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The Unenviable Circumstances of Women in Saskatchewan Before 1920

**Prepared for
Saskatchewan Western Development Museum's
"Winning the Prairie Gamble" 2005 Exhibit**

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January 27, 2003**

The Unenviable Circumstances of Women in Saskatchewan Before 1920

1. Introduction

[image removed]

It was almost unheard of for women in the early twentieth century to work outside the home; most women came to the Canadian West as homemakers. For the majority of farm women, however, life on the Saskatchewan homestead required hard physical labour. "Without such basic services as running water and medical care," the authors of *A Harvest Yet to Reap* point out, "their duties expanded almost beyond the limits of human endurance."¹

Women were essential to the success of the family farm; they performed a wide variety of duties from traditional housework and child-rearing, to outside farm chores. "Looking after the stock was a big chore for me," Charlotte Lawford Carswell recalled of the winter of 1904-05 when her husband left her alone for days at a time while he went to get firewood.

I had to leave my little son alone in the house. I would leave the stock till midnight in hopes my little one would not wake up while I was gone. ... [During my first experience with night chores] I fought my way back to the house through the blizzard to find my little son awake and almost in hysterics. After I got him quieted down a little, he fell asleep, sobbing in his sleep for the rest of the night. After that I would return to the house four or five times during the time I was attending to the chores. ... By [the second year], I had 32 head of cattle, four horses, one colt, a calf, pigs and chickens to look after. First the cattle all had to be untied and let out. Then, in a howling blizzard, I had to stand and pull up water by hand in a leaky old bucket for all those cattle, get them all back and tied up. Then lead the horses out one at a time. Can anyone feature the ordeal of trying to water stock in that manner, especially when it had to be done at midnight and usually in a snow storm?²

Isolation was also a problem for farm women in Saskatchewan during the early years of settlement. Unless they were fortunate enough to live within driving distance of a church, there were few opportunities for rural women to meet with each other. When they did get together, women's discussions were often confined to kitchen hints and society gossip. "Those things which are now generally interesting to women were not mentioned in polite society, let alone discussed," Mary P. McCallum wrote in her history of the Women's Grain Grower's Association. "Women were given little encouragement to consider their political status."³

¹Linda Rasmussen, Lorna Rasmussen, Candace Savage, and Anne Wheeler, *A Harvest Yet to Reap; A History of Prairie Women* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1976), 88.

²WDM Library, Promotional – Handsworth – #37. Charlotte Lawford Carswell, "Pioneer Life in Saskatchewan," [Written ca 1970 at age 85].

³Mary P. McCallum, "A Brief History of the Women's Section, Grain Growers' Association," in

Isolation and hard work, however, gave prairie farm women a lot of time to think about their experiences and about their legal and social status. They began to ask themselves difficult questions such as: Why does my husband own all the money and land, when we both work together? As economic conditions became more secure and more and more settlers arrived, women began to meet, first for company, and later for community improvement and social reform. Fueled by reports in farm newspapers such as the *Grain Growers' Guide* about women's movements in Europe and the United States, women in rural Saskatchewan began to work to reform laws that affected the home such as guardianship laws and married women's property rights. Most dramatically, they campaigned successfully for women's suffrage. The outbreak of the First World War accelerated the process of the organization of women's groups.

2. Homemakers' Clubs

For a woman who settled in Saskatchewan, farming on the open prairie was an entirely new way of life, yet the survival of her family often depended directly on her efforts and abilities. The lack of adequate medical care created additional burdens for farm women who had to depend on their neighbours for help in cases of childbirth or serious illness. Loneliness was another problem. "After haying my husband would work out, only to return very seldom, in an effort to earn a few dollars," Mrs. Melchoir Schermann of the St. Joseph's Colony remembered.

