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The Incredible Harvest Excursion of 1908

W.J.C. Cherwinski

THE TORONTO *Daily Star* reporter sent down to the city's Union Station in the wee hours of a mid-August day in 1908 witnessed what he considered an awesome sight: "Hundreds of telescope valises with coats strapped to them are stumbling blocks to traffic in the... station. Thousands of small parcels and lunches are falling from the hands of heavily laden excursionists, or are left behind to be remembered later with regrets."[1] His sketch described a scene repeated annually over four decades in a number of railway stations, large and small, in a number of cities and towns across the eastern half of Canada. The event involved the largest mass movement of men organized to meet a specific peacetime need. The crusade for this civilian army was to protect the nation's most valuable commodity from the vagaries of prairie weather. Each August the Canadian Pacific Railway Company (and other companies in later years) organized low-cost harvest excursions to transport to the west able-bodied men, preferably farmers, from the Maritimes and central Canada to help farmers to harvest their crops before winter permanently gripped the region.

It was a crusade because the Wheat Economy was critical to the nation's development. To sustain it Canadians everywhere had been bombarded for years with propaganda about the fantastic opportunities available in the west for people with money or ambition or both. Land was cheap or free for the asking, jobs were plentiful, and wages were high. Granted, there were dangers, largely created by writers of cheap romantic publications, but this only enhanced the sense of adventure.[2] These publicity agents created a myth or mystique about the west which was only partly true even in good times and a total fabrication in bad.

Myths were necessary because the prairies needed people in large numbers. Permanent settlers were most desirable but they, once settled, required skilled help in even larger numbers. One need only scan the numerous "heart render-

[1] Toronto *Daily Star* [hereafter *Star*], 14 August 1908.
[2] *Canadian Annual Review*, 1907, 175.

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ing appeals for additional help" received by provincial and federal agencies to realize that apart from the weather, an adequate supply of cheap labour was the farmer's single most important problem.[3] While farm labour was needed year round, it was in great demand in spring during seeding and absolutely crucial in autumn during harvest. Other sectors of the prairie economy including mining, ranching, lumbering, and railway construction competed with farmers for labour and to satisfy them the creation of a large floating pool of labour which could be tapped at will in any given year became the main objective.[4] Thus the harvest excursions became an integral part of prairie labour supply.

Besides the cheap labour they might provide, harvest excursions also made solid business sense to all interested parties. The CPR's stake in western Canadian land meant that the company also had a decided interest in prairie prosperity. Especially since a part-time harvester could become a full-time settler who might homestead or even purchase railway land. (In 1906, for example, Immigration Branch officials estimated that 30 per cent of the harvesters stayed.[5]) At the very least he might advertise the bounty of the west to his friends and relations on his return home. Besides, the service the railway provided meant that excursions were inexpensive ventures.

For the three prairie provincial governments as well, harvest excursions, if properly run, were extremely useful politically both in silencing labour-starved farmers and in attracting potential settlers. Consequently Manitoba even sent its own recruiting agent to the Maritimes in some years.[6] Meanwhile Ottawa officials encouraged excursions because they too realized the importance of having high-paying jobs available in the autumn when the economy was beginning to slow down.

For the men who journeyed to the west as harvesters, the reasons for going were numerous. An escape from a jilted lover perhaps, or a pre-nuptial last fling, or even the unexpected advent of fatherhood must have figured in some men's decisions. The younger ones saw it as a chance for freedom at small cost since "papas kept a tight hold on the money." Others took advantage of the opportunity to visit friends or just look around.[7] For the majority, however, the harvest excursion meant either survival or self-improvement. To the largest number it was simply a matter of good, quick money to tide them and their families over a long winter; for some, however, it meant a chance at success in the real land of opportunity.

[3] See particularly Dept. of the Interior, Immigration Branch [hereafter IB], RG 76, Vol. 131, File 29490, Public Archives of Canada, and the papers of the ministers responsible for labour and agriculture in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta.

[4] David J. Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men: The Rise and Fall of the One Big Union* (Toronto 1978), ix-xvi; Donald Avery, *"Dangerous Foreigners": European Immigrant Workers and Labour Radicalism in Canada, 1896-1932* (Toronto 1979), 16-38.

[5] IB, Vol. 38, File 839, part 2, O. Smith to W.D. Scott, 1 April 1907.

[6] *Ibid.*, Vol. 131, File 29490, part 1, Hugh McKillan to C. Sifton, 20 July 1901.

[7] *Ibid.*, Vol. 38, File 839, part 2, Walker to Scott, 8 September 1908; Glenbow-Alberta Institute, Robert G. Tressler Account, AT 873A.

Whatever their reasons for travelling to the northwest, the excursionists shared a distorted image of the west whose message was that opportunity and success were assured to those who dared to venture forth. As a consequence they were determined to "go west," although often wages at home were comparable and the hours of work were certainly shorter.[8] Since two levels of government and the nation's foremost railway had spent so much time and money creating the myth, they were loath to taint it with the reality of terrible weather, primitive conditions, deadly boredom, and possible failure. In fact, there is evidence to indicate that some highly-placed officials were accomplices in deception by actually conspiring to withhold information which could jeopardize the flow of both settlers and workers.[9]

In the long term perhaps the myth and the means of its propagation may have been justified. It is less easy to condone it in the short term in light of the hardship and widespread personal suffering experienced by the 1908 harvest excursionists in their pursuit of the myth. This paper, which relates the experiences of these excursionists from departure to dispersal across the prairies, is both an examination of what happened on one occasion when myth and reality differed markedly, and simply a good story.

John Thompson's recent study of harvest excursions does place them within the context of the prairie and national economies and therefore much of the detail does not require repeating. Suffice it to say here that as a means of recruiting labour they were unique in North America and a subject of envy to United States agriculture officials.[10] First offered in 1890 when less than 300 men from Ontario travelled west free of charge, their numbers increased rapidly as more western land was settled, their points of origin were expanded, and a basic nominal charge, considerably smaller than a regular fare, was levied by the railway company for the service. By the time Saskatchewan and Alberta became provinces the annual affair appeared to be quite systematic and well organized. Using a method introduced in 1903 each local improvement district provided information on the number of harvesters needed to its provincial department of agriculture which made an estimate of the total required.[11]

[8] IB, Vol.131, File 29490, part 3, clipping, *Ottawa Free Press*, 12 July 1906.

[9] In 1909, for example, W.D. Scott, the Superintendent of Immigration for the Immigration Branch, expressed his concern to his brother Walter, the Premier of Saskatchewan, that the Annual Report of the province's Department of Agriculture was too explicit in the details it presented regarding "... frost, drought, gophers and other enemies to successful crop raising." These looked "very bad in a public document" and were therefore harmful to immigration work. In reply Walter agreed. Sask. Archives Board [hereafter SAB], Motherwell Papers, W.D. Scott to Walter Scott, 29 January 1909, 9824; Scott to Scott, 3 February 1909, 9823.

