

**A History of Saskatoon
To
1914**

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I. Introduction:

Saskatoon owes its existence to geographical and climactic factors relating to its suitability as an agricultural region, and to 19th century political and economic issues having to do with the decline of the fur trade, Canadian nationalism, fear of American expansion into the northern prairies, and the development of the industrial economy of Central Canada, as well as technological advancements which made it practical to build and operate transcontinental railways.

Social reform movements popular in the late 19th century which prompted groups of people to emigrate westward in order to establish new communities based on utopian social ideals, also played a role. As the populations of central and northern Saskatchewan increased so, too, did the importance of Saskatoon as a supply and service centre to its regional hinterland as well as a trans-shipment point in the flow of goods and services to and from northern Saskatchewan.

II. Geology and History to 1670:

That part of the earth where Saskatoon now stands has been covered by mountains, by oceans (four times) and by great fern forests. For most of the last million years it has been covered by glaciers. At least four separate periods of glaciation have been recorded, the last of which began its retreat 20,000 years ago and which formed the South Saskatchewan River. By about 8,000 years ago the geography of the Saskatoon area was much as we know it today.¹

Human habitation of this area began at least 8,000 years ago and may go back as far 15,000 years. The earliest aboriginal inhabitants were related to historic Algonkian-speaking groups such as the Blackfoot, Peigan and Gros Ventre. Beginning about 3,000 years ago Ojibwa- and Cree-speaking groups from the eastern woodlands began moving out onto the prairies, gradually displacing the older inhabitants westward. This process accelerated after about 1000 AD and later as European settlement initiated a general progression of peoples westwards. During historic times and especially following American expansion during the middle of the 19th century Assiniboine and Dakota peoples began moving northward into what would become the Canadian Prairies including the area around Saskatoon.²

III. Rupert's Land – 1670-1870:

From 1670-1870 most of Saskatchewan was part of Rupert's Land, a huge territory granted to the Hudson's Bay Company by King Charles II for the purpose of carrying out the fur trade. The first European to set foot on the Northern Prairies was Henry Kelsey, and explorer and fur trader

¹ Raymond Moriyama, The Meewasin Valley Project, (Toronto: Raymond Moriyama Architects and Planners, 1979), pp. 13-17.

² See http://www.mcgrawhill.ca/school/schoolGraphics/defining_u1_ch02.pdf for related information.

who arrived in 1690. In 1754 Anthony Henday became the first European to known to have travelled through the Saskatoon area, followed by Matthew Cocking – who wintered near Saskatoon in 1772-1773 - and Peter Fidler, who followed the South Saskatchewan River as far as the Red Deer River in 1800, and returned to explore Beaver Creek in 1801. At the time the area was unpopulated, a circumstance which he ascribed to the danger of raids by parties of Gros Ventres, Piegans and Bloods from the south and west. One consequence of this was that wildlife was very plentiful in the area.³ Early settlements in the area included Metis hunting camps at Moose Woods and Round Prairie, south of Saskatoon, in the 1850s and '60s.

In 1857 an expedition under the auspices of the Royal Geographical Society, led by John Palliser, set out to explore the southern prairies west of the Red River Colony (present-day Winnipeg) and the southern passes through the Rocky Mountains, in the process making a record of the geology, geography, climate, inhabitants and natural resources of the area with an eye to future exploitation. Palliser passed about 20 miles to the west of Saskatoon on the way to Fort Carlton in October, 1857. Describing the “fertile belt” of the northern prairies (of which Saskatoon is near the southern border) he reported that it had natural pasture for cattle, an abundance of fish for food, timber for houses and fuel, and land cleared by fires ready for the plow.

The following year an expedition under Henry Youle Hind (a geology and chemistry professor at Trinity College in Toronto) travelled by canoe down the South Saskatchewan River. Of the prairies west of Red River he waxed poetic:

The vast ocean of level prairie which lies to the west of Red River must be seen in its extraordinary aspects, before it can be rightly valued and understood in reference to its future occupation by an energetic and civilised race, able to improve its vast capabilities and appreciate its marvellous beauties⁴

The expedition passed the spot where Saskatoon now stands on the afternoon of September 2nd, 1858. Stopping to survey the land he reported “Nothing but a treeless, slightly undulating prairie was visible”.