For the first while after our arrival, we were the only people in this part of the country. There was lots of loneliness on my part and many a prayer I said, especially rosaries in the days I spent alone. The long nights were an extreme test to my courage. With the nearest of the neighbours four miles from our sod house, I would awake often to the howl of a nearby coyote pack with cold chills down my spine. I would rise early, although there was little to do, in an effort to escape the dreaded night.⁴

The first farm women's organization in Saskatchewan was the Prosperity Homekeepers' Society, formed in a farm home in the Rocanville district on February 6, 1907. Initially, the only goal of the founding members was "to get acquainted" – to have "something other than the daily work to plan for." "From the first meeting the women were deeply interested," the history of the Society recounts, "and one member voiced the feeling of many when she said that she lived on the meetings — going over the last and looking forward to the next."⁵

The newly created University of Saskatchewan played an important role in the organization of Homemakers' Clubs in the province. Part of its mandate was to extend agricultural services and

The Grain Growers' Guide (June 28, 1918).

⁴WDM Collections, artifact file for WDM-1974-S-287. Mrs. Melchoir Schermann, "As It Was," [1905-1906] (March 13, 1942).

⁵Quoted in L.C. Paul, *Extension at the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, 1910-70; A History* (Saskatoon: L.C. Paul, 1979), 77.

information to the farm population of the province. In 1910, the director of agricultural extension, F. Hedley Auld, asked Lillian K. Benyon, editor of the women's pages in the *Manitoba Free Press*, to help with the organization of a women's program modelled on the Women's Institutes in Ontario. Benyon found Saskatchewan women eager to organize. In the winter of 1910-11, she visited nearly a dozen Saskatchewan communities and helped to organize the first eight Homemakers' Clubs in Saskatchewan, starting with the Broadview Club in November 1910. In January 1911, a special conference for women was held in Regina in conjunction with the provincial convention of agricultural societies. This first convention of the Homemakers' Clubs of Saskatchewan was attended by forty-two delegates from eighteen isolated clubs. Following the convention, twenty-seven more clubs were organized in the province.

The objectives of the Homemakers' Clubs in Saskatchewan as stated in the 1911 constitution were "to promote the interests of the home and the community." Under the guidance of the University of Saskatchewan, they quickly became agents of adult education, providing courses in the skills of homemaking. They also provided new social opportunities for women isolated in rural areas. And, for rural communities as a whole, the clubs provided meaningful and needed services.

At the beginning of the First World War, a new patriotic objective was added, with the constant work of preparing bandages, knitting garments, making quilts, and sending parcels of food for the boys overseas through the Red Cross and other relief organizations. In 1917, for example, the Grenfell Homemakers' Club reported that they had sent 140 Christmas boxes overseas to men from their district. Each of these boxes contained "a two pound homemade fruitcake, butter, sardines, cocoa, oxo cubes, gum, nut bars, salted peanuts, taffy, bachelor buttons, boot laces, handkerchiefs, tooth paste, shaving cream, and socks."⁶ The number of Homemakers' Clubs in the province expanded from 90 in 1914 to 190 in 1918, a growth attributed mainly to the demands of the First World War.

Through membership fees and fundraising initiatives such as concerts, dances, bazaars, teas, raffles, and sales, local clubs set up services in towns and villages like libraries, "rest rooms" for women,⁷ homes for the disabled, schools for retarded children, and hostels for unwed mothers. Many clubs sponsored the Boys' and Girls' Camps held at agricultural exhibitions, as well as homecraft clubs for girls. Emphasis was on educational programs rather than competitions.⁸

⁶*Legacy; A History of Saskatchewan Homemakers' Clubs and Women's Institutes, 1911-1988* (Saskatoon: Saskatchewan Women's Institute, 1988), 11.

⁷The "rest room" was "a place where women and children may wait in comfort for their escort. It is also to be a place where the young people of the town may meet in the evenings for a read or a game, and where the stranger may find a bit more of home than in the hotel." Benyon quoted in *Legacy*, 7.

⁸Paul, 85.

Improved health care was a major interest of the Homemakers' Clubs. Baby clinics were conducted, with local doctors giving children physical examinations. Home nursing received much attention, and public nursing services and hospitals were established in some communities. Concerned about the lack of proper care available to expectant mothers – especially those in remote areas – Homemakers' Clubs were instrumental in the creation of the Maternity Grant, instituted by the Government of Saskatchewan in 1919. Money was granted both to the mother and to the attending physician or hospital to assist with prenatal care and childbirth.

