NEIGHBOURING HOMESTEADERS

Indian residents of the Qu'Appelle region were not joined by significant numbers of newcomers until 1882. Until that time settlers had largely ignored the Qu'Appelle in favour of the Saskatchewan country to the north. They had believed the land was more fertile and wooded there and had anticipated that the transcontinental railway would be built through that region. The Canadian Pacific Railway, however, was built across the southern plains and created a land rush in the Qu'Appelle in 1882 and 1883. The number of homestead entries plummeted in 1884 and 1885, and immigration was at almost a complete standstill in 1886.¹ In that year the population of the Qu'Appelle region, broadly understood as extending from Virden, Manitoba, to Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, numbered 23,500.² Settlers from Ontario and Britain composed about half the population; a diversity of ethnic groups, including Germans, Hungarians, and Icelanders, made up the other half.

Settlement at this time was clustered along the CPR; few homesteaders had ventured more than thirty miles north of the line or twenty miles south. Farming in the more distant areas was not seen as feasible until branch line construction was completed. Transportation was the essential prerequisite of agriculture, as it permitted the development of an exportable cash crop and the import of essential farm implements, household goods, and food. Because of this vital transportation facility, immigration agencies, the Department of the Interior, and the railway itself promoted settlement in the Qu’Appelle. And settlers came – not because of the agricultural potential of the area, but because of the railway. At this time it was uncertain whether agriculture was possible in this region of variable
rainfall and early frosts, and suitable techniques for farming the dry land had yet to be devised.

The single family homestead was the principal economic unit in the development of the Qu’Appelle district. Homesteads of 160 acres were available for a ten dollar registration fee. Within three years a homesteader could receive title to his land if he met a residence requirement, had constructed a habitable dwelling, and had a certain number of acres in crop. Farm-making costs varied considerably, but few homesteaders made a large initial investment. It has been estimated that the costs for the average settler to set up a homestead in his first year fell in the range of $590 to $1,193. This estimate takes into consideration the cost of constructing a house, stable, granaries, fencing, and a well. The settler also had to purchase some provisions and to begin cultivation a breaking plough, a stubble plough, a mower and rake, a team of oxen, and a wagon.

Farming operations were primitive for the first few years of limited equipment and small acreages. Seeding by hand was a common practice as was harvesting with scythe and cradle, hand-binding, and threshing with a flail. In most cases this early pioneering stage, characterized by crude cultivation methods, did not last more than a few years. The farmers of the Qu’Appelle began early on to specialize in grain, particularly wheat. Even in the mid-1880s farms were more specialized here than just to the east in Manitoba where there were more cattle and mixed farming. The larger acreages of the specialized wheat farmer, and the necessity for speed because of early frosts, demanded the use of machinery such as the mechanical drill seeder, the self-binding reaper, and the steam thresher.

Although the single-family homestead was the most common farming enterprise, other types were found in the Qu’Appelle district in the 1880s. A number of community experiments were set up, as well as ethnic, religious, working-class, and aristocratic colonies. Hungarians settled at Esterhazy, Icelanders at Thingvalla, and Russian Jews at Wapella. A New Sweden and a New Finland were also established in the district. There were English colonies such as the East London Artisan’s Colony near Moosomin, the Scottish crofter colony south of Wapella, and the Primitive Methodists of the Pheasant Plains. Aristocratic Englishmen settled at Cannington Manor, and a community of French counts and noblemen took up residence near Whitewood. The Major William R. Bell Farm at Indian Head, founded in 1882, was the largest company farm in the West, comprising over 57,000 acres and employing 300 men in the summer.
The settlers who joined the Indians in attempting to farm this district in the 1880s provided no real model of successful husbandry. The 1880s were characterized by failure rather than by success and have been described as a "nightmare to pioneers." Among this generation of settlers, references to the "drought years" meant not the 1930s but the 1880s. Many of the colonies found farming a severe struggle and did not survive the decade. The Bell Farm was bankrupt by 1889. Homesteaders deserted the district in large numbers after 1883. In 1886 homestead cancellations greatly outstripped entries. In a case study of three townships in the Abernethy district of the Qu'Appelle in the 1880s, historian Lyle Dick found that most settlers did not persist and that 59 per cent of all entries were cancelled. Dick argues that the Darwinian model, based on the survival of the fittest, is not in itself sufficient to explain why some farmers succeeded and others did not, although he identifies as a "deeply ingrained theme" in prairie folklore the idea that "hard work, determination and perseverance were the basis of the settler's success." Dick contends that the question is much more complex and cannot be accounted for solely in terms of adaptability and individual enterprise. Certain districts revealed much higher incidents of failure than others. Much of it can be accounted for by a lack of rail service. Settlers most distant from the railway, such as those in the Balcarres district near the File Hills, registered the highest cancellation rates.

The adverse climatic conditions of the 1880s also account for the high failure rate. In 1886 drought nearly totally devastated crops after three successive years of crop failures: there was drought in 1883, drought and frost in 1884, and frost in 1885. In 1889 drought and early frost were again experienced, and in 1890 the crop was widely injured by frost. The farmers' techniques, used in their homelands where moisture was abundant, often aggravated the situation in the early years before methods suitable to semi-arid regions were developed. Many who broadcast their seed, for example, met with failure because the seed did not germinate. Drought also created a problem for wintering stock in the Qu'Appelle district. When hay and water were scarce, some stock-raisers had to drive their cattle northward into the Saskatchewan country. Other hazards, including hail, prairie fire, and grasshopper and gopher infestation, made farming a precarious undertaking. Blizzards were a threat to livestock in winter.

A major difference between the Indian farmer and his neighbours in the 1880s was that while the newcomers had the option to leave and try their luck elsewhere, the reserve residents had little choice.
but to persevere. Clause 70 of the 1876 Indian Act excluded Indians from taking homesteads in Manitoba and the North-West, thereby preventing the Indian farmer from seeking better railway, market, or soil advantages. This issue was brought to the attention of Indian Affairs officials in 1886 when Joseph Tanner, a member of the Gambler's Saulteaux band, attempted to take out a homestead near Maple Creek, at a spot where he and his family had resided for some time and had made improvements. Tanner, described by Commissioner Dewdney as a “well-to-do Indian earning his livelihood as a whiteman,” ran the mail for the police between Maple Creek barracks and points in the United States. He was not allowed to take out a homestead, as he refused to become enfranchised, give up his annuity and his Indian status. Tanner’s wife applied for homestead entry but was informed that a farmer’s wife was not the sole head of a family and could not obtain entry. Indian farmers then had no choice but to stay on their reserves; a new life on a different plot of land was not an option for them.

**IMPROVING CONDITIONS FOR THE INDIAN FARMER**

In the late 1880s, however, relations between the Indian farmers and their instructors were characterized by a high degree of cooperation. Indian farmers were anxious to see agriculture succeed. On the whole the instructors of this period appear to have been competent men who were also genuinely anxious to accomplish this goal. Despite the grim climatic conditions of these years, significant strides were taken from 1885 to 1890 toward alleviating many of the problems that had handicapped and impeded Indian farming in the past, although this resulted in few immediate rewards and created new difficulties. For the most part, local department officials played a constructive role in facilitating favourable conditions, although their superiors were often slow to respond and always claimed to be financially constrained.

The resident supervisory staff on the Treaty Four reserves was greatly increased after 1885. As noted previously, Allan MacDonald became the agent for the Crooked Lakes reserves. His staff consisted of three farm instructors, a clerk, interpreter, cook, and labourer. J.B. Lash was appointed agent for Muscowpetung. A former policeman, Lash had first worked in the Department of Indian Affairs and was serving as agent at Carlton in 1885 when he was taken prisoner by Riel. His clerk and interpreter was Henry Halpin, a former Hudson’s Bay Company clerk at Frog Lake, who had been
taken captive by Big Bear's band but had testified in defence of the chief at his trial when he was found guilty of treason. There were three farm instructors at this agency, two interpreters, a farm assistant, storeman, and the wives of two of the instructors were hired as cooks. Hilton Keith was the agent for the Touchwood Hills. Keith had been instructor at Crooked Lakes at the time of the Yellow Calf incident. At File Hills, P.J. Williams was appointed agent. He was one of the original Ontario farm instructors brought west in 1879. For the most part the instructors were young married farmers from Ontario, the Maritimes, and Scotland. The interpreters were generally described simply as half-breeds.

In the years after 1885, reserve farmers began to acquire some of the machinery necessary to facilitate their operations. Mowers and rakes were the most common purchases. Some reserves were fortunate in their abundant hay supplies, and a number of bands sold hay on contract to other reserves, to settlers, and to the North-West Mounted Police. Selling hay was one of the very few opportunities for outside employment available to reserve residents. In 1886 there was a heavy yield of hay on the Muscowpetung agency and 200 tons were sold to the police in Regina. With the proceeds, the Indians purchased a mowing machine and a horse rake, seven double wagons, and four double sleighs, items that could sustain and bolster this industry. Yellow Calf and his party sold 150 tons of hay in 1886 and purchased two mowing machines and horse rakes. Little Bones' band, which had joined Sakimay's, also had a mowing machine, and the Chacachase party had a mower and were cutting hay for sale.

Agents and farm instructors felt that access to mowers and rakes was essential for all bands, not only those that sold hay. In 1884, for example, agent MacDonald had strongly recommended that the Touchwood bands be granted their request for this machinery because they could not get sufficient hay out with scythes and would not have their haying finished before harvest with the slow hand method. The File Hills farm instructor similarly argued that as stock was increasing, the bands required mowers and rakes to provide enough hay. Hay was particularly difficult to obtain with scythes in dry years, when the danger of not being able to procure enough was at its highest. Agent MacDonald reported in 1890 that on the Crooked Lakes reserves it would have been impossible to cut the amount of hay required to winter the cattle without mowing machines; because it was a dry year, two or three acres in some cases had to be gone over before a ton of hay was secured. Some agents claimed that the Indians under their charge did not have
enough strength because of illness to put up adequate hay with scythes.  

Reapers and self-binders were also acquired during this period. As one Treaty Four agent explained, the self-binder lessened the danger of being caught by frost during a protracted harvest, and it also reduced the waste experienced in binding with short straw, both advantages encouraging the farmers to cultivate a larger area. The File Hills agent reported in 1888 that, without a reaper, it would be impossible to harvest the Indians' 130 acres of wheat in time to save the crop from frost. Local agents and instructors argued that these implements were a necessity and were totally in favour of their acquisition. Distant officials were more reluctant to recognize these implements as necessary and were certainly not prepared to purchase them for the farmers.

The department's policy on the acquisition of mowers, self-binders, and other machinery was that if individuals could afford to buy them from their own earnings, they should be allowed, even encouraged, to do so. The goal was to get the "industrious" to invest in useful articles, so that they could gain a sense of pride in their property and be seen to stand above the more "lethargic" band members. The department itself provided these items only rarely, and requests of agents and instructors were regularly turned down. Generally the machinery was purchased by the band, or at least a number of farmers together, contrary to the goal of official policy. Individuals could seldom afford these items. The money came from the proceeds of crops or from pooled annuities. