

# Homesteading on the Prairies

**Iwan Mihaychuk**

John Lehr



**HERITAGE  
SERIES**

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**Grolier Limited**  
TORONTO

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Cover Photo: Public Archives of Canada (C-6605).

Illustrations: Weldon Hiebert, pages 9, 28; Penelope Stephensen, pages 17, 45.

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Photo credits: Collection of Dmytro Mihaychuk, courtesy of Mary Ann Mihychuk, pages 5, 6, 20, 31, 35, 37, 38, 43; Public Archives of Canada, pages 8 (C-9366), 11 (C-5611), 12 (PA-33762), 32 (C-6034); Canadian Pacific Corporate Archives, page 14 (12968); Manitoba Archives, pages 19 (W-10911), 23, 27, 40.

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**Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data**

Lehr, John.

Homesteading on the Prairies: Iwan Mihaychuk

(Heritage)

ISBN 0-7172-2574-7

1. Mihaychuk, Iwan.

2. Frontier and pioneer life—Manitoba.

3. Ukrainians—Manitoba—Biography.

I. Title. II. Series: Heritage (Markham, Ont.).

FC3400.U5L43 1990 971.27'00491791 C90-093753-X

F1065.U5L43 1990

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9876543210

Printed and Bound in Canada.

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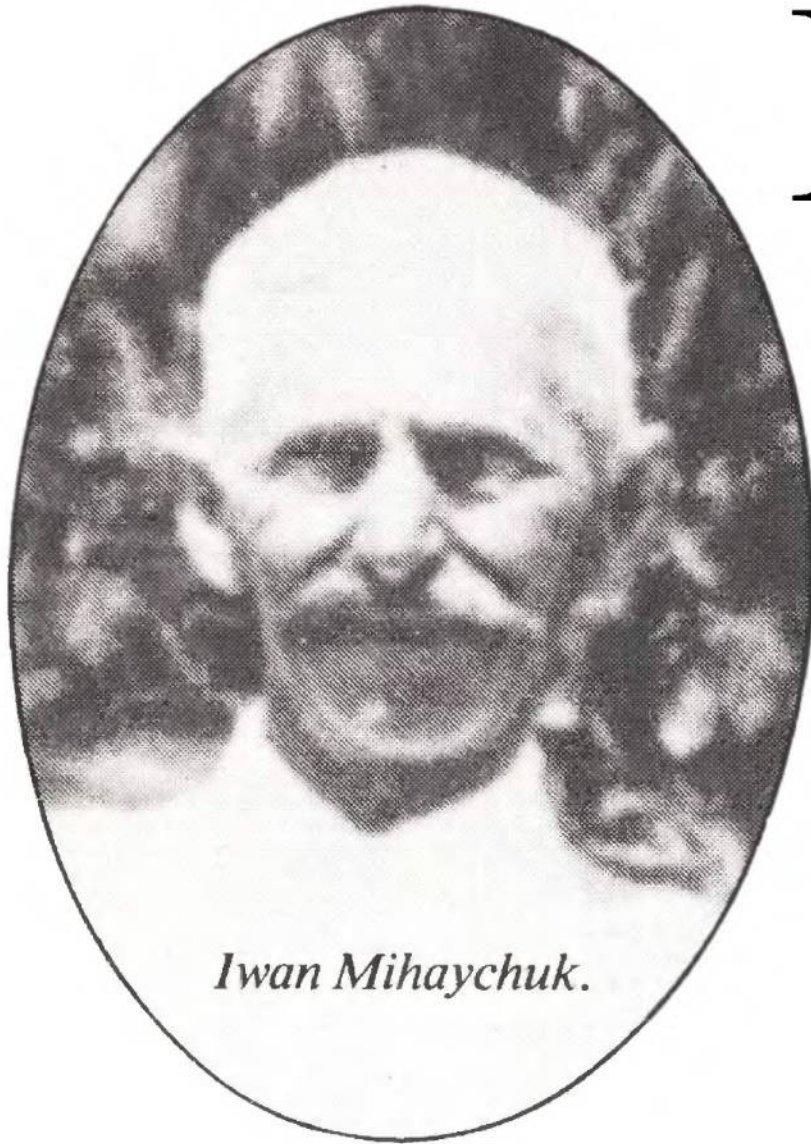
**For Karen, Garreth and Scott.**

*Acknowledgements*

My thanks to Mary Ann Mihychuk for providing me with family photographs, the unpublished memoir of Wasyl Mihaychuk, and invaluable information about the Mihaychuk family.

# Introduction

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**I**wan Mihaychuk was an ordinary man who had an extraordinary life. In 1900, at the age of forty-three, he joined thousands of other Ukrainians who left their homes in the provinces of Galicia and Bukovyna and brought their families across the ocean to start a new life in Canada.

Iwan never learned to read or write, but he was an intelligent man. He showed a lot of initiative and seldom made hasty decisions. Nonetheless, he settled on poor land in the wooded country around Stuartburn in southeastern Manitoba. He was not alone. Thousands of other Ukrainian settlers chose similar land in Alberta, Saskatchewan and other parts of Manitoba.

Why did Iwan choose to settle in the Stuartburn area? Why did he not seek out better land on the open prairie farther west? What made him decide to leave the Ukraine in the first place? We can find many of the answers in Canada, but not all of them. First we must go back to Iwan's home village of Bridok in the province of Bukovyna in the western Ukraine, which in the 1890s was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.



# Chapter One

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## Life in the Ukraine



*Like all Ukrainian immigrants, Iwan modelled the first house he built in Canada on the one he had left behind in the old country.*

**L**ife was not easy for a peasant farmer in Bukovyna in the 1890s. There were too many people and not enough land. This meant small farms, tiny fields and, all too often, poverty and hunger. For most people, it was a constant struggle to grow enough to feed and clothe a family and pay their taxes.

Iwan Mihaychuk was better off than many. He and his wife, Wasylyna, lived with their six children in Bridok, a village of two thousand people on the banks of the Dniester River. They had about three hectares of land scattered around Bridok in small fields. On them Iwan grew wheat, barley, corn, rye and beans for food, hemp for oil and fibre, and anise to sell to pay his taxes.



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His one cow and twelve sheep were pastured on the hillsides above the village, while three pigs and a few chickens wandered among the fruit trees surrounding his three-room house.

Iwan farmed much as his family had for generations. Although he had two horses, a wagon, a plough and a harrow, much of the work was done with hand tools. Iwan cut grain with a scythe or sickle, stooked it by hand and threshed it with a flail.

Wasylyna spun thread from hemp fibre and wove it into cloth from which she made all the family's clothing.

Although there was enough food, it was seldom plentiful, and it was usually rather monotonous: corn meal, beans, dark bread and milk were basic, as were fruit and vegetables in season. Eggs and meat were eaten only on special occasions, and white bread was a real luxury for most families, eaten only as part of the Easter celebration.

Even firewood was hard to find. The forests that covered the hilltops near Bridok were owned by rich aristocrats who did not allow wood to be gathered on their land. Iwan's family, like their neighbours, used hemp and anise stalks as fuel for heating and cooking.

Some farmers obtained extra cash by journeying to work in distant oilfields or on harvest gangs in northeastern Germany, but it was still hard to make a living. Nor did the future seem to offer much hope of change for the better. Iwan's children were able to go to school and learn to read, something that had not been possible for him, but economically things looked grim.

People in Bridok first heard of opportunities to





*Dr. Joseph Oleskow. A professor of agriculture, Oleskow was instrumental in convincing many would-be emigrants from Galicia and Bukovyna that western Canada offered them the best possible opportunities.*

obtain land in Canada in 1896 when two booklets by a Dr. Joseph Oleskow appeared in Bridok's small public library. Entitled *Pro Vilni Zemli* (About Free Lands) and *O Emigratsii* (On Emigration), they caused quite a stir. People argued about the accuracy of the statements made by Dr. Oleskow. Was it really possible that you could get land for almost nothing in Canada? And even if you could, would it be worth the risk of emigrating and saying goodbye to friends and neighbours forever?

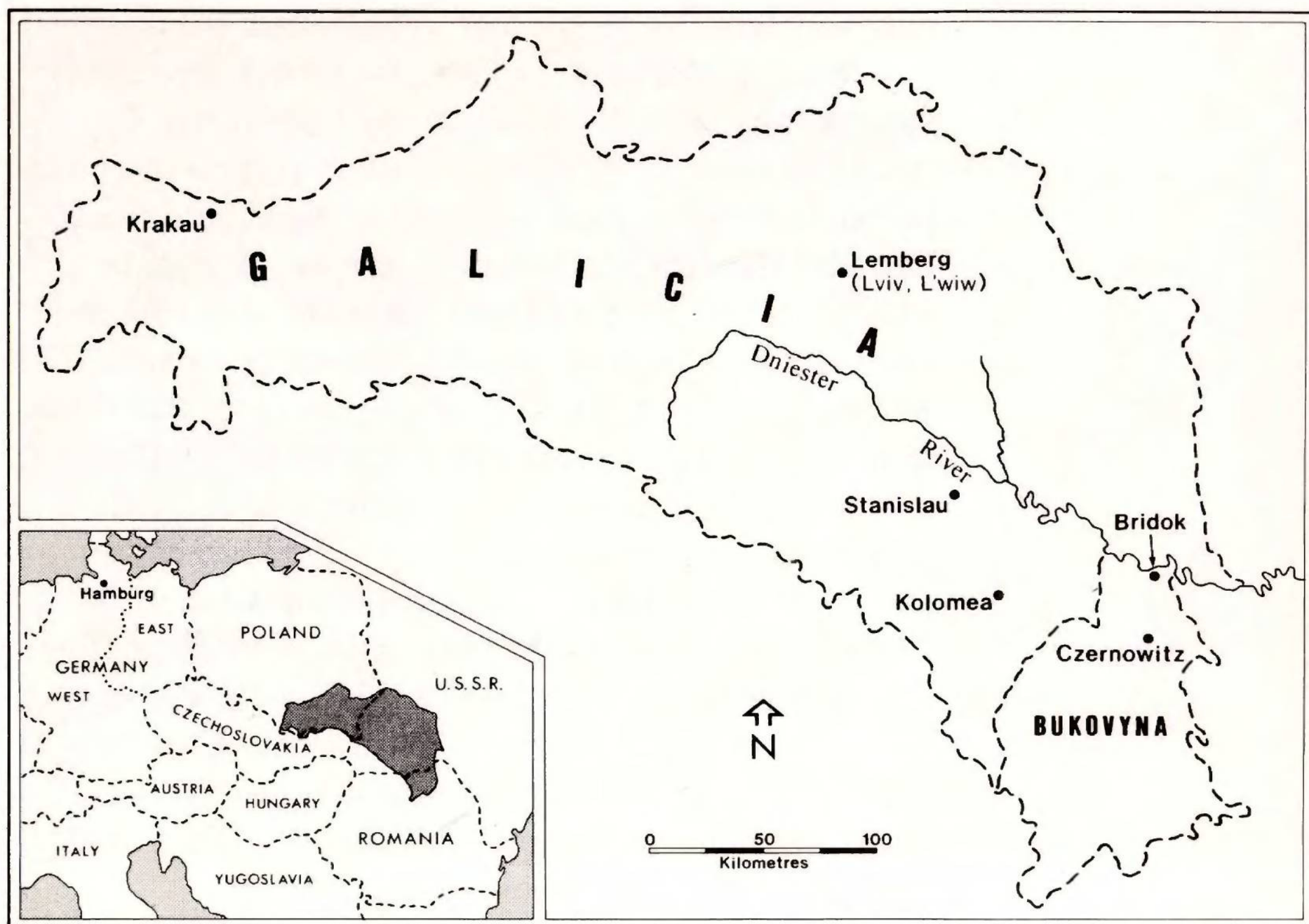
At the time, Iwan was not much attracted by the idea of emigrating. He did not know anyone who had ever gone overseas. He knew no English, and apart from his two years of compulsory service in the army, he had never been more than a few kilometres from Bridok. Emigrating seemed far too drastic a step to take.

It was only in 1898 that Iwan began to think seriously of emigration. Tsiya Mihaychuk, his eldest daughter, was to marry Simeon Zahara. As father of the bride, Iwan had to pay for the wedding celebrations and provide Tsiya with a dowry, which by custom was her share of the family lands.

Iwan knew he could manage the cost of the wedding, but what worried him was the loss of one of his fields. He was not sure that he could feed his family with one-seventh of his land gone, and as his other children married his farm would be reduced even further. His three sons would be left with very small farms indeed, and the prospects for their children did not bear thinking about.

Iwan's younger brothers Danylo and Onufrij, who could read, subscribed to the newspaper *Bukovyna*.





They told him what they read there about opportunities to acquire land in Brazil, Argentina and Canada, and about jobs available in factories in the United States or on the sugar plantations of Hawaii. Ukrainians had already emigrated to all these countries, but the information in Oleskow's booklets and the reports in *Bukovyna* suggested that Canada was the best bet for a Ukrainian immigrant. There, sixty-five hectares could be acquired for ten dollars. Iwan would have to work more than a month to earn the equivalent of ten dollars, but it still seemed unbelievably cheap. In Bukovyna

*Like most of the old Austro-Hungarian province of Bukovyna, Iwan's home village of Bridok now lies within the borders of the Soviet Union.*

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only very wealthy people owned that much land.

What made the idea of emigrating to Canada even more attractive to Iwan was that by 1899 he had contacts there. In 1896, Wasyl Zahara from Bridok had become the first person from Bukovyna to emigrate to Canada. His brother Michajlo, who was married to Iwan's cousin, had followed a year later, and by now several Bridok families had joined them in a place called Stuartburn, Manitoba. The Zaharas seemed to be doing well. Both had homesteads of sixty-five hectares, with lots of wood and plenty of hay. After only two years they had more livestock than most farmers in Bridok.

At the same time, throughout Galicia and Bukovyna, steamship company agents were circulating leaflets advertising opportunities in Canada. According to these leaflets one could live like a lord in Canada—there were no taxes and no compulsory army service, and people ate white bread every day, something that only the very rich in Bukovyna could afford.

Iwan undoubtedly heard of these claims, but in his case the decision to emigrate was not based on the supposed attractions of Canada. He was pushed into the move by the dismal future he saw for himself and his children in Bukovyna.



# Chapter Two

## Emigrating to Canada



Iwan decided to emigrate to Canada sometime in 1899 and set about selling his farm, livestock and most of his implements. He kept only a few small tools—a sickle, scythe, hoe and axe. With their handles removed, they could be packed into the one small trunk he and his family would take with them. The cost of buying tickets to Canada for a family of seven was considerable. Iwan barely made enough from the sale of his land and possessions to cover the expenses of emigrating.

*Ukrainian immigrants  
land at Quebec.*

Most emigrants leaving the western Ukraine for Canada booked their passage through a local agent of





*As Canada's Minister of the Interior, Clifford Sifton was responsible for the immigration policies that brought thousands of central and eastern Europeans to the Canadian prairies in the early 1900s.*

the Morowitz Steamship Agency of Hamburg, Germany, which specialized in selling steamship tickets to emigrants from central Europe. For each ticket sold, Morowitz received a commission from the shipping line concerned. He also received a secret payment from the Canadian government: \$5.00 for each Ukrainian farmer, \$3.50 for his wife and \$1.50 for each child. This payment was meant to ensure that the emigrants were sent to Canada. Otherwise, the agent might persuade them to go to more distant countries, such as Brazil, so that he could collect a larger commission.

As the Mihaychuks were preparing to leave, Iwan's daughter Tsiya and her husband, Simeon Zahara, decided to join them. Both families packed their few hand tools and some packets of grain. Vegetable, herb and flower seeds were sewn carefully into the corners of a kerchief and packaged with a few blankets, quilts and extra clothes. A satchel was crammed with hard black bread, cheese and sausage for the long journey by train to Hamburg, where their boat to Canada awaited them.

Although well over a dozen families had already left Bridok for Canada, the departure of the Mihaychuks and Zaharas in the early spring of 1900 created quite a stir in the village. Wasylyna wept as she left her house for the last time. Taking with her a handful of soil from her garden as a memento of Bridok, she walked with her family, neighbours and friends to a church outside the village, where final farewells were said. Then they began the long walk to the nearest railway station, at Czernowitz, over thirty kilometres away.



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Two days later they reached Hamburg and sought out the offices of the Morowitz company. There, clerks directed them to the docks from which ships of the Hamburg-Amerika line left for Canada and probably also helped them find a cheap place to stay until they could board their ship.

The trans-Atlantic journey took ten to twelve days, depending on the weather and the boat. Most emigrants, especially families with children, found the voyage unpleasant. The steerage accommodations were crowded. The food, although plentiful, was unfamiliar and unappetizing to Ukrainian tastes. Atlantic storms were terrifying. Many tired, bedraggled, seasick and homesick emigrants lamented the day they had left home, and by the time they landed at Halifax or Quebec, most were a sorry sight.

The first hours on Canadian soil were bewildering for all immigrants. The Mihaychuks and Zaharas walked down the gangplank of their ship along with hundreds of other newcomers. Germans, Austrians, Swedes, Norwegians, Finns, Danes and Ukrainians all milled around before being hurried through a cursory medical inspection. The obviously infirm and those with trachoma, a contagious eye disease, were refused entry, as were those who could not produce at least ten dollars to show that they were not destitute.

Once through the initial screening, each family was interviewed by an immigration officer. Iwan's family was seen by Kyrillo Genik, himself a Ukrainian from Galicia who had immigrated only four years previously. An educated man, fluent in Polish, German and

### **Immigration**

According to government records, 41 681 immigrants came to Canada in 1900, the year the Mihaychuks arrived.



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English, Genik was now an interpreter for the Department of the Interior. He wrote the name and destination—Winnipeg—of each person on a cardboard label and pinned the labels to their coats. Then he directed them to the colonist cars of a waiting Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) train.

Each colonist car was fitted with wooden benches that converted into berths for sleeping. At the end of each car was a washroom, a toilet and a drinking water dispenser. Immigrants with money to spare could buy a mattress to use on their berths, but few Ukrainians could afford that luxury.

*The CPR colonist cars provided little in the way of comforts for immigrants making the long journey west.*





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During the next three days, while the train headed west, Genik and his superior, colonization officer Wesley Speers, travelled up and down the cars, calming the immigrants' fears and giving them advice on where to settle and how to adapt to Canadian society. Genik tried to persuade Iwan and Wasylyna not to join their relatives in Stuartburn but to head further west to Yorkton, Saskatchewan. There was better land available there, he argued, and having a relative nearby was no substitute for good land. And there were Ukrainians at Yorkton, even some from Bukovyna—the Mihaychuks could settle near them, and others from Bridok would be sure to join them.

Genik knew from first-hand experience that there was little good land around Stuartburn. He had tried homesteading there himself but had eventually abandoned his land because it was too swampy and stony. Iwan and Wasylyna would not listen, however. Wasyl and Michajlo Zahara and others from Bridok and the neighbouring village of Onut were there, so that was where they were going to go. Like thousands of other Ukrainian immigrants, Iwan thought that with sixty-five hectares—over twenty times as much as he had had in Bridok—it would not really matter if the land was poor. Even Genik agreed that there was plenty of wood in the Stuartburn area, so why take a chance and go to a place where they knew nobody?

Genik knew that neither he nor the Department of the Interior could force any immigrants to go where they did not want to go. That had been tried in May 1898. Immigration commissioner William McCreary

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had attempted to persuade some newly arrived Ukrainians to settle at Fish Creek in Saskatchewan, but they had not wanted to go into an area where there were no other Ukrainian settlers. Nonetheless McCreary had sent off a trainload of them to Fish Creek, telling them that they were going to Dauphin, Manitoba, or to Edmonton, Alberta, where most had relatives.

When the immigrants arrived at Fish Creek and discovered they had been deceived, a riot had broken out. Some had even threatened to kill the interpreter, and virtually all had set out to walk back to Regina. Agent Speers, who was in charge of the train to Fish Creek, had had to ask for police assistance and had still been unable to stop the immigrants from walking away. In the end he and McCreary had had to admit defeat and take the Ukrainians where they wished to go. Since then McCreary's officers had simply tried to direct the Ukrainians to areas where others were already settled and to the kind of land they liked.

At first the Ukrainian immigrants' choice of land had astounded McCreary. He wrote to his superior in Ottawa:

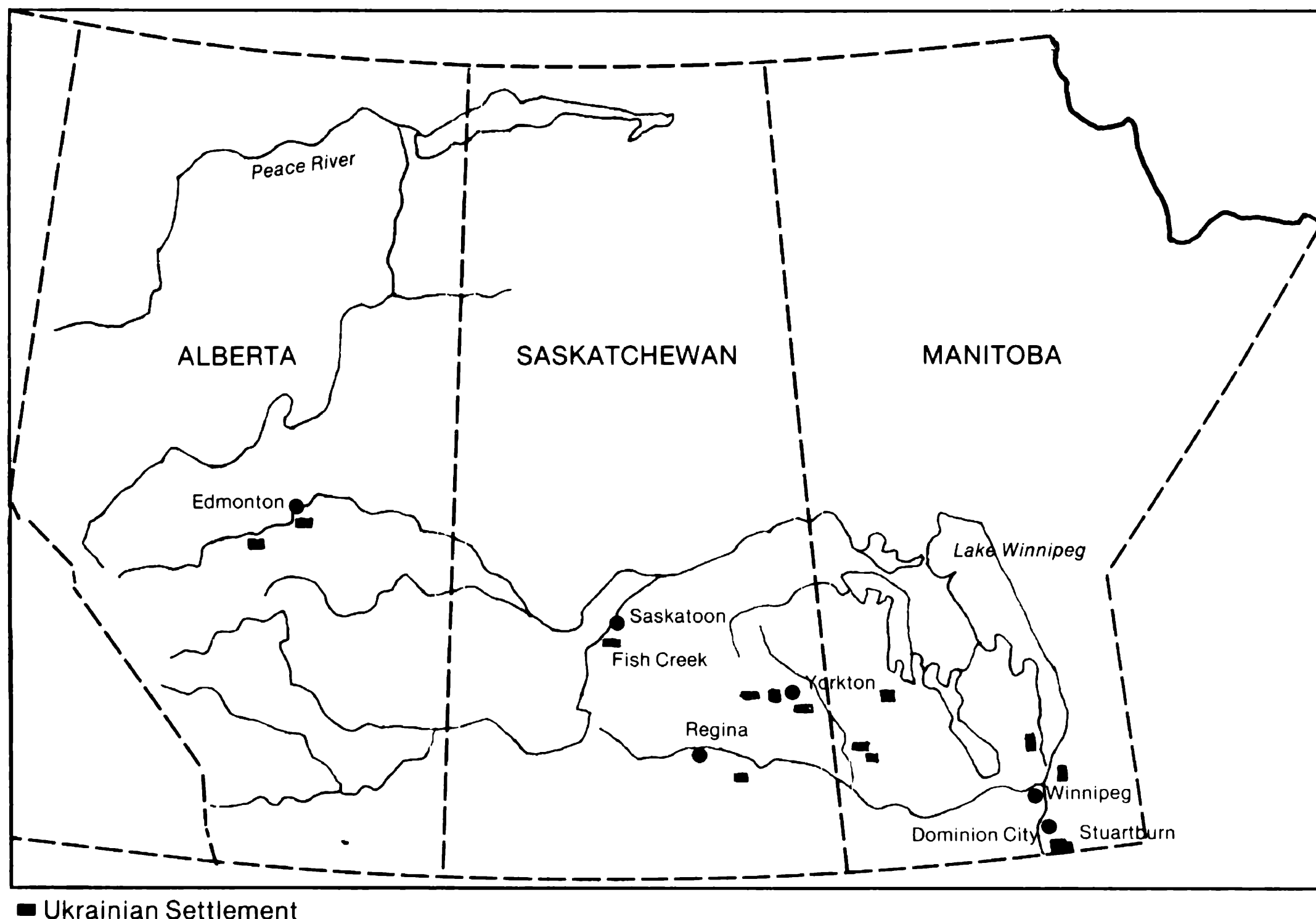
The Galicians [Ukrainians] are peculiar people; they will not accept as a gift 160 acres [65 hectares] of what we should consider the best land in Manitoba, that is first class wheat growing prairie land; what they want is wood, and they care but little whether the land is heavy soil or light gravel; but each man must have some wood on his place.

After four years of settling Ukrainians on homesteads across the West, however, McCreary now understood them better. He would have liked more of them to

choose open prairie lands where good crops of grain could be expected, but he had come to realize that most did not have enough money to attempt settlement there. Poor settlers needed to have all the necessary resources right on their homestead. That meant wood for fuel, fencing and building.

By the time the Mihaychuks arrived, therefore, officials of the Department of the Interior no longer attempted to force Ukrainians into areas where they did not want or could not afford to settle. Genik and his fellow officers merely tried to stop them from going into areas which they knew to be hopeless. If the

*This map of the prairie provinces shows the main areas of concentrated Ukrainian settlement in 1900.*



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Mihaychuks and Zaharas chose not to listen to Genik's advice, it was their own affair.

As the colonist cars rolled westward towards Winnipeg, many immigrants became worried and depressed. They had travelled halfway across a continent and still had not seen any unsettled land that anybody could hope to farm. Those who were familiar with Dr. Oleskow's booklets were perhaps a little more confident. Oleskow had cautioned against despair at the sight of the seemingly endless forests and rocky infertile lands of the Canadian Shield:

After a trip of two days through this country, one develops a heartache. "What a place I have come to," thinks the colonist. Rocks and more rocks . . . this rocky plain looks like a petrified stormy sea. . . . Our people are shocked most of all by a phenomenon unknown in Europe. The express train goes for two days through a forest, but what a forest. Trees burned or scorched by fire reflect in the dull water of lakes throughout these immense spaces and are a sad and painful sight.

Even those who knew what to expect were relieved when the train left behind the trees and rocks of the Shield and emerged, some eighty kilometres east of Winnipeg, onto the flat fertile lands of the prairies. Many Ukrainians were heading farther west to Edmonton and faced another thirty-six hours in the colonist cars, but for Iwan and his family, Winnipeg was almost the end of the journey. Another train would take them ninety kilometres south to Dominion City, and then they would cover the last kilometres however they could—if necessary as they had the first, on foot.



# Chapter Three

## Early Years of Homesteading



**M**ost immigrants spent their first days in Manitoba in the Winnipeg Immigration Hall, located a short distance from the CPR station. New arrivals could stay there for a few days or weeks while they got their bearings, bought supplies and made final decisions about the area in which to seek a homestead. The accommodation in the hall was very simple but clean. Each family had to provide its own food and could cook it on the premises. The Mihaychuks and Zaharas were placed with other Ukrainians because British immigrants refused to regard central and eastern Europeans as equals and objected to sharing accommodation with them.

*Winnipeg at the turn of the century, looking south along Main Street from the city hall.*



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Iwan had only \$25.00 in Canadian money when he arrived in Winnipeg. In preparation for farming he bought a cow and a bull calf. That left him less than the \$10.00 he needed to make an official entry for a homestead. He considered trying to earn the \$10.00, but that would take at least two weeks—if he was lucky enough to get a job. A labourer could only earn between \$1.25 and \$1.50 for a ten-hour day, and food and accommodation would easily take half of that. So after a few days in Winnipeg Iwan decided to move on.

The Mihaychuks loaded their animals into a boxcar and travelled by train to Dominion City, where they were able to hire a driver with a wagon and a team of horses to take them to Stuartburn. There they rented a cabin on the southwest quarter of Section 2, in

*Taken a few years later, this picture of children on their way to school gives a good idea of what the land was like in the area of Ukrainian settlement in southeastern Manitoba. Dmytro, the youngest Mihaychuk son, is seen on the far left.*





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Township 2, Range 6 East (SW2 TWP 2 R6E), next to their relatives, Michajlo and Anna Zahara. The Mihaychuks and Tsiya and Simeon Zahara—nine people in all—moved into the one-room log cabin. It belonged to a British landowner, Orlin Post, who had homesteaded there in 1882.

A few other English-speaking people had also tried homesteading in the Stuartburn area, but had left for better lands available further west. Only settlers like the Ukrainians, who came from a peasant background and who were aiming at self-sufficiency, thought that this area was worth settling. Without money to buy barbed wire or ready-cut timber or to pay for well drilling, they needed its plentiful supply of wood for fuel, fencing and building, and of water and meadowland for their animals.

The area had another advantage for the Ukrainians: in the 1870s, German-speaking Mennonite farmers from the central Ukraine had settled only fifty kilometres or so northwest of Stuartburn and were now becoming prosperous. Most could speak Ukrainian and offered work to new settlers who needed the cash in their first years in Canada.

At first Iwan and his family found their new life in Canada far worse than the one they had left behind in Bukovyna. Their tiny cabin was crowded and it was infested with bugs whose bites drove them to distraction. Hordes of mosquitoes came in through the door and windows. To get relief Wasylyna kept a smudge pot burning on the cabin floor. It filled the house with smoke but drove out the mosquitoes.

### **Mennonites**

The Mennonites were a pacifist religious group who had fled east from Germany because of religious persecution. When the Russian government later tried to force them to give up their language and to serve in the army, they were again obliged to look for a new home. Many chose Canada, the first group of about 8000 arriving in 1874.

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Outdoors, things were not much better. There were mosquitoes everywhere, and Wasylyna was terrified of the garter snakes that thrived in the area. The family dog chased a skunk, got sprayed and brought the skunk smell into the cabin. Strange plants caused problems for the boys. Wasyl got blisters and sores from poison ivy and no one knew what it was or what to do about it. Anna Zahara suggested using black ink, but that did no good—in fact, it probably made things worse. To cap it all, Anna, the youngest child, burned her feet badly when she toddled through the embers of the smudge pot.

That first summer, Iwan and Wasylyna planted a large garden with onions, potatoes, cabbages, tomatoes, beans, cucumbers, tobacco and herbs, all with seeds brought from Bridok. Until the produce ripened, they got by on the milk from their cow, fish from the nearby Roseau River, and a few bags of flour from the store at Stuartburn, eleven kilometres away.

To earn some cash, the family collected snakeroots and sold them to the store for forty-five cents a kilogram. Digging snakeroots was hard work, but a family could collect enough to make about a dollar a day—not bad when work on the CPR construction gangs paid fifteen cents an hour at most. It was hot, miserable work, but the Mihaychuks were desperate for money to buy supplies like tea and sugar, lamp oil and clothing. At least Iwan did not have to leave his family and search for work halfway across the prairies with the CPR or in the mines of British Columbia.

Wasylyna often cried, homesick for the cleanliness, order and beauty of Bridok. In Canada everything

### **Snakeroot**

Also called seneca root, snakeroot was used in manufacturing pharmaceutical products.



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seemed so chaotic, new and unpleasant. She missed her friends and neighbours and the bustle of village life. In Canada, farms were spread out. Their nearest neighbours, the Zaharas, were a kilometre away. The Mihaychuks had no well and Wasylyna disliked the taste of the river water they had to drink. She missed the clear well water of home. Yet even she had to admit they were better off in some ways than many new settlers. Michajlo Zahara had a brand new Adams wagon, pulled by two oxen, and he hauled supplies for them from the store. Others had to carry the heavy sacks of flour on their backs along rough trails through swamp and muskeg, sometimes up to their knees in water.

And some things were better in Canada. They drank tea and coffee every day, and had sugar, syrup and white bread, things reserved for very special occasions in Bridok. Because there was plenty of wood,

*Virtually all Ukrainian farms had large vegetable gardens, usually tended by the women.*





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they had no worries about fuel or building materials. In the fall the bushes were laden with berries. Saskatoon berries, pin cherries, chokecherries and highbush cranberries were easy to find. The children netted fish in the Roseau River and picked mushrooms. After the garden produce was harvested they had a good supply of vegetables.

Nonetheless, Iwan soon had doubts about the wisdom of remaining in Stuartburn to look for a homestead. Most of the better land in the area was already occupied. Even in the next township, which had not been officially declared open for settlement, squatters—people who settle on public land to gain ownership of it—had already taken the best land. There did not seem to be much hope of getting a good homestead in the immediate vicinity. Iwan considered taking Kyrillo Genik's advice and going to Yorkton, but Wasylyna opposed the move. She did not want to leave the Zaharas and other friends, and she had heard terrible things about the weather in Yorkton. Besides, she argued, how could they survive without snakeroots to dig and sell? Iwan gave in.

Snakeroots could not be dug in frozen ground, however, so as fall approached Iwan walked forty kilometres to Dominion City looking for work harvesting and threshing. He returned after eight weeks with \$18.00. Seven dollars bought six forty-five-kilogram bags of XXXX flour at \$1.15 a bag. That left a little more than the \$10.00 Iwan needed for his entry fee for a homestead.

Besides the six bags of flour, the Mihaychuks had



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two flour sacks full of hazelnuts, a nineteen-litre crock of cranberry jam, a seventy-six-litre barrel of sauerkraut, another of pickled cucumbers and a few bushels of potatoes. That, with milk from the cow and the odd rabbit they might trap, would have to see them through the winter.

The intense cold of the Canadian winter was a shock. Like most immigrants, the Mihaychuks were taken aback by temperatures that dropped as low as  $-40^{\circ}\text{C}$ , blistering exposed skin and freezing the river to a depth of a metre or more. It was difficult to chop through that much ice for water, so they had to melt snow for themselves and their animals. Cutting and sawing poplar trees to burn kept Iwan and Simeon busy all day.

It was soon all too obvious that their old-country clothing was not adequate for a Canadian winter. Strips of hemp cloth wrapped around the feet were no substitute for woollen socks. The short sheepskin coats worn in Bridok did not keep out the extreme cold of western Canada, nor were their leather boots as warm as Indian moccasins. At night the children slept on top of the big clay stove Iwan had built, with the rest of the family huddled together around it. Even then they found their quilts and blankets barely adequate, for their rented cabin was poorly built and very drafty.