[10] John Herd Thompson, "Bringing in the Sheaves: The Harvest Excursionists, 1890-1929," *Canadian Historical Review*, (1978), 467-89; Don D. Lescohier, "Sources of Supply and Conditions of Employment of Harvest Labor in the Wheat Belt," U.S. Dept. of Agriculture Bulletin No. 1211, 22.

[11] Saskatchewan, Dept. of Agriculture, *Report* [hereafter SDA Report], 1906, 13-4.

Then the railway company ran advertisements in every major community newspaper from Toronto east, gradually building up to the announcement of the actual departure dates as determined by harvest forecast experts. (See illustration.) The terms were simple. For ten dollars a harvester could buy a ticket to take him from the closest point on the main line all the way to Winnipeg where he was met by agriculture officials or by farmers' agents and directed to his place of work. If need be, his ticket could be extended 500 miles west to Moose Jaw free of charge. To travel beyond Moose Jaw, but no further than Calgary, MacLeod or Edmonton, or to reach points on branch lines an additional one cent per mile was assessed. Following completion of a minimum of 30 days' labour for one or more farmers, the harvester could, on presentation of his ticket stub, signed by a farmer, return home by regularly scheduled train for another 18 dollars. For Nova Scotians and Prince Edward Islanders the rates were slightly higher. Excursion tickets could also be issued to women. With each ticket the holder could also take 150 pounds of baggage.[12]

Despite the liberal provisions the CPR could not meet the demand and other means to find men had to be found. In 1902 and 1906 the federal Immigration Branch and the railway tried to get harvesters from the Old Country, while at about the same time the two new national railways, the Grand Trunk Pacific and the Canadian Northern, organized their own less extensive excursions.[13] Hence, as Thompson has indicated, the long-term trend was for the number of excursionists to increase as people succumbed to the mystique, but the one in 1908 was exceptional in that it was the first large excursion when 27,500 men were moved, surpassing by 4000 the previous record set in 1906.[14]

A number of factors converged to make excursion organizers anticipate 1908 as a banner year. The acreage put to wheat that spring had been estimated at 20 per cent to 25 per cent higher than 1907 as the number of homesteads settled and the amount of railway and pre-emption land purchased continued to reflect the unbounded optimism associated with the Canadian prairies.[15] While there had been minor changes in agricultural technology over the previous two decades, the process of harvesting the crop was still labour intensive. Horse-drawn reaper-binders simplified what previously had been two time-consuming tasks, but the grain still had to dry and harden in stooks of sheaves skillfully constructed to shed rain, a back-breaking job requiring several men for each farm. Depending on the weather, threshing was accomplished several days later by custom crews operating a wheeled threshing machine or separator powered by a twenty-five ton mobile steam-driven engine.(See illustration.)

[12] *Daily Gleaner* (Fredericton), [hereafter *Gleaner*], 4 August 1908.
[13] SDA Report, 1906, 13-14; SAB, Motherwell Papers, Commissioner of Agriculture to Alex Skene, 20 March 1907, 5933; IB, Vol. 131, File 29490, part 1, Robert Kerr to Smart, 11 July 1902; *Star*, 21 August 1908.
[14] Thompson, "Bringing in the Sheaves," 469.
[15] SDA Report, 1907, 110; IB, Vol. 38, File 839, part 2, Walker to Scott, 8 September 1908.

A CPR Harvest Excursion Poster, 1905. Courtesy: PAC, Immigration Branch Records.

While fewer men were required at this stage the numbers were still considerable. Crews comprised 6 to 50 men working long hours, in some cases several months on end. Consequently, with the increased acreage put to crop each year farmers and officials alike complained that labour shortages were a perennial problem.[16] To compensate, the railways and governments stepped up their compaign to promote the region. This solved the labour problem only temporarily. In the longer term, however, it was exacerbated, for as one provincial official complained:

> Owing to the fact that farmers have, as a rule, been very successful . . . during recent years, men, who in the older provinces would be content to work under a good master, instead of endeavouring to obtain a farm for themselves, do not long work for wages . . . but at the earliest opportunity procure a portion of our fertile prairie land and proceed to make homes for themselves.[17]

Harvesting Crew seated on Separator, Taylor Farm, Delisle, Sask., c. 1920-11. Portable bunkhouse, named "City Hotel," Tracy Bros. on left. Courtesy: Glenbow-Alberta Institute.

In 1907 the manpower situation was particularly bad. Poor weather meant a late harvest and farmers were held up for ransom as wages rose dramatically. The CPR even ran an unprecedented "monster" excursion on 12 September to meet the demand for men. It was with memories of this panic situation fresh in their minds that agriculture and railway officials planned for the harvest of

[16] SDA Report, 1907, 107, 110; S.H. Holbrook, *Machines of Plenty* (N.Y. 1955), 123; M. Denison, *Harvest Triumphant* (London 1949), 182.
[17] SDA Report, 1907, 107.

1908.[18] Towards the end of July scattered reports appeared that cutting had begun in some areas indicating that the harvest would be as much as three weeks ahead of 1907. Shortly thereafter the annual game of forecasting the ultimate yield began. This contest, so necessary for the maintenance of the west's reputation, was waged in the nation's press by a variety of public and private "experts" over the next six to eight weeks with one-upmanship as the only recognizable rule. The early consensus in 1908 was that it would be a record crop in the neighbourhood of 120,000,000 bushels valued at over $85,000,000.[19]

Coincident with the optimistic crop forecast came predictions of a serious scarcity of farm labour. Reports that a good crop in Minnesota and the Dakotas could cut off that traditional though limited source of harvesters from the United States worsened the picture. Manitoba farmers were particularly apprehensive since their experience was that many men chose to go further west into Saskatchewan and Alberta where they would be closer to available homestead lands.[20] Also, remembering 1907, they inundated the offices of the immigration commissioner in Winnipeg, the man responsible for distributing harvesters, demanding assistance. By mid-July, a full month before the harvest would begin, he was processing up to 50 requests per day and within 3 weeks the number of men needed had escalated considerably. The initial provincial totals of estimated requirements at the beginning of August were 12,000 for Manitoba, 10,000 for Saskatchewan, and 2000 for Alberta. Only a very short time later Saskatchewan's projected needs had risen to 20,000 men alone.[21]

The reports of the wages that farmers were willing to pay rose almost as fast. Some were rumoured to be offering as much as $50 per month but a more realistic figure was between $35 and $40 per month or $2.50 per day plus board for an experienced hand, and between $15 and $25 for a greenhorn. It was the daily rate that was of interest to potential excursionists and it was significantly higher than the going rate of $1.50 per day without board for railway construction.[22]

Accounts of the state of the prairie wheat crop, the expected labour shortage, and the wages to be paid to harvesters appeared in a variety of newspapers

[18] IB, Vol. 38, File 839, part 2, W.S. Herron to Alta. Dept. of Agriculture, 6 November 1907; clipping from *Montreal Herald*, 21 August 1907; See SAB, Motherwell Papers, 5942-47 for letters and telegrams concerning the shortage of harvesters in September and October of 1907.

[19] SDA Report, 1907, 109; (Regina) *Morning Leader* [hereafter *Leader*], 1 August 1908; *Halifax Herald* [hereafter *Herald*], 24 July 1908; Toronto *Globe*, 29 August, 11 September 1908. See also the *Canadian Annual Review* for the variety of estimates made the year before.

[20] *Moose Jaw Times* [hereafter *Times*], 24 July 1908; IB, Vol. 38, File 839, part 2, clipping from *Manitou Sun*, 9 November 1905.

[21] *Times*, 14 July 1908; *Manitoba Free Press* [hereafter FP], 5 and 7 August 1908; SDA Report, 1908, 92-3.

[22] *Times*, 14, 24 July 1908; FP, 1, 7 August 1908.

across the country that summer as a prelude to the first harvest excursion advertisements which were printed in all papers in Ontario and points east after the third week of July. Their very tone indicated urgency as those interested were told by the CPR to "Get Ready" because 30,000 harvesters were needed on the prairies.[23] Later the figure was scaled down to 25,000 but there was still "work for all at good wages." To meet the demand the railway would run specials leaving the Maritimes on 11 August and 5 September and 12 other trains would leave Ontario points between 14 August and 14 September. These ads, which ran daily for two weeks, also gave details of the fares to be paid by prospective harvesters.[24]

Despite the railway company's efforts, predictions still called for a shortage of harvesters. Not much help could be expected from western cities. Although it had been a bad year for urban employment especially in Winnipeg, the *Free Press* concluded that most of the skilled unemployed thought harvest work beneath them. Furthermore, the extreme earliness of the western harvest would leave no time lag between Ontario and Manitoba making officials even more pessimistic. There was even a suggestion that prisoners be paroled for the harvest but that idea was loudly condemned by organized labour.[25]

By early August there was every indication that the publicity and myth-making had not worked. Yet, unpredictably, men from across the country responded to the last-minute appeal for harvesters. Railway construction workers began to leave their jobs, seriously threatening that year's building programme. The national CPR shopworkers' strike which began on 5 August created another unexpected source of help when numerous ancillary workers were laid off. Also unexpectedly, the economy slowed down dramatically in July and scores of urban breadwinners, many without work all summer, saw the harvest as an opportunity to assist their families through a long winter or to create a new life in the west with a small grubstake to get them started.[26]

Early ticket sales in the Maritimes were slow,[27] but by departure time every station on the main line was blocked as branch lines and the Intercolonial funnelled in excursionists from the entire region as rumours spread that there would be a farmers' agent aboard hiring men at rates considerably higher than the year before.[28] There were six trains set to depart the Maritimes on 11 August, each carrying between 9 and 14 cars and up to 2 baggage cars. Each car held 50 persons and by the time all the trains passed through Fredericton

[23] See *Herald*, 24 July 1908 for a statement by CPR Vice-President Whyte. See also 22 July 1908 and *Gleaner*, 21 July 1908.
[24] *Globe*, 5 August 1908; *Star*, 11 August 1908; *Herald*, 29 July 1908; *Gleaner*, 30 July 1908.
[25] *FP*, 7 August 1908; *Herald*, 21 July 1908; *Leader*, 1 August 1908.
[26] *FP*, 7 August 1908; SDA Report, 1908, 93-3; Derek A. White, *Business Cycles in Canada* (Ottawa 1970), 43; *Star*, 14 August 1908.
[27] *Gleaner*, 11 August 1908.
[28] *Ibid.*, 12 August 1908.

Junction, 3500 of the 5200 Maritimers were on board, surpassing all previous records. The CPR had only planned on a total of 4500 with the result that the surplus had to wait for extra cars to be marshalled.[29]

From the beginning the 1908 harvest excursion was marked by misfortune. The first victim was Fred Leman, a young farmer from Hunter River, P.E.I. who was killed when he jumped from the train when it failed to stop at the station at Kensington.[30] For Islanders on the train the tragedy created some excitement, but for the rest the mind-numbing realities of low-cost transcontinental travel became immediately apparent. The common denominator for all excursionists was another CPR exclusive, the colonist car built to transport large numbers of immigrants to the west which was sparse and functional but offered little by way of comfort. A Toronto *Star* reporter described one of them thus:

> The majority have slat seats, the kind that leave marks. A few have thin cushions. At night the slat seats are pulled out and beds formed in the same way as the ordinary Pullman. But they are not Pullman beds. The passengers carry their own bed linen in the form of quilts and blankets, and there is no porter to tuck them under their chins at night.

In addition each car had a stove for cooking and a supply of water for drinking and washing.[31]

A routine was quickly established by the men despite the few comforts offered and it was broken only by periodic stops to purchase food and other necessities. Almost automatically those with liquor sought and settled in with others similarly fortified and the resulting boisterous behaviour continued unabated. Veterans reunited to reminisce about earlier efforts to tame the west while those venturing forth for the first time listened in awe to their tales.

The trip from Fredericton Junction through Maine and the Eastern Townships provided little diversion from the increasingly painful monotony. At Montreal the trains with a complete complement of coaches continued on the main line to Ottawa while the rest went to Toronto to pick up additional colonist cars. These would rejoin the main line later near Sudbury. Meanwhile additional trains were being marshalled at Toronto to accommodate the 7000 to 8000 expected from Ontario in the first contingent, and there, as in the eastern provinces, the response was greater than anticipated. Twenty-five hundred tickets were sold in Toronto alone on 14 August, and an equal number was expected the next day. Meanwhile, many more were reported to be gathering at points outside the city.[32]

Significantly, of the excursionists leaving Ontario centres, it was estimated

[29] *Star*, 12 August 1908.
[30] *Gleaner*, 12 August 1908.
[31] *Star*, 14 August 1908. See PAC, Shaughnessy Papers, Letterbook 80, Shaughnessy to J. Osborne, 7 April 1903, and Letterbook 81, Shaughnessy to William Mulock, 9 April 1903, concerning the rationale for colonist cars and complaints of bad conditions associated with them.
[32] *Star*, 14 August 1908.

that only one-third were farmers. The rest were craftsmen, labourers, and clerks from small towns who saw an opportunity for work or for an inexpensive holiday, or unemployed Toronto labourers who had been "sleeping in lodging houses and living on one meal a day all summer." Also among them were 100 women, some of whom hoped to get work as kitchen assistants on "big Western farms," and some Italian and central European immigrants who wanted to use the excursion as a stepping stone to a homestead.[33] For railway officials the immediate problem was providing space for the numerous people who descended on Union Station and who had to wait, in some cases up to nine hours, to board a train. For the first-time travellers, meanwhile, it meant confusion caused by doubt and apprehension. The result was numerous false alarms as each train that arrived, no matter what its destination, was besieged by "a crowd of bundle-laden excursionists who struggle[d] on, hanging by every available grip" until told of their error whereby "they tumble[d] down dejectedly, and settled down to gather energy to attack the next arrival."[34] To pass the time, most ultimately dipped into their three-day food supply while others preferred the bottle, but an observer noted that the majority were more concerned with protecting their possessions so they remained quiet until they boarded the correct train.[35]

While the southern Ontario excursionists awaited departure, the lead group in the Maritime contingent had already crossed the Ottawa River and was well into the province. By this time the men had become restless, particularly the tipplers whose limited supply of spirits had disappeared. A nasty incident triggered by a minor train wreck at Chalk River on 13 August, however, brought sudden unexpected relief for both the bored and the thirsty.

