

PRIX MARTIN ELI WEIL PRIZE

A FERTILE WILDERNESS The Canadian Pacific Railway's Ready-made Farms, 1909-1914

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During the last decades of the nineteenth century, the federal government and several railway companies collectively promoted the Canadian Prairie West, encouraging agricultural settlement and development of the vast grasslands that extended across Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Alberta, and the former Northwest Territories. A large portion of one of the most intractable regions—a semi-arid zone known as Palliser's Triangle stretching some three hundred and seventy-five miles from present-day Saskatoon to Calgary—became exclusively owned and marketed by the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR). Their development and promotional efforts centred on creating a massive irrigation project and hundreds of ready-made farms, which together recast the desert wasteland as a fertile wilderness (fig. 1).

Geared to attract novice British settlers, each farm was equipped with farm buildings and pre-seeded land, and was ready for occupation and first harvest. British rural ideals were harnessed throughout the planning, construction, and marketing of the farms. Reinforcing emerging regional and national identities, the CPR depicted the farms as civilized communities in contrast to the supposedly primitive frontier developments associated with the American West. In doing so, they created the image of an ordered agricultural society and contributed to a new vision of a major Canadian landscape.

PRAIRIE SETTLEMENT AND CPR IRRIGATION

As early as the seventeenth century, explorers and traders described the

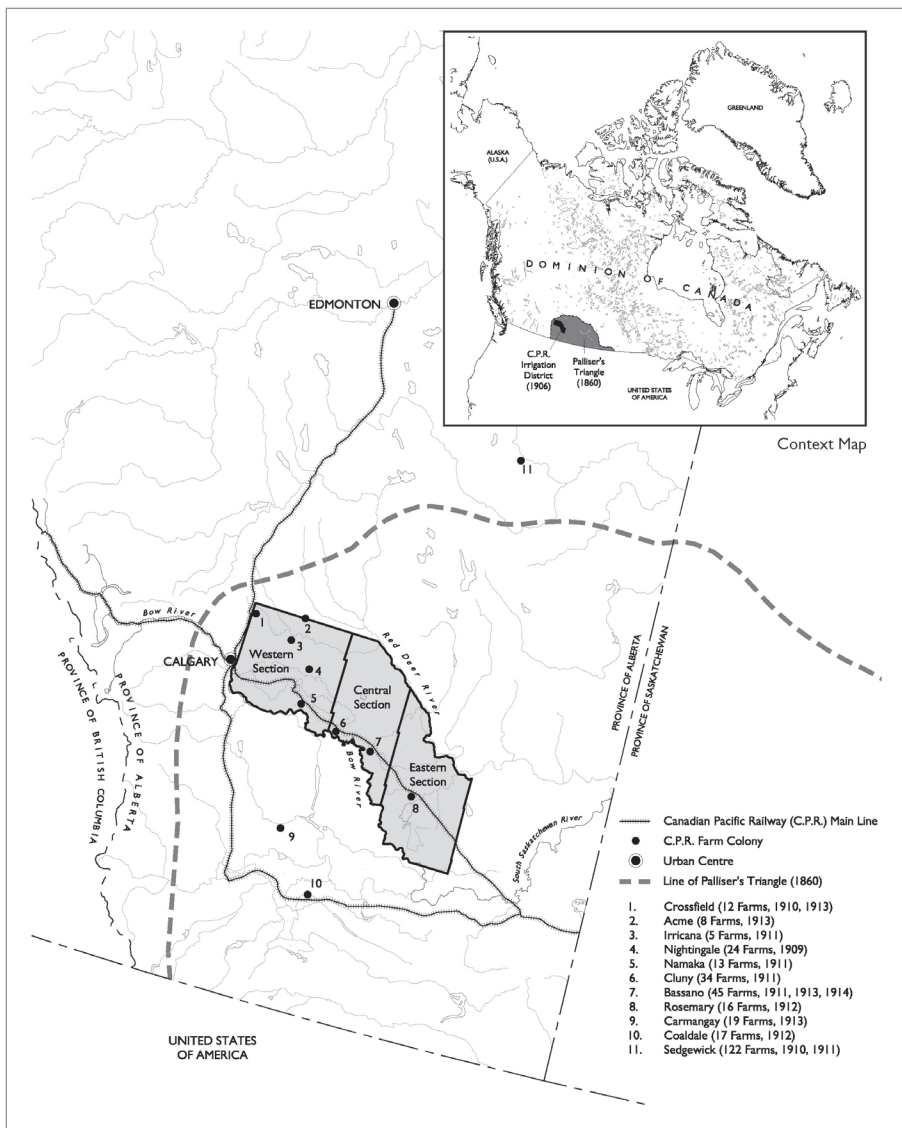


FIG. 1. CPR READY-MADE FARM COLONIES IN ALBERTA AND CPR IRRIGATION DISTRICT, 1914. NOTE THAT FARM COLONIES AT CAIRNHILL (10 FARMS, 1910, 1913) AND GLENROSE (10 FARMS, 1911) ARE NOT SHOWN. | GRAPHIC BY JAMES MALLINSON.

Prairie West as a desert wasteland. The beginnings of a marked perceptual shift in viewing the territory can be traced to the late nineteenth century. Following Confederation in 1867, the new Dominion of Canada began re-evaluating the territories in the Northwest section of the continent, then held by the Hudson's Bay Company. A group of Canadian expansionists led the identification and depiction of the former wasteland as a promised land—an untouched, “fertile wilderness” for both agricultural production and social renewal. Engaging this vision of the area’s potential, they pressured the newly created Canadian government to purchase the Northwest Territories in 1869. Subsequently, the Canadian government, along with western railways and other prairie boosters, developed and propagated the image of a fertile Prairie West to inspire a transformation of the region from a fur-trading hinterland into an agricultural homeland.¹

The settlement of the “Last Best West” was well underway by the turn of the century. However, the region west of modern-day Moose Jaw and extending into Southeastern Alberta, identified in John Palliser’s 1857-1859 surveys as an extension of the American desert to the south, remained virtually unsettled during that period. Initial government surveys had planned to route the transcontinental railway through the future site of Edmonton and across the Yellowhead Pass to the north, avoiding “Palliser’s Triangle” altogether and traversing a fertile parkland belt.

In 1881 the privatized CPR, which had recently taken over responsibility for the railway construction, decided on a flatter and more direct southern route that traversed the semi-arid region. This new route would forestall incursions by American railroads, and significantly reduce



FIG. 2. CPR READY-MADE FARM, 1913. | CANADIAN PACIFIC ARCHIVES, A12028.

construction costs and transcontinental transit times. Nonetheless, the railway’s income depended on land sales and future revenue from agricultural freight transport. The company thus had significant incentive to encourage settlement of the territories along its entire length—including the unpromising Palliser’s Triangle.

In order to prepare the region for agriculture, the CPR acquired a solid block of land and planned a series of irrigation projects.² The venture was massive—one of the world’s largest irrigation undertakings of its time. Its western and eastern sections each comprised over one million acres, and a planned Central District occupied the remainder of the 3.3-million-acre territory. Through a series of dams, reservoirs, and canals, the CPR anticipated irrigating just under half of that area, creating irrigated and mixed irrigated-dry land farms throughout.³ Construction of the western section launched in 1904, and as the infrastructure neared completion in 1909, the CPR began a settlement phase.

“A FERTILE WILDERNESS”

The essential basis for marketing the region was a vision of naturally productive agricultural land. In describing the broader Prairies, expansionist Allan Macdonell boldly asserted that the land’s unexploited fecundity created an imperative for occupation. “No power on earth can close upon the immigrant that fertile wilderness which offers resources to all industry—an oasis and refuge from all want,” he wrote.⁴ In the case of Palliser’s Triangle, the image of a fertile wilderness took on even greater importance. The act of irrigation, the CPR asserted, would activate the latent productivity of the apparent wilderness, resulting in land that demanded agricultural use.