Neither expedition provided what could be called "glowing" reports of the conditions on the western prairies, particularly in the south west (what we now call the Palliser Triangle), which was undergoing a period of drought in the late 1850's and early 1860's. Palliser's adverse report on that area helped discourage immigration for many years until more desirable land elsewhere was filled, particularly in the USA. Nevertheless, in 1870 the Hudson's Bay Company surrendered ownership of Rupert's Land and the stage was set for European settlement of the Canadian prairies.

IV. Colonization and Settlement: 1870-1884

³ John Duerkop, Saskatoon's History in Street Names, (Saskatoon: Purich Press, 2000), pp. 13-14.

⁴ Henry Youle Hind, Narrative of the Canadian Red River Exploring Expedition of 1857 and of the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition of 1858, (London, 1860).

In 1872 the federal government passed the Dominion Lands Act, which set up the square township system of survey for the new territories in the west and offered free homestead lands to prospective settlers. The first treaties were signed with the aboriginal inhabitants of Saskatchewan and a transcontinental railway was started. Despite these measures the rate of western settlement remained disappointingly low. In 1881 the government began selling blocks of land to colonization companies, one of which was the Toronto-based Temperance Colonization Society.⁵

The Society was an outgrowth of the Temperance Movement that had been growing in urban centres across Canada and the US through the latter half of the 19th Century [CHECK]. It was one of many utopian visions that was explored by colonizing groups determined to make new lives for themselves on the Canadian prairies. Reformers of the day saw alcohol – and urban living – as the twin evils on which all vice flourished. The new colony would suffer from neither: it would be both rural in nature and free from the ravages of drink. As one speaker exhorted:

All believe that drunkenness, and the drinking habits that lead to it, are bad for the individual and bad for the country... Keep strong drink then out of as wide a section as possible of the North West which is to be the home of our children.⁶

In April, 1882, the Society was granted 21 sections of land in a block extending from Warman to Dundurn, straddling the South Saskatchewan River. That summer a party under John Lake headed west to inspect the land grant and to choose a site for a new town. It was an arduous journey: two weeks by rail from Toronto to the end of the line at Moosomin and then a three week cart-trek to their destination.

On July 28, 1882 the party arrived at Clarks Crossing at the northern edge of the grant area. For the next two weeks they surveyed the river south to Moose Woods. On August 18 they camped on the east side of the river near where the CPR Bridge now crosses at 33rd Street. Examining the riverbanks they agreed that this would form the northern boundary of the new settlement. The next day – John Lake’s birthday - they camped at what is today Idylwyld, on the east side of the river in the extreme south east corner of Section 29, Township 36 Range 5 West of the 3rd Meridian. “Minnetonka is the name of our Camping Place”, Lake wrote in his diary, “the finest we ever had.”⁷

Lake and his party spent a two more weeks in the area before returning to the East. Saskatoon had been found, but it would be another year before it would be founded.

In the spring of 1883 Lake returned to Saskatoon leading a group of settlers. By then the railway had made it as far as Moose Jaw, a mere 150 miles from the new settlement. Nevertheless, that first group of settlers - hindered by the weather and with few marked trails to follow - took

⁵Sally Potter Club, Saskatoon: the Serenity and the Surge (Saskatoon: City of Saskatoon, 1966), p. 7.

⁶ Stan Hanson and Don Kerr, Saskatoon, the First Half Century, (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1982), p. 1.

⁷ Ibid., pp 3-4.

nearly a month to reach the town site (later parties were to make the same trip in 4-8 days). On August 18 the townsite survey was completed and Saskatoon was born.