News from Bridok came in occasional letters from Wasylyna's father, Domitrash Hudyma. The Mihaychuk's eldest son, Wasyly, read them aloud to the family. What Wasylyna heard that winter upset her. Her father pleaded to be brought to Canada. Rather

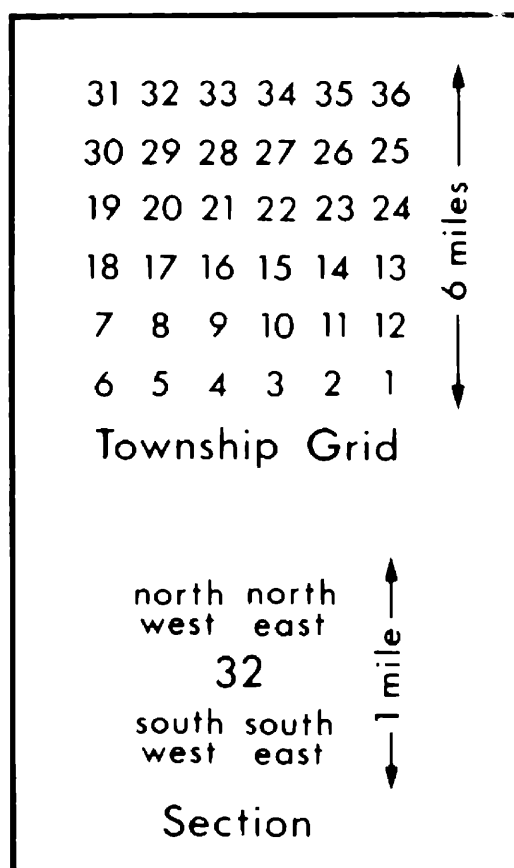


unwisely, he had given all his property to his son, who had then begun to treat him badly. To calm his worried wife, Iwan walked to Dominion City and mortgaged his only possessions, the family cow and its calf, and sent the money for a ticket to the Morowitz Steamship Agency. Wasylyna's father arrived around the end of June 1901.

By then, Iwan had applied for a homestead on the southwest quarter of Section 33 in Township 1, Range 7 East. Although his right to the quarter section would not be officially recorded until December, he spent much of that summer building a two-room log house on the homestead while his family worked digging snakeroots on their rented land.

The homestead had only two hectares of dry land. The rest was wet and stony. Even to get to the site where he was building his house, Iwan had to wade up to his knees in water for a couple of kilometres. Wasylyna did not think much of this place. It was twenty kilometres from Stuartburn, it had no woods or snakeroots on it and only a hectare or two of pasture for their animals. As bad, if not worse from her point of view, it was a long way from their relatives.

Perhaps because of Wasylyna's sensible objections, Iwan abandoned his homestead even before he had finished his house. The ten-dollar entry fee that had taken him a month to earn was forfeited, and the house, built with so much effort and valued at five dollars, was lost along with it. Iwan was wise to take the loss, however: the quarter section was too poor to offer much hope of providing a decent living.



*For settlement purposes, prairie lands were surveyed into townships of 36 square miles (93.24 ha) each. The townships were then divided into 36 sections of one square mile (2.59 km<sup>2</sup>) each, and the sections were further divided into quarter sections of 160 acres (64.8 ha) each.*



# Chapter Four

## Proving Up



It was hard to abandon a homestead and all the work put into it, but it was not unusual. Iwan was lucky that he had not done more than build a log cabin. He had not cleared any trees from the land, nor had he spent time ploughing in preparation for planting crops. Settlers sometimes abandoned their homesteads after three or four years of wasted effort.

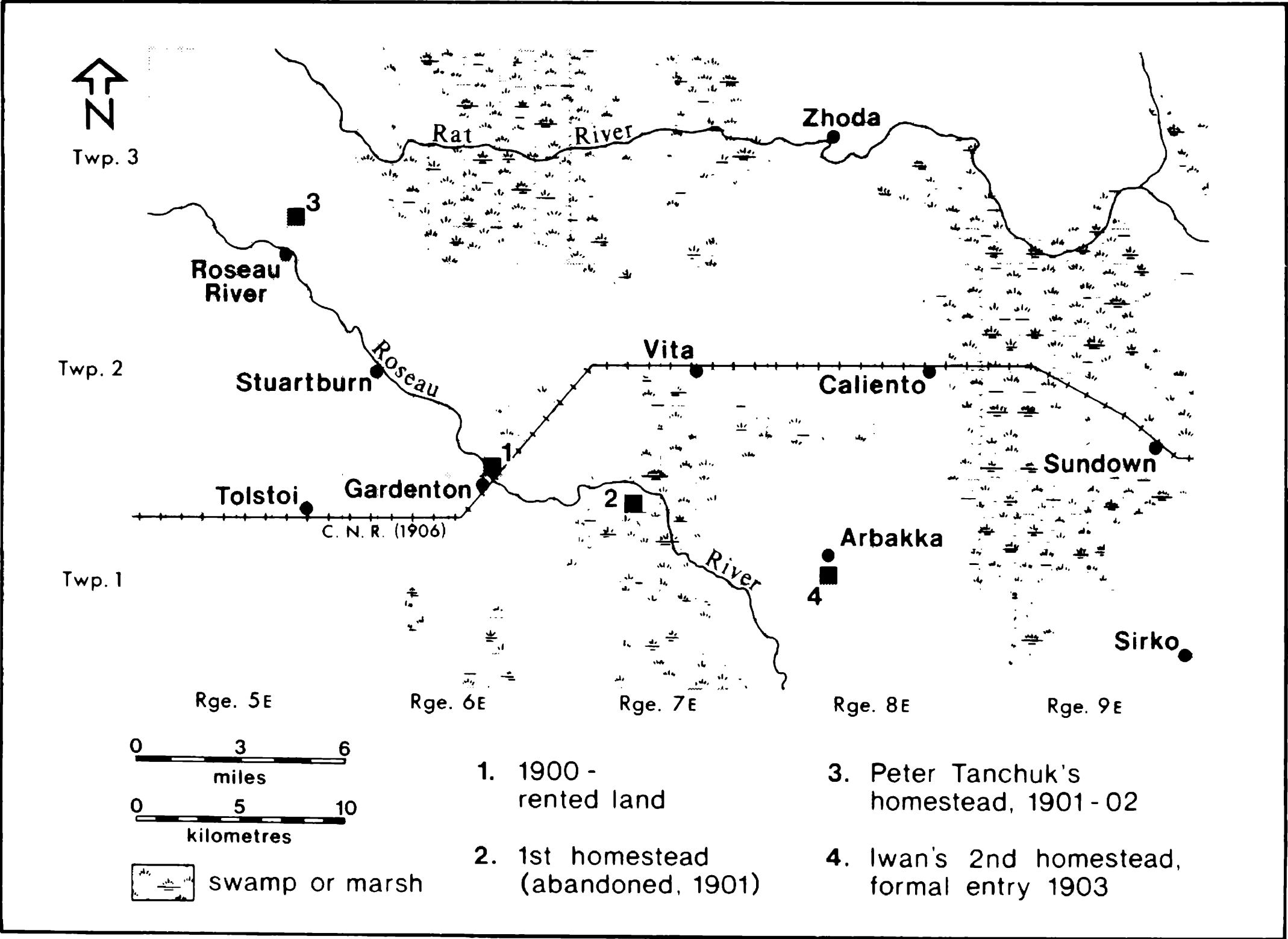
In order to be eligible for another homestead, Iwan had to make a formal declaration of abandonment to the Dominion Lands Office agent. As his reason for abandoning the first one, Iwan declared it to be “stony and low swamp land” that could not be farmed successfully.

*Ukrainian settlers near Vita, Manitoba, plaster the outside of their log house.*



Giving up any hope of finding suitable land in the immediate vicinity, the Mihaychuks decided to move twenty kilometres north to stay with their daughter Maria, who was now married to Petro Tanchuk. Iwan's plan was to find a homestead close by, but unfortunately, the families soon quarrelled. In March 1902 Iwan loaded his belongings onto a homemade sleigh, hitched up his oxen and led his family on a two-day, forty-five kilometre trek east to Township 1, Range 8 East. The township was not officially open for

*Detailed map of the area in which the Mihaychuks settled.*





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settlement, but his son-in-law Simeon Zahara had built a house there anyway, on the southwest quarter of Section 20.

Iwan took a good look around and decided to settle near Tsiya and Simeon, even though there was no way of getting legal title to the land. As it turned out, the quarter section Iwan chose was not too bad: sandy soil over clay subsoil, about half open grassland or scrub, with ten hectares or so of mature woodland and twenty of wet, low-lying hay land.

The family's first tasks were to build a house and to clear and break some land so that they could plant a crop to provide food for the winter. There were no snakeroots on this new homestead. To earn some money they cut down trees, sawed the wood into short logs and hauled them to Stuartburn or Dominion City to sell as cordwood.

To build their house, Iwan and his father-in-law first cut down the largest trees on the homestead, removed the branches and bark and dragged the logs to the site chosen for the house. Logs were laid horizontally on top of each other and joined at the corners by a notch made at the end of each one. Like every Ukrainian settler's house, Iwan's faced south and was a rough copy of the house that had been left behind in Bukovyna. It had two rooms, one 6 by 5.5 metres, the other 4 by 5.5 metres. In the smaller room he built a big clay stove. It took up almost a quarter of the room and had a flat shelf along one side of the top where the children could sleep.

The ceiling was made from split poplar poles



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covered with a thick layer of mud and straw. The roof was thatched with long grass and the floor was made from hard packed clay. Iwan and Wasylyna plastered the inside walls with clay, mixed with chopped-up straw and manure to stop it from cracking when it dried. Later, after their crops were planted, they plastered the outside of the house and whitewashed it inside and out.