The Homemakers' movement remained closely connected to the University of Saskatchewan's Extension Department. In 1913, Abigail DeLury was appointed as Director of Women's Work for Extension – a position she held until 1930. The university recognized that Saskatchewan women wanted to educate themselves for community service. As a member of one Homemakers' Club said: "Only those who have homesteaded forty miles from town can realize what this means."⁹

3. Violet McNaughton and the Women's Grain Growers' Association

Violet McNaughton (1879-1968) was a leading agrarian feminist during the first half of the twentieth century whose life was dedicated to improving the lives of prairie farm women. A Saskatchewan suffragist and first president of the Women Grain Growers' Association, McNaughton is perhaps best known for the many years she spent as the editor of "Mainly for Women" in *The Western Producer*.

McNaughton was born Violet Jackson in the rural village of Borden in Kent, England. In 1909 she immigrated to Saskatchewan where she joined her father and brother on their homestead near Harris. She soon met and married John McNaughton, who lived on a nearby homestead. McNaughton was in physical pain for years following a hysterectomy in 1911. The hardships she experienced doing farm chores such as hauling water led her to campaign for the relief of farm women's burdens. "I suffered so much from carrying ... pails of water which are so much a part of the burden of the country women that it burned into my mind this water question very deeply" she later recalled. "I met so many women afterwards who were suffering from the effects of this same hard work that I have never been able to get away entirely from this question."¹⁰

With the formation of the Saskatchewan Grain Growers' Association (SGGA) in 1901,¹¹ farm

⁹Quoted in Paul, 77.

¹⁰As quoted in Georgina M. Taylor, "Pushing for Equity for Farm Women," in *Western People* (January 24, 1991), 12.

¹¹Named the Territorial Grain Growers' Association when it first formed in 1902, the name changed to the Saskatchewan Grain Growers' Association in 1905 with the creation of the Province of Saskatchewan.

women like McNaughton soon saw that farmers' problems were their problems, too, and that organization would lead to better conditions. Women realized that the Dominion government's protective tariff, for example, was a problem not only for farm operations in western Canada, it also kept modern conveniences and comforts out of reach of farm homes. "Labour-saving devices, conservation of health, better rural schools and higher education were directly connected with better markets, co-operative buying and selling, and better agricultural credit."¹²

The impetus for the formation of the Women's Section of the SGGA came from F.W. Green, the Secretary-Treasurer of the SGGA. He contacted Francis Benyon, women's editor of the *Grain Growers' Guide*, and McNaughton in 1913 and asked them to help organize a special women's meeting at the SGGA's annual convention. Green, like other male members of the SGGA, was very supportive of the movement for women's franchise. "I feel quite sure there are thousands of women on the prairie that have more snap in them and more intelligence than many men," Green wrote to McNaughton. "Many of the men are soaked in drink and tobacco and every indulgence of many kinds until they are only walking monuments, practically lost to the privileges of manhood."¹³

February 1913 marked the first convention of farm women in Saskatchewan. There was a great deal of discussion about whether they should become Homemakers' Clubs or evolve into an organization of their own. In the end, they agreed to become part of "the farm people's organization" – the SGGA – and thereby strengthen the farm movement. At the second annual convention in 1914, an amendment was made to the constitution of the SGGA allowing for the formation of women's auxiliaries and giving women full standing in the organization. As an integral part of the SGGA, the Women's Section (WGGA) was given funding from the men's convention to begin their work.

McNaughton saw the WGGA as an equal partner in the farm struggle, working in concert with men farmers, but from a woman's point of view.¹⁴ From 1914 to the mid-1920s, she worked, primarily through the WGGA, to make Canadian institutions more responsive to the plight of farm women. This work led her into leadership roles in several regional, provincial and national organizations which dealt with broad political, economic and social issues. She served as the first president of the WGGA from 1914 to 1916, and then became the president of the Interprovincial Council of Farm Women.

The WGGA provided a platform for farm women to lobby for the right to vote. Other goals of the women's section of the SGGA included the establishment of libraries and reading rooms in rural areas of Saskatchewan, fostering co-operative buying and selling of farm products, and

¹²McCallum.

¹³Saskatchewan Archives Board (SAB), Papers of Violet McNaughton, A1. File E.92 (1), letter from F.W. Green to Violet McNaughton, January 17, 1914.

