must at some time resort to the service sector in food service or retail sales for either full or part-time employment. Why are these industries so hard to organize? Is it simply because they depend on part-time workers which few skills offer? Which factors do you consider most critical in improving the condition of the Saskatchewan worker in the 20th century? Union organization? Technology? Changing attitudes towards workers? Examples of practices elsewhere?

The processing of food products continues to employ numerous Saskatchewan workers but due to the consolidation of capacity by national and international conglomerates like Maple Leaf foods in massive processing facilities like the ones in Brooks, Alberta and Brandon, Manitoba the loss of local jobs to offshore workers imported for such plants is considerable. Assess the social and economic impact of consolidation on Saskatchewan's local communities.

Examine the photo of the University of Saskatchewan carpentry shop to draw some conclusions about the worker safety in the 1920s. Would such a shop be permitted to operate now? Why?