For furniture Iwan made a couple of benches which were placed along the walls of the smaller room beside a rough table made out of hand-cut poplar boards. The family's spare clothes hung from a row of pegs along the wall and their small trunk from Bridok held their few personal items. The only decorations were a few religious pictures on the east wall of the large room. The adults slept on hay on the clay floor, and in the corner a newborn calf had its hay-bed. It was too cold outside for the calf, so it slept in the house until Iwan finished building a stable.

In 1903, Township 1, Range 8 East was officially declared open for settlement. There were many squatters already on the land, people like Iwan and Simeon who had taken a chance and had got in ahead of others. Iwan quickly made his entry legal. On March 3, 1903, he paid his ten-dollar fee and secured his homestead. If he could meet all the government's requirements he would be eligible to claim full legal ownership of it after three years. But first he had to clear, break and cultivate the land.

Clearing and breaking land was slow, exhausting work and it could be dangerous. Small trees and bushes had to be hacked down and their roots dug out by hand.





Before the land could be ploughed rocks had to be removed. The small ones were hauled out of the ground, but the really big ones had to be broken up first. Fires were lit to heat the rock, then water was poured over it to crack it. Some rocks that were too big to split were simply buried. Like most Ukrainian settlers, Iwan at first used oxen rather than horses for ploughing. They were cheaper to buy and to feed, they were more powerful, though slower, than horses, and they could work longer without tiring. The plough had to be held down to cut through a tangled mat of fine roots. If it hit any obstruction, it could jerk upwards and injure the person guiding it.

In the first year Iwan and his family cleared and

*Iwan and Wasylyna lived in their two-room house for over fifteen years. Not until 1918 was Iwan able to spare the time, effort and money to build a larger one. This picture of the two houses was taken in the early twenties.*



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ploughed a little less than a hectare of land. Everyone worked. While Iwan ploughed, Wasylyna, her father and her sons grubbed roots, cleared bushes and moved stones. About a fifth of a hectare was planted with vegetables, another two-fifths in wheat and the rest in barley. Because Iwan did not have any horses to feed, he did not need to sow any oats, nor did he bother to grow rye as he had in the Ukraine. For the first year at least, he could only hope to grow enough to feed his family. There would not be much left to sell. If he wanted cash to make the payments on his oxen or to buy equipment, he had to get it by cutting timber to sell for cordwood or by going away to work for wages.

*Threshing gang on the prairies in the early 1900s.*





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Like Iwan, many farmers in the Stuartburn colony did both. In the winter, when work was scarce, they cut wood and took it by sled to Stuartburn or Dominion City. In the summer they worked on their land and in the fall left home to work on threshing gangs harvesting the crops of wealthier farmers west of the Red River. On some homesteads, most of the work of clearing and breaking land was done by women and children while the men were away.

After the township was officially opened for settlement, new settlers from Bridok and other parts of Bukovyna began to arrive. While they looked for land and built their houses, they stayed with the people who were already established. Up to six families slept in Iwan's house at one time. As many as thirty people crowded together on the floor, with hay for mattresses and horse blankets and their clothes for covers—and the calf wandering through both rooms.

Homestead hospitality meant that all these people had to be fed free of charge with bread, tea, coffee, meat and milk. This was quite a drain on the Mihaychuks' supplies. There were some benefits, though. A lot of people owed Iwan favours and some of the new settlers bought a calf, pig or chickens from him when they moved out to start farming on their own.

Fourteen-year-old Wasyl, Iwan's oldest son, disliked the crowded conditions and soon left to find work elsewhere. He walked for three days, often knee-deep in slushy snow and water, until he found a German settler who took him on as a hired hand for eight dollars a month plus food and shelter.

### **Ukrainian Immigration**

Approximately 170 000 Ukrainians came to Canada between 1896 and 1914.



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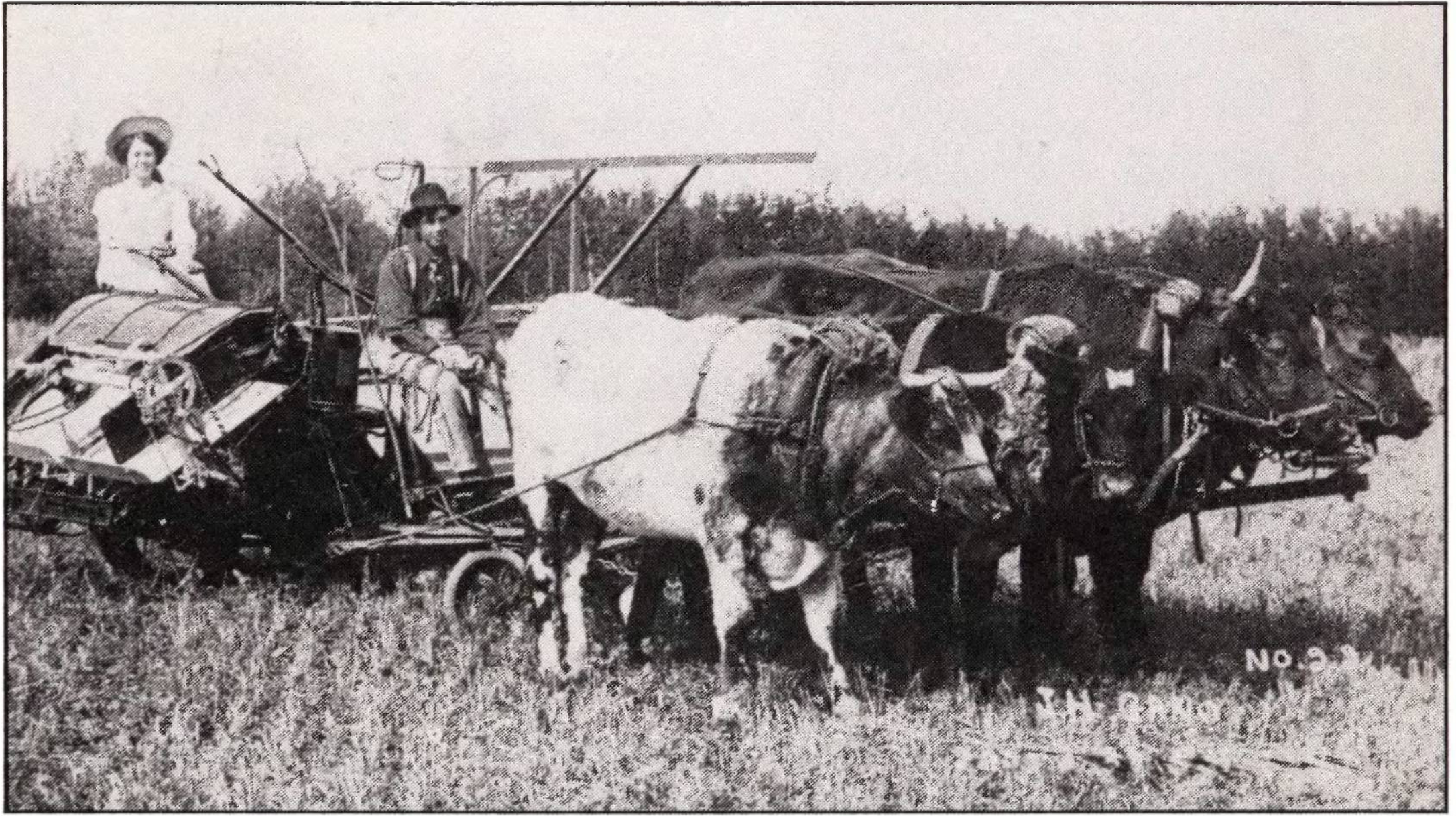
Wasyl worked a long hard day, beginning at five in the morning when he cleaned the stable and curried, combed, fed and harnessed a team of horses. He spent the rest of the day ploughing, haying, harrowing and doing general farm chores. He ate with his employer's family and the food was good and plentiful, but as a hired man he was not allowed to stay in the house. His place was in the stable, where he slept on a pile of oats in the hayloft.

After almost eight months, Iwan learned where Wasyl was working and went to bring him home. He was paid fifty-two dollars for Wasyl's wages. Eight dollars were held back to pay for two pairs of boots, two pairs of pants and some shirts that Wasyl's employer had bought for him. Fifty-two dollars was a lot of money for the Mihaychuks, but it was soon spent on supplies at the Stuartburn store.

The following spring, in hopes of earning some cash without working out, Iwan and Wasyl went looking for snakeroots across the American border. It was not a very successful trip. In a week-long, sixty-five-kilometre search they gathered only one sackful, which they traded for six dollars' worth of shoes and four litres of syrup.

Little by little, the Mihaychuks cleared and ploughed more land, getting about one more hectare under cultivation every year. Most was planted in wheat and barley, with half a hectare or so of potatoes and other vegetables. As well, Iwan gradually built a three-rail wood fence around his quarter section—about two kilometres of fencing in all. It would have been quicker and a lot easier to use barbed wire, but that had





to be bought whereas wood could be cut for free.

