Eastern European Immigration

These write-ups and resource links are intended to serve as the meat on the bones of the lecture outlines and PowerPoints of the Local History Teaching Aids (LHTA) materials. The goal in composing them has been for clarity, which is a key part of making the material interesting and inspiring. The material below is presented as a resource for the teacher, rather than for the students.

I. The New Immigration

*Until 1890, immigrants to Manitoba were almost exclusively of British or northwestern European descent. Shortly before Confederation, Ontarians began to drift into the Red River Colony. Ontarians flooded in after 1870. Beginning in the 1890s, however, new waves of immigration brought people from Eastern Europe to seek freedom and prosperity in the young Dominion of Canada. Some of them settled in the Red River North area.*

Canada passed the **Dominion Lands Act of 1872** to provide incentives for prospective settlers to come to the prairies. It offered **160 acres** for only $10, the commitment to cultivating 40 acres of it, and for building a permanent residence on the land within three years. Farmers could buy a second lot adjacent to the first for the same price. The act remained in effect until 1918, but did not have huge success right away. A recession in Canada reduced appeal to come there. Canada also had to compete with the United States for immigrants. When the United States government announced in 1890 that the American frontier had effectively ceased to exist, Manitoba and the Canadian northwest suddenly became the **"Last Best West."**

**A) Canadian Immigration Imitative**

When **Wilfred Laurier** led the Liberal Party to victory in the **1896** Dominion election, he appointed **Clifford Sifton** to be his **Minister of the Interior**. Sifton served his country in that capacity until 1905 and did much to promote Eastern European settlement in Canada. Many still came from Britain and the United States (although fewer than desired), but Sifton saw potential in the hardy **"peasants in sheep-skin coats"** from the eastern steppes of Europe. He actively targeted them in his large-scale advertising. The Department of the Interior printed about one million pamphlets in 1901. They carried such names as *The Wondrous West*, *The Last Best West*, and *Canada: Land of Opportunity*.

**Clifford Sifton**

The major group to come was the **Ukrainians**. They began arriving in 1891, but flowed in from 1896 to 1914. Most of them left the provinces of **Galicia** and **Bukovina**, which were ruled by the **Austro-Hungarian Empire** at the time. One of the problems they faced there had to do with **land**. The peasants were small lot farmers. As the population expanded significantly, they divided their plots to create new farms for their sons. The size of new lots soon became too small to support a family. Another problem was **religious persecution**. Though Galicia and Bukovina were ruled by Austria-Hungary, Polish landlords held power in the area. They were adherents to the Church of Rome, and opposed the Orthodox Ukrainians. General ethnic persecution also made the situation of the Ukrainians increasingly untenable. This was particularly the case in Russian areas of Ukraine, where the government was pursuing a policy of "**Russification**." Count Pyotr Valuev issued the Valuev Circular in 1863, which stated that the Ukrainian language "never existed, doesn't exist, and cannot exist." Many forms of publications in Ukrainian were banned. Many Ukrainians found their situation untenable. After a dance or parade and blessing at church, families set off with their carts to board ships for the 10 to 12 day passage to North America.

**B) Inbound Groups**

The Doukhobors and Poles also fled Central and Eastern Europe. The **Doukhobors** were a particular religious group in Russia whose name means "spirit wrestlers." They were pacifists in a country implementing forced military service, and anti-Tsarist in a nation with an autocratic tsar. Some were exiled to Siberia, others were beaten or worse. In the **1890s**, 7,000 left for Canada after the Dominion gave them free land in Saskatchewan and pledged they would not have to serve in the military. The famous Russian author Leo Tolstoy helped fund their passage. **Poles** came for economic opportunity, responding well to Sifton's advertising campaigns.

**Doukhobors and Poles**

The railway Roundhouse in East Selkirk provided temporary lodging for inbound immigrants. It was originally constructed in **1876** as a repair and maintenance site for trains. There was an enormous turntable in it that could be used to lift engines for easier access. After the Canadian Pacific Railway made its 90-degree turn south to cross the river at Winnipeg, the **East Selkirk Roundhouse** was no longer useful. It was converted into the **East Selkirk Immigration Shed** in **1898-99**.

**C) The East Selkirk Roundhouse**

The Roundhouse was located south of Colvile Road on Frank Street. It measured 90ft by 180ft with four extensions for its new purpose. In February of 1899, it opened its doors to 1,700 Doukhobors. On 1 March, a four year old girl died of pneumonia. In April, 600 Galicians arrived. A month later, 1,000 more westward-bound Doukhobors meant tents had to be set up outside to house all the people. The crowd gradually thinned out as different parties took trains to Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia. The Immigration Shed continued to be used until **1906**. When it was demolished, some of its bricks were used in the first **Happy Thought School** in East Selkirk in 1916.

Many Ukrainians and smaller numbers of Doukhobors, Poles, Germans, and Latvians stayed in Manitoba. They founded or added to towns and villages like East Selkirk, Libau, Gonor, Narol, Thalberg, Garson, Lockport, Poplar Park, Rossdale, and Walkleyburg. Though the newcomers settled on both sides of the Red River, St Clements was shaped by them more than was St Andrews. East Selkirk became known for Ukrainian influence. Narol and Gonor also bore the impress of Galicia and Bukovina. Eastern European families purchased river lots in the area in the late 1890s. Men found work on the CPR, at Garson Quarry, constructing Lockport Dam, and in the timber businesses on Lake Winnipeg while the women and children looked after family gardens and livestock at home. The bell in the original St Nicholas Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church (built in 1904) came from Bukovina.