Instead of being a condition to be feared, the wilderness aspect of the Southern Prairies was thus celebrated insofar as it represented unexploited, rich land. Early CPR promotional brochures for the irrigation district, including the aptly if erroneously titled *Facts Concerning the Bow*

River Valley, emphasized the untapped natural wealth of the soil. "It is a fact that the richest lands in America lie in the vicinity of the 100th Meridian, where the rainfall is the lowest," it informed readers. "In humid countries, the soil is continually subjected to leaching by heavy rains [...]. The soil of the Irrigation Block [...] retains all the valuable constituents that nature has stored up during past centuries. It only awaits the plow to yield up its treasures."⁵ The territory was celebrated as fertile land, poised to blossom when irrigated and cultivated.

AGRARIAN IDEALS AND THE READY-MADE FARM CONCEPT

Although constructing irrigation infrastructure comprised the bulk of the CPR's financial investment in the area, the showpiece of its marketing campaign was a series of ready-made farms. The farms were grouped in colonies and each was to be equipped with a house, barn, implement shed, and fencing, as well as fifty acres of ploughed and sowed land (fig. 2). The form of the individual farmsteads, their envisaged grouping in rural communities, and the promotional depiction of the farms and surrounding lands advanced a vision of the region related to British picturesque aesthetics, reflecting the values of its prospective audience and supporting an Anglo-Canadian vision of the West as an imperial domain.

The ready-made farm colonies were intended for a specific type of settler: married, British, with a moderate amount of capital and, preferably, previous agricultural experience. In 1909, the CPR launched the twenty-four farm Nightingale Colony with an upbeat advertising campaign in British newspapers (fig. 3). One early ad proclaimed: "In order to save the settler the inconvenience of having to build his house, fence,

and prepare his land in his first year while he would rather be attending to his crops, the Canadian Pacific Railway has prepared a number of Ready-Made Farms," noting in bold type, "they are reserved for British Settlers."⁶ Such marketing was consonant with an Eastern Canadian vision of the West as an extension of the British Empire and combated a perceived cultural threat posed by an influx of Slavic immigrants into Western Canada at the turn of the century.⁷

The idea of ready-made farm colonies also targeted their intended audience. Raymond Williams has observed that an image of the "country" is periodically advanced as a compensatory cultural ideal against a contrasting idea of the "city," including at the turn of the twentieth century. As Britain became predominantly industrial and urban, domestic agricultural production declined and colonial territories abroad began functioning as the empire's food sources. One of the effects of this developing global landscape, Williams noted, was the mid-nineteenth-century idea that emigration would solve rural displacement and urban overcrowding in England. Characters in popular novels escaped to distant lands such as Canada to realize a countryside ideal that had become ever more elusive in England.⁸

Within England itself, prototypes of small-scale rural existence persisted in the village typology, in which small, independent cottages were arrayed along a main road or around a park-like green. The first planned villages were eighteenth-century settlements at the gates of large British domains, created when older hamlets were removed from within estate boundaries. By the late nineteenth century, the village was considered an appropriate form for emerging charitable institutions such as orphanages, which hoped to achieve moral reform by

EMIGRATION

READY-MADE FARMS
IN WESTERN CANADA

In order to save the settler the inconvenience of having to build his house, fence and prepare his land in his first year while he would rather be attending to his crops, the Canadian Pacific Railway has prepared a number of

Ready-Made Farms

equipped with house, barn, well, and suitable fences, with a proportion of land already broken. These farms are eligible for married couples with farming experience, and are paid for on easy instalments.

They are reserved for British Settlers

For Application Forms and further particulars apply to:
CANADIAN PACIFIC RAILWAY
Land Department,
62-65, CHARING CROSS, LONDON, S.W.,
OR LOCAL AGENTS.

BANK OF MONTREAL.
ESTABLISHED IN 1817.
Capital Paid Up, £2,958,304. Reserve Fund, £2,465,753.
Undivided Profits, £140,046.
President: R. B. ANGUS, Esq.
Head Office and Board of Directors: Montreal. Vice President and General Manager: Sir Edward Clouston, Bart., Montreal.
• 152 Branches and Agencies throughout Canada.

LONDON OFFICES:
47, THREADNEEDLE STREET, E.C.
Committee: Rt. Hon. Lord Strathcona and Mount Royal,
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The Bank undertakes Monetary Business with all parts of Canada, Newfoundland, and the United States, and issues Sterling and Currency Drafts and Cable Transfers.

FIG. 3. ADVERTISEMENT FOR READY-MADE FARMS. | MANCHESTER GUARDIAN, NOVEMBER 30, 1910.

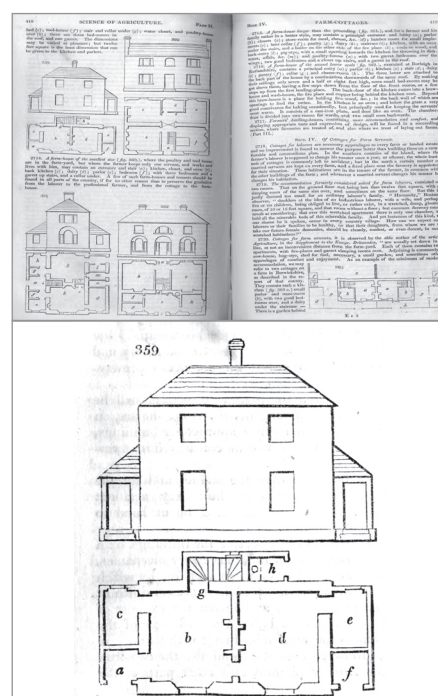


FIG. 4. A COTTAGE OF THE SMALLEST TYPE. | LOUDON, JOHN CLAUDIUS, 1826, *ENCYCLOPEDIA OF AGRICULTURE*, LONDON, P. 418. COURTESY OF AVERY LIBRARY.

offering sanitary environments composed of family-like living units.⁹

In parallel with these social reform movements, British architects and designers became increasingly concerned with rural aesthetics. This interest was linked to the growing popularity of a “picturesque” style of landscaping and building, which valued visual intricacy and stood in opposition to formal, symmetrical designs. Horticulturalist and landscape planner John Claudius Loudon, one of the movement’s key proponents, hoped on the one hand to improve farm workers’ living conditions; on the other, his rural designs tracked a broader change in the status of the country—from a site of labour to a place of potential leisure and escape from the city. “The practice of agriculture, from having been chiefly confined to men of humble station, who pursued it as a matter of business or profit, has of late years been engaged in by men of rank, and other opulent or amateur practitioners, as a matter of taste and recreation,” explained the introduction to an 1844 edition of his *Encyclopædia of Agriculture*. The upper classes’ interest conferred new importance to the aesthetics of farmsteads, which Loudon saw as a direct measure of an area’s success:

How much of the beauty of a country, and of the ideas of the comfort and happiness of its inhabitants, depends on the appearance of its farmhouses and cottages, every traveler is aware; and every agriculturist who has traveled through the British Isles can recognize at once a well cultivated district by the forms of the farm-yards and the position of the farmer’s dwelling-house.

Loudon proposed grand farmhouses and clean-lined labourers’ cottages to replace the “scattered straggling hovels of all sizes and shapes, monstrous barns, and rickety shapeless farm-houses” that would indicate

“a low state of culture, and an ignorant tasteless set of occupiers.”¹⁰ By lending an increased level of aesthetic sophistication to rural landscapes, he proposed that the countryside might become “cultivated” in more than one sense (fig. 4).

Farms grouped in social colonies, at the heart of the CPR ready-made farms, recall Loudon’s designs, striking a balance between his simple farm workers’ dwellings and his more lavish freestanding villas for landowners. In contrast to the makeshift sod huts common as pioneer Prairie dwellings, the farms promised fully-built homes, paired with colour-coordinated barns and outbuildings. This strategy resonates with Loudon’s idea of a coherent farm community aesthetic, signalling a civilized refinement possessed by the inhabitants of this rural environment.