The Chalk River affair became one of the highlights of the 1908 excursion because of later repercussions. During the hour's delay the men left the train and descended on the local hotel where they threw out the owner when he resisted them and carried off over $1000 worth of liquor and cigars, the cash register containing $300, and a large quantity of beer which replaced the water in the tanks on each car. From this point on any attempt to maintain law and order became futile and the single CPR constable was ignored as the men ranged widely throughout the trains in search of excitement. For those not involved, the next leg of the trip became a terrifying nightmare. Within a short period fighting was reported as general, with cuts and bruises widespread. Some of the revellers even tried to lynch one excursionist but he was rescued by his friends. Meanwhile, two others were chased off one of the trains when it slowed down.[36]

Each stop brought incidents of looting of a degree "that would bring discredit to a colonial regiment," forcing merchants in each town to lock their

[33] *Ibid.*, 15 August 1908.
[34] *Ibid.*, 14 August 1908.
[35] *Ibid.*, 17 August 1908.
[36] *FP*, 15 August 1908.

premises. The excursionists on the next train simply forced the doors and openly walked away with what they wanted. At Mackey's Station they even raided the home of the station agent and demolished the furniture, while in another community they reportedly drank three taverns dry during a few minutes' stopover. Further on the men "swarmed out" and raided the garden tended by two sisters, and when the women protested the hungry raiders pelted them with onions.[37] At one station, however, a woman answered insults directed at her by shooting at the train and a man from Merogonish, Nova Scotia received a crease in the head as a memento. Forewarned by telegram, a specially reinforced North Bay police contingent met the first train and promptly arrested seven men for "attempted hooliganism," but they were released and allowed to return to the train as soon as it was ready to depart.[38]

Back on the train the "drink-crazed brutes" continued their rampage. Some even brought out the firearms they were carrying and as one of the trains passed through a deep cut they shot at an Indian sitting on an embankment. She escaped, but a horse at another place was not as lucky. Others threw bottles at the section men working on the line, causing several to be hospitalized for cuts and gashes. When there was nothing of interest outside the train, they turned their attention to the interior where they broke windows, smashed chandeliers, splintered shutters and left the coaches in a "disgracefully dirty" condition.[39]

With the rowdies in control of the train those who simply wanted to be left alone were "... forced to seek refuge in certain cars from which the others were excluded." Some tried to intervene when things got out of hand, but this only led to "worse trouble" and they were forced to retreat. The few women on one of the trains were herded into a single car, but this ploy offered little protection as several rapes were reported by observers, and one Maritime school teacher allegedly was stripped and assaulted repeatedly.[40] One woman, travelling from Halifax to meet her husband in Edmonton, was so distressed that she collapsed.[41]

Momentary order was restored when the trains reached Fort William on 14 August. There Lewis Cuttle, a one-armed, 50 year old harvester from Truro was arrested for having Chalk River Hotel liquor in his possession and another man was led away for breaking a glass door on the train. Once under way again, however, the shouting and singing continued as did the intimidation of the other passengers.

West of the lakehead the Maritimers discovered another source of entertainment. The CPR was constructing another track parallel to the main line from Fort William to Winnipeg that summer using Italian and Doukhobor labourers and the harvesters on the first train directed "an indiscriminate fusillade of

[37] *Ibid.*, 14, 18 and 21 August 1908; *Leader*, 18 August 1908; *Star*, 20 August 1908.
[38] *FP* and *Gleaner*, 15 August 1908.
[39] *FP*, 15 and 21 August 1908.
[40] *Ibid.*, 20 and 21 August 1908; *Leader*, 18 August 1908.
[41] *FP*, 19 and 20 August 1908; *Times*, 21 August 1908.

empty cans, bottles and other unnecessary articles" toward these foreigners. The later trains, and particularly the last one in the first contingent with several Ontario coaches attached to it, felt the full impact of this act. Under cover of darkness the construction labourers retaliated with rocks hurled at the windows of the train. One man was struck in the face and knocked out, while another received a scalp wound from what was reported to be a Winchester bullet. Soon every window was smashed forcing the faint of heart to seek refuge in the upper berths, while the rest replied in kind with every possible missile they could muster. Revolvers that had been kept for future contingencies were brought out to defend the train. On meeting a group of Italians east of Kenora, a harvester threw a heavy bottle into the crowd killing one man, while one was shot in the shoulder and another in the hand. While this incident ended the serious injuries, the train still was forced "to run a continuous gauntlet over the entire division" until it reached Winnipeg in the early hours of 15 August.[42] For the meek a four and half day ordeal was over.

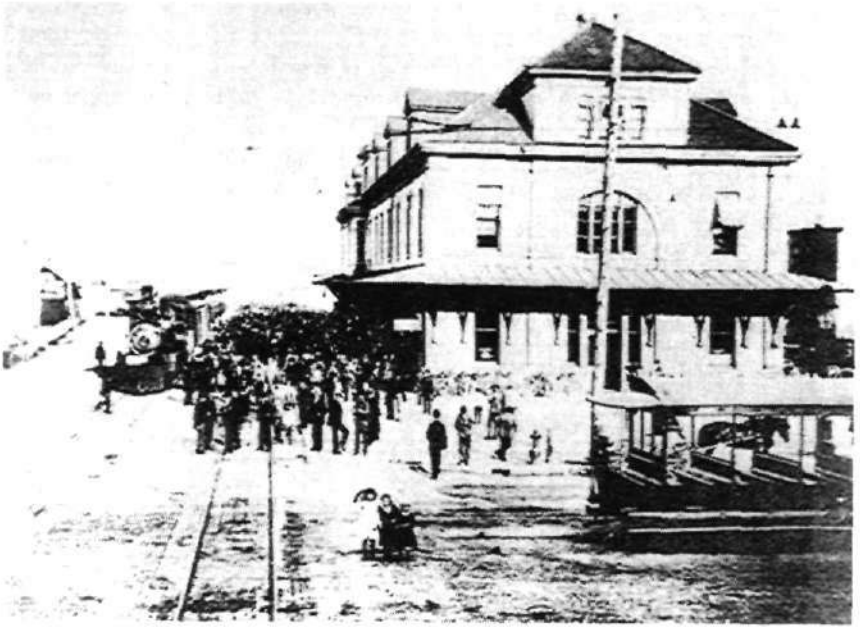
A new reporter on hand to see the arrival of the first train commented that "a more disreputable looking aggregation [had] never pulled into the C.P.R. depot." Using a comparison popular at the time he claimed that:

> No party of Galician immigrants ever had such disreputable appearances as these tenderfeet, who started out West with the idea that they were going to be bad men, and arrived here, some without hats, or coats, others with blood-besprinked shirts, and clothes, and many of them with black eyes and bruised faces, which had not been washed since they left the East.[43]

Accompanying him to greet the "embryo desperadoes" was a squad of police armed with descriptions of the alleged law breakers. Of these, two men, both Nova Scotians, were arrested for willfully damaging railway property and promptly sent to join the two captured in Fort William to face trial. The remainder evaded arrest.[44] Police also cordoned off the last train when it arrived later in an effort to find the killer of the Italian labourer, but he too escaped custody.[45] As a precaution railway officials locked the waiting room in the depot and prepared the basement for the men when they detrained. At that moment making trouble was the farthest thing from anyone's mind, however, and once released they cheered at the termination of a long and arduous journey.

Long before the first contingent of the 1908 harvest excursion arrived in Winnipeg detailed accounts of the escapades of its members were telegraphed

[42] *Leader* and *FP*, 18 August 1908; *Star*, 17 August 1908.
[43] *Star*, 17 August 1908.
[44] *Ibid.* All four were tried on 18 August. Cuttle was released because the liquor theft at Chalk River had occurred off CPR property. Another claimed that he had damaged railway property while very drunk so he was assessed a $20 fine plus damages. The others pleaded not guilty to breaking telegraph pole insulators but a railway constable identified them as sober at the time so they received nine-month terms in Central Prison in Toronto. *FP*, 19 August 1908.
[45] *FP*, 18 August 1908.



Arrival of Harvest Excursionists at CPR Station, Winnipeg, 1897. Courtesy: Public Archives of Manitoba.

from coast to coast and appeared in all the major papers. Journalistic comment was quick and scathing, most of it levelled at the Maritimers. The *Free Press* conceded that every year excursionists "cast off the restraints and decencies of civilization as they find themselves headed for the West" and stimulated by drink their behaviour deteriorated into "brutal hooliganism," but 1908's bunch was simply "drunken savagery running amuck." It recommended that all the law-breakers be jailed. Both the railway and the Ontario government were blamed for not taking adequate preventative measures and for not arresting the guilty earlier. In the editor's opinion, the only reason the "riotousness" was not carried into Manitoba was because the participants were too worn out and battered.[46] The *Toronto Daily Star* pointed the finger at the same people, although it did concede that the Maritimers were decent citizens in their own communities who had been affected by "distance from home, the excitement of unusual travel, and the leadership of a few naturally inclined to rowdyism."[47]

The discussion was not confined entirely to the editorial pages. James Hartery, the Manitoba agent responsible for the excursionists, confirmed that the rowdies were "almost entirely" Maritimers who from "the first time they went to the west . . . raised a commotion and their successors each year consid-

[46] *Ibid.*, 24 August 1908.
[47] *Star*, 15 August 1908.

ered it their duty to live up to the tradition."[48] The Fredericton *Daily Gleaner*, by proudly announcing that "Our Harvesters Raise Big Riot" in its headline on the Chalk River raid story, agreed that their behaviour was not completely unexpected.[49] A former Maritime excursionist residing in Winnipeg gave one clue as to the reason, when he pointed out that despite their respectable backgrounds "upon their return they are afflicted with a desire to spin horrible tales of the wildness and wooliness of the west and their exploits." These yarns, while largely imaginary, "fire the blood of the younger boys and when they come west in a few years they set out to eclipse all previous records," led by "some reckless dare devils who do anything in the way of rowdyism." Consequently they became a disgrace to their families and their region.[50]

The only unqualified defender of the excursionists was "Islander" writing to the *Free Press*. He claimed that the reports were deliberately exaggerated to discredit the Maritimes and "to give an entirely wrong impression of the best settlers Western Canada is getting." In his opinion the theft of beer from the Chalk River Hotel was justified since the CPR had failed to provide an adequate supply of water to the cars.[51] But whether the behaviour of the harvesters was warranted or not, the 1908 excursion was generally judged by commentators as the worst ever.

The reports of lawlessness on the trains had almost immediate consequences. The first to feel the pinch was the CPR as land-seekers from Ontario who planned to travel west with their wives began to have second thoughts. Pressure from ticket agents forced the railway to hire 20 special constables within days, arm them with batons and revolvers and instruct them in crowd control. Consequently no further trouble was experienced on subsequent trains and the 2500 harvesters that arrived on 22 August were described as "respectable and quiet" and " . . . of the kind that is required to do the work in this part of the country."[52] Meanwhile, attempts by the railway company to track down the perpetrators of the "disgraceful outrage" against the women on the first train produced no results, largely because, as the company weakly explained, it took place east of Fort William and therefore out of the jurisdiction of Winnipeg authorities.[53]

While CPR officials were trying desperately to deflect criticism over the behaviour of the Maritime excursionists, they faced the more pressing problem of getting these men distributed to places where they were needed. For some of the experienced harvesters it was a simple matter owing to commitments based on contacts made in previous years. A few others were hired by farmers or their agents standing on the station platform in Winnipeg. Some harvesters had

[48] *Globe*, 19 August 1908.
[49] *Gleaner*, 14 August 1908.
[50] *FP*, 15 August 1908.
[51] *Ibid.*, 22 August 1908.
[52] *Times*, 21 August 1908; *Star*, 22 August 1908.
[53] *Times*, 1 September 1908; *FP*, 26 August 1908.

engagements further west on the main line and for them it was simply a matter of waiting for the right train. They were the exception, however. Most did not know where to go and simply wanted to try their luck elsewhere; for the company this meant trying to accommodate them without interfering with regular train service. A special building was set aside and extra ticket agents and baggage handlers provided to avoid congestion in the main waiting room. In addition the building was fenced in to control the crowds and trains were rescheduled to minimize difficulties.[54]

Despite the precautions the CPR distribution system at Winnipeg broke down almost immediately. Some of the Maritimers did go west in coaches attached to regular trains, but most were forced to wait more than a day while their eight cars of baggage were stored in a private warehouse. While they remained in Winnipeg the depot processed a record 20,000 passengers on the evening of 16 August, half of whom were other excursionists. Meanwhile, 11 more harvester trains from Ontario with 120 coaches were approaching to Winnipeg, and 4 more trains had not yet departed.[55]

It was only after the congestion created on 16 August had been cleared up that a special train of 20 coaches was made up to leave for the west at midnight. The interminable hours of waiting resulted in pandemonium when the boarding announcement was made and the gates were opened. The *Free Press* reported that:

> . . . spectators were given a sample of the mob spirit which has rendered some of the excursion trains beyond control. The men fought and crowded and pushed with all their might to force their way by main strength through the narrow opening, and when this was accomplished amid much swearing and wrecking of baggage and clothing, they ran toward the cars like a lot of insane men, shouting at the top of their voices. Women who were endeavouring to board the cars were forced back by the stampede, and the men climbed aboard through the doorways and windows as though they were being pursued.[56]

A number of harvesters did not catch the west-bound special and had to settle back, along with those who arrived after them, to await another train. This alternative was not only wearisome but expensive as their limited subsistence funds rapidly dwindled. As some began to wander around the city, several burglaries took place which the press promptly "attributed to undesirable visitors from the east." In one instance a man walked into a store on Portage Avenue and held up a cashier with a revolver and escaped, while around the same time a number of residences were entered and money and property stolen.[57]

Most of the harvesters eventually returned to the stockade to sleep and wait

[54] *FP*, 15 August 1908.
[55] *Ibid.*, 15, 17, 18 August 1908.
[56] *Ibid.*, 18 August 1908.
[57] *Globe*, 24 August 1908.

and by the morning of 18 August the atmosphere was tense, the mood ugly, and officials apprehensive. At 10:30 the first disturbance took place, allegedly started by one George Ryall. The depot master tried to subdue him but he resisted and the CPR police removed him from the building only to be met by over 1000 men who converged to prevent his arrest. He was pulled off a police wagon but the driver retrieved his prisoner by whipping the crowd "with the greatest vigor and enthusiasm" and delivered him to the police station.[58]

Another incident two days later involved almost identical circumstances. This time James Forrester of Truro was "spoken to" for "acting in an indecent manner" in the depot. When he persisted he was thrown out by railway police and arrested by a city constable. His friends, seeing his plight, rushed the policeman shouting "rescue, rescue." Four extra officers arrived and after a lengthy tussle with some of the mob, estimated at 1500, Forrester was subdued with a truncheon and thrown into the police rig. His would-be rescuers gathered around the police station for awhile but finally dispersed. In the meantime the CPR locked the depot and assigned special constables to prevent a recurrence of trouble.[59] The long hours of waiting had had their effect on all concerned.

With so much bored and bitter humanity plaguing Winnipeg, the primary concern of the CPR and municipal officials was to dispose of them somewhere before the tense situation escalated into something even more serious. The railway assured the men that they were badly needed on branch lines in Manitoba and eastern Saskatchewan. Most excursionists were reluctant to venture off the main line, however, and to some extent their hesitation was justified. Many had been told that they would receive at least $45 per month but this rate was not being offered in Manitoba. Naturally, they assumed that it applied further west.[60] Moreover, since most were unfamiliar with the country, they were loath to detrain only to find themselves stranded if they were not hired immediately at satisfactory wages, a sentiment shared by those who feared being separated from their luggage stored in the baggage car. In addition, some harvesters heard that a special had been dispatched which missed all the connections with the branch lines and this must have convinced them to go as far as their tickets would take them.[61]

Some excursionists, of course, took the railway's advice and tried their luck in small communities, but their initial experiences proved disappointing. For those stuck in Manitoba points the problem was that that both the railway company and the Manitoba provincial immigration officers, unbeknownst to each other, had sent batches of men to the same places. Consequently, at Deloraine, in the southwest corner of the province 100 harvesters were reported to be dependent on the resources of the town, a situation similar to the one

[58] *FP*, 19 August 1908.
[59] *Gleaner*, 21 August 1908.
[60] *FP*, 17, 22, 26 August 1908.
[61] *Leader*, 24 August 1908.

being experienced by Virden on the main line.[62] Meanwhile, at Indian Head, 300 miles west of Winnipeg, 24 harvesters were hanging around on 22 August waiting for cutting to begin. There they made the town "a busy and interesting place" by holding nightly concerts in the hall which served as their home. Within a week the number had swollen to 100, and then to over 200 by which time all semblance of fun had disappeared for the men and the community. Bitter complaints were directed at the CPR and residents feared trouble if the situation did not improve quickly. The following letter, one of many received by the *Globe* from stranded farm labourers appealing to others to stay home, sums up their collective frustration:

> In every town and village in the country dozens of men are walking around without a cent to their names, and practically starving. They are all willing to work, but there is no work to do. These same railways that enticed them to come out here by their false representations now refuse to carry them back to the East at the reduced rate, taking refuge behind and basing their argument upon the fact that the men must first put in a month on the farm, a condition that the railway companies knew when they were flooding the country with these men would not, and could not be fulfilled.[63]

While the plight of farm workers stranded in small villages and towns gave cause for concern, they at least were relatively comfortable compared to those who rode the trains all the way to Moose Jaw where the next major episode in the tragicomedy of the 1908 harvest excursion unfolded. One hundred and fifty men, "some . . . evidently . . . from the happy bunch which made such a triumphant journey through New Ontario," arrived there on 16 August, many still bearing "the signs of battle." There was some initial reluctance to hire them because of the news reports of their rowdy reputations, but the local Board of Trade took the responsibility for distributing them and they were dispersed quickly to local farmers or down the Soo Line to the southeast of the city.[64]

The real flood began on 17 August. One hundred harvesters arrived that day and two more large groups were expected on the next. Even at this early date local officials agreed that no more men were needed for at least a week and a half until the threshing started. Moreover, it was expected that the farmers would do more than the usual amount of work themselves, because the season was early and the crop had only short and medium straw which required less effort.[65] Nevertheless the CPR kept bringing harvesters into the city. By 20 August the surplus had turned into a glut and the municipal government found itself feeding 200 individuals who had no visible means of support. The Board of Trade dispatched some of them down the Soo Line that evening and the CPR offered others jobs laying track south of the city. Local farmers hired a few more while those who acquired some money bought tickets to Alberta, but

[62] *Globe*, 1 September 1908; IB, Vol. 38, File 839, part 2, Walker to Scott, 8 September 1908.
[63] *Leader*, 24, 27, 28 August 1908; *Globe*, 1 September 1908.
[64] *Times*, 18 August 1908; *Globe*, 26 August 1908.
[65] *Leader*, 19 August 1908.

altogether they made little impression on the total and by 24 August hundreds of men were still walking the streets and sleeping in the trains or on the floor of the YMCA."[66]

The situation in Moose Jaw became even more critical later in the month when numerous men arrived intent on getting one of the homesteads that were to be distributed from the local Land Office. As a consequence, the land rush and the excursions together placed a tremendous strain on the resources of the small community of about 9000 people and accommodation of any kind was impossible to find.

