

# *The Urbanization of the Canadian Prairies, 1871-1916*

by Paul VOISEY\*

Canadian historians mistakenly have often suggested that the settlement of the three prairie provinces was very much a rural affair. In truth, one third of the pioneers who headed West before 1916 found themselves living, not on the farm, but in the country villages, the bustling rail towns, and the fast-rising cities that sprang from the prairie. Although many of these urban places<sup>1</sup> were among the fastest growing cities in Canadian history, little is known about their development. Basic questions concerning their founding, location, growth, size, and function remain unanswered. An examination of these processes, however, quickly reveals that geography alone cannot explain the prairie urban pattern. The activities of railway companies and those individuals who stood to gain most by urban growth—real estate speculators, construction contractors, merchants—were equally important in determining the development of prairie urban centres. High property qualifications for public office made it easy for such individuals to dominate city hall and their collective promotional skill often shaped the destiny of their towns.

Before 1870 the only commercial centres in the West were scattered Hudson's Bay Company posts. Managed by a few fur traders, they could scarcely claim urban stature and only the two largest would become important in the agricultural age: Fort Edmonton on the North Saskatchewan River had a population of about 200, while another 1,000 lived near Fort Garry (Winnipeg) at the junction of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers.<sup>2</sup> The early 1870's brought a trickle of settlers to the West and Winnipeg developed as an agricultural centre. Other towns appeared: Prince Albert and Battleford on the Saskatchewan, and a number of lesser villages in southern Manitoba.

The largest centres hugged the shorelines of navigable rivers and were served by steamship. But prairie rivers were shallow and few in number; they froze in winter and flowed uselessly to the Arctic. Railroads quickly replaced them as carriers of trade. The Pembina Branch opened in 1878. This government-built road originated north of Winnipeg and ran south to the United States border where it connected to a St. Paul line. Two new towns, Emerson and Selkirk, sprang into prominent existence

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<sup>1</sup> The word urban will be used throughout this paper to mean incorporated villages, towns, and cities in order to delineate the farm from the non-farm population.

<sup>2</sup> All subsequent population figures for urban places are taken from *Census of Canada 1931*, Vol. 2, Tables 8-12; or *Census of the Prairie Provinces 1906 or 1916*.

along its side while Winnipeg-St. Boniface leaped ahead in population.<sup>3</sup> When the Canadian Pacific transcontinental swept across the prairies two years later, it left whole new towns in its wake: Brandon, Virden, Moosomin, Regina, Moose Jaw, Swift Current, Medicine Hat, Calgary, and many others.

This sudden appearance of towns was caused by the fact that railways facilitated the use of recent advances in agricultural technology. Between 1870 and 1914 the crude subsistence agriculture of the Red River valley was transformed into a highly mechanized enterprise.<sup>4</sup> The prairie pioneer was no self-sufficient farmer but an agricultural industrialist engaged in commercial trading. He produced a large surplus of grain and was a heavy consumer of manufactured goods. He needed grain shipping depots, farm implements, hardware goods, wagons, harnesses, lumber and other supplies. He needed banking services to finance these investments. He needed consumer goods that he could not produce himself: clothing and staple foodstuffs. As a result, every rural community needed a town, both as a shipping point that gathered surplus grain, and as a distribution point that fanned manufactured goods back into the countryside. To fulfill these functions it was imperative that towns develop along railway lines. And because improving agricultural technology and expanding railway networks continually increased the commercial nature of farming, towns became increasingly important to the settlement process.<sup>5</sup>

Armed with this knowledge, enterprising men realized that great profits might await the professional town builder and promoter. Their hope of course was that the town would not stagnate, but would explode into a thriving frontier metropolis. The usual scheme was to purchase vacant land, divide it into lots, advertise the surrounding country as suitable arable land, and grow rich by selling town lots to merchants. The merchants in turn hoped to reap a fortune from outfitting new settlers.

The urban pioneers knew that the greatest profits in trade and real estate would go to those towns located on the proposed transcontinental. What the Pembina Branch had done for Emerson, Winnipeg, and Selkirk, the Canadian Pacific Railway promised to do for many other towns. Communities along the proposed route were soon invaded by speculators and profiteers. Selkirk, twenty miles north of Winnipeg, was selected as the major rail centre, and the town was enjoying a sharp boom by 1880.

The decision spelled doom to Winnipeggers, but they marshalled their forces and declared war on the smaller town. City council promised the

<sup>3</sup> Although both towns were founded before 1878 (Emerson in 1873, Selkirk in 1875) neither showed any promise of development until the railway arrived.

<sup>4</sup> In the United States it took 61 hours of labour to produce one acre of wheat in 1860. By the 1890s the same task could be accomplished in three and one half hours. Ray GINGER, *Age of Excess* (London: Macmillan, 1965), p. 38.

<sup>5</sup> This is supported by the fact that in 1881 only about 8% of the population in the prairie provinces lived in incorporated urban places, but by 1911 this had increased to 35%. During the same period the rural population increased from 108,000 to 860,000. These and subsequent figures on rural-urban distribution are all taken from *Census of Canada 1931*, Vol. 1, Table 7a.

Canadian Pacific Railway a bridge over the Red River, a \$200,000 subsidy, free land, and property tax exemptions forever in return for the main line, a station, and rail shops.<sup>6</sup> Neither Selkirk nor Emerson could match this generosity, but Winnipeg held yet another advantage. The Hudson's Bay Company owned 1,750 acres of land near the city and the majority share holder, Donald Smith, was also a major share holder in the Canadian Pacific Railway. Smith had the power to help the Winnipeg entrepreneurs and he was happy to use it. The city secured the transcontinental and Smith's company immediately sold its real estate to Canadian Pacific for \$2,000,000.<sup>7</sup> The railway told Selkirk it could also remain on the line if it offered the company a subsidy of \$125,000. The town was unable to raise the money and was bypassed.<sup>8</sup> Emerson tried to promote its own railway and went bankrupt.

While those towns languished, Winnipeg became a glittering example of successful town promotion. Between 1871 and 1881 its permanent population swelled from 1,000 to 9,000. Perhaps another 10,000 transients roamed its streets in 1881. Real estate prices skyrocketed. Lots changed hands with amazing frequency and soon ranged from \$20,000 to \$40,000 in price.<sup>9</sup> Stories of quick and fabulous fortunes splattered the newspaper. Speculators bought farmlands nearby and they bought them far away. Maps were falsified. Realtors sent unscrupulous agents to sell Winnipeg lots in Ontario. The speculation fever quickly spread to other towns. Portage la Prairie, with a population of about 1,000, alone had thirty real estate offices.<sup>10</sup>

While some men rode to fortune on real estate, others made money outfitting pioneers. During the settlement period of each prairie district frontier conditions often made merchandising particularly profitable; there was a large and rapid influx of rural pioneers all in immediate need of supplies and town services, and all having ready cash, in varying amounts, to pay for them. During the 1881 boom a shortage of farm supplies had caused prices to rise sharply and aspiring merchants poured into the towns to meet the demand. One man who took full advantage of the situation was J.H. Ashdown. Arriving in Winnipeg in 1869 and setting up a tinsmith shop in the back of a liquor store, he soon turned to selling pioneers much needed hardwares. By 1881 Ashdown was on his way to becoming one of the largest wholesalers in Winnipeg and one of the city's most ardent pro-

<sup>6</sup> R.C. BELLAN, "Rails Across the Red—Selkirk or Winnipeg," *Papers Read Before the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba*, Series 3 No. 17 (1960-61), pp. 74-76; and W.L. MORTON, *Manitoba: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957) p. 194.

<sup>7</sup> BELLAN, "Rails," pp. 73-4 and 77; and J.M.S. CARELESS, "The Development of the Winnipeg Business Community, 1870-1890," *Royal Society of Canada Transactions*, Series 4 Vol. 8 (1970), pp. 245-6.

<sup>8</sup> BELLAN, "Rails," p. 76.

<sup>9</sup> Articles in *Manitoba Free Press*, 1881.

<sup>10</sup> Margaret McWILLIAMS, *Manitoba Milestones* (Toronto: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1928), p. 126.

moters.<sup>11</sup> Other merchants began buying Western grain and selling it in the East, foreshadowing the appearance of the Winnipeg Grain Exchange in 1887. The merchants needed farmers to keep them in business and through advertising, every town urged pioneers to settle nearby and not within the economic hinterland of a rival.<sup>12</sup>

Existing towns had failed to match Winnipeg's promotional success, but when rumours of proposed Canadian Pacific Railway branch lines began to circulate, entrepreneurs thought that a brand new town might rise to equal prominence. A syndicate of businessmen laid out the uninhabited town site of Rapid City, and by 1881 speculators were gridding town sites everywhere. Farmers joined in the frenzy. They threw their plows aside, divided their homesteads into lots, and opened real estate offices. Rapid City, Clark's Crossing, Mountain City, Minnedosa, Dominion City, Gladstone—all were designed to fill the pockets of hopeful town builders. Jim Coolican in Winnipeg specialized in selling lots in nonexistent towns throughout southern Manitoba and apparently did well promoting a fantasy named Cartwright.<sup>13</sup>

These schemes shrank to insignificance, however, compared with those of the Canadian Pacific Railway, the greatest prairie town builder of all. Although the company had learned from the Selkirk-Winnipeg rivalry that it was profitable to play one town against another, a new idea now guided their plans. Why run the transcontinental across the northern prairies where town building profiteers already lurked in ambush? Why not drive through the empty south, build new towns, and share the profits with no one? This, argues historian Pierre Berton, was the reasoning of J.J. Hill, who in 1881 convinced fellow syndicate members to change the route by some 200 miles.<sup>14</sup> The plan was sound. The company already owned 25 million acres of prairie land, a subsidy from the federal government; and it could decide arbitrarily the location of yards, shops, and stations.