¹⁴Linda Rasmussen, Lorna Rasmussen, Candace Savage, and Anne Wheeler, *A Harvest Yet to Reap; A History of Prairie Women* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1976), 122.

making farm life more attractive. According to McNaughton's presidential address to the 1916 annual convention, further objectives of the organization were: "Medical Aid and District Nurse, Pure Food, Woman's Part in the Rural School Problem, and Our Part in the Prohibition Campaign."¹⁵ Improvements to the provincial health care system were especially important to the WGGa. Together with their allies in the SGGa and the Saskatchewan Association for Rural Municipalities, the WGGa brought about changes in provincial laws that permitted rural governments to appoint nurses, fund doctors, and establish hospitals.

4. The Women's Christian Temperance Union

By the turn of the century, drunkenness was a problem on the Canadian prairies. The old Prohibition Law of 1870 had been replaced in 1892 by a Liquor License Ordinance which permitted the establishment of licensed saloons as well as off-sale and wholesale liquor establishments. Drinking in public was legal, and, according to James H. Gray, "wife-beating was a frequent offshoot of over-indulgence."¹⁶

Gray asserts, however, that farmers generally drank less than their urban brothers. Distance from the town bars was the main factor that helped keep their drinking from getting out of hand. Saturdays, however, were a different story. "With families dispersed into the country stores to shop, visit friends, and exchange gossip," Gray writes, "the farmers had the opportunity [to slip away for a drink] if they had the urge." They did so at the risk of impairing not only themselves and their family relations, but also their credit rating – critical for Saskatchewan farmers who lived on credit from crop to crop.¹⁷

Concern about the high rate of alcohol consumption led to the appearance of Women's Christian Temperance Unions (WCTU) on the prairies. The WCTU originated in the United States in the 1870s. Its primary concern in the lobby for temperance was "protection of the home." Through education and example the WCTU hoped to obtain pledges of total abstinence from alcohol. The white ribbon bow was selected to symbolize purity, and the WCTU's watchwords were "Agitate - Educate - Legislate."¹⁸ In Western Canada, the WCTU was first organized under a Territorial banner. With the creation of the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan in 1905, it soon separated into two distinctive provincial unions.

The WCTU in Saskatchewan began with the simple objective of combating the evils of whisky. Soon, however, its mandate broadened to the campaign for women's suffrage, and to benevolent

¹⁵"The Home Department," in *The Saskatchewan Farmer* (Vol. VI, No. 7, April 1916), 17, 19.

¹⁶James H. Gray, *Booze; The Impact of Whisky on the Prairie West* (Scarborough: New American Library of Canada Limited, 1974), 42.

¹⁷Gray, 68.

¹⁸Women's Christian Temperance Union web site, <<http://www.wctu.org/earlyhistory.html>>, January, 2003.

work such as establishing homes for unwed mothers.¹⁹

Pressure from the WCTU and the Banish-the-Bar movement in Saskatchewan resulted in an announcement by Premier Walter Scott in March, 1915 that all bars in Saskatchewan would be closed as of July 1, 1915. Liquor was still sold, however, in twenty-three government dispensaries. Scott also promised that a plebiscite would be held later on to see if the citizens of the province still wanted the government to stay in the liquor business.

With the closure of the bars in Saskatchewan, it was estimated that liquor consumption in the province dropped by ninety percent.²⁰ The Ban-the Bar movement in the province was not satisfied, however. A plebiscite on the issue of liquor dispensaries was called for, and on December 11, 1916, the electors of Saskatchewan voted out the dispensaries and opted for complete prohibition. This referendum was not only the first chance for Saskatchewan women to exercise their newly-won franchise, it was also the first opportunity for any woman in Canada to vote at the provincial level.

Prohibition, however, did not completely do away with liquor consumption in Saskatchewan. As Gray informs us, "there were enough loopholes left to enable a determined drunk to drink almost without pause."²¹ Several breweries in Saskatchewan continued to operate unhindered under federal charter.²² And, because alcohol was widely considered to have medicinal value, provisions in the provincial act allowed doctors to issue prescriptions of liquor and for its sale by drugstores. During the Spanish Influenza epidemic of 1918, liquor came to be seen as an absolute necessity either as a preventative, a cure, or simply as a tonic. Nevertheless, the number of convictions for drunkenness in Saskatchewan dropped from 2,970 cases in 1913 to 1,062 in 1916, and, due to federal government liquor restrictions under the War Measures Act, to 434 in 1918.²³

¹⁹Nancy M. Sheridan, "The WCTU on the Prairies, 1886-1930: An Alberta-Saskatchewan Comparison," in *Prairie Forum* (Vol. 6, No. 1, 1981), 22, 26.

²⁰Gray, 75.

²¹Gray, 81.

²²When Prohibition dried the province in 1916 there were four breweries in operation and only one survived the drought: John Hoeschen's Saskatoon Brewing Co. Other breweries in post-prohibition operation included two owned by E.L. Drewry and two others owned by Fritz Sick. By the 1980s, these plants were under the control of Molson, Labatt and Carling. Allen Sneath, "A Brew Frontier" on web site <http://www.beer.com/ca/pl/articles/be_bht_020606_westernbrewing.html>, January 22, 2003.

²³Gray, 84.

5. The Woman's Suffrage Movement in Saskatchewan

"The greatest argument against women's suffrage is that they can do so much by indirect influence. If they can do so much good by indirect influence, why can they not do much more good by direct influence."

- Nellie McClung, May 20, 1915.

[image removed]

Prior to 1920, provincial and federal legislation prevented women from voting in elections or running for any type of public office from federal Parliament to local school boards. Voters were defined as "persons" with specific characteristics, namely: being male and (usually) over the age of 21 years of age. The Dominion Election Act decreed that "No woman, idiot, lunatic or criminal shall vote."

For the advocates of women's suffrage in Saskatchewan, the franchise was not an end in itself. Rather, it was considered a prerequisite to the achievement of other reforms such as prohibition, homestead rights for women and the passage of a dower law. In the words of Nellie McClung, "We have to get the vote on account of the laws."²⁴ Violet McNaughton also saw winning the vote as only a first step towards broader social change. In her opening address to the newly formed WGGa in February, 1914, McNaughton stressed that, because political equality was fundamental to the betterment of home and community, and since it was essential to the improvement of the social fabric of the country, women's suffrage was to be the principal goal of the Association.²⁵

"At the last session of the Saskatchewan Legislature Premier Scott expressed himself as in favor of extending the franchise to women, but did not care to enact the necessary legislation until the women of Saskatchewan asked for it. It is now up to the women to 'SPEAK' in clear and unmistakable terms." From *Grain Growers' Guide*, February 26, 1913.

Unlike the largely urban suffrage movements in Ontario and Manitoba, agitation for women's franchise in Saskatchewan was, according to Christine MacDonald, "first and foremost a movement of farm and small town women."²⁶ Male farm leaders, however, were also strongly supportive of women's suffrage. As early as 1909, E. A. Partridge, president of the Grain Growers' Grain Company, published an editorial in the September issue of *The Grain Growers' Guide* drawing attention to the matter. The SGGA was the first organization in the province to publicly declare itself in favour of votes for women. In 1913, the SGGA prepared and distributed petition forms addressed to Premier Walter Scott, calling for "an act providing for the general extension of the franchise to the women of Saskatchewan on equal terms with men." The majority of signatures on the petition, which was presented to the Premier in December,

²⁴Nellie McClung, *Clearing in the West* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1935).

²⁵MacDonald, 4.

²⁶Christine MacDonald, "How Saskatchewan Women Got the Vote," in *Saskatchewan History* (Vol. I, No. 3, October 1948), 1.

1913, were those of farm women.²⁷ Despite this display of interest, Scott declared himself unconvinced that women truly wanted to vote. Francis M. Benyon, editor of "The Country Homemaker" page in the *Grain Growers' Guide* from 1912 to 1917, wrote to ask him how many signatures it would take to convince him. "I could not extend the franchise on the say-so of women," Scott replied. "I'd need the approval of the electorate [men]."²⁸

Meanwhile, the provincial Women's Christian Temperance Union, insulted by the suggestions that women be allowed to vote only in provincial liquor referenda, prepared a petition calling for full women's suffrage. Their work, along with that of Violet McNaughton and the WGGGA, led to the formation in February, 1915 of the Provincial Equal Franchise Board, a province-wide alliance of all organizations in favour of women's suffrage. Within four months of its inauguration, the Board presented the Saskatchewan Legislature with a petition containing over 10,000 signatures gathered from organized farm women, city club women, and the temperance unions. The Scott government, however, still considered the number insufficient.