Another problem which the city faced was a marked increase of petty crime and disorderly conduct. As the Moose Jaw *Times* observed, there seemed "to be a rather tough lot of men about town with nothing to do except get drunk." Since the land seekers were an "orderly lot" the paper concluded that the "toughs" were the "off-scourings of eastern cities who came out with the harvesters." In one instance four men were discovered in a car in the stockyards consuming a case of liquor stolen from a local warehouse. One of them was reportedly so drunk that he was oblivious of a broken leg. In response the local judge cracked down on the "crime wave" by meting out justice swiftly in all cases and the city's cells were filled to overflowing most of the time.[67]

The growing sense of apprehension felt by the community was exacerbated by increased hostility expressed by the harvesters themselves for the helplessness of their position. Without money or even a place to sleep most of them directed criticism at the CPR. Publicly the railway replied that the reports of stranded harvesters were exaggerated and they " . . . referred to men who did not particularly want work, or who were dissatisfied with the conditions offered them." The *Free Press'* crop expert, P.M. Robinson, shared this view. While on tour of the prairies he found that the unemployed hanging around Moose Jaw were " . . . young fellows, who came from the city of Toronto, look unfit for harvest work, and being homesick, are looking for a cheap trip back."[68] Yet the CPR considered them fit for railway construction labour and almost immediately offered either track work at $1.75 per day or a free trip down the Soo Line. Sixty took the first option and over a hundred the second, giving Moose Jaw a brief breathing spell.

Despite the railway company's efforts the harvesters considered the job offer a betrayal of the original deal. On 24 August, for example, one individual, possibly an I.W.W. spokesman, set up a box at a major intersection and harangued the 100 or so men gathered around him. Shouting that they "had been wronged and misled" by the CPR's advertising extolling the bounties of the west, he urged them to do something. A YMCA secretary defused the situation before it got out of hand by admitting that conditions were bad. He

[66] *FP*, 22, 25 August 1908; *Globe*, 24 August 1908; *Times*, 21 August 1908.
[67] *Times*, 4, 8 September 1908.
[68] *Ibid.*, 28 August 1908; *Globe*, 31 August 1908.

assured the men that even though the city was not responsible for the sad state of affairs and had warned the harvesters to stay away, it would do all it could for them. He personally offered the YMCA as a place to sleep but only to those who arrived that day and not to those who refused the railway's offer. By nightfall nearly 200 more had departed Moose Jaw. It made no difference, however, for 3 more trains had arrived and disgorged another 500 men. While they were, according to the *Times*, of a "better class" than the Maritimers and had some money, they still had no place to stay and were forced to seek shelter where they could.[69]

With the continuing influx of farm workers the situation became so serious that the Saskatchewan government intervened to protect the province's reputation and thereby its future supply of harvesters. Its Department of Agriculture requested the railway to inform those still on trains east of Winnipeg where help was required. When still more men arrived in Moose Jaw, direct consultation took place with Winnipeg officials who gave assurance that no more would be sent on to Moose Jaw. Yet, incredibly, another three trains pulled into the community soon after "for some reason or other, perhaps because it was not known where to send the men."[70] Since the city could not afford to feed so many, agriculture officials again approached the railway company for other solutions and won the assurance that the harvesters could return east for $18 without putting in the requisite 30 days work. However, they soon discovered that this was no solution because few had the money and those who did wanted to stay until threshing began when they knew they could get work for at least six to eight weeks.[71]

In total, Moose Jaw had to cope with 5500 harvesters during fall 1908. The problem of unemployed farm workers was by no means confined to that city, however. Saskatoon, for example, reluctantly received 1260 men via the CPR branch line and the CNR main line which connected it to Winnipeg. There the Board of Trade also took it upon itself to distribute them, but in a ten day period filled only a dozen requests from local farmers; the rest were placed digging city sewers or helping on railway construction in the area, rather demeaning options for men who had come west to make "big money" harvesting.[72]

Meanwhile Regina, as the capital and the province's largest city, faced special problems because it became the final refuge for the many harvesters who met failure elsewhere. A particularly pathetic story involved 12 men from the first contingent who had bought tickets down the Soo Line from Moose Jaw only to find no work. They trudged back to Moose Jaw, where they too fell on the mercy of the Board of Trade. They remained two days and then set out to find government work in Regina. The two meals they received before leaving

[69] *Times*, 25, 28 August 1908.
[70] *Ibid.*, 28 August 1908.
[71] *Ibid.*, 1 September 1908; *Leader*, 27 August 1908.
[72] *Leader*, 27 August 1908.

turned out to be their last for three days; what they obtained in addition they did by their collective wits, and in some instances they were not very successful. At Belle Plain, half-way to their destination, for example, they begged for food from a man who said he was a parson and offered to help them, but after a two-hour wait they approached the house only to find him beating his wife in a drunken rage. As a result the men bartered extra pairs of pants for food.

These "sturdy sons of the soil who never before had known what it was to be without food"[73] were somewhat the worse for wear when they joined close to 200 others in like circumstances at the CPR depot in the capital. Without 50 cents among them and with no immediate prospects for improvement the larger group had earlier held an "indignation meeting" on 23 August where they condemned the railway for not sending them back home and accused the company of misrepresentation, and as one observer noted " . . . it would have required but little to have incited them to open revolt."[74] Fearing serious trouble the Salvation Army stepped in immediately and gave them temporary bed and board and no doubt spiritual solace. The Regina City Council took longer to act but after 24 August it fed the men two meals a day at City Hall. In the meantime the mayor and one councillor demanded that the CPR and the government find work for the men or ship them back. The Agriculture Department appealed in turn to all the railway companies to drop the 30 day work rule and to provide work for the men.[75]

With pressure building from all directions the CPR offered work for 200 at $1.75 per day and agreed to transport them to the job site east of Winnipeg. After 60 days work they could return home for the $18 excursionists' fare. The Canadian Northern, which needed 100 men to ballast the Regina to Brandon line offered the same terms. In addition all carriers cancelled later excursion trains thus forestalling further complications.[76]

In spite of the grudging attempts by the railway companies to make amends, the stranded harvesters were far from ecstatic. Many had left what they claimed were good jobs in the east — paying $2 per day in some cases — to earn more money. Understandably, the railway offer was a blow since out of wages they had to pay $4.50 per week board, $1.25 per month medical fees, and another $2.50 per month for blanket rental. With no bargaining power whatsoever they were forced to "acquiesce to this proposal." Yet when they presented themselves at the depot at the appointed time they found no one there from either company to take them to the job site. The situation was cleared up eventually but not to anyone's satisfaction.[77]

The harvesters who were able to wait for the start of threshing fared sub-

[73] *Ibid.*, 25 August 1908.
[74] *Ibid.*; *Globe*, 26 August 1908; *Herald*, 26 August 1908.
[75] *Leader*, 26 August 1908.
[76] *Ibid.*, 1 September 1908; *Times*, 1 September 1908; *Gleaner*, 28 August 1908; *Globe*, 1, 4 September 1908.
[77] *Leader*, 25, 31 August 1908.