Iwan made many things from the materials he had on his homestead, but he had to have money to buy those things that he could not produce: nails, glass, tea, coffee, syrup, salt, kerosene and matches. And there were other things that it was simply easier to buy. In Bridok they had made their own cooking oil by crushing hemp seeds. Some settlers around Stuartburn still grew hemp for fibre and oil, but Iwan did not consider it worthwhile. The Mihaychuks relied upon commercially produced cooking oil which they bought at the Stuartburn general store.

Eventually, with the money earned from working out, cutting cordwood and selling surplus crops, Iwan was able to buy fifteen cattle, three pigs and a new

*Dmytro Mihaychuk and an unidentified friend pose on the binder Iwan bought once his fields got too large for him to harvest his wheat by hand.*



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Adams wagon. Alongside his house Iwan and his father-in-law built a barn, a stable, a granary and a pig house, each made of logs plastered with mud and covered with a thatched roof. A short way from the house was a shallow well, dug by hand, which gave a good supply of clear water. Five years of work had made improvements on the land valued at \$531, but Iwan still did not own his homestead.

Before he could claim the full legal title, or patent, Iwan had to “prove up.” This meant proving that he was a genuine settler who had fulfilled all the conditions for homesteading set out in the Dominion Lands Act. Government inspectors checked to make sure that a settler had cultivated a reasonable amount of land, had built a house and farm buildings and had lived on the land for at least three years. Iwan had indeed done all that, but there was still one more step. Before he could apply for the patent to his homestead he had to obtain Canadian citizenship.

Iwan became a Canadian citizen in 1907, and shortly afterwards he applied for and was granted the patent to his homestead. He now owned more land than he could ever have dreamed of owning in Bridok. He knew that by Canadian standards he was still a poor man on the edge of the frontier, but he was enjoying a higher standard of living than he had in the Ukraine and he had many opportunities to improve his position.



# Chapter Five

## Becoming Canadianized



**W**hile Iwan was proving up, the district was changing. Across the township Ukrainian settlers, mostly from Bukovyna, were clearing land and planting crops. As a result, Iwan and Wasylyna still lived to some extent in a Ukrainian world.

Wasylyna spoke no English. Iwan had learned a little while working out, but in Arbakka, as their district was named, they did not have much chance to meet English-speaking people. Even the English storekeepers in Stuartburn had learned enough Ukrainian to serve their customers, and now Ukrainians were beginning to establish businesses. Theodore Wachna from Galicia, who had lived in the United States for some years,

*Seen from right to left in this 1914 photo are Wasylyna and Iwan, a neighbour and her child, and Anna, the Mihaychuk's youngest daughter.*



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opened a store at Stuartburn and later added another in the village of Gardenton. Others followed his example, opening businesses of all kinds in the new communities that sprang up along the Canadian Northern Railway line built through the district in 1906.

For Iwan and Wasylyna life remained in many ways similar to their old life in Bridok. Wasylyna baked bread in the big indoor clay stove. In the summer she cooked in a smaller clay oven outside. They had more and better food than before, but they still ate the same kinds of things: not much meat but plenty of milk, eggs,

*Maria Tanchuk  
(right) and a friend in  
traditional  
Bukovinian dress.*



cheese, sour cream, bread, borsch, cabbage rolls and perogies, with vegetables from Wasylyna's garden. In addition they had syrup, tea, coffee and sugar from the store. They ate as the wealthy in Bridok ate.

Wasylyna continued to wear the long skirt, blouse and headdress traditionally worn by married women in Bukovyna. For special occasions she wore a blouse richly embroidered with designs traditional to Bridok. Iwan wore clothes bought from Wachna's general store or sewn by Wasylyna from store-bought cloth. In Canada she bought cloth rather than spinning and weaving it from hemp fibre.



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News from home came from arriving settlers and from Ukrainian-language newspapers published in Winnipeg and elsewhere in North America. Iwan and Wasylyna encouraged their children to subscribe to several of these papers so that the whole family could keep up with events in the old country and in Ukrainian communities across Canada.

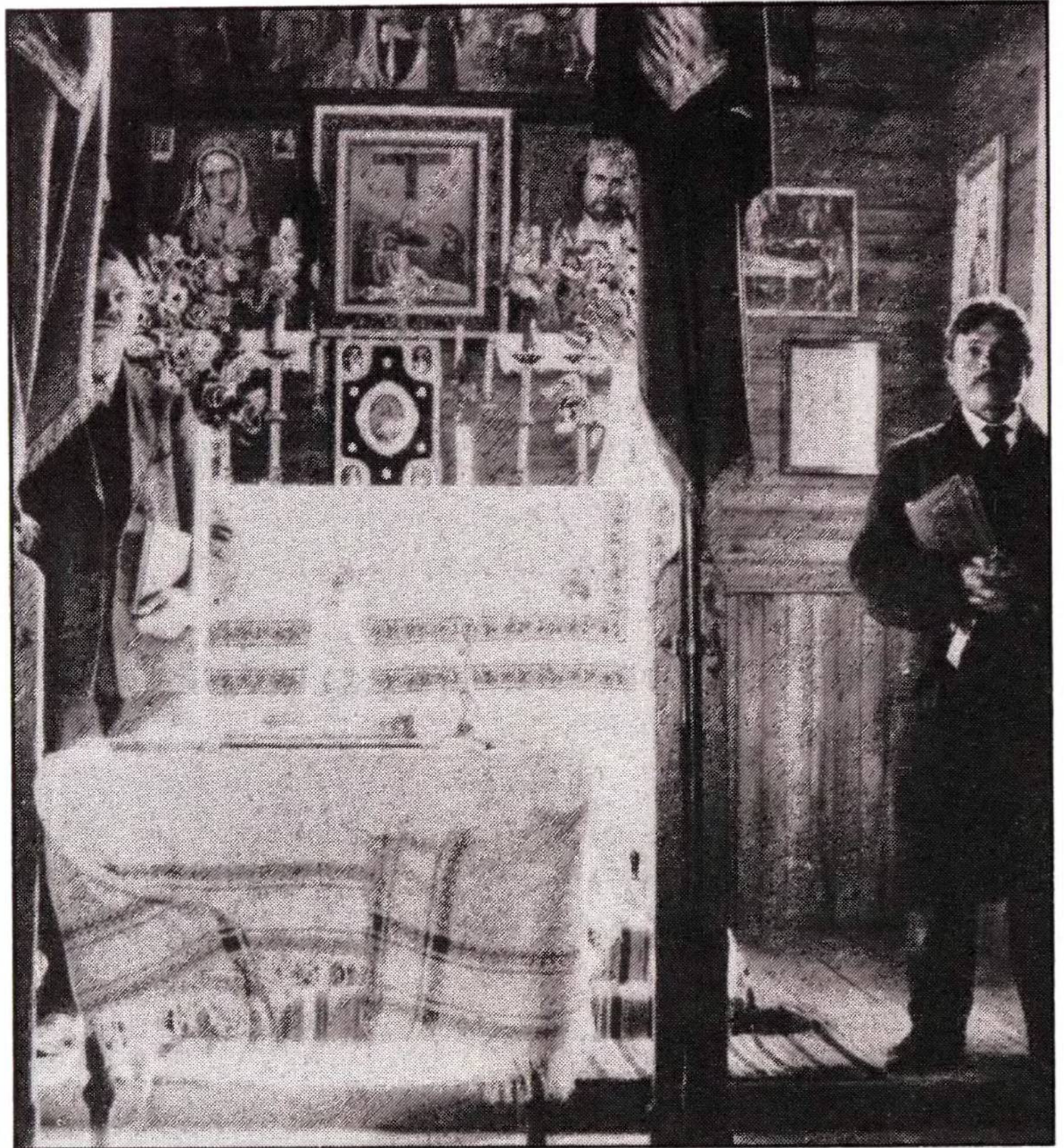
Although she was now far better off than she had been in the Ukraine, Wasylyna hated life in Canada. She missed the friendliness of village life. Her nearest neighbour was a kilometre away over a narrow winding trail. In the summer mosquitoes made the walk unpleasant, in the spring the trail was usually under water, and in winter it was too cold to walk any distance. More than that she missed the hilly landscape of Bukovyna. She missed home. Canada was where she lived, but she would never consider it home.

The Mihaychuks' younger children, however, soon became Canadianized. They wore Canadian-style clothes and picked up English rapidly. At school they learned very little about their Ukrainian heritage. In fact the provincial government discouraged it. The official position was that all immigrants should become as British as possible as quickly as possible, so the schools stressed the need to learn English and the importance of Canada's ties to Britain.