The alignment of the Canadian ready-made farm program with British ideals of neat, village-style developments is especially apparent when contrasted to rural ideals in the United States, which emphasized self-sufficiency. As described by historian Henry Nash Smith, a Jeffersonian ideal of the free yeoman farmer became one of the dominant symbols of nineteenth-century America. Moral value was assigned to agricultural labour, transforming the farmer into a heroic figure and a paragon for the nation. Frederick Jackson Turner famously celebrated this aspect of the agricultural frontier as formative of a common American character: “that dominant individualism [...] that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom [...] these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier,” he noted in his speech at the World’s Columbian Exhibition in 1893.¹¹

In terms of architecture, this attitude of independence was manifested in a genre

of rural self-building manuals particular to the United States. One manual for new agriculturalists, *Todd’s Country Houses, and How to Save Money*, is an early example of the type, with a central chapter dedicated to a first-hand house-building account. Todd’s narration stressed the savings obtained by relying on the farmer’s own labour. Emphasizing physical as well as psychological independence, Todd recommended locating new farmhouses at the centre point of the site, for convenience of access to the fields and to protect the inhabitants from “ill ways, ill markets, and ill neighbors.” If situated on the main highway, Todd warned, “every itinerant interloper that travels the streets, by raising on tip-toe, may peep into the parlor or bed-room windows.”¹²

In comparison, British manuals from the same period presumed that landowners would hire builders. Loudon’s *Encyclopædia of Cottage, Farm, and Villa Architecture* included detailed specifications for the work to be completed by various specialized trades. Decades later, John Scott’s *Farm Buildings: A Practical Treatise* cautioned: “it is not [...] recommended to agriculturists to become their own architects and builders,” and included a complete specification for the work to be completed by outside labour.¹³ Aligning the program with British ideals, CPR president Thomas Shaughnessy contrasted the ready-made homesteads to self-built American farms. “The American, even the wealthy American, will build himself a rough hut and live in it for a season or two while making a start,” he explained, invoking a generalized image of the American frontier. “The Englishman does not like this, yet he wants land.”¹⁴

Within the ready-made-farm concept, the use of a village typology with its implicit community structure was balanced by the promise of individual land ownership. This

mix of ideals was clear in Shaughnessy's reaction to a 1907 version of the British Small Agricultural Holdings Act, which enabled county councils to acquire land subdivided from large estates to rent to men desiring to establish independent small farms. An enthusiastic response testified to the program's appeal: in the final round of distributions, thirty-five thousand applicants vied for leases on one thousand and six hundred plots. Shaughnessy believed that the failed applicants were potential ready-made farmers. "We propose to prepare land for this class of small holder," he announced. "We will build his house, fence his holding, break part of the soil, and sow it, so that he can come down and find all ready for him to settle down."¹⁵ As originally formulated, the concept of pre-built farm colonies thus tapped into the aspirations of a certain class of British farm labourer for land ownership, coupled with the convenience and familiarity of a pre-made farm.

BEGINNINGS OF THE CPR READY-MADE FARM PROGRAM

Prior to the CPR program, several commercial colonization companies attempted to create pre-built tenant farms on the Prairies. In the early 1880s, the Qu'Appelle Valley Farming Company acquired sixty-four thousand acres to establish three hundred farms each with a house, stable, and shed—although in the end they constructed only one model farm and twenty-two cottages. Another effort sponsored by the Anglican Churchbridge Colonization Land Society in 1887 offered prospective British colonists rudimentary two-room wooden houses on forty-acre land tracts. Their nearby Commercial Colony furnished pre-built houses with the requisite supplies to start farming; settlers were obliged to post bonds on these



FIG. 5. PHOTO OF NIGHTINGALE, ALBERTA FROM CPR ALBUM. | GLENBOW ARCHIVES, LSDF PD-31, VOL. 8, P. 34.

assets and pay interest on the outstanding debt. In all three cases, construction was of a very low standard, with no interior finishes.¹⁶

As early as 1885, the CPR considered entering the ready-made farm market. Company records from that year include a circular sent by Keewatin Lumbering & Manufacturing to CPR vice-president William Cornelius Van Horne, explaining their portable house system. Correspondence in 1894 between Van Horne and P.J. Hamilton, a Winnipeg-based CPR land commissioner, pointed to a more serious research on ready-made farms. In one letter, Hamilton estimated the cost for establishing a settler in a fully-equipped, company-built house, including items such as furnishings, livestock, and farm tools. Hamilton ultimately recommended against a ready-made farm scheme. "I do not think it possible for the farmer to start on a homestead saddled with a debt of \$1500.00 with the view of ultimately discharging the loan with interest," he wrote.¹⁷

Several factors entered in the CPR's decision to produce ready-made farms a decade later. A twin impetus for the program came from the Salvation Army of England's announced intention, in the spring of 1909, to sponsor a program of assisted land settlement in Canada, along with a contemporaneous proposal for a Dutch settlement on irrigation farms "improved" with a house and cultivated land.¹⁸ On October 9, 1909, the *Strathmore Standard* reported that the Salvation Army had purchased land for one hundred and twenty British settlers and planned to sponsor a settlement colony similar to those it already had created in other parts of the world. Work was contracted out to the Canadian Pacific Irrigation Colonization Company (CPICC), a CPR subsidiary that since the previous year had initiated development of farms for absentee clients from England and North America. In 1909, they took on over one hundred contracts to break and seed some twelve thousand acres of land, erect one hundred and twenty-five miles of fence, and build nine

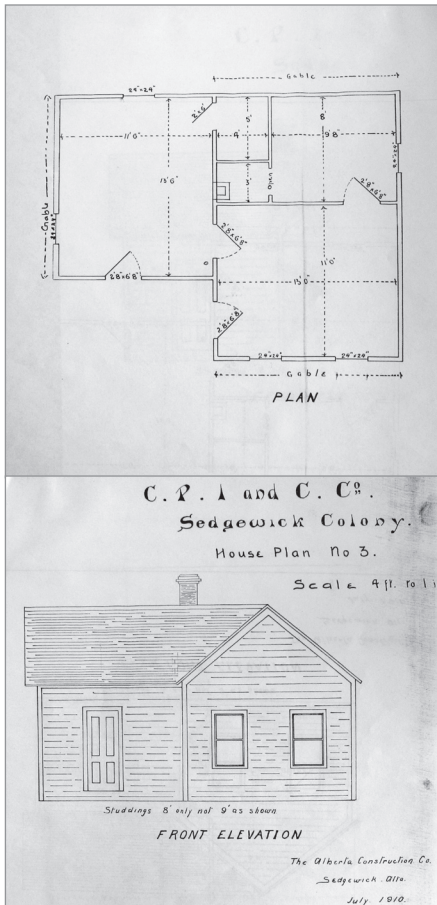


FIG. 6. ALBERTA CONSTRUCTION CO., PLAN FOR READY-MADE FARM IN SEDGEWICK, ALBERTA, 1910. | SEDGEWICK MUSEUM, ALBERTA.

houses. The enterprise took the Salvation Army settlement in its stride. "Fences and buildings have already been erected by the company, land plowed and sown with fall wheat," the *Standard* reported that winter.¹⁹

By March of the following year, the Salvation Army had apparently relinquished interest. The CPR accordingly took up the role of marketing and settling the twenty-four-quarter section farms already prepared in the Irricana district. However, rather than simply selling the two dozen "improved" farmsteads, it used them as the springboard for a much broader campaign, which would last almost a decade,