By changing the route, however, the company did not completely avoid the speculators, largely because company employees leaked proposed town locations to friends. It was known, for example, that a divisional point would be needed near Grand Valley, some one hundred miles west of Winnipeg, and speculators soon secured land in that vicinity. Dougald McVicar settled on the proposed town site and at first the company was willing to buy his land. When McVicar and his brother held out for a larger sum, the company simply moved two miles west and built the

<sup>11</sup> A brief biography appears in F.H. SCHOFIELD, *The Story of Manitoba*, Vol. 2 (Winnipeg: S.J. Clarke, 1913), pp. 721-723.

<sup>12</sup> Much of the farm land immediately surrounding Winnipeg had been established as métis reserves. The city convinced the federal government to liquidate the reserves, throwing them open to pioneer settlement. Years later, in 1887, the Board of Trade created the Joint Committee on Vacant Lands to lure farmers onto unsettled homesteads.

<sup>13</sup> Pierre Berton, *The Last Spike; The Great Railway 1881-1885* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971), pp. 60-61.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19. Berton presents a convincing rejection of traditional interpretations of the route change.

station.<sup>15</sup> Grand Valley tried to compete with the booming new town of Brandon, but was destined to fail; no one was going to buy lots in a town where the train refused to stop. The Brandon story was repeated many times. Whenever speculators bought land near a proposed town site, the company simply moved away from the crowd and onto land it already owned.

Halfway across the prairies, however, the Canadian Pacific Railway confronted a speculator of considerable political influence. In 1882 Edgar Dewdney, the federally appointed Lieutenant-Governor of the North West Territories, was authorized to select the site for a new capital city.<sup>16</sup> Speculators were guessing that its location would be the scenic Qu'Appelle valley where water and wood were plentiful, but Dewdney and a few associates were buying up Hudson's Bay Company lands on a dry treeless plain to the south. It was one of those holdings, a certain Section 26, that Dewdney selected for the capital. The Canadian Pacific Railway had other plans, suggesting a location on its own land to the east. To satisfy both political friends, the Macdonald government arranged a compromise; half the capital was built on Section 26 and half on adjacent railway lands. The town of Regina was thus born. The Canadian Pacific Railway, however, was shrewd enough to locate the station well on its own half and consequently, it soon outstripped Dewdney in real estate sales. Dewdney retaliated by pressuring Ottawa to establish all public buildings on his side. Again a compromise was reached and Regina's government buildings were strung out for over a mile.<sup>17</sup> Unwilling to compete with Dewdney any longer, the Canadian Pacific Railway moved its divisional point some 40 miles west where it established the rival town of Moose Jaw. This was a direct blow to the fledging capital for it thwarted hopes for early branch line construction out of the city. Not even Dewdney's successful attempt to wrestle the headquarters of the North West Mounted Police away from Fort Macleod compensated for the loss.

From Moose Jaw the railway rolled westward, dashing the hopes of speculators along the way and throwing up new towns behind it. In 1883 the line reached the Mounted Police outpost of Fort Calgary, established in 1875. Here speculators squatted on nearby Section 14, as Section 15 had been reserved by the government for a Police horse pasture. Under the Canadian Pacific Railway charter, however, the company was entitled to assume ownership of any odd numbered section and it easily persuaded parliament to revoke the horse pasture reserve.<sup>18</sup> The station was built in the very middle of Section 15.

<sup>15</sup> MacDONALD COLEMAN, *The Face of Yesterday; The Story of Brandon, Manitoba* (Brandon: Jr. Chamber of Commerce, 1957), pp. 12-13; and BERTON, *Last Spike*, pp. 25-6.

<sup>16</sup> The North West Territories included all of present day Alberta and Saskatchewan which were not created as provinces until 1905. The capital had been established at Battleford in 1877, but with a change in the Canadian Pacific Railway route, the decision was made to locate the capital on the railway.

<sup>17</sup> For a more detailed account see Earl DRAKE, *Regina, The Queen City* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1955), pp. 10-13; John W. POWERS, *History of Regina* (Regina: by author, 1887); BERTON, *Last Spike*, pp. 113-24.

<sup>18</sup> Grant MacEWAN, *Calgary Cavalcade; From Fort to Fortune* (Edmonton: Institute of Applied Art, 1958), p. 43.

The speculators who crowded along the transcontinental actually benefitted the Canadian Pacific Railway. Though unable to realize a profit on the initial founding of the towns, they still had faith in the growth potential of prairie urban centres. As a result, they were Canadian Pacific's first customers, immediately buying thousands of lots and touching off speculative booms in Calgary, Medicine Hat, Moose Jaw, Regina, and Brandon. In Calgary, for example, the squatters violently protested the location of the train station, but within the first week of sales they bought 260 Calgary lots, paying \$300 to \$450 for each.<sup>19</sup> To sell its urban real estate, the Canadian Pacific Railway created a subsidiary, the Canada North-West Land Company, which bought all 47 transcontinental town sites for \$13.5 million.<sup>20</sup>

In spite of the town building mania of the 1878-1883 period, the dreams of the urban pioneers were largely unrealized. Dozens of would-be towns were never built and those that were failed to grow. By 1901 only one prairie town boasted more than 6,000 residents. The Winnipeg area, with a population of 45,000, stood alone as the successful realization of speculators and merchants.

The first setback came in 1882 when Winnipeg realtors attempted to promote the village of Edmonton, 200 miles removed from the proposed Canadian Pacific line. Lots which the Edmonton Bulletin evaluated at \$20 were advertised for \$300<sup>21</sup> and none were bought. It was the first indication that spiralling real estate prices were based on speculative insanity rather than real values. In 1883 Winnipeg real estate prices fell sharply and many millionaires discovered that their fortunes were only on paper.

The problem was that most regions had few farmers; without farmers, prairie towns were stripped of their reason for existence. Between 1881 and 1891 the entire prairie population increased from 118,000 to 251,000. Most of this growth occurred in southern Manitoba, and it was there where new towns emerged in the late 1880s and the 1890s. Rail spurs criss-crossed the region and railway-built towns emerged to serve the rural pioneers. Though not entirely absent, the speculative building and promotional craze of 1881 was not a prominent feature of town development, largely because urban dwellers finally realized that the incoming trickle of settlers was not likely to become a flood. It was a period of low grain prices and a time when most pioneers preferred the free homesteads of the northern United States. As a result, new towns appeared more gradually, and grew more slowly. By 1901 only six of the Manitoba towns established after 1883 had populations exceeding 1,000. Urban growth in the Territories was even less extensive. The early speculation and railway construction that caused centres like Calgary and Regina to jump from the prairie into bustling little towns of 2,000 quickly faded. The southern prairies were experiencing drought and the urban hinterlands were put to a much

<sup>19</sup> *Calgary Herald*, Jan. 16, 1884, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> *The Canada North-West Land Company* (Calgary: unpublished file prepared by Glenbow-Alberta Institute), p. 2. The Canadian Pacific Railway itself continued to sell branch-line town lots and the Land Co. was eventually brought under direct control.

<sup>21</sup> *Edmonton Bulletin*, April 20, 1882.



less intensive use than farming—cattle ranching—and although ranchers needed shipping facilities, goods, and services, they were too few and thinly spread to stimulate much urban growth. By 1901 Calgary, the largest ranching town, could claim only 4,400 residents.

The two most important prairie communities to emerge during this period were Lethbridge, centre of the new coal mining industry in southern Alberta, and Strathcona. The founding of the latter town provoked the most bitter urban rivalry of the 1890s. In 1891 the construction of a Canadian Pacific Railway line from Calgary to Edmonton began. From the north bank of the Saskatchewan, Edmonton businessmen waited in eager anticipation. Denied the railway ten years earlier, it now promised to bring settlers, trade, and real estate profits. They watched the railway crawl to the southern bank of the river—and stop. Here the Canadian Pacific Railway proceeded to build the rival town of Strathcona. Edmonton was enraged. Frank Oliver's *Bulletin* accused the company of trying to destroy the older town and Oliver was right. In 1892 the company persuaded the federal government to transfer the important land titles office from Edmonton to Strathcona. Edmonton businessmen attempted to prevent the move by physical force and armed Mounties were needed to supervise the transfer.<sup>22</sup> The federal government solved the conflict only by opening land offices in both towns. For years Edmonton fought for a railway bridge across the valley but without success until it raised \$25,000 to help finance the project in 1902.<sup>23</sup> The completion of the bridge ended the rivalry and in 1912 the towns amalgamated. The founding of towns on opposite sides of a river occurred many times over, but the rivalries it generated usually disappeared when bridges facilitated easy transportation and allowed the towns to grow as one.