The organizing of schools was an important part of pioneer life. The settlers of Arbakka built a one-room school. About thirty children attended, but irregularly since at busy times of the year they had to stay home and help with work on the farm. It was often difficult



*Religion was very important to Ukrainian settlers. A community's first church might be nothing more than a rough log cabin, but it would be richly decorated with brightly painted pictures and carvings and finely embroidered cloths.*



for the settlers to hire qualified teachers. There were few qualified Ukrainians and few English-Canadians willing to come and share their harsh living conditions. Finally, the government set up special schools to train Ukrainians as teachers.

Iwan's two eldest boys, who did not want to be farmers like their father, saved enough money to attend the Brandon Teacher Training School for Ukrainians. Although they had not had much schooling themselves,



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they graduated with a certificate allowing them to teach in rural schools. The youngest boy, Dmytro, helped out on the farm, but he did not want to be a homesteader either. Eventually he left to run a sawmill, and he later built and operated the first flour mill in the nearby village of Vita.

Iwan and his neighbours put a good deal of time and effort into developing the community. Iwan helped to build the Vita community hall and took part in organizing a Ukrainian Orthodox church at Arbakka. Church members hired a carpenter to supervise them as they built their own church. When it was finished, it was the largest building in the area, designed in the distinctive Ukrainian style with a large onion-shaped dome and a separate bell tower.

*The Ukrainian Orthodox Church at Arbakka. In the background to the right of it, mostly hidden by the remains of a farm house, is the cemetery where Iwan and Wasylyna are buried.*





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When Iwan first moved on to his homestead there were no roads, just a few paths winding through the woods and swamps. If produce was to be hauled to the railway at Vita, decent roads had to be built. Using a four-horse team and a scraper, Iwan worked with other settlers to construct and grade roads along the section lines bordering his homestead. These dirt roads were hard to keep in good condition. In the spring farm wagons cut ruts in the soft mud. Children using the road to get to school had to wade through mud and water much of the time.

Living in the Ukrainian community around Arbakka, Iwan and his family did not meet the prejudice that their friends working in Winnipeg experienced. Many English-Canadians discriminated against Ukrainian immigrants and made it difficult for them to get good jobs even if they were well educated and well qualified. To some extent this anti-Ukrainian feeling died down as the years passed, but the outbreak of the First World War in Europe in August 1914 led to renewed prejudice and harsher discrimination.

Almost all the Ukrainian immigrants to Canada had come from the western Ukrainian provinces of Galicia and Bukovyna. These provinces were governed by Austria, with whom Canada was now at war. Most Ukrainian immigrants did not care about the war in Europe and very few felt any loyalty to Austria. Nonetheless, many Anglo-Canadians claimed that the Ukrainians were a threat to Canada and that they should be arrested and put into internment camps as enemy aliens. The government responded by requiring



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all Austrian citizens to register with the police. Since Iwan was now a Canadian citizen he was not affected by this, but several thousand Ukrainians who were not yet Canadian citizens were interned and spent at least part of the First World War in prison camps.

In 1917 Iwan was directly affected by anti-Ukrainian feelings. In response to demands that the authorities take action against so-called “dangerous foreigners,” the government took away the right to vote from all Canadian citizens who had been born in an enemy country unless they had become citizens before March 31, 1902. Iwan did not become a citizen until 1907, so he lost a basic right of citizenship.

Iwan must have been puzzled by all this for he knew that some of the younger Ukrainian men had volunteered for the Canadian army and were serving overseas. After the Conscription Act was passed in 1917 all male citizens of military age could be conscripted into the army. Many local Ukrainian boys were drafted, yet Iwan and others like him were still labelled “dangerous foreigners” and denied the right to vote.

Despite all this, Iwan did quite well during the war. Prices for farm produce were good, and with the money he earned from working out in the summers he was able to build a new house. It was made from wood cut by Dmytro in his sawmill, and the design was based on the homes of Canadian farmers for whom Iwan had worked at various times. It was very different from his first house—far larger, with two stories, many more rooms and wooden floors.



# Chapter Six

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## Changing Times

*A different kind of pioneer . . . Although neither of his parents ever learned to read or write, Emmanuel Mihaychuk graduated from the University of Toronto, becoming the first Ukrainian to qualify as a dentist in Canada.*



**A**s the years passed Iwan realized that he was never going to become a wealthy man farming the poor land around Arbakka. He still had to work out as a labourer, helping on harvesting crews and threshing gangs, to get cash to buy equipment and supplies. The same was true of most Ukrainian farmers in southeastern Manitoba.

They could not compete as wheat growers with farmers on the rich prairie lands to the west, so they settled for being as self-sufficient as possible. They stuck with mixed farming, growing some wheat, oats, barley, vegetables and hay, keeping some cattle and supplementing their small income by digging snakeroots, cutting cordwood or working away from their farms for part of the year.

Some of the younger men, however, decided that there was no future for them in southeastern Manitoba. In 1912, a number of them took their families west to the Peace River district of Alberta, where it was still possible to get a homestead on fairly good land. Others who did not want to homestead, went to Winnipeg to obtain work. Still others migrated to Detroit, Michigan,



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in the United States, where they could earn good wages working on the new assembly lines of the Ford Motor Company. Iwan's two eldest sons worked there for a while after a few years of teaching in rural schools in Ukrainian areas. Wasyl eventually became a newspaper editor. Emmanuel came back to Canada and began to study dentistry at the University of Toronto in 1922. He was a new kind of pioneer, the first Ukrainian to become a dentist in Canada, and one of the first to overcome the barriers of prejudice to enter a profession.

In 1922 Wasylyna fell ill and died. Eight years later Iwan died, aged seventy-three. He was buried beside his wife in the cemetery of the Orthodox church at Arbakka. Their graves were marked with simple concrete crosses. Forty years later their children and grandchildren placed a memorial over their graves. On it their names were written in English and Ukrainian. Engraved on the memorial was a trident—the emblem of the Ukraine—placed inside the outline of a maple leaf. Without words it told the story of their lives.





# For Discussion and Activity

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1. Iwan Mihaychuk left Bukovyna because he foresaw a bleak future for himself and his children. However, the Mihaychuks suffered many hardships in Canada. In your opinion was their move worthwhile?
2. The Dominion Lands Act specified certain conditions which needed to be fulfilled before a settler could claim full legal title to his property. Prepare a list of the steps Iwan Mihaychuk followed in order to finally qualify as a genuine settler.
3. In order to understand how the Mihaychuks may have felt leaving their home for a strange new land, compare their move with one you will make. You have just been told by your parents that you are leaving for a new settlement on the moon. Just like the Mihaychuks you and your family are only able to take along one trunk filled with your belongings. List what you decide to pack. Choose carefully and include things for all family members. Describe your journey and your first impressions of the new settlement.
4. On a blank map of Canada draw the route the Mihaychuks followed to Stuartburn. Include the names of present-day provinces and capital cities, the Great Lakes and Dominion City. A map of the Canadian Pacific Railway routes and a detailed map of Canada should be used to help you trace the route.
5. Just as Dr. Joseph Oleskow urged Ukrainians to immigrate to Canada, so did others promote settlement in the Canadian West. Use an encyclopedia to find out about one of these leaders of settlement:  
a) Lord Selkirk      b) Charles Ora Card  
c) Peter Verigin  
Write a paragraph summarizing the person's accomplishments.



# Glossary

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**Anise** A plant grown for its licorice-flavoured seeds.

**Bushel** A volume measure equal to 35 litres. A bushel of potatoes was about 25 kilograms.

**Cordwood** Wood cut into short logs to be used for fuel. A cord of wood was 128 cubic feet (3.6 m<sup>3</sup>).

**Dominion Lands Act** The act of Parliament that regulated the use and sale of all land owned by the Federal Government.

**Flail** Two poles linked together by a short chain. Used to beat wheat to separate the grain from the stalks.

**Homestead** In western Canada, a quarter section (64.8 ha) of land granted to a settler under certain conditions for a fee of ten dollars. No person could obtain more than one homestead.

**Prove Up** To fulfill all requirements for obtaining full title to a homestead.

**Quarter Section** 160 acres (64.8 ha), or one-quarter of a *section*.

**Range** Six miles (9.7 km) measured on a line running east-west.

**Scythe** A long broad blade mounted on a long handle, used for cutting grass or grain.

**Section** One square mile of land, 640 acres (2.59 km<sup>2</sup>).

**Sickle** A curved blade mounted on a short wooden handle used for cutting grass or grain.

**Steerage** The cheapest accommodation on a passenger ship. Usually very crowded and often below the waterline.

**Township** Six miles (9.7 km) measured on a line running north-south *or* a block of land six miles by six miles, i.e. 36 square miles or 93 km<sup>2</sup>.

**Working Out** The term used by homesteaders for the practice of working for wages away from their own farm.

**XXX Flour** Very cheap flour of poor quality.



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# Heritage Series

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MATHURIN BROCHU OF NEW FRANCE

Christopher Moore

PEGGY CRYSLER OF UPPER CANADA

Christopher Moore

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HOMESTEADING ON THE PRAIRIES: IWAN MIHAYCHUK

John Lehr

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