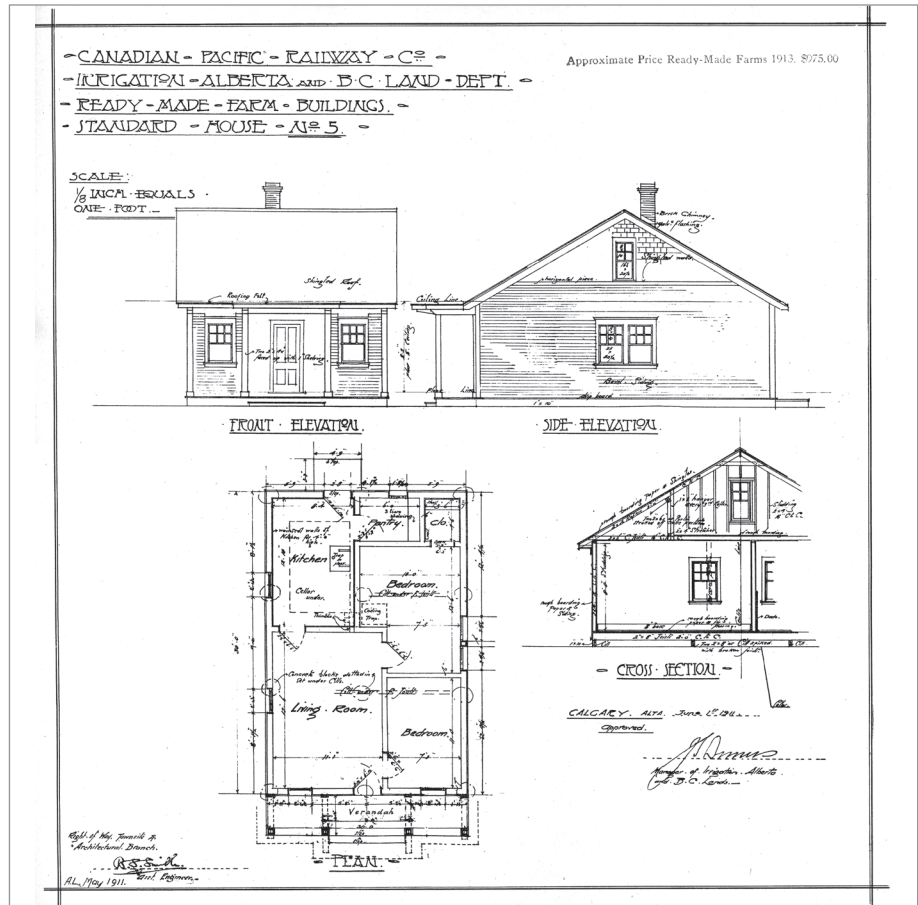


FIG. 7. READY-MADE FARM PLAN FROM PRESENTATION BOOK, 1912. | GLENBOW ARCHIVES, LSDF M2381.

surpassing previous short-lived schemes for pre-built Canadian farms in scope and scale.

THE 'ENGLISH COLONY' - NIGHTINGALE, ALBERTA

Rather than producing patchwork developments on conventional agricultural land, the CPR intended to settle thousands of British farmers in stable, high-density communities on irrigated lands in the Alberta dry belt.²⁰ Targeting buyers of moderate means, the farms would be secured with a two-hundred-and-fifty-pound downpayment and paid off, with interest, over ten years.²¹

On March 26, 1910, nineteen farm families set sail from Liverpool, England, en route to the first CPR ready-made farms in the Irricana district of Alberta, Canada. The head of each family possessed from five hundred to one thousand pounds, or roughly two thousand five hundred to five thousand Canadian dollars, a fact that for the local paper demonstrated "that these settlers are of a very good class."²² In addition to capital, farming experience was another prerequisite for the program, and the CPR vowed to only select experienced yeoman agriculturalists. However, descriptions of the first party indicate that the required "farming experience" was interpreted very

broadly: the party included an engineer, a former innkeeper, a retired civil servant, an army pensioner, a builder, a coachman, a dairy farmer, and a veterinary surgeon.²³ Nevertheless, the local press welcomed the newcomers as seasoned agriculturalists who “have spent a lifetime tilling the soil in the old country” and simply lacked experience in the particular terrain of the Canadian West.²⁴ Subsequent ready-made farms would continue to attract a broad spectrum of settlers, who were often less than prepared for irrigation farming.

The first colony—known locally as the English Colony, and later rechristened Nightingale—consisted of relatively simple, box-like houses of two or three-rooms, each on a twenty-eight by twelve foot floorplate (fig. 5).²⁵ A single door was centrally set on the long side of the dwelling, and small, square windows pierced the back wall and each of the end walls. A metal pipe chimney marked a stove that would have served for both cooking and heating the home. A small barn and a storage shed accompanied the houses.

While illustrations of box-like houses similar to those at Nightingale initially appeared in ready-made farm publicity, they were replaced with more elaborate renderings as the CPR expanded the program. In 1910, farms were added at Cairnhill, Crossfield, and Sedgewick. Each development was assigned to a local contractor—the Alberta Construction Company built the farms at Sedgewick, while the Crown Lumber Company was responsible for fourteen farms at Crossfield.²⁶ The designs presented modest improvements: plans from the Sedgewick-based Alberta Construction Co. show a gabled three-room house on an L-shaped plan, with some interior spaces for a storage closet and pantry (fig. 6). Despite their more refined aesthetics and the avowal of a local paper that the “new buildings are

substantially erected according to artistic designs,”²⁷ inhabitants reported that the houses were flimsy constructions. Settler Edwin Snowsell complained that “these CPR cottages were frame structures, no insulation of any kind, 2 by 4 joists, tarpaper and drop siding on the outside; inside, laths and plaster directly on the joists.” The thin walls provided little protection against the harsh winters, when water would freeze inside kettles. As a consequence, recalls Snowsell’s son Frank, the family, “like most settlers, banked the house outside up to the level of the windows with barnyard manure to help keep out the frost.”²⁸

The next year, the CPR’s architecture offices in Calgary prepared their own set of house designs, engaging local contractors to realize construction to the railway’s higher standards. The Calgary and Sedgewick-based contractors Hayden & Skeene built ninety-nine of the one hundred and fifty ready-made farms completed in 1911. Each included a four-roomed house with porch and a saltbox barn, both finished with coordinated trim and siding colours.

The following year, these more elaborate designs appeared in a presentation book for the ready-made farm program, which included five different house plans, two barn layouts, and two exterior colour schemes (fig. 7). The dwellings were detailed with columns topped by simple capitals and framed dormer windows. Inside, kitchens were finished with wainscoting and equipped with storage cupboards. Contrasting shingles and wood siding distinguished the ground and loft levels of houses and barns, while a choice of colour schemes proposed matching trim, wall, and shingle tones. An articulated roof profile on both the houses and barns gave an additional level of detail and variety to the structures. Each house

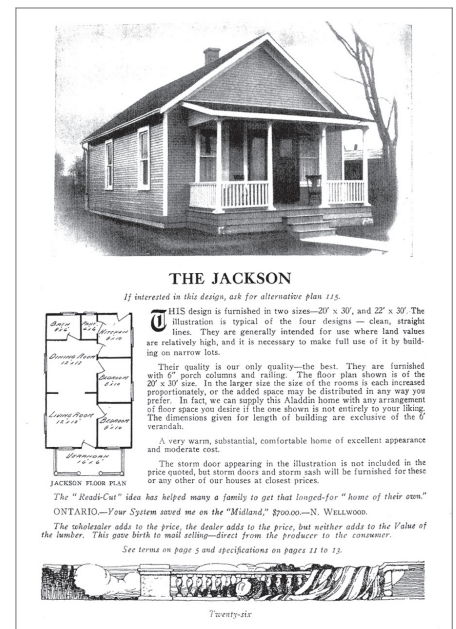


FIG. 8. “THE JACKSON,” FROM CANADIAN ALADDIN CO. COMPARE TO FIGURE 2. | ALADDIN HOMES: COMPLETE CITIES OR SINGLE HOMES, TORONTO, CANADIAN ALADDIN CO., 1919.

featured a central hearth, brick chimney, and roofed verandah.