Except in Lethbridge and Strathcona, however, urban development remained slow throughout the 1890s. Towns along the transcontinental sat quietly on the empty prairie and experienced no significant growth for a full twenty years after their founding.

Between 1900 and 1916 the tranquility was shattered. These years witnessed the most dramatic migration of settlers in Canadian history; the population of the prairie provinces swelled from 420,000 to 1,700,000. The town building and promotion mania of 1881 was revived on a grand scale, but this time with justification. Thousands of new farming communities needed the rail centres, the services, and the goods that towns could provide. After 1900, over 600 new towns with populations of at least 100 mushroomed from the prairie. Hundreds of villages cropped up between them. It was Canada's greatest period of railway expansion and by 1916 steel rails served nearly all the prairie communities. The railway companies founded most of the towns and the Canadian Pacific Railway alone built hundreds of villages,<sup>24</sup> mostly in Alberta and Saskatchewan.

<sup>22</sup> An account of the event is given in the *Edmonton Bulletin*, June 20 and 23, 1892.

<sup>23</sup> James G. MACGREGOR, *Edmonton: A History* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1967), pp. 122-3.

<sup>24</sup> The Canadian Pacific Railway claimed that it established a total of nearly 800 towns in the prairie provinces and that total sales of urban real estate amounted to \$16 mil-

The growth of the new towns tended to follow a clear pattern, one that characterized many pre-1900 villages as well. As the town was essential to rural settlement, it was often founded before a single farmer arrived in the area, or else developed simultaneously with the first influx of rural pioneers. It was born with a train station and a grain elevator, to which a general store was quickly added. The general store offered the advantage of providing a variety of different goods to a small population. As settlers poured onto nearby homesteads, the general store was usually duplicated and then supplemented by more specialized businesses: an implement dealer, harness and wagon shop, lumber yard, hardware store, bank, and blacksmith shop. At this point the townspeople themselves required a school, a post office, and a livery stable, and were soon able to support less essential services: a café, barber shop and "pool hall," a hotel and beer parlour, a newspaper, and churches. The original general stores usually began to specialize in groceries. One other business that often appeared was the speculator's real estate office. Cleverville in Alberta, with a population of about 100, had two offices by 1910.<sup>25</sup> This pattern of town development was usually very rapid, depending always on the rate of farm settlement in the surrounding countryside.<sup>26</sup>

Since the railway companies founded most of the new urban centres, entrepreneurs concentrated almost exclusively on promoting the towns into teeming cities. This phenomenon—the rise of the large prairie city—was the most spectacular development of the 1900-1916 period. (See Table I.) The urban population of the prairies increased from 103,000 to 606,000, primarily on the strength of explosive growth in five centres. Calgary leaped from 4,400 to 56,500; Edmonton from 5,500 to 53,800; and Saskatoon from 113 to 21,000. Regina skyrocketed from 2,200 to 30,200 in 1911, and then declined to 26,100 over the next five years. No city, however, paralleled the rise of Winnipeg-St. Boniface. Already a substantial city of 45,000 in 1901, it catapulted to 187,200 over the next fifteen years.

The growth of the Western cities was even more remarkable in view of the fact that the period also represented the most rapid advance of rural settlement in Canadian history. Although hundreds of thousands of new settlers flocked to the prairie homesteads, the cities and towns grew even faster. Urban dwellers comprised 25 percent of the prairie provinces' population in 1901; 35 percent in 1911. (See Table II.)

lion. DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC RELATIONS, *Canadian Pacific Facts and Figures* (Montréal: Canadian Pacific Foundation Library, 1946), p. 238. The majority of these towns were probably mere sidings where the population never reached 100. The Glenbow-Alberta Archives holds an unpublished list of 400 towns in which the company actually sold real estate. It also seems probable that the \$16 million sales figure does not include Canada North-West Co. sales which were likely higher. Even less is known about the town building activities of the Canadian Northern and Grand Trunk Pacific Railways.

<sup>25</sup> CLEVERVILLE PIONEER CLUB HISTORY BOOK COMMITTEE, *Cleverville-Champion 1905-1970* (Champion, Alta.: Champion History Committee, 1970), p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> An examination of local history studies reveals a close similarity in the growth patterns of small prairie towns.



Table I

## PRAIRIE PROVINCES 1871-1931; GROWTH OF THE LARGEST METROPOLITAN AREAS

Year	Winnipeg	Calgary	Edmonton	Regina	Saskatoon
1871	1,058				
1881	9,286				
1891	27,192	3,876			
1901	44,972	4,392	5,547	2,249	113
1906	95,272	13,573	12,717	6,169	3,011
1911	144,040	43,704	31,064	30,213	12,004
1916	187,251	56,514	53,846	26,127	21,048
1921	193,662	63,305	58,821	34,432	25,739
1931	243,228	83,761	79,197	53,209	43,291

Year	Moose Jaw	Brandon	Lethbridge	Medicine Hat	Prince Albert
1871					
1881					
1891					
1901	1,558	5,620	2,072	1,570	1,785
1906	6,249	10,408	2,313	3,020	3,005
1911	13,823	13,839	9,035	5,608	6,254
1916	16,934	15,215	9,435	9,272	6,436
1921	19,285	15,397	11,097	9,634	7,352
1931	21,299	17,082	13,489	10,300	9,905

SOURCE: *Census of Canada 1931*, Vol. 2; *Census of Prairie Provinces 1906*, *Census of Prairie Provinces 1916*.

Table II

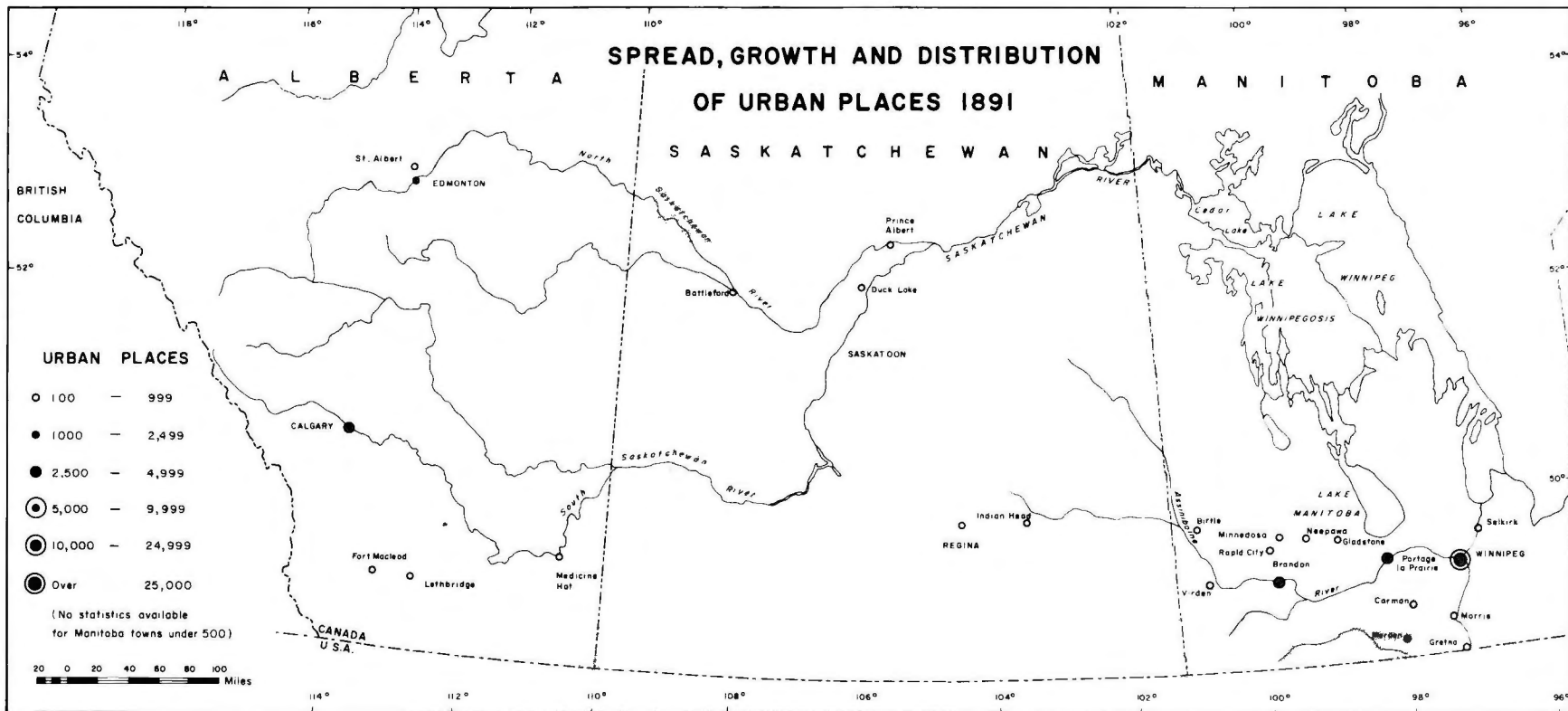
PRAIRIE PROVINCES 1871-1931; RURAL AND URBAN \* POPULATION GROWTH  
(in thousands)

	Northwest Territories		Manitoba		Total Prairies				
	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	% Urban		
1871	48	—	25	1	72	1	1		
1881	56	—	52	10	108	10	8		
1891	95	4	111	41	206	45	18		
	Alberta		Saskatchewan						
	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban					
1901	54	19	77	14	185	70	316	103	25
1911	237	138	361	131	261	200	859	470	35
1921	366	223	539	219	349	262	1,253	704	36
1931	453	279	631	291	384	316	1,468	886	37

\* Incorporated villages, towns, and cities as recorded in *Census*.