stantially better than those forced into railway work. Before long all the surplus labour was absorbed and the prairies experienced another shortage of men. Once employed all the men disappeared from public record and most of their follow-up experiences have been lost. Some obviously fulfilled their desires and returned home happy. Others must have stayed because circumstances left them with insufficient funds to get home. They drifted to the cities in search of work and there became a burden on municipal ratepayers causing civic officials to voice repeated opposition to harvest excursions in later years. Yet others who had used the excursions as a means of introduction to the west and its riches returned to the east disillusioned.[78]

The harvest excursion of 1908 had been a disappointment for large numbers of workers. The tales of their hardships discouraged harvesters the following year. Only 18,246 came in 1909 and the prairie provinces had an extremely difficult time procuring men. As the Saskatchewan Department of Agriculture noted in its report for that year, " . . . short of using compulsion, nothing . . . could be done to induce men to answer the call of the western harvest fields."[79] But memories were short and in later years new records were set as the expanding wheat economy absorbed more and more men with a pre-war high of 57,000 journeying west in 1912.[80] Like their predecessors, they flocked to the large centres almost by instinct creating the same problems as before.

While the human factor still caused chaos especially when supply and demand markedly diverged, there is no doubt that the agencies involved in recruiting and distributing harvest labour learned more from the 1908 experiences than the men. Harvest help was treated somewhat less as a commodity and more as a component necessary to the continued prosperity of the prairie economy with the result that greater care was taken to properly direct the men wherever they gathered.[81] Also, the CPR imposed a half-cent per mile charge beyond Winnipeg to discourage the invasion of Moose Jaw. Provincial governments took measures to decrease their dependence on eastern harvesters by recruiting farm help from prairie cities and even by using public servants when the situation was particularly bad.[82] Yet the circumstances surrounding the 1908 harvest excursion revealed flaws in the system of recruitment and distribution of temporary farm help so serious that minor modifications and adjustments could not possibly have solved them.

The major problem in 1908 was that the provincial governments and the railways had planned badly. The former, afraid of not getting enough harves-

[78] IB, Vol. 38, File 839, part 2, Walker to Scott, 8 September 1908; SDA Report, 1908, 92-3. See also this report for the detailed distribution of the 14,034 harvesters who found work in the province.

[79] SDA Report, 1909, 82.

[80] *Ibid.*, 1912, 20-21. This figure differs markedly from Thompson's total of 26,500 but there appears to be no reason to doubt the SDA tally.

[81] IB, Vol. 38, File 839, part 2, Walker to Scott, 8 September 1908.

[82] SDA Report, 1915, 20-21; SAB, Motherwell Papers, Motherwell to P.J. Phin, 18 July 1913, 5980-3.

ters in time, overestimated requirements. The latter made little effort to spread out the trains more effectively with weekly quotas to avoid congestion at Winnipeg and Moose Jaw. Also basic to the problem of planning was the system of crop forecasting by which manpower requirements were determined. Saskatchewan's Deputy Commissioner of Agriculture predicted difficulties as early as 1905 when he complained of

> the absurd estimates or rather guesses, made by irresponsible and ill-informed people and given undue publicity through the press. . . . It need scarcely be pointed out that the immense agricultural development of the province, which is now taking place demands a correlative expansion on the part of the crop reporting and statistical service.[83]

Still another component in predicting harvest needs was the amount of land being homesteaded. The estimators neglected to consider the "phenomenal" number of homesteaders who had arrived over the previous year, especially in the area west of Saskatoon, and whose land had no crop and who were themselves " . . . only too glad to get a little work to help them over the winter."[84] They also ignored the recent arrival of numerous settlers from central Europe who pursued subsistence agriculture using large families to meet labour requirements thereby indirectly contributing to the surplus.

The 1908 situation also involved circumstances which were beyond the capacity of even the most perceptive planner. For example, there is no doubt that the economic picture in the summer of that year, and the CPR strike contributed to the unusual demand for excursion tickets. In addition, these circumstances spawned a new kind of excursionist who was more likely to be an unemployed city worker who in desperation boarded the first advertised trains to come along, whether at Fredericton Junction or Toronto, rather than an Ontario or Maritime farmer who waited until the local harvest was over before catching one of the excursions scheduled in early September to coincide with western threshing. Moreover, this early rush of first-timers contributed not only to the glut at Winnipeg but also to the large number who insisted on ignoring advice by continuing on as far as their tickets would take them. Once in the west they had to compete with an unexpected influx of local urban labour and harvesters from the western United States.[85]

The prairie climate was another unpredictable quantity which cannot be overlooked in connection with the 1908 fiasco. Manpower estimates had been based on an early and heavy crop, but a dry spell and an early frost cut the yield to almost half. Not only did this make farmers more cost-conscious in the binding and stooking stage but it also meant a shorter threshing season. Both factors thus contributed to the harvesters' difficulties.[86]

[83] SDA Report, 1905, 7.
[84] *Leader*, 27 August 1908.
[85] *Times*, 28 August 1908; *Globe*, 31 August 1908; *Leader*, 26 August 1909. A thousand men unexpectedly joined the 1908 harvest from Winnipeg alone. IB, Vol. 38, File 839, part 2, Walker to Scott, 8 September 1908.
[86] *Leader*, 26 August 1909; *Times*, 28 August 1909.

The failure to recognize the prairie climate's destructive potential, the inflated crop forecasts, the manpower requirements based on these predictions, and the kind of harvester who was attracted to the west that year share a common element which helps to explain the problems experienced by all those concerned with the 1908 excursion. This was the myth that Canada's garden was the key to the nation's growth, continued prosperity, and in times of stress its salvation. Canadians believed the myth which had been propagated with so much effort. In times of prosperity the surplus labour requirements were left to the immigrants to fill, but with the slump in the economy in mid-summer a substantially larger number decided to exercise the option to which they felt entitled as Canadians, and they "... instinctively look[ed] westward in hope of better things."[87] The immigrants laying track east of Winnipeg were not Canadian and the harvesters did not consider them eligible to partake of the fruits of the garden at such times of difficulty and they were treated accordingly. Some of the harvesters also showed by their behaviour that they believed the west to be untamed wilderness where they could shed the restraints of civilized society. This part of the myth was exploded by railway police and municipal constables intent on maintaining law and order. More important, the fruits of the west were found to consist of interminable waits in crowded railway stations, soup lines, uncomfortable benches and YMCA floors, and sometimes demeaning work at very low wages. For those who did find sufficient work early the reality was not less appealing than the myth; for the unfortunate the mystique of the west was shattered and with it the unfounded belief in the ability of the nation to provide for all in equal measure.

[87] *Leader*, 27 August 1908.