The colourful presentation of an array of house plans, in blueprints and photographs, shared its format with the mail-order house catalogues of contemporary companies including B.C. Mills Timber and Trading Co. of Vancouver, Eaton’s, and the Canadian Aladdin Company. The latter, the most active of these companies, offered mail-order houses from 1905 to 1952. CPR ready-made farmhouses were remarkably similar to some of Aladdin’s arts-and-crafts-styled houses, which were pre-cut at the factory and shipped to the customer’s nearest railway station, accompanied by a set of blueprints and a construction manual (fig. 8). From 1910 to 1932, Eaton’s free plan books presented dozens of houses through artist’s sketches, floor plans, and information on lumber, doors, windows, flooring, and hardware. Blueprints could be purchased for between \$1 and \$2.50, and customers

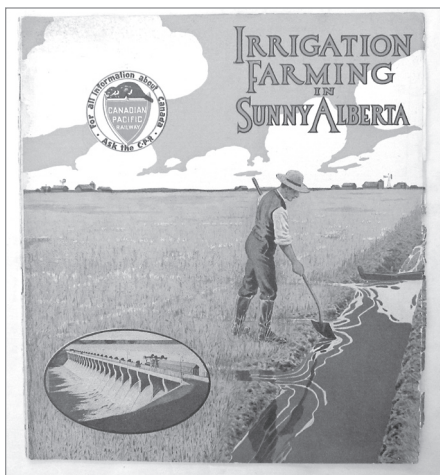


FIG. 9. COVER OF CANADIAN PACIFIC RAILWAY COMPANY. | IRRIGATION FARMING IN SUNNY ALBERTA, CHICAGO, M. KALLIS & COMPANY, 1921.

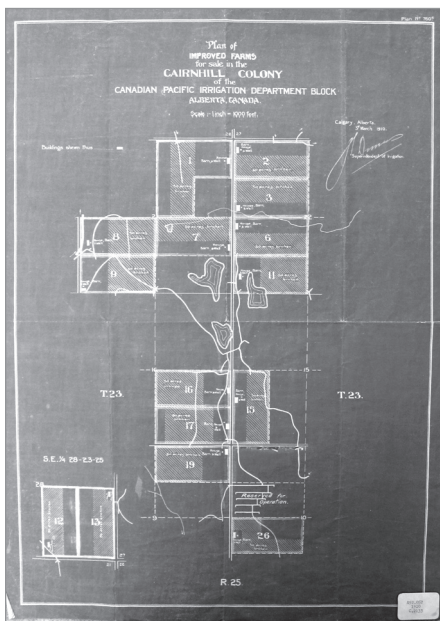


FIG. 10. MAP OF CAIRNHILL READY-MADE FARM COLONY, 1910. | GLENBOW LIBRARY, A92.052 1910 C.2133.

could order lumber and supplies based on the blueprints. The most popular type of Eaton’s house—a one-and-a-half-storey bungalow dubbed “the Earlsfield”—was listed for \$696.50 in the 1912 catalogue.²⁹ A ready-made CPR farmhouse with similar dimensions retailed for \$950. While CPR houses were somewhat more expensive, the premium secured the convenience of a turnkey dwelling.³⁰



FIG. 11. CPR READY-MADE FARM POSTER, 1912. | GLENBOW ARCHIVES, POSTER COLLECTION.

In the initial years of the program, the CPR moved increasingly to a model of standardized houses, adopting a similar attitude to companies such as Aladdin and Eaton’s in marketing designed homes as consumer objects. Moreover, the CPR’s program expanded the mail-order house concept by offering entire farms, complete with land, outbuildings, and the prepared fields necessary to ensure a first harvest.

DENSITY, IRRIGATION, AND SOCIETY

Beyond the design and sale of individual farms, a broader impetus for creating the ready-made farms was the need to occupy the massive irrigation district, assuring future income from freight traffic and water fees. From the Company’s standpoint, ready-made farm colonies based on small land holdings would ensure the most profitable settlement of the territory. “I take the

position that the whole irrigation project is designed to secure the highest possible amount of traffic. This involves the densest possible settlement,” reasoned CPICC manager C.W. Peterson. “I like the improved farm program and think it would be the means to that end. In this way we can settle families on eighty acre tracts and make sure that this land is not being bought merely for speculative purposes.”³¹ In its publicity material, the railway company rationalized the small farms by explaining that, compared with the standard one hundred and sixty acres allocated for dry farms, eighty acres would suffice to sustain an irrigated farm, with its propensity for consistently yielding more crops than dry land farms.

This denser development may also have alleviated a fear of isolated homesteading on vast prairie landscapes. The terror of isolation held particularly true for British settlers accustomed to urban environments or tight rural development on rolling, treed parklands. A 1921 CPR brochure on irrigation farming (fig. 9) thus depicts an irrigated landscape with two farmsteads within view of each other, while its text reassures readers that:

The irrigation farmer has greater community advantages [...] The settlement is confined to certain definite areas, instead of scattered over the country. Consequently, there are neighbors close at hand; schools, churches, telephones, mail deliveries, and all community organizations flourish as is not possible under other conditions.³²

British journalists sponsored by the CPR guardedly acknowledged the effectiveness of this planning. “Nightingale [...] was not nearly such a lonely place as I pictured it to be,” reported Eldred Walker, who toured the colony soon after its founding. “One’s nearest neighbour is generally half a mile distant, but that is not far on these open, rolling prairies.”³³

Although no early maps of Nightingale exist, plans of improved farms for colonies at Cairnhill (1910), Namaka (1911), and Irricana (1911) indicate attempts to group farm dwellings near to one other. In Cairnhill, at least ten farms are situated along a common main road, with houses, barns, and wells located close to the roadway and within sight of at least one neighbour (fig. 10). Ready-made farms at Namaka and Irricana were likewise situated on common roads, and in several cases pushed to the corner of their eighty-acre lots, closer to the houses of adjacent ready-made farms.

On a practical level, building standardized houses and barns in close proximity led to economies associated with mass construction. For instance, delivery of materials could be streamlined and construction delegated to a single contractor. Settlers also arrived in larger groups who could be attended to collectively. At times, these practicalities seem to have taken precedence over the initial imperative to settle irrigation lands *per se*. This was apparent when a shortage of contiguous irrigated lands from 1910-1911 led to the construction of the Sedgewick colony on non-irrigated lands. Although these were larger one-hundred-and-sixty-acre farms, at greater distances from one another than irrigated farms, promotional literature continued to emphasize the sociability of the ready-made colonies. A series of 1912 advertisements in the *Manchester Guardian* noted: “the farmer can start his farming at once with congenial neighbours of the same British stock as himself, instead of having to rough it alone under primitive conditions,” even while the CPR ready-made farm campaign of the time promoted farms from eighty to as large as three hundred and twenty acres.

A 1912 promotional poster encapsulates the image of sociable, civilized ready-made farm colonies (fig. 11). A well-

dressed farmer and his wife converse by the house, in mid-ground a young man sits on a horse, and in the foreground, a young woman holds a pail, perhaps to feed the chickens pecking by her feet. The corner of a fenced-in garden is seen in front. The broad expanse of a wheat field can be glimpsed behind the house, whose chimney is topped with a wisp of smoke, a stock compositional element for a scene in the picturesque tradition. The group constitutes a working family unit, the ideal settlers sought by CPR campaigns. The text points to a broader network of social connections: the farm is close to the railway, schools, markets, and churches. At the same time, harking back to the idea of a “fertile wilderness,” the unexploited potential of the land itself is emphasized on the poster—these are not farms on established agricultural land, but rather “special farms on virgin soil”—the units that through hard work and social cooperation would comprise a new, ideal settlement. As such, the depiction reinforces the Dominion’s reputation as a new society in the making. Although only a single farm is portrayed in the poster, it is inhabited by a full family and balanced by a text indicating the farm’s place in a larger social structure. The poster thus suggests that a broader community of like-minded individuals supports the independent family life of a ready-made farm.

The CPR’s farms also reflected British ideals of civilized rural life by engaging picturesque landscaping principles. Although the ready-made farms did not come with landscaping in place, free trees were available to settlers and British aesthetic ideals were manifest in the farm layouts suggested by the CPR-issued *Settler’s Guide* to homesteading in the irrigation district and contemporary newspaper articles (figs. 12-13). Rejecting formal, symmetrical layouts, these guides suggested that trees were to be deployed

in sheltering lines on the periphery, then distributed in picturesque groupings within the farm enclosure.³⁴ In the ideal farmstead, “clumps of various shrubbery have been scattered about the lawn, a neat little dairy house has been tucked in the shade and shelter of the trees and shrubs convenient to the well, and beautiful flower beds add to the effect.”³⁵ This suggested arrangement of vegetal clumps alongside folly-like outbuildings on a neat lawn recalled the landscapes introduced by English landscape designer Capability Brown a century earlier. Only later in the manual was the practical importance of the trees as windbreaks discussed, along with recommendations for planting density and species choice. “It will be found a splendid plan to plant a double row of white or blue spruce in the wind break,” the guide stated, noting the sheltering advantages of their dense needles, then adding another aesthetic note: “There is nothing prettier than a substantial wind break of such evergreens.”³⁶ When laid out in the correct manner, trees not only served practical purposes as protective windbreaks, but created visual variation in the monotonous grassland, recalling the aesthetics of British picturesque landscapes.