SOURCE: *Census of Canada 1931*, Vol. 1, Table 7a.

# SPREAD, GROWTH AND DISTRIBUTION OF URBAN PLACES 1891



The growth of the cities, like that of the towns, was an economic response to massive rural settlement. Just as farmers depended on towns, so in turn towns needed cities. Before 1900 when the prairie population was scarcely 400,000 and concentrated in southern Manitoba, there was need for only one large city, but as settlers spread west, the economic need for major transportation centres quickly grew. Central distribution points were necessary to receive large volumes of manufactured goods from the East which could be shipped to the towns in smaller quantities. Grain and cattle returned from the towns and were shipped to market on the transcontinental. These major distribution and shipping points needed a battery of transportation facilities: grain terminals, stockyards, warehouses, wholesale businesses, vast rail yards, roundhouses, an locomotive shops—establishments that formed the nucleus for a prairie city.

Cities were also needed to house industrial activities. Transportation costs to Eastern Canada were so high that it was often profitable to increase the value per unit weight of Western products by reducing their bulkiness—to ship flour and packed meat rather than wheat and cattle.<sup>27</sup> Food processing immediately became an important industry and flour mills, meat packing houses, breweries, distilleries, dairy product factories, and cold storage plants sprang up around major rail centres.

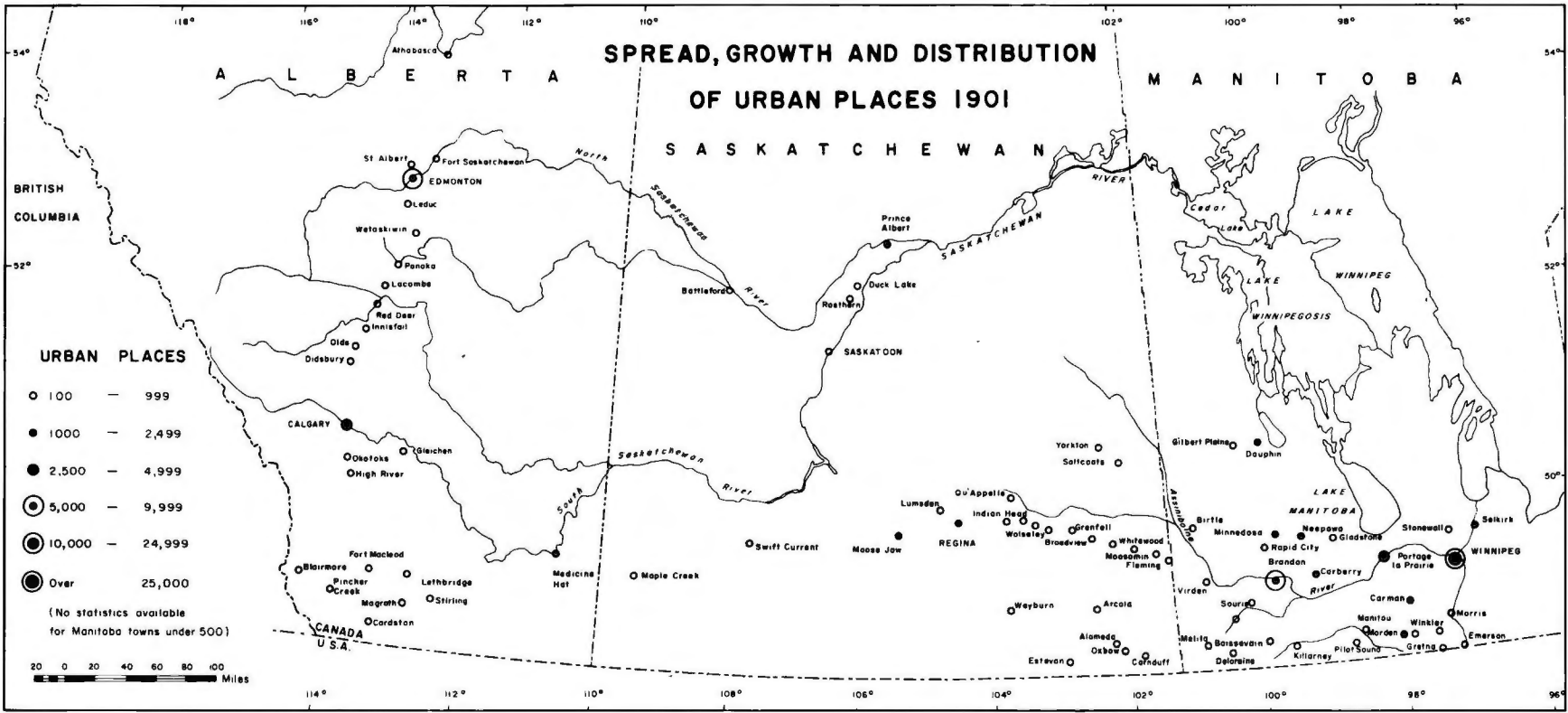
It was also profitable to manufacture certain commodities for the prairie market: simple iron and steel products to supply farmers, blacksmiths, and the railway construction boom. A few sawmills developed in Edmonton and Winnipeg, and farm wagons, furniture, housing fixtures, and other wooden items were produced. Leather was made into harness and infantile clothing industries developed. Between 1901 and 1911 the value of goods manufactured in Winnipeg rose from \$9 million to \$39.4 million; in Calgary from \$0.6 million to \$7.8 million; and in Edmonton from \$0.2 million to \$4.5 million.<sup>28</sup>

To achieve all this armies of construction workers were required to build the facilities, large banks to finance them, and rising office buildings to manage them. An extensive chain of retail businesses were needed to serve the new inhabitants and the booming frontier city soon became a magnet that drew in teachers, doctors, lawyers, entertainers, barbers, cooks, launderers, policemen, engineers, accountants, prostitutes, saloon keepers, and clergymen. By 1911 the economic functions of the Western city were well defined. At that time approximately 25 percent of the working people in each of the four largest cities were engaged in professional or service occupations; 20 percent in trade and merchandising; 20 percent in building construction; 15 percent in railway transportation; 15 percent in manufacturing; and 5 percent in finance. Of those engaged in manu-

<sup>27</sup> New technological developments made these industries feasible for Western manufacturers. The refrigerator car, developed in 1878, meant that slaughtered meat could be shipped East without spoiling. The La Croix purifier, chilled steel rollers, and other technological improvements gave rise to the large centrally located flour mill and eliminated the small local grist mills.

<sup>28</sup> *Census of Canada 1931*, Vol. 3, Table 11.

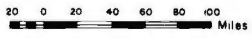
# SPREAD, GROWTH AND DISTRIBUTION OF URBAN PLACES 1901



### URBAN PLACES

- 100 — 999
- 1000 — 2,499
- 2,500 — 4,999
- 5,000 — 9,999
- 10,000 — 24,999
- Over 25,000

(No statistics available for Manitoba towns under 500)



facturing, 30 percent were producing iron and steel products; 25 percent processed foods; 20 percent wooden products; and 10 percent textiles and clothing.<sup>29</sup>

By 1916 Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Regina, Edmonton, and Calgary had clearly emerged as the five dominant urban centres. Though in 1900 it was not altogether clear which towns would expand into booming cities and which would not. The outcome was largely determined by the foresight, ambition, and promotional skill of each City Council and Board of Trade to attract those facilities most crucial to urban growth.

A transcontinental railway was the first prerequisite for a thriving shipping and distribution point, and the towns along the Canadian Pacific Railway already had this advantage. When the Canadian Northern began to drive to the Pacific in 1902, however, ambitious towns to the north had their chance. Saskatoon jumped at the opportunity. In 1901 it was a sleepy hamlet of 113 people situated on a spur line from Regina. The hinterland supported only a few ranchers. In 1903 a large contingent of English settlers passed through the village and local merchants made a killing outfitting the party. With this taste of quick profits they were determined to develop an extensive trade area by attracting the railway.