It took another 10,000 signatures, presented on Valentine's Day, 1916, before Premier Scott was ready with a positive answer. "Gentlemen, we object to being classed with those who are denied the vote," Zoe Haight stated in her speech to the Saskatchewan legislature while presenting the suffrage petition. "We are not idiots, not imbeciles. We are women, and we are asking for equal franchise, not as a favour, but because it is just that we should have it."²⁹ Saskatchewan women were enfranchised on March 14, 1916, about two months after women in Manitoba became eligible to vote.³⁰ Scott frankly admitted he'd had a change of heart because he didn't want Saskatchewan to lag behind Manitoba and Alberta.³¹

Saskatchewan women took their new responsibility seriously. Years later, a member of the Charles Newman family of the Carievale, Saskatchewan, district recalled:

When the first election was called after women were given the right to vote, Mother and Dad favored opposing parties, so they agreed neither would cast a ballot. But before the day was over, some enthusiastic citizen had convinced Dad that he must vote and he drove quietly off to town. Discovering Dad missing, Mother cranked the phone and procured a ride for herself. Dad knew that she was going to vote when they passed on the road. Nothing more was ever said about it.³²

²⁷MacDonald, 3.

²⁸As quoted in Rasmussen, *et al*, 175.

²⁹As quoted in "Suffrage: '...Not Idiots or Imbeciles'," on *Herstory: An Exhibition* web site, <<http://library.usask.ca/herstory/suffer.html>>, January 21, 2003.

³⁰Manitoba granted the franchise to women on January 28, 1916; Alberta on April 19, 1916; British Columbia in 1917; Ontario and Nova Scotia, 1918; New Brunswick, 1919; Prince Edward Island, 1922; and Quebec, 1940.

³¹Rasmussen, *et al*, 175.

³²"Charles Newman Family Story," in *Autumn Leaves, Gilded Sheaves; Carievale and District*

6. Legal Rights

Pioneer women were vital to economic success of the family farm in Saskatchewan. Sandra Rollings-Magnusson argues that, because of this, the federal and provincial governments enacted and maintained legislation that limited the independence of women in an effort to ensure that women would remain tied to the farm and contribute to the grain economy. "While it is unlikely that attention was specifically directed at creating legislation to deliberately hitch women to the homestead, the patriarchal nature of society worked hand in hand with this outcome," she asserts. "For example, limiting women's ability to support themselves, encouraging high birth rates by prohibiting access to family planning measures, restricting divorces, and supporting male inheritance of property would all have a tendency to keep women as invisible and constrained workers on the farms."³³ Government maintained *status quo* of male rights and ultimately supported the structure of the family farm through legislation, Rollings-Magnusson claims. The general restriction on legal rights of women, especially married women, were "extremely far-ranging."

The Dominion Lands Act of 1872, for example, specifically prevented most women from acquiring free homestead property. Section 33 of the act allowed only those people who were head of a family or males of at least 21 years of age to apply for a 160-acre homestead. "Widows, divorcees or deserted wives with children, assuming they could pass a vigorous examination on their status as the head of a household, could obtain a homestead, presumably because they were already contributing to a population increase," Rollings-Magnusson writes.³⁴

[The story of Georgina Binnie-Clark](#), an Englishwoman who came to Saskatchewan in 1906, is a case in point. Binnie-Clark attempted to secure a free homestead but government refused her. She ended up buying a farm in the Qu'Appelle Valley for five thousand dollars and farming alone until 1909, when she paid a hired man and his wife to do the heavy work. Farming, Binnie-Clark wrote in her memoirs,

should be a highly profitable means of independence and wealth for women as it has always proved for men. But on every side my neighbours had obtained their lands as a gift from the Government, or at least one hundred and sixty acres of it, and a further hundred and sixty had been added on the condition of a pre-emption ...; in this way a farm in every way equal to the one which had cost me five thousand dollars was to be obtained by any man for nine hundred and seventy dollars.³⁵ So that even allowing

(Carievale, SK: Carievale History Book Club, 1988), 711.