**D) New Settlements**

Many families in the **Narol** and **Gonor** area planted large vegetable gardens on their river lots. When they harvested their crops, they loaded the produce onto wagons (often pulled by oxen), and hauled their wares to the north end of Winnipeg. There they set up booths to sell their vegetables at a farmers market. The path to Winnipeg followed the east side of the Red River (now Henderson Highway) to the Redwood Bridge. In Manitoba's capital, the people of Narol and Gonor became famous as **Market Gardeners**.

**Ukrainians; Narol and Gonor**

Ukrainian Immigrants built homes using two related architectural styles, depending on where they came from:

1) The **Galician-style house**. "[L]ack of money and time did not allow them to follow the traditions completely. The style they tried to follow, which scholars today call Galician-style was a log house with a simple thatched gabled roof. A gable roof is the triangular portion of a wall between the edges of a sloping roof. They peeled logs and connected them at the corners with either a dovetail joint for a saddlenotch joint. Each log fitted atop the next. The people often plastered or whitewashed the exterior wall. A wall divided the interior into two rooms. These houses had a life span of about ten years."

2) The **Bukovina-style house**. "The Bukovyna folk house was a little larger than the Galician house with three rooms and a doorway in the middle that opened to a small entryway called a “siny.” Houses were also made of log and generally had a hipped-roof as well with overhanging eaves. A hipped-roof means that all sides slope downwards to the walls giving the building the shape that somewhat resembles a pyramid." (<https://redrivernorthheritage.com/european-immigration-to-st-clements/>.)

Hundreds of families applied for homesteads north and northeast of East Selkirk. Like earlier pioneers, they struggled to build new lives in the harsh climate. Soon after locating their land, they constructed small houses and out buildings. Some farmers built using round logs that they chinked with clay. Others cut down trees, peeled the bark, and sawed planks to use in construction. They visited each other's homes to discuss schooling for the children, building churches for local worship, and economic possibilities. Churches they built are still important features of East Selkirk, Narol, Gonnor, and Libau.

**Latvians and Libau**

The quiet little village of **Libau** was built by immigrants from **Latvia** and **Germany**. It took its name from a German pronunciation of the Lettish city of **Liepaja**, which means "linden" (lime-tree). The old Liepaja was located on a narrow sandy peninsula between the Baltic Sea and Liepaja Lake in western Latvia. It was an ice-free port year round.

Another noteworthy community of immigrants was the 3,400 acre German settlement in **Little Britain** in St Andrews (between Lockport and Lower Fort Garry on the river's west side). They arrived on 27 March **1927**. After the First World War, Germany's economy was in shambles. Unemployment was high and inflation was rampant. Mrs. Wehrle, who settled in Little Britain with her husband, remembered a single loaf of bread costing one billion Marks.

**The Little Britain Farming Community**

The Little Britain Germans established a co-operative settlement. Advertisements insisted that settlers either be the second or third son of a family and thus bound to end up in factories, or men wanting to return to farm life. They were each to invest 5,000 Marks into the "society." Applicants also had to be Roman Catholic. When they arrived in St. John, New Brunswick from Antwerp via Southampton, **Father Kierdorf**, an agent for the Canadian Colonization Association, escorted them west and served as their priest. They lived in a **communal building** at the start. The settlement model had each man as an independent farmer, but with the society in charge of supplying farm machinery, selling produce, and purchasing food in bulk. **Frederick Schneider** led the settlement.

Like all communal settlements, the Little Britain farm **swiftly fell apart**. The settlement was in a prime location, with regular electric street car service to Winnipeg, good soil, and nearby railways. Despite this, however, money ran out for feeding the colonists and providing equipment. Wehrle wrote that "The situation brought opposition and mistrust to the point of explosion. People packed up and left, hoping for better luck elsewhere on their own. Of the 30 farmers, only 12 stayed." The farming community **split along east-west lines** on 1 January **1928**, less than a year from its founding. The following year, the Great Depression hit and inflated food prices. The community building was dismantled in 1931, except for a quarter part of it that was used as the church (St. Margaret's Roman Catholic) until 1943. The original socialistic format continued to decline. Wehrle wrote that "In 1936, each farmer became his own boss." She also recalled that the farmers' resolve increased as they became of necessity self-sufficient.

**Additional Resources on the Red River North Heritage Website:**

"European Immigration to St. Clements 1880-1920." Red River North Heritage. Acessed August 11, 2018. https://redrivernorthheritage.com/european-immigration-to-st-clements/

"Immigration to St. Clements PowerPoint Presentation: Grades 4-6." Red River North Heritage. Accessed August 11, 2018. https://redrivernorthheritage.com/immigration-to-st-clements-powerpoint-presentation-grade-5-6-level/.

**Other Resources:**

Municipality of St. Andrews (Manitoba). *Beyond the Gates of Lower Fort Garry: 1880-1981, R. M. of St. Andrews*. Clandeboye, MB: Volunteers in the Municipality of St. Andrews, c. 1982.