The Canadian Northern Railway had planned to by-pass Saskatoon but by pressuring the company and finally offering \$25,000 towards the construction of a railway bridge, the city fathers ensured its link with the transcontinental system.<sup>30</sup> Further west, Edmonton merchants had already learned from the Klondike gold rush of 1898 that outfitting pioneers was profitable business. They enticed the railway with 68 acres of free land in return for the line, major yards and shops.<sup>31</sup> In hot pursuit of the Canadian Northern Railway came the Grand Trunk Pacific, Western Canada's third transcontinental, and again Saskatoon was ignored. The local entrepreneurs staged such a protest that the railway finally agreed to connect with the town. Rather than running through its heart as Saskatoon realtors had hoped, the company purchased nearly 1,000 acres to the south, built the transcontinental through it, and offered its own lots for sale.<sup>32</sup> When the company ran a branch line to Regina in 1911 where it was building major shops, it skirted the outskirts of that city as well. Edmonton was determined to prevent a similar occurrence and City Council offered the Grand Trunk Pacific \$100,000 and tax exemptions if it ran the transcontinental through the city limits, and made Edmonton the major divisional point between Winnipeg and the Pacific.<sup>33</sup>

Though the main lines were a crucial step in achieving city stature, they did not guarantee success. To become a major distribution and ship-

<sup>29</sup> *Census of Canada 1911*, Vol. 6, Table 6.

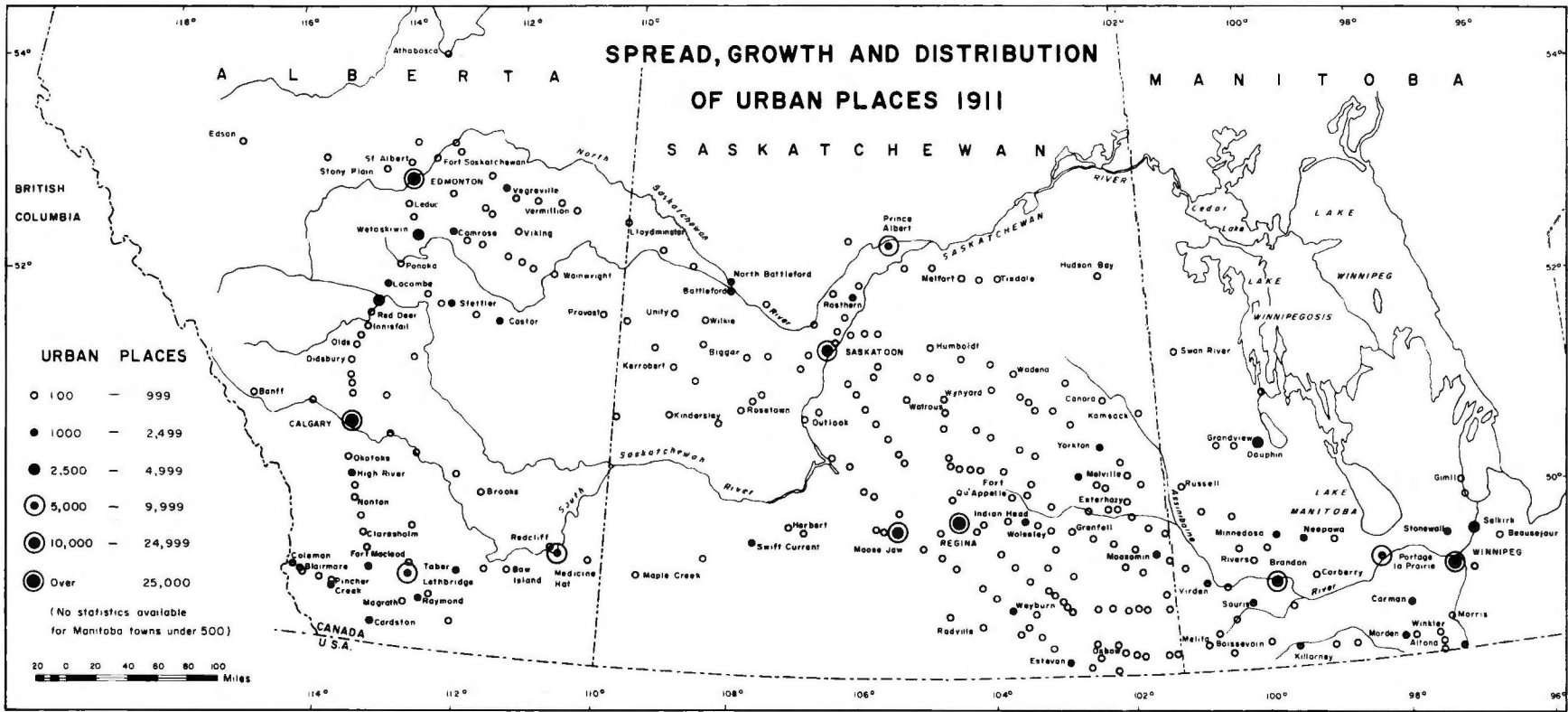
<sup>30</sup> MEN OF THE CITY, *Narratives of Saskatoon 1882-1912* (Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan, 1912), p. 71.

<sup>31</sup> *Edmonton Wheat Belt, Information for Intending Settlers* (Town of Edmonton pamphlet, 1903), p. 43.

<sup>32</sup> Bruce PEEL, *The Saskatoon Story* (Saskatoon: Pamphlet published by author, 1952), p. 53.

<sup>33</sup> MACGREGOR, *Edmonton*, p. 155.

# SPREAD, GROWTH AND DISTRIBUTION OF URBAN PLACES 1911





ping point, branch lines were needed: important ones, and as many as possible. It was the early realization of this fact that enabled Winnipeg businessmen to transform their town into a metropolis long before 1916. As early as 1880 City Council and the Board of Trade began pestering the Canadian Pacific Railway to run spur lines out of the city and when the company failed to respond quickly enough, Winnipeg entrepreneurs screamed for the removal of its monopoly privilege.<sup>34</sup>

By 1885 steel rails sprang from the city in five directions and connected with every railway in southern Manitoba. As a result, Winnipeg swelled to such an important market in its own right that neither the Canadian Northern nor the Grand Trunk Pacific could afford to by-pass it. As was its custom, however, the late-arriving Grand Trunk Pacific avoided high real estate prices by building its yards on the outskirts of the city, giving rise to the town of Transcona in 1908. The Canadian Pacific later established additional yards in the town.

The addition of two new transcontinentals benefitted Winnipeg immensely. By 1916 tracks entered the city from fifteen directions;<sup>35</sup> every line of steel between Eastern and Western Canada passed through the city, and this fact alone ensured its rise as the metropolitan capital of the prairie provinces. Its sprawling rail yards were the largest in Canada and in 1909 Winnipeg handled more grain than any city in the world.<sup>36</sup> Its wholesalers were the largest in Western Canada. It became the regional head office for nearly all Eastern based firms. Neighbouring St. Boniface was moulded into an industrial suburb where giant flour mills, meat packing plants, and other industries crowded against knots of converging rail lines. By 1911 Winnipeg was the fourth largest manufacturing city in the nation, accounting for half of the entire prairie output.<sup>37</sup> Between 1900 and 1912 building permits rose in value from \$1.4 million to \$20.5 million; bank clearings from \$100 million to \$1.5 billion.<sup>38</sup> Winnipeg, Canada's third largest city, owed most of this economic growth to its strategic rail connections.

Further west, a multitude of towns battled for the new branch lines that were spreading everywhere, tempting the railway companies with promises of free land, money, or tax exemptions. Those that were most successful duplicated Winnipeg's economic development on a smaller scale. Edmonton acquired several lines between 1905 and 1910, and the Board of Trade happily announced that during the same period the annual trade value of the hinterland had spiralled from \$3 million to \$20 million.<sup>39</sup> By 1916 from Edmonton went no less than eleven rail lines into the arable

<sup>34</sup> CARELESS, "Winnipeg," p. 252.