³³Sandra Rollings-Magnusson, "Hidden Homesteaders: Women, the State and Patriarchy in the Saskatchewan Wheat Economy, 1870-1930," in *Prairie Forum* (Vol. 24, No. 2, Fall 1999), 173.

³⁴*Ibid*, 174-5.

³⁵Under the *Dominion Lands Act*, a male farmer was required to pay a \$10 filing fee; at least \$300 in improvements (including a house); a \$10 preemption filing fee; \$3 per acre for a preemption on 160 acres, or \$480; and additional improvements on the homestead and

that a woman farmer is at a slight disadvantage in working out a farm proposition, she has the killing weight of extra payment thrust on her at the very outset. She may be the best farmer in Canada, she may buy land, work it, take prizes for seed and stock, but she is denied the right to claim from the Government the hundred and sixty acres of land held out as bait to every man. I talked to every man about it, and almost to a man they said: "Too bad!"³⁶

Property laws prevented women from inheriting their husband's property upon his death, denying married women any return from their work on the farm. "Dower," a wife's traditional claim to a share of her husband's estate, had been suspended in Canada since 1887. Unless a husband provided for his wife in a will, a relatively uncommon practice in the early 1900s, she was the last choice for ownership of property, after all of the husband's immediate blood relations – his children or his father. As a result of these laws, almost all of the land in western Canada, and hence almost all of the income, was legally owned and controlled by men.

In Saskatchewan, women's property rights slowly improved over time. Changes came about in two stages: one enabled a wife to prevent a transaction involving her home; the other guaranteed that she would receive a piece of her husband's estate. Under the Saskatchewan *Homestead Act* of 1915, a husband was forbidden to sell, mortgage, transfer or bequest the family home or the land on which it stood without the wife's written consent. The Saskatchewan *Devolution of Estates Act*, 1919, provided that even in circumstances where a husband had prepared a will, a wife was entitled to a claim on a portion of his property. The wife would receive all of her husband's property if there were no children involved, one-half if one child was alive, and one-third if there were two or more children.

Separation or divorce could be financially disastrous for a woman. All land and personal property, particularly in farming operations, was held in the name of the husband, and no law existed that would enable the wife to claim any part of the assets while her husband lived.³⁷ Women did not finally gain the right to equally share in matrimonial property and assets until 1979, when the Saskatchewan government passed the *Matrimonial Property Act*.

In the meantime, as the following story illustrates, farm women in Saskatchewan continued to work hard in their efforts to help establish their farms. "Being a pioneer of Southern Saskatchewan," Mrs. Zelickson of Hirsch wrote in a letter to the *Nor'West Farmer*, 1925,

it is quite interesting to note the value of work which I have performed. Although not having the money in cash, I figure the experience is worth it. I am one of the oldest pioneers in Southern Saskatchewan, coming to this country in 1891 and settling with my

preemption quarters (possibly \$170), for a total of \$970.

³⁶Georgina Binnie-Clark, *Wheat and Woman* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979 [1914]), 300.

³⁷Ibid, 177.

husband in our present location in 1892. Having worked here for 33 years you will see in the latter part of this letter what I have done. On remarking the value of my work I do not reckon it the wage of a maid but I figure it as taking the produce to market. ... I estimate the value of my work for these 35 years as \$141,578. I have cooked 361,351 meals, baked 78,800 loaves of bread, 12,045 cakes, 5,158 pies, preserved 3,300 quarts of fruit, churned 13,728 pounds of butter and raised 4,950 poultry. I have put in 48,180 hours scrubbing, cleaning and washing. I think this is quite a record and will be pleased to hear from any woman who can beat it.³⁸

³⁸Mrs. Zelickson, Hirsch, SK, in *Nor'West Farmer* (1925).

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This research paper was written as background information for the creation of the 2005 "Winning the Prairie Gamble" exhibits at the WDM and is copyright of the Western Development Museum.

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