Some confusion exists over the naming of Saskatoon. The traditional story is that “Saskatoon” is an anglicization of a cree word for the small, red berries that grow in such profusion in these parts. There is even an almost-certainly-apocryphal story to the effect that John Lake, upon being given a handful of these berries and told their name immediately cried “Arise, Saskatoon – Queen of the North!” The truth appears to be somewhat less dramatic. The area was long-known to the local Cree as a good place to stock up on willow wands for arrow shafts. Thus the name of the place was “Sask-kwa-tan” – roughly, “the place where willows are cut”.⁸

The new settlement grew slowly at first; at the end of the first year there were only 80 people living here. But the numbers were increasing. The Temperance Colonization Society, however, found itself in a crisis. The government had only allowed it to claim every second section of land rather than a contiguous block of territory. Government-owned land was being sold at \$10.00 for a quarter section. The TCS was trying to sell its land for \$2 per acre, or 320.00 per quarter section. It was a recipe for disaster in more ways than one: anyone could file for a homestead within the TCS land grant area including those not willing to renounce the drink! As well, the railways were passing far to the south of Saskatoon and the river turned out to be almost completely unnavigable, making it difficult to bring people and goods into and out of the area.⁹ The Temperance Colony experiment was doomed to failure and oblivion, but would the settlement itself follow?

V. The Pioneer Years: 1884-1890

In 1884 Saskatoon consisted of six houses, a store, a sawmill, and some 80 optimistic souls. The first homesteaders took land on the west side of the river that year (in what are now the southern part of the Caswell Hill and Westmount neighbourhoods) and settlement received a slight boost when ferry service was established across the river, making Saskatoon the crossing point for the busy Regina – Battleford Trail.¹⁰ Saskatoon may not have been the Mecca of the West that Temperance Colonization Society Boosters claimed it to be, but it was flourishing.

1885, however, began with high hopes but ended badly. That was the year of the North West Rebellion, which while the dangers it brought to the settlement were temporary (and for the most part non-existent) served to dampen enthusiasm back East for settlement in the area. Partly as a result, less than a dozen new settlers per year arrived in the district over the next five years. This slowdown helped put the final nails in the TCS coffin. Unable to meet shareholder expectations,

⁸ Duerkop, p. 16. A number of variations of this word are cited as the source of the name Saskatoon.

⁹ Hanson and Kerr, pp. 9-10.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 12

wracked by internal squabbles and lawsuits, the Society finally folded in 1891 after having dropped from 1,000 shareholders to just 25.¹¹

(The Rebellion, it should be noted, was also a boon for Saskatoon, providing employment for many - as teamsters, scouts, stretcher bearers, etc - and a lucrative market for surplus agricultural products. It may also be that many of those who would later settle in the West got their first taste of this little-known land while marching with Middleton's army.)

The years 1885-1890 were also years of drought and early frost. However, local foodstuffs were plentiful – one settler recalls shooting prairie chickens off the back fence for supper, and of course berries grew everywhere - and for the most part the settlement was self-sufficient. Even if there had been much in the way of agricultural production, without a rail link to the rest of the world there was no practical means of getting it to external markets. Thus before 1890 the local economy was strictly one of subsistence.

VI. Settlement to City: 1890-1906

In 1890 one of the most important events in Saskatoon's history occurred: the Qu'appelle, Long Land and Saskatchewan railway arrived, saving the settlement from extinction and setting the stage for the physical outline of the City we know today. The QLLS connected Regina and Prince Albert, crossing the South Saskatchewan river where the Idylwyld Freeway bridge is today. At that time the settlement was concentrated on the east side of the river, clustered around the intersection of Broadway and Main. The railway, however, set up its roundhouse and pumping station on the west side of the river where the banks were much lower (thus making it easier to pump water for the locomotives). Streets were laid out for a new subdivision, a station was built at what is now 1st Avenue and 20th Street, and soon businesses began to spring up around it. Gradually the west bank settlement usurped the role as business centre to the community. It would eventually become Saskatoon's downtown core.

On November 16, 1901, with 26 houses and a population of 113, the new settlement on the west bank was incorporated as a village. To the chagrin of those across the river, it took for itself the name "Saskatoon"! East side residents adopted the name "Nutana" – a scrambled inversion of "Saskatoon" - for their settlement.¹²

Changes came thick and fast thereafter. On July 1, 1903, Saskatoon was incorporated as a town. Later that year Nutana was incorporated as a village and Riversdale was established as a separate community. Riversdale itself was incorporated as a village in 1905. The Grand Trunk Pacific Railway had deflected its survey northward so as to go through Saskatoon (rather than Hanley) and both the CNR and CPR had promised to divert rail lines through the town. Prosperity was on

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 21-23.