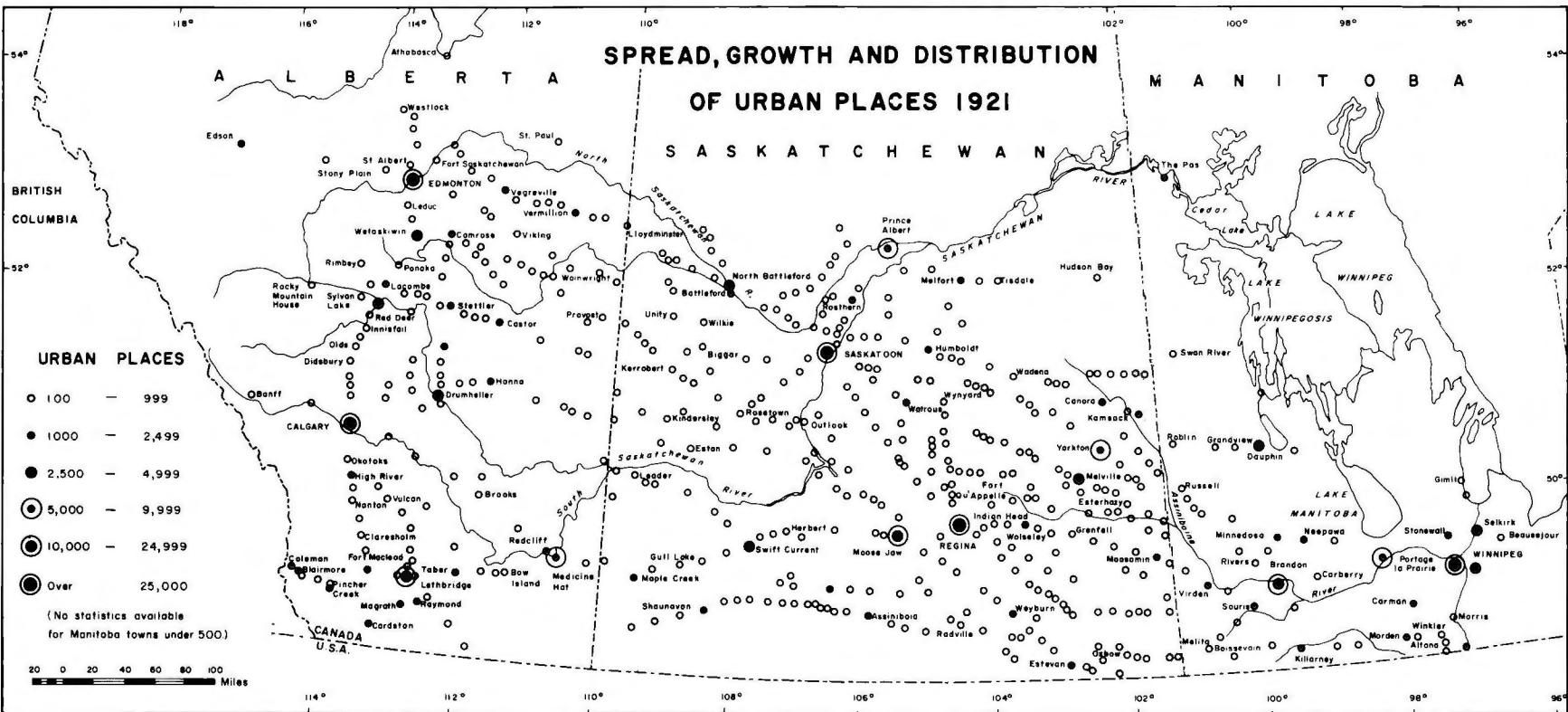
<sup>35</sup> This and subsequent information on numbers of branch lines are taken from M.L. BLADEN, "Construction of Railways in Canada to the Year 1885," *Contributions to Canadian Economics*, Vol. 5 (1932); and M.L. BLADEN, "Construction of Railways in Canada, Part II, From 1885 to 1931," *Contributions to Canadian Economics*, Vol. 7 (1934).

<sup>36</sup> "Winnipeg, the Gateway of the Canadian West," *Canadian Annual Review* (1912), p. 79.

<sup>37</sup> *Census of Canada 1931*, Vol. 3, Table 11.

<sup>38</sup> "Winnipeg, the Gateway," pp. 78 and 82.

<sup>39</sup> *Canadian Annual Review* (1910), p. 570.



lands of northern Alberta. Saskatoon, led by Allan Bowerman, who was rapidly accumulating a fortune in city real estate, fought for and acquired seven rail connections into the hinterland, and emerged as the trade capital of northern Saskatchewan. Although railways left Regina for eight different points, the city faced stiff competition from nearby Moose Jaw. Its early establishment as a major Canadian Pacific Railway divisional point made it the centre for seven lines. Stealing what Regina regarded as their rightful population, Moose Jaw soared from 1,600 people in 1901 to 17,000 in 1916. Calgary's rail lines were extremely important if few in number, and it became Canadian Pacific's major rail centre between Winnipeg and the Pacific, a position greatly enhanced by the construction of the huge Ogden Shops in 1912.

Railways could offer cities more than branch lines. Calgary became the headquarters for the Canadian Pacific Railway's irrigation projects in 1895 and, in 1912, the head office of its Department of Natural Resources.<sup>40</sup> Special freight rates were another eagerly sought advantage. Regina, for example, secured rates in 1902 which made it cheaper to ship Ontario built farm machinery to a village in southern Saskatchewan via the city instead of directly to the village.<sup>41</sup> Winnipeg's ability to secure freight rates lower than any prairie city helped her wholesalers to compete successfully throughout the West.

The cities were not merely content to let their multiplying rail lines serve as natural lures for new industries; they fought for them by offering economic incentives to intending manufacturers. Calgary tempted them with ten-year tax exemptions and cheap land: from \$200 to \$800 an acre.<sup>42</sup> Saskatoon tried to provide cheap labour. City Council offered to buy a large block of land for an industrial park that would give free lots to manufacturers. Commissioner Bell of the Industrial League planned to provide the necessary labour by building a suburb for Slavic immigrants and he actually formed a company called Toil Corporation Limited.<sup>43</sup> Other cities created promotional organizations. In 1906 the Winnipeg Development and Industrial Bureau was formed to attract manufacturers, and by 1914 it had gobbled up \$112,000 in municipal subsidies in the attempt.<sup>44</sup> Nor was the campaign for industry restricted to the larger centres. Even "Far-Famed" Broadview, Saskatchewan, with a population of 700, offered economic incentives to industry.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Included under the Department were farm lands, coal, timber, oil, natural gas, and irrigation. The Canadian Pacific Railway land office at Calgary was the most important one in Western Canada.

<sup>41</sup> DRAKE, *Regina*, p. 111.

<sup>42</sup> *Calgary, Alberta, The Manufacturing, Jobbing and Commercial Center of the Canadian West* (City of Calgary pamphlet, 1911), p. 18.

<sup>43</sup> PEEL, *Saskatoon*, pp. 74-5.

<sup>44</sup> Alan F.J. ARTISBISE, "Advertising Winnipeg: The Campaign for Immigrants and Industry, 1874-1914," *Papers Read Before the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba*, Series 3 No. 27 (1970-71), pp. 98-99.

<sup>45</sup> *All About Far-Famed Broadview, Saskatchewan* (Board of Trade pamphlet, 1911), p. 6.

Energy was crucial to these industry-hungry towns, and Boards of Trade followed the expansion of local reserves with sharp eyes. When the City of Winnipeg initiated public ownership of electricity in 1906, it did so at the urging of the Board of Trade which wanted to control a cheap source of power for manufacturers.<sup>46</sup> Other cities took similar action.

Much of the campaign to win settlers and industries was waged in a great propoganda war. Pamphlets were a relatively inexpensive means of advertising and hundreds of prairie towns bombarded North Americans with the printed word. In 1906 the Calgary Board of Trade asked City Council for \$15,000 to spend on advertising and the following year it churned out 24,000 pamphlets.<sup>47</sup> Regina created a Publicity Commission and Saskatoon appointed a full-time commissioner to advertise the city. Between 1907 and 1910 Winnipeg's Industrial Bureau assaulted the reading public with two million pieces of printed material.<sup>48</sup> That city was soon publishing a periodical entitled *The Emigrant* in order to lure new residents.

Each pamphlet extolled its city's virtues and discredited all rivals. There was Calgary, "the most prosperous and fastest growing city in the world;" Winnipeg, "the Chicago of Canada;" Lethbridge, "the great manufacturing centre;" Alix, "the rail transportation capital of the West;" and a hundred others like these. Champion, Alberta declared that "of all the thriving towns... destined to become industrial centres of the future, none [had] grown to such importance, in so brief a time, as Champion."<sup>49</sup> Its population at the time was less than 400!

To attract farmers to the hinterland towns made absurd claims often suggesting that their soil would produce 50 to 100 bushels of wheat per acre annually. In an attempt to attract livestock-raisers to the foothills, one Calgary pamphlet printed a picture of grazing animals with a caption reading "Happy Alberta Horses."<sup>50</sup> Agricultural fairs were started to advertise the productivity of local farmlands. Winnipeg's Western Canada Immigration Association provided free tours of the prairies for editors of farm magazines and foreign colonization agents. Small towns dropped bundles of pamphlets in city train stations. The pamphlets issued by the small towns urged farmers to settle in the immediate vicinity, while those originating in the large branch line centres like Edmonton or Regina called for pioneers to settle anywhere within a one hundred mile radius. Winnipeg, with its vast economic influence, often advertised farm land all across the West.

After convincing the reader that its city was destined to become one of the largest farming, rail, jobbing, and manufacturing centres in Canada, the pamphlet usually drew attention to such intangible benefits

<sup>46</sup> *Canadian Annual Review* (1905), p. 190.

<sup>47</sup> *Canadian Annual Review* (1906), p. 268; and (1908), p. 147.

<sup>48</sup> ARTISBISE, "Advertising," p. 99.

<sup>49</sup> *Grain Golden Champion, Alberta, Canada* (Board of Trade pamphlet, 1913), p. 1.