READY-MADE FARMS AND VARIANTS, 1912-1914

An enthusiastic response at the beginning of the ready-made farm program indicated its appeal, and building quickly accelerated to meet the demand. After the initial twenty-four farms of 1909, the CPR created an additional seventy-eight farms in 1910, one hundred and seventy-seven farms in 1911, and fifty-seven in 1912. However, with a rapidly growing stock of ready-made farms, maintaining sales became difficult: at the end of 1911, one hundred and ninety-three ready-made farms were unsold (69.2 percent of

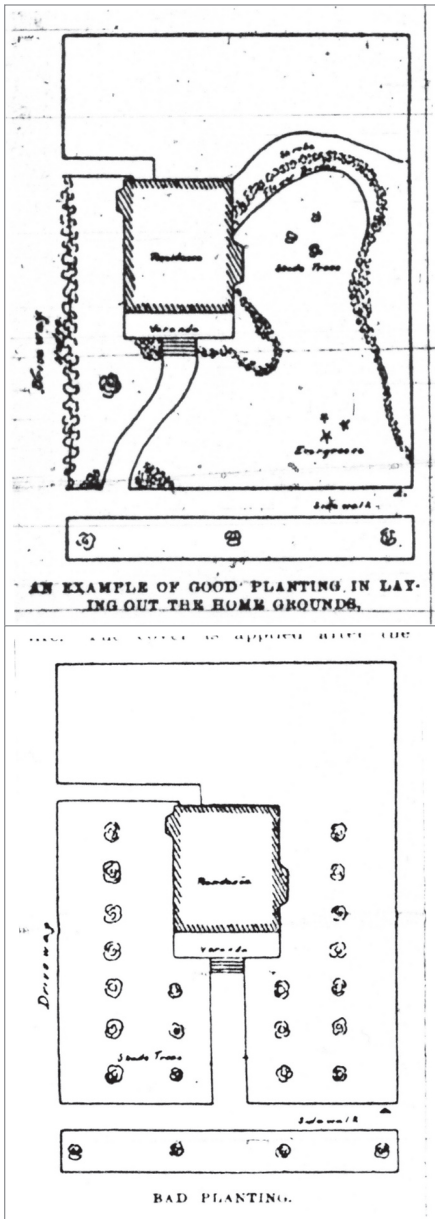


FIG. 12. EXAMPLES OF GOOD AND BAD PLANTING. | ERWIN, A.T. "PLANNING THE HOME GROUNDS," STRATHMORE STANDARD, MAY 7, 1910

the total then existing), and at the end of 1912, one hundred and forty-six farms (43.7 percent) were still unsold.³⁷

Several factors may have contributed to sluggish sales and the cancellation of contracts. Irrigation canals were regularly clogged by weeds and invaded by

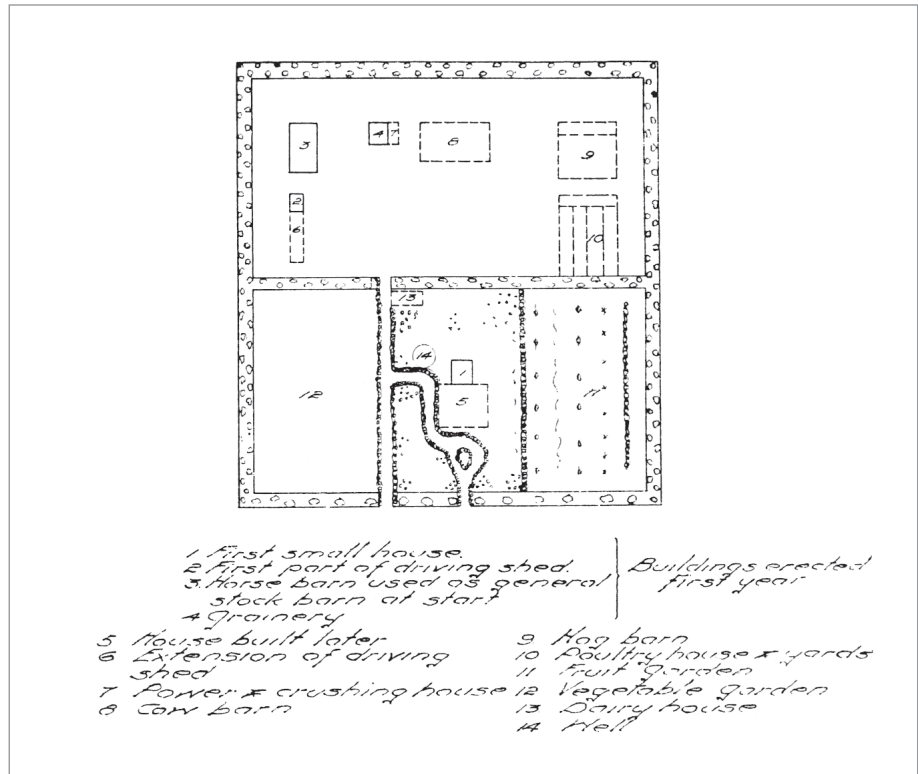


FIG. 13. RECOMMENDED FARM PLAN. | CANADIAN PACIFIC RAILWAY COMPANY, 1911, SETTLER'S GUIDE: A HANDBOOK OF INFORMATION FOR SETTLERS IN THE CANADIAN PACIFIC RAILWAY IRRIGATION BLOCK, CALGARY, CANADIAN PACIFIC RAILWAY COLONIZATION DEPARTMENT. CANADIAN PACIFIC ARCHIVES, ID 5303-13

muskrats, which slowed the flow of water. Large tracts of land were spoiled by salinization, which occurred when minerals were drawn up through the soil following irrigation.³⁸ Low precipitation levels in 1910 likely overwhelmed the capacities of the irrigation system, resulting in crop failures and disillusioned farmers.

Perhaps in an attempt to recapture the program's early success, the CPR ready-made farm policy took on increasingly broad-based tactics. By 1912, the program had shifted from establishing coherent ready-made farm colonies in blocks to the improvement of more scattered properties. "Under its 'improved farms' policy, the Company selects certain areas within the Irrigation Block upon which an expenditure of some \$2500 is made in the way of buildings and other improvements and the land is then sold to the settler

on ten yearly payments," explained a CPR memorandum addressed to its land surveyors.

You will, therefore, whenever you have established a unit of, at least, average quality, mark this on your map as being **specially set apart for development as a ready made farm** and proceed to lay out building site, breaking, etc. in accordance with special instructions.

The directive continued: "It is the Company's desire to develop as much as possible of the vacant lands as ready made farms and it is not desirable that too much discrimination [*sic*] should be exercised in selecting these farms."³⁹ At this time, the CPR also began taking up custodianship of abandoned ready-made and regular farms, restoring and reselling them as "improved farms."

In the following year (1913) the ready-made farm program expanded its mandate yet again, accepting clientele from a larger geographic base. This new effort appeared to target settlers with more extensive agricultural experience than the former recruits. Eligible applicants were accepted from Northern Europe, with fliers reaching out to potential Dutch settlers, a group who had earlier expressed an interest in ready-made farms.⁴⁰ A group of sugar beet farmers was persuaded to migrate from Arkansas, apparently to take up ready-made farms prepared by the CPR in the irrigation district.⁴¹

At the same time, the CPR created a parallel program encouraging American farmers to independently occupy lands in the irrigation district. The 1912 loans-to-settlers policy lent up to two thousand dollars toward basic preparations for irrigation farming. The developments covered by the loan closely parallel the ready-made-farm program, except in this case the farmers were to make the improvements themselves. These included “providing a house and barn, digging a well, and fencing the land.” The criteria for selection—“a practical farmer, a married man who has a thorough knowledge of farm work [...] and who has sufficient capital to make his first payment and provide for himself and family for the first year”—also mirrored the ready-made farm program’s call for stable yeoman farmers.⁴² The scheme directly reused ready-made farm designs, inviting settlers to select the type of house and barn they desired from Company-furnished blueprints, “which plans are the result of many years’ knowledge of conditions in this country and the requirements of the settlers.”⁴³ While many of the program’s participants took up these designs, others modified the blueprints or constructed houses from their own plans.⁴⁴

Unlike some mail-order houses of the era, the CPR’s ready-made farms were never prefabricated on a remote site. Rather they were built on-site to predetermined specifications. In what was perhaps an effort to increase the program’s efficiency, the CPR briefly considered using prefabricated buildings. In the spring of 1913, they enquired about “knock-down” houses provided by Prudential Builders in Vancouver, among others.⁴⁵ However, soon after these initial inquiries, the decision was made to continue with contract-based construction of farm buildings “along the ordinary lines.”⁴⁶

SUSPENSION OF THE READY-MADE FARM PROGRAM, 1914

Despite the close oversight of company officials, the ready-made farm program’s high turnover rate ultimately made it unprofitable, reflecting the economic and agricultural challenges of farming in the semi-arid Prairies.⁴⁷ The program was effectively discontinued in 1914. Although appropriations were made for preparing one hundred and thirty farms that year,⁴⁸ a management directive in March instructed that no new ready-made farms were to be created. Farms already under construction would be finished through that year and the next. The onset of World War One gave reason for an official, public suspension of the program. The Development Branch’s Advisory Committee stated: “as the primary object of the Company’s improved farm project was to provide ready-made homes for settlers coming out from Great Britain and Europe, it has been decided to discontinue the development of any additional farms until after the War.”⁴⁹

By December of 1915, five hundred and twenty-one ready-made farms and one hundred and sixty-five loan farms had been created, and an aggregate of over

two hundred and twenty-five cancellations had been recorded. At the end of the year, one hundred and seventy-five of the ready-made and loan farms were unsold (26.8 percent of the total), becoming the responsibility of the CPR to maintain and market. CPR records from a year later show that only a handful of the ready-made farms had not defaulted or fallen behind in their payments by that time. While the CPR had collected \$196,266 in principal and interest payments, they were owed \$366,333 in arrears.⁵⁰

Peter Naismith, general manager of the CPR’s Department of Natural Resources, later summarized the course of the program from the Company’s perspective:

These farms we sold on a very small first payment, and ultimately found that the result of the purchaser not having sufficient equity in them, did not warrant him in sticking and overcoming the obstacles due to all new settlers in a new country, nearly so well as if he had a larger interest in the property. We found that instead of the farms being sold as we thought, they had to be sold in some cases a half a dozen times before we got a purchaser who would stick, and the result was that there was considerable depreciation, and in a good many cases some ‘writing off’ before final sale was made.⁵¹

Moreover, many farmers complained of CPR mismanagement, or felt deceived by false promises of easy agricultural conditions. Dr. C.S. Longman was appointed by the Alberta government in 1931 to study the experience of farmers in the CPR irrigation districts, many of whom had taken up ready-made farms. In a later interview, he reported hearing from the farmers:

The same story over and over [...] It was a heart breaking thing in a way [...] Usually the procedure was that as soon as we would get talking and they would see that I was

sympathetic to what their problem was—out would come the literature that the C.P.R. had scattered about the old country and elsewhere to induce them to come in here [...] It showed the irrigation water running down—the crops responding, and other literature [...] of farmers who had written up testimonials and that sort of thing.

These people were green grocer trademen [*sic*] and what have you, but very few farmers actually who came out to irrigation in this country. They came out here to the ready made farms; settled down on them and of course everything was new [...] You see in the homes lovely furniture, know that they had seen better days and then you could tell how disappointed they were.⁵²

Longman concluded that the CPR was essentially sympathetic to the settlers' difficulties, adjusting contracts periodically to try and respond to problems such as crop failures. Nonetheless, by 1931, three waves of settlers had come and gone from the farms. After decades of financial loss, the CPR negotiated to transfer the Eastern and Western irrigation districts to farm-owned cooperatives in 1935 and 1944, respectively.

The CPR's abandonment of the ready-made farm program and irrigation districts reflected their failure to live up to promised hopes—the familiar theme of many utopian ventures. However, through its massive publicity campaigns as well as its completed constructions, the CPR established the tenuous foundations for irrigation farming in Palliser's Triangle. While the most obvious legacy of the CPR's involvement in the region is the physical infrastructure and the farms themselves, arguably no less important are the images and ideals that the Company projected onto this region. The ready-made farm program prepared environments that would be aesthetically

and socially familiar to their British audience, venturing that this would mitigate the uncertainties of a new landscape, facilitating the establishment of thriving communities. By doing so, it proposed a crucial link between the aesthetics of a colony and its success. As the *Settler's Guide* emphasized, the appearance and comfort of the rural farm was seen by the CPR as being of foremost importance: "However important the business side of the farm may appear, it is not more important than the creation of an attractive and comfortable home, surrounded by tasteful grounds and garden and sheltered by beautiful trees and shrubs."⁵³ By attempting to create such environments, the ready-made farm colonies contributed toward promoting a vision of Canadian Prairie landscapes as prosperous and civilized settings—a fertile ground for establishing idyllic farms as well as model societies.

NOTES

1. For more on the Canadian Expansionist Movement, see Owram, Doug, 1980, *Promise of Eden: the Canadian Expansionist Movement and the Idea of the West, 1856-1900*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press. An excellent documentary anthology focused on changes in the perception of the Prairies can be found in Francis, R. Douglas, 1989, *Images of the West: Responses to the Canadian Prairies*, Saskatoon, Western Producer Prairie Books.
2. In principle, the Canadian Pacific Railway's twenty-five-million-acre land grant from the Canadian government occupied alternate six hundred and forty-acre sections, extending back twenty-four miles deep on each side of the railway. However, the CPR was only obliged to accept lands deemed "fairly fit for settlement," with the remaining lands to be made up from other tracts. Because of this proviso, the Company was still due an area of 3.3 million acres by 1896. In 1903, they negotiated with the federal government to complete their land grant by accepting a solid block of land between Medicine Hat and Calgary. The acquisition of a contiguous land block allowed for their planned irrigation scheme to proceed.
3. Mitchner, A., 1984, "The Bow River Scheme: the CPR's Irrigation Block," In Hugh A. Dempsey (ed.), *The CPR West: The Iron Road and the Making of the Nation*, Vancouver, Douglas & McIntyre, p. 264.
4. Public Archives of Canada, Macdonell Papers, vol. 40, undated manuscript on the subject of Confederation, quoted in Owram, p. 102.
5. Canadian Pacific Railway Company Colonization Department, 1909, *Facts Concerning the Bow River Valley*, Calgary, Canadian Pacific Railway Company, p. 7.
6. Canadian Pacific Railway Company, "Emigration: Ready-made Farms in Western Canada," *Manchester Guardian*, November 30, 1910.
7. See Owram, p. 125-148.
8. Williams, Raymond, 1973, *The Country and the City*, New York, Oxford University Press, p. 280-281.
9. Darley, Gillian, 1975, *Villages of Vision*, London, Architectural Press, p. 54.
10. Loudon, John Claudius, 1844 [3rd ed.], *An Encyclopædia of Agriculture*, London, printed for Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, p. 453.
11. Turner, Frederick Jackson, 1998, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," In John Mack Faragher (ed.), *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," and Other Essays*, New Haven (CT), Yale University Press, p. 60. While later historians have debated the factual accuracy of Turner's view, they have widely acknowledged the impact of its symbolism in the development of America. See Smith, Henry Nash, 1950, *Virgin Land; the American West as Symbol and Myth*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press; White, Richard, Patricia Limerick, and James Grossman, 1994, *The Frontier in American Culture: an Exhibition at the Newberry Library*, Berkeley, University of California Press.
12. Todd, Sereno Edwards, 1876, *Todd's Country Homes and How to Save Money. A Practical Book by a Practical Man*, Philadelphia, Bradley & Company, p. 38-39, 73. Other examples of this genre include: Hill, George, 1901, *Practical Suggestions for Farm Buildings*, Farmers Bulletin, Washington, US Department of Agriculture; Fiske, George B., 1902, *Poultry Architecture: A Practical Guide for Construction of Poultry Houses, Coops and Yards*, New York, Orange Judd Company; Ekblaw, Karl John Theodore, 1914, *Farm Structures*, New York, The MacMillan Company; Roberts,

- H. Armstrong, 1918, *The Farmer his Own Builder: a Guide and Reference Book for the Construction of Dwellings, Barns and Other Farm Buildings*, Philadelphia, D. McKay. Related books emphasize practicality by compiling "actual construction by actual men," in contrast with the model dwellings proposed by Loudon; see for example The Breeder's Gazette, 1911, *Farm Buildings*, Chicago, Sanders Publishing Company.
13. Scott, John, 1884, *Farm Buildings: A Practical Treatise*, London, Crosby Lockwood and Co., p. v-vi. Other examples include Stephens, Henry and Robert Scott Burn, 1861, *The Book of Farm-buildings: their Arrangement and Construction*, Edinburgh, W. Blackwood and Sons; Clarke, A. Dudley, 1895, *Farm Buildings: Their Construction and Arrangement*, London, B.T. Batsford; Taylor, Samuel, 1905, *Modern Homesteads: A Practical and Illustrated Treatise on the Designing of Farm Buildings, Farm Houses and Cottages*, London, The Land Agents' Record, Limited; Lawrence, Charles P., 1919, *Economic Farm Buildings*, London, The Library Press Limited.
 14. "Ready-made Farms," *The Los Angeles Times*, January 16, 1910.
 15. "Ready-made Farms," *op. cit.*
 16. Mills, G.E., 1991, *Buying Wood & Building Farms: Marketing Lumber and Farm Building Designs on the Canadian Prairies, 1880 to 1920*, Ottawa, National Historic Sites, p. 54-55.
 17. Letter from Hamilton to Van Horne, October 25, 1894, CP Archives.
 18. Hedges, James Blaine, [1939] 1971, *Building the Canadian West; the Land and Colonization Policies of the Canadian Pacific Railway*, New York, Russell & Russell, p. 223.
 19. "Farm Development," *Strathmore Standard*, January 8, 1910.
 20. Hedges, p. 224.
 21. The cost of work was added to the sale price of the farm; the buyer paid one-tenth of the price down, then the balance in nine equal instalments with six percent annual interest. In 1913, payment terms for the farm were extended from a ten- to a twenty-year contract to relieve the financial burden of crop losses in 1911 and 1912; in the wake of another period of drought in 1923 the terms were extended to thirty-four years. (Letter from Naismith to Murray, March 15, 1913, Glenbow Archives, Canadian Pacific Railway Land Settlement and Development Fonds (LSDF), M2269-18.)
 22. "From the Old Country," *Strathmore Standard*, April 10, 1910.
 23. "30,000 English Farmers Embarking for America," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 1, 1910.
 24. "From the Old Country," *op. cit.*
 25. Binnie-Clark, Georgina, "Ready-made Farms, Why the Settlers are So Content," *Overseas Daily Mail*, reprinted in the *Strathmore Standard*, October 29, 1910.
 26. "More Ready-made Farms," *Strathmore Standard*, September 3, 1910.
 27. "Ready-made Farms Completed," *Strathmore Standard*, October 10, 1910.
 28. Snowsell, Frank and Edwin, 1982, "Starting Over on 'a Ready-made' Farm, 1911-1916," *Western People*, no. 14.
 29. Eaton's houses were not true "prefab" houses in that the lumber was shipped uncut. The house elements traveled by boxcar to the nearest railway station and were delivered by horse-and-wagon to the site.
 30. Henry, Les, "Mail-order Houses," Canadian Museum of Civilization Corporation, [www.civilization.ca/cmcc/exhibitions/cpm/catalog/cat2104e.shtml#1222116].
 31. Quoted in Hedges, p. 223.
 32. Canadian Pacific Railway Company, 1921, *Irrigation Farming in Sunny Alberta*, Calgary, Department of Colonization and Development, p. 1-3.
 33. Walker, Eldred G.F., 1912, *Canadian Trails: Hither and Thither in the Great Dominion*, Toronto, Musson Book Co.
 34. Many promotional illustrations of the farms included established trees, even though the ready-made farms did not come with them—contrary to claims for the natural fertility of the soil, trees demanded settlers to look after them. However, CPR nurseries distributed fast-growing poplar trees and cuttings to settlers at no cost. (P.L. Naismith to Hart, January 27, 1913, LSDF, M2269-9.)
 35. Canadian Pacific Railway Company, 1911, *Settler's Guide: A Handbook of Information for Settlers in the Canadian Pacific Railway Irrigation Block*, Calgary, Canadian Pacific Railway Colonization Department, p. 14.
 36. Canadian Pacific Railway Company, 1911, p. 15.
 37. Even assuming that the farms created in one year were not sold until the next year, this meant that sixteen existing farms were unsold in 1911, and ninety-two existing farms were unsold at the end of 1912, almost a third of the total ready-made farms at that time. (Data from Canadian Pacific Railway Department of Natural Resources, Development Branch Annual Report, 1923, p. 5, LSDF, M2263 vol. 8.)
 38. Evenden, Matthew, 2006, "Precarious Foundations: Irrigation, Environment, and Social Change in the Canadian Pacific Railway's Eastern Section, 1900-1930," *Journal of Historical Geography*, vol. 32, no. 1, p. 76-77.
 39. LSDF, M2269-577 b, 169-170 (emphasis in original).
 40. See a Dutch-language brochure that includes ready-made farmhouse plans: Canadian Pacific Railway Company, n.d., *Hoe een landbouwer gelukken kan in Canada* [How an agriculturalist can succeed in Canada], University of British Columbia Chung Collection, 0002-07.
 41. "Arkansas Farmers Migrate," *Wall Street Journal*, October 2, 1913.
 42. Canadian Pacific Railway Company, 1921, p. 37-38.
 43. *Ibid.*
 44. See, for example, the Development Branch Annual Reports from 1920 and 1923, both of which document a mix of houses erected under the loan policy in those years. Some of these follow ready-made farm designs, and others feature divergent designs, possibly inspired by plan-books readily available in both the United States and Canada at the time. (LSDF, M2263, vol. 8.)
 45. Naismith to Hart, January 15, 1913, LSDF, M2269-9.
 46. Naismith to Hart, January 27, 1913, LSDF, M2269-9.
 47. Naismith to Mead, February 8, 1921, LSDF, M2269-138.
 48. "Attracting Farm Settlers," *New York Times*, January 25, 1914, p. 236.

49. Advisory committee document, 1916. (Glenbow, LSDF, M2269-430.) Although the original program was officially suspended, the development branch continued to restore and resell abandoned farms as ready-made farms until at least 1923. A related initiative during the war years created three ready-made farm colonies for returned veterans, a subject which deserves its own research. Nevertheless, the fact that these soldier settlements were opened some years later for general purchase indicates probable difficulties with sales to their intended audience.
50. "Standing of Ready Made Farm Contracts up to 31st December, 1916," LSDF, M2269 File #381. Also see "Canadian Pacific Railway Department of Natural Resources Development Branch Annual Report 1923," LSDF, M2263 vol. 8.
51. Naismith to Elwood, February 8, 1921, LSDF, M2269-138.
52. Interview with W.L. Jacobson conducted on April 14, 1959, Edmonton. Transcript in Glenbow Archives, W.L. Jacobson project, CPR Western Section – General History, folder 32, 631.7 J14A.
53. Canadian Pacific Railway Company, 1911, p. 11.