¹² Scrambled, no doubt, because of the small likelihood that anyone would ever want to live in a place called "Nootaksis".

the horizon; that year the three communities began to consider the possibility of combining their resources and incorporating as a city.

The little settlement was at a critical juncture and this would be an important step. A village may only borrow up to 5% of its total assessment while a town can borrow 10% and a city up to 20%. This money would be needed if the settlement was to provide the kinds of services needed to turn it from a sleepy agricultural backwater to a modern industrial city. As population densities increased – there were around 4,500 people in the three settlements by 1906 – the need for infrastructural improvements became more and more pressing. The advantages of amalgamation were that sufficient money would finally be available to provide an electrical system, build a water works and put in a sewerage system. This would in turn make the city more attractive to business and industry which in its turn would draw more people to Saskatoon. In early Saskatoon, therefore, growth and development was both the cause and the effect of growth and development.

Despite the obvious advantages, Nutana balked at the prospect of amalgamation. The only link between it and its upstart neighbour was the ferry – which ran infrequently when it ran at all – and across the railway bridge. This made the movement of goods and people across the river expensive, difficult and occasionally dangerous (for those walking across the railway bridge). People had been talking about the need for a new bridge as early as 1901 and the Territorial government had budgeted \$60,000 to help build one in 1904, but a promise is not the kind of thing you can drive across and in a December 1905 meeting of the Nutana ratepayers it was decided that without a firm commitment there would be no amalgamation.

In 1906 the province promised funding for a new bridge. Plans were drawn up and contracts worth \$105,000 were let for the construction. With that the Nutana ratepayers came on side and the new City Charter was passed by Council in March.¹³ It was assented to by the Lieutenant Governor on May 26. The first City Council was elected (by acclamation) on June 21. Council held its inaugural meeting on June 26 and on July 1, 1906, the City of Saskatoon threw party to celebrate. Saskatoon was officially a “city”.

VII. Boom and Bust: 1906-1913

From 1906 to 1912 Saskatoon grew prodigiously. The civic assessment in 1906 was 2.5 million dollars . It had more than doubled to \$6,621,327 in 1907. and 1912 the civic assessment had leaped to 40 million dollars.¹⁴ Building permits taken out that year totalled \$7,640,530 – a figure not to be exceeded until 1952.¹⁵ Land values rose steadily from 1906-1909. Caswell Hill – the City’s first suburb – had gone on the market in 1905, had sold out by 1906 and was rapidly being

¹³ Pouring of the concrete piers for the new bridge began in the fall of 1906. The steelwork and roadway were built the following summer and the Traffic Bridge was officially opened on Oct 10, 1907.

¹⁴ Saskatoon Henderson Directory, (Saskatoon: Henderson Directories Ltd., 1909), p. 55.

¹⁵ Hanson and Kerr, p. 69.

followed by new subdivisions on the west side. Downtown, land values were rising in 1906-1907 and as they went up so did Saskatoon's first truly permanent buildings along 1st and 2nd Avenues, centred on 21st Street.

New rail lines into and out of the City were also being built. The CPR was building in from the east (establishing the village of Sutherland in the process), crossing the river on a brand new bridge at 33rd Street. The Grand Trunk Pacific railway line cut across the City's southwest corner where it, too, was busy building a bridge across the river and the CNR was adding a new line from its downtown yards southwest out of the city to the tap into the newly settled areas past Delisle in the Goose Lake country before heading off to Calgary. Prosperity was in the air and the river seemed to run with gold.

A poor harvest in 1907 and a general economic downturn put an end to this first boom. Credit dried up and the City – with a number of large projects only half completed – faced bankruptcy. It was only through decisive action by local business and political leaders and – ultimately – their willingness to risk their own money to prop up civic finances that the situation was saved from disaster. By 1909 the worst was over and in 1910 Saskatoon entered a period of financial optimism that was to last for three delirious years before crashing to a halt in the fall of 1912.

One of the most noteworthy events of this period was the establishment in Saskatoon of the provincial University, a result of intense lobbying on the part of Saskatoon's political and business elite and the provincial government's policy of decentralizing services where possible.¹⁶

The years 1910-1912 were a speculator's dream. Land values skyrocketed. A 35 foot lot on 2nd Avenue north of 21st Street that cost \$300 in 1903 sold for a whopping \$1,957 per frontage foot (almost \$70,000 in total) in the summer of 1912. Almost the whole of 3rd Avenue was transformed in one grand developmental splurge between the summers of 1912 and 1913. The developer, 30 year-old Otto Helgerson, estimated that he had earned a net profit on real estate of \$530.95 / day for 449 consecutive days for a total of \$238,396.55 in only 15 months.¹⁷ There were 267 real estate firms operating in Saskatoon that year, up from 28 in 1908. New subdivisions were being planned and marketed miles away from the city's built up area and in many cases far outside the then-city limits. Fairhaven – a half-section of barren prairie west of Avenue W went on the market in 1910 and was completely sold by October, 1911. By May of 1912 the price of a lot in this distant "subdivision" had hit \$350 per frontage foot. Everyone, it seemed, was buying and selling land at a frantic pace.

Population figures from this time are a bit tricky. In 1906 Saskatoon qualified as a city with 4,500 people living in the three settlements. In 1911 the federal census gave Saskatoon 12,004 and by 1916 it was 21,054.¹⁸ Local estimates, however, were much higher. Hanson and Kerr

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 83-85.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 112.

¹⁸ City of Saskatoon Municipal Manual. (Saskatoon: City of Saskatoon Office of the City Clerk, 2000), p. 79.

use the figure of 28,000 persons for 1912 (based on a City of Saskatoon census), and note that total estimates tended to vary depending on the needs of the group doing the counting.¹⁹

No matter what figures one uses, it is apparent that the City had doubled or tripled in size very shortly after being incorporated. For local boosters there was no end in sight. A new power plant was built in 1911 at 19th Street and Avenue A (to replace the smaller one farther upstream at 11th Street), streets were paved, and miles of sewer and water pipes were being laid. On January 1, 1913 the city's first public transit system – the Saskatoon Municipal Railway – opened and by 1914 the line ran all the way out to the Town of Sutherland, two miles past the city limits. By the time the boom peaked in 1912 growth figures 50,000 by 1915 and 100,000 by 1920 were being widely predicted. The President of the University, Walter Murray, predicted that the population would reach two million by 1931.²⁰

One of the most interesting things to come out of the pre-war boom was Factoria – “the Magic City”. Factoria was the brainchild of an entrepreneur from Chicago named R.E. Glass. Founded in November, 1912, it was located on land owned by local farmer and horsebreeder Billy Silverwood, two miles north of the city in the area now known as “Silverwood”. Billy Silverwood had been bottling water from springs on the riverbank just below his farmstead at what is now the east end of Adilman Drive. Glass' plan was to extend a railway siding in from the line at what is now Warman Road and build a series of factories - a brick plant, a brewery, an expanded bottling works, a flour mill and other ventures. An entire town was planned based around the needs of the industries to be located there with houses for the workers, stores, schools, hotels, a post office and all other amenities to be developed. Boosters confidently predicted a population of 2,000 within the first year.²¹

The rail line was built and by 1913 several firms had located in Factoria. A hotel had been built along the railway and a half dozen or so houses were put up. The problem lay in getting a power line built out from Saskatoon to the new development. City Council wrestled with several competing industrial options and the debate was still going on even as Saskatoon's boom fell apart. A number of the businesses established there continued to operate for some time. The Northlands Flour Mill, which was bought out by Robin Hood in 1926 was there as late as the Second World War, and the Factoria Hotel may have been used briefly as a school in 1931 after the old Brownell School burned down.²² A power was built out to there – in 1918, paid for the company that owned the flour mill. But it was too late for Glass' vision of an industrial

¹⁹ Hanson and Kerr, pp. 78, 114-115.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 104.

²¹ John H. Archer and J.C. Bates, Historic Saskatoon: 1882 – 1947, (Saskatoon: Junior Chamber of Commerce, 1948), p. 77.