<sup>50</sup> *Calgary, Alberta; The Land of Plenty* (City of Calgary and Board of Trade pamphlet, 1907), p. 25.

as scenic streets, a balmy climate, healthy drinking water, friendly citizens, and a high standard of morality. Brandon was "the most beautiful city in Western Canada," while in Regina "no sphere of development had [progressed more rapidly] than the advancement of religious thought and activity."<sup>51</sup> In bold type Saskatoon assured intending residents that it had "no old inhabitants to hinder progress,"<sup>52</sup> and Moose Jaw promised newcomers an aggressive city council "composed of live wires."<sup>53</sup>

Real estate speculators also did much to advertise the urban prairies; they were often the most enthusiastic supporters of town promotion as well as its greatest beneficiaries. Downtown lots available in 1900 for less than \$1,000 were sold ten years later for \$40,000 to \$200,000. Pat Burns sold a 320 acre parcel of land on the edge of Calgary for \$500,000.<sup>54</sup> In 1912 the speculative fever reached epidemic proportions. In three-inch-type, newspaper advertisements shrieked their message with excited urgency: "Buy Immediately... Don't wait to buy real estate, buy now and then wait... Rare Opportunity of a Life Time—Buy Now... Values sure to double... Going Like Hot Cakes... Values five to ten Times Present Prices... Buy at Once..." All three railway companies promoted their town lots and often ran five full pages of advertisements per day in the larger newspapers. Realtors advertised towns both large and small. Plans for an irrigation dam at Bassano, Alberta resulted in a massive campaign to sell real estate. "The best buy by a dam site," cried the promoters, "scores of industrial projects are now in the embryo." "One of the most attractive investment opportunities ever offered in the West... predicted 1915 population — 15,000."<sup>55</sup> Unlike others, this campaign failed miserably, for by 1921 Bassano's population was 800 and declining steadily.

Outside the emerging cities contractors threw up scores of new suburbs. In Winnipeg communities such as St. James, St. Vital, Tuxedo, Fort Garry, and East Kildonan rose from the prairie to house thousands of people. The suburban boom fired the imagination of real estate speculators. Belgravia and Mayfair, properties advertised as suburbs of Regina, were actually vacant farms miles from the city.<sup>56</sup> Even small towns were selling suburban lots to unsuspecting buyers in the distant East.

The Hudson's Bay Company land sale in Edmonton was a prime example of the powerful grip that real estate speculation held over the minds of urban pioneers. Contrary to the impression conveyed by many historians, the Hudson's Bay Company did not disappear with the fur trade. It constructed mammoth department stores all across the West and established a retail business that shamed the old fur trade by comparison. The company was also a mighty town promoter, playing a decisive role in Winnipeg's early acquisition of the Canadian Pacific Railway. In 1882

<sup>51</sup> *Regina, the Capital of Saskatchewan* (Board of Trade pamphlet, 1906), p. 5.

<sup>52</sup> *Saskatoon* (Board of Trade pamphlet, 1913), p. 2.

<sup>53</sup> Real estate advertisement, *Calgary Herald*, March 9, 1912, p. 26.

<sup>54</sup> *Calgary Herald*, March 30, 1912, p. 1.

<sup>55</sup> Advertisement, *Calgary Herald*, March 23, 1912, p. 1.

<sup>56</sup> *Canadian Annual Review* (1912), p. 625.

its Fort Edmonton property amounted to 3,000 acres and in 1912 it decided to sell the large portion that remained. A blistering campaign was launched, it was so successful that buyers began lining up the day before the sale opened. In fairness to all, the company drew names from a barrel to determine the order in which buyers could select their lots. George Kettlys, whose name was drawn early, was offered \$130 for his place in line.<sup>57</sup>

Real estate profit was one reason why urban centres competed for government institutions. Construction contracts, a civil service that consumed goods, and added prestige were others. As early as 1887 Calgary proposed that the capital of the North West Territories alternate between itself and Regina,<sup>58</sup> and in 1895 the city issued a pamphlet with the suggestive title of *Calgary, the Denver of Canada; its Adaptability as a Health Resort and as a Site for the Dominion Sanatorium for the Treatment of Consumption*.<sup>59</sup> In 1905 when it was known that the province of Alberta would be created; Edmonton, Calgary, Red Deer, Lacombe, Banff, and other towns locked horns to secure the prize of capital city. Petitions and delegations sped quickly to Ottawa where the principal contenders presented their case. The arguments in favour of each site grew wilder and wilder—it was even suggested that in the event of foreign invasion, only Banff in its mountain fortress would be a safe and logical location for the capital.<sup>60</sup>

Through the daily press, Calgary and Edmonton blasted each other with derogatory statements. Unfortunately for Calgary, her M.P. in Ottawa sat with the Conservative opposition while Frank Oliver of Edmonton was a government cabinet minister. By curious coincidence Edmonton was selected for the capital, pending ratification by the new Alberta government. The premier, A.C. Rutherford, also happened to represent Edmonton (Strathcona) and the choice was confirmed. In 1907 the Premier abruptly announced that the University of Alberta would be built in his home town and Calgarians were left with nothing but steaming indignation.

In the new province of Saskatchewan, Regina already had the necessary government buildings and it retained the capital without much difficulty, though various attempts were made by Moose Jaw, Prince Albert, and Saskatoon to steal it away. The provincial university site was more hotly debated. Saskatoon, Prince Albert, Regina, Moose Jaw, and even Indian Head, with a population of 1,300, entered the contest. In 1907 a Board of Governors was appointed with powers to select the site and after much wining and dining as guests of the various cities, narrowed their choice to Regina and Saskatoon. The capital quickly offered 640 acres of the free land and a "strong moral atmosphere." Saskatoon offered nothing but, oddly enough, a member of the Board from the southern part of the

<sup>57</sup> John G. NIDDRIE, "The Edmonton Boom of 1911-12," *Alberta Historical Review*, Vol. 13 (Spring, 1965), p. 4.

<sup>58</sup> *Calgary Tribune*, Dec. 10, 1887. The city applied to Ottawa for approval.

<sup>59</sup> (City Council pamphlet, 1895).

<sup>60</sup> MACEWAN, *Calgary*, p. 130.



province defected to the northern cause and his vote tipped the decision in favour of Saskatoon.<sup>61</sup>

Winnipeg, which had been the confirmed capital since 1870, so dominated other urban centres in Manitoba that it encountered no difficulty in securing the provincial university. Its ambitions were national in scope and the political favours it wanted could only be granted by Ottawa. But although its Board of Trade fought hard for the transfer of Western natural resources to provincial control, for reduced tariffs, lower freight rates, and other advantages that would stimulate Winnipeg's growth, the city was largely unsuccessful in realizing its objectives, primarily because they ran counter to the wishes of powerful business elites in Toronto and Montreal. Winnipeg's greatest political triumph probably came in 1890 when it pressured the federal government to give Western boards the sole right to set grain standards. This right stimulated local grain trading and more wheat was soon bought and sold on the floor of the Winnipeg Grain Exchange than anywhere else in the world. In turn, the Exchange spawned the large trading, brokerage, and financial firms that contributed significantly to Winnipeg's wealth and growth.

Although government institutions and political favours helped spark the growth of prairie cities, other promotional activities proved wasteful. Pamphleteering and real estate advertising, for example, lured many new residents, but they quickly left when solid economic development failed to materialize. Many towns actually lost population between 1911 and 1921 as a result of over-speculation.<sup>62</sup> The campaign for settlers often brought farmers to some towns earlier than to less advertised regions, but the long range effects were negligible. Pioneers eventually settled in all arable regions and their numbers were determined solely by the ability of the land to support them. Successful efforts to attract rail lines always brought the most beneficial results. Whenever a new line thrust into the hinterland, it generated a new cycle of growth in trade, industry, and construction. Each new line, depending on its importance, had a more dramatic effect than its predecessor; multiplying rail connections made the town attractive to larger and more specialized businesses. Economic incentives probably attracted industry only if good transportation facilities were already established.

The tendency for large towns to get larger was also related to the fact that the largest centres could raise the most money to spend luring railroads, industries, and government institutions. In Saskatchewan this advantage could be enhanced by the political status of the municipality. An incorporated village could borrow up to 5 percent of its assessed property

<sup>61</sup> For detail see Jean E. MURRAY, "The Contest for the University of Saskatchewan," *Saskatchewan History*, Vol. 12 (Winter, 1959).

<sup>62</sup> Although Census records show a steady increase in the populations of Calgary, Edmonton, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg between 1911 and 1916, there is some evidence to suggest that these cities may have lost population between 1913 and 1916 as a result of overspeculation. The Census records a population loss for Regina between 1911 and 1916.

value and when its population reached 500 it could become a town and borrow up to 10 percent; as a city, requiring a population of 5,000, it could borrow up to 20 percent. To obtain more promotional money, Saskatoon changed its status as quickly as population growth permitted: it became a village in 1901, a town in 1903, and a city in 1906.<sup>63</sup> In some cases, however, rapid changes in municipal status simply encouraged many towns to go bankrupt by overspending, with the result that they were later forced to revert to a lesser status.

Nonetheless optimism remained high and entrepreneurs everywhere believed that the urban boom would last indefinitely. A 1911 prediction placed Winnipeg's population at one million within ten years.<sup>64</sup> The Greater Regina Club hoped to promote the city to a population of 50,000,<sup>65</sup> and in 1907 Calgary's Hundred Thousand Club predicted that its objective would be reached "within a few years."<sup>66</sup> Soon after, the organization changed its name to the Quarter Million Club, and many small towns organized local Ten Thousand Clubs.

Although many of these predictions began as real estate gimmicks, the town promoters soon believed their own propaganda. In Winnipeg, for example, City Council began planning in 1906 for a population of 450,000 by 1921.<sup>67</sup> In 1914 a Calgary City Planning Commission report made a startling prediction; the city would have a population of 500,000 within a generation. As a result of irrigation, farming would intensify, industries would rise, and the population of the immediate hinterland could exceed 3,000,000.<sup>68</sup> The report, fully illustrated, envisioned spacious town squares where great cultural, public, and financial institutions would rise to challenge the architectural beauty of any city in Europe. Gracefully curved streets lined with stately homes would radiate from each public square.

Unfortunately for the town promoters, the plans of Calgary and other cities were based on the false assumption that the growth rate of the 1900-1912 period would continue forever. As in 1882, a collapse in real estate prices signalled the end of the boom. Disaster struck in 1913. In Regina, where a tornado had devastated much of the city in 1912, the blow was particularly severe and the population declined by 4,000 over the next three years. Elsewhere, the urban growth rate slowed significantly and many years passed before the value of real estate and building permits returned to 1912 levels. The more serious problem, again as in 1882, was that farm population growth was beginning to level.

Before 1914 cities grew explosively because pioneers and townsmen needed huge quantities of goods to build their farms and businesses. Once

<sup>63</sup> PEEL, *Saskatoon*, p. 43.

<sup>64</sup> *Manitoba Free Press*, Jan. 14, 1911.

<sup>65</sup> *Canadian Annual Review* (1909), p. 334.

<sup>66</sup> E.L. RICHARDSON, *Calgary, Alberta, Commercial Metropolis of Western Canada* (Calgary: Hundred Thousand Club pamphlet, 1907), back cover.

<sup>67</sup> MORTON, *Manitoba*, p. 308.

<sup>68</sup> Thomas H. MAWSON and Sons, City Planning Experts, *The City of Calgary, Past, Present, and Future* (Calgary: City Planning Commission of Calgary, 1914), pp. 12-14.

established, however, less economic growth was necessary to maintain them. By the end of the Great War the settlement of the West was largely an accomplished fact. Cities continued to grow, but no faster than the rural population: between 1921 and 1931 the farm population of the prairie provinces increased from 1,253,000 to only 1,468,000; in 1911 urban dwellers accounted for 35 percent of the population and in 1931 for only 37 percent.

Urban development was linked inseparably to agriculture and little else. The natural resources of the prairie, though great, were few in number. Most of its petroleum remained undiscovered until the late 1940s and its coal did not require a huge population to extract. The soil was the only great natural resource that was fully exploited during this period. It was difficult for Western cities to develop any further as industrial centres. Because of a small local market it was profitable to manufacture only commodities that were cheap and bulky or required little capital investment. Because of high transportation costs, prairie cities could only penetrate the eastern market by processing bulky food products. It was more profitable for manufacturers to locate in Eastern Canada where mineral resources, cheap power, abundant cheap labour, and water for industry and transportation were more abundant; and where accessible markets were larger.<sup>69</sup> As a result the Western cities grew slowly after 1921, functioning almost exclusively as agricultural service centres.

By that year, powerful geographic forces had arranged prairie urban centres into a distinctive pattern. The very creation of major distribution-shipping points dictated that only a small number of them emerge and that they be separated by long distances. By 1921 only Winnipeg, Regina, Saskatoon, Edmonton, and Calgary had populations in excess of 25,000 and the five cities were located across the prairie region in a remarkably even pattern.

Equally important in determining the distribution of urban places was the relationship between transportation time and the frequency of need for various goods and services. The rural pioneer travelled by team and wagon, and because he spent much of late fall and winter hauling grain to the railway, it was highly advantageous to settle within ten miles of a shipping point. Distances beyond about ten miles were too far to travel on a regular basis so the shipping point developed into a town that provided frequently needed goods and services. Its population depended on the density of rural settlement—about 700 to 1400 farm families within a ten mile radius<sup>70</sup>—but usually ranged from 100 to 1,000. Where attempts were made by railway companies to establish several towns within ten miles of each other, one usually emerged dominant while the others remained mere elevator sidings, often without a general store, and in most cases,

<sup>69</sup> The problem was augmented by discriminatory freight rates which always favoured Eastern manufacturers. Although Winnipeg attempted to manufacture a wide variety of products, high transportation costs prohibited nationwide marketing. The opening of the Panama Canal led to the rise of Vancouver as a grain shipping point and Winnipeg lost its monopoly on that function as well.

<sup>70</sup> Based on the estimate of two to four farms per section during the settlement period.

with populations of less than fifty. Consequently by 1921 over 900 towns with populations exceeding 100 had developed, 90 percent of them having less than 1,000 inhabitants. (See Table III.) Separated by distances of ten to twenty miles and strung together by railway lines, their distribution across the prairies was relatively even because farm population distribution was relatively even. The town pattern was somewhat denser in the parkland belt from Winnipeg to Edmonton where higher rainfall permitted more intensive farming, and thinned gradually towards the arid plain along the southern Alberta-Saskatchewan border.

Table III  
PRAIRIE PROVINCES 1871-1931; GROWTH OF THE NUMBER OF URBAN PLACES

	1871	1881	1891	1901	1911	1921	1931
100	2*	20*	70*	160*	590*	920*	1,010*
1,000	1	4*	10	17	49	67	82
2,500		1	4	5	13	20	22
5,000		1	1	2	11	12	16
10,000			1	1	7	8	9
25,000			1	1	4	5	5
50,000					1	3	4

\* Estimated. *Census* is reliable for Alberta and Saskatchewan where almost every town over 100 population became incorporated. In Manitoba towns under 500 were not allowed to incorporate and do not appear in *Census*. 1881 is most difficult to estimate. Estimates are based on *Census*, old maps, and printed sources. All other figures based on *Census of Canada 1931*, Vol. 2, Tables 8-12.

NOTE: Manitoba, which was settled first, accounted for over half of all urban places up to 1901. By 1921 Saskatchewan, with the largest area of farm land, accounted for nearly half.

Towns with populations exceeding 1,000 provided a greater range of goods and services than the villages. Swift Current, Saskatchewan, with a population of about 2,000 in 1914, offered doctors, a hospital, lawyers, insurance companies, a court house and jail, furniture stores, and a Mounted Police station besides fulfilling all the functions of a village. But because farmers and villagers did not need these additional services regularly, only 67 towns with populations over 1,000 developed. They were separated by distances of forty to eighty miles and railways provided the only feasible means of transportation for many hinterland residents to travel to and from them.<sup>71</sup> Centres over 2,500 where the services were even more specialized and infrequently needed, numbered only twenty, and were seventy to one hundred miles apart.

Cities over 5,000 became branch line centres where wholesale trading and industry accounted more for their size than specialized retail functions. Only twelve cities of this size developed. The largest five—Win-

<sup>71</sup> Increased use of the automobile after 1921 increased the frequency of visits to these towns at the expense of smaller ones. For more detail on the changing urban pattern of small places in the 1930's and 1940's see Carle C. Zimmerman and Garry MONEO, "The Total Community of the Canadian Wheat Prairies," *Canadian Journal of Agricultural Economics*, Vol. 18 No. 3 (1970).

nipeg, Saskatoon, Regina, Edmonton, and Calgary—were separated by distances of 200 to 500 miles. They carved the prairie region into five roughly equal parts and controlled the commercial activity within their domains so effectively that small cities could only emerge by tapping a portion of the trade half-way between them. Moose Jaw was an exception, rising to prominence on Regina's doorstep as a result of the early Canadian Pacific Railway divisional move; but Brandon, Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, Red Deer, and Prince Albert all owed their position as small cities to the fact they were far removed from larger competitors. At the apex of the urban hierarchy stood Winnipeg, the only city with a population exceeding 150,000. From its commanding position at the narrow gate where the Sheild gives way abruptly to fertile prairie, it was able to intercept all transcontinental traffic, the most important factor in its rise to metropolitan stature.

Although the size, number, and distribution of urban places developed in response to the economic geography of the hinterland, the role of town promotion was by no means useless. A similar pattern could have easily emerged with the various towns simply exchanging economic functions and population sizes. Selkirk, for example, might well have become the gateway to the West and Winnipeg a prairie village. It would, in fact, have been a better location for a large city as river flooding is less serious at Selkirk than at Winnipeg. The exact geographic location of the larger cities played almost no role in determining their growth. Although most cities were located on major rivers, Regina rose to the largest centre in Saskatchewan from the banks of tiny Wascana Creek. At Edmonton the river banks were too steep and transportation between the north and south sectors of the city was, and remains, a major problem. Town location and growth depended far more on railways; and across the flat treeless prairie, railways ran with arbitrary will. By operating within the broad limits set by the economic geography of the Western prairies, railway companies and town promoters largely determined the location and growth of the larger urban places.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Several themes in this essay have earlier been explored for the settlement of the American West. In particular see Wyatt W. BELCHER, *The Economic Rivalry Between St. Louis and Chicago, 1850-1880* (New York: 1947); A. Theodore BROWN, *Frontier City: A History of Kansas City to 1870* (Columbia, Mo.: 1964); Charles N. GLAAB, *Kansas City and the Railroads* (Madison, Wisc.: 1962).