²² Joan Champ, Factorial Archaeological Review, (Saskatoon: Stantec Consulting Ltd., 1998), p. 22.

metropolis on the outskirts of Saskatoon. By 1914 the dream of Factoria, like the rest of the grandiose dreams of Saskatoon's boom-era developers, was dead.²³

The prewar boom was fuelled by outside capital (mostly from Britain), an influx of new immigrants, and a wild, self-perpetuating optimism. The banks, eager to cash in on this entrepreneurial spirit were alarmingly generous with their credit. "Saskatoon's growth and progress can not be checked, and in her onward and ever-forward course she will scatter wealth and plenty among a worthy and deserving populace" one writer gushed.²⁴ But the future did not appear so bright to everyone. One writer commented that land speculation was "a radical evil...which, as sure as night follows day, we will later regret in sackcloth and ashes."²⁵ But during this time of boundless growth such warnings were generally ignored (regrettably, as it turned out).

It couldn't last, and it didn't. Things started to give way near the end of 1912 and while people remained confident well into 1914 that the setback was temporary (as the collapse following the 1906-1907 boom had been) the coming of war that summer put the final nail in the coffin. The boom was over. Most of those who owned property in the distant subdivisions just walked away from it. Some who had bought land closer in held on to it for years – even decades - hoping to someday realize a profit from it. Very few did. Most lost their land through non-payment of taxes or finally sold it off at a loss. Fortunes had been made by those few who got in early and got out in time; the rest lost everything.

Why the sudden bust? The factors appear to have been external. Early in 1913 the supply of money from Britain suddenly dried up. The political situation in Europe was starting to deteriorate; there was war in the Balkans and a general re-arming in Europe. Development in other places was also draining new money away from Saskatoon. The banks in Saskatoon responded by cutting off credit and calling in loans. The price of wheat had also dropped in the fall of 1912, which further reduced the capital available locally. With the war came a complete freeze on credit and the final end of Saskatoon's great boom. Never was the city to experience such a period of unimaginable growth again. The events of 1906-1914 were to shape the way the city would develop thereafter:

The city of the Teens and Twenties, full of open fields and empty lots, was great for children to grow up in, but their games were often played on the open spaces

²³ Hanson and Kerr, pp. 140-143. The Silver Springs Bottling works did not survive either, partly as a result of contamination of the springs from the run-off from Silverwood's huge horse barn up the hill. In 1951 the horse barn – a riverbank landmark since 1911 – burned down after being struck by lightning. A low stone wall and the asphalt floor are all that remain, halfway down the hill. Area teenagers use it as a "hangout" on warm summer nights. The house is also long gone. All that remains are the graffiti-covered back steps, surrounded by weeds in the empty lot at the foot of Adilman Drive. In the long grass and bush along the river bank can still be found the remains of the bottling works building and various outbuildings dating from the days of Factoria's glory.

²⁴ B.E. Dutcher, quoted in Saskatoon Star Phoenix, July 18, 1912. From Hanson and Kerr, p. 106.

²⁵ Anonymous writer quoted in Saskatoon Star Phoenix, 17 December 1910. From Hanson and Kerr, p. 106.

were investors had lost their fortunes. Saskatoon became a city of deferred economic hopes and its future, in keeping with its origins, would be more sober. It had experienced its one great spree.²⁶

VIII. Conclusion

Saskatoon had made huge strides since the hardscrabble days of the 1880s. By 1914 where once had stood open prairie now stood the beginnings of a beautiful modern metropolis. Still, difficult times were in store for the Wonder City: the First World War and the dark days of the 1918 Influenza Epidemic, the Great Depression of the 1930s and then yet another war, before prosperity was finally to return.

With its dependence on agriculture, Saskatoon has experienced many "booms and busts" in its short history. The expansion of the mining industry in the 1970s and 1980s reduced this to some extent, and the future promises continued diversification through the emergence of more advanced technology industries and an increase in manufacturing, primarily to service the resource sector.

Through the good times and the bad the people of Saskatoon held their heads high, certain that with a little luck and a healthy dollop of hard work it would all come out right in the end. And it did.

²⁶ Hanson and Kerr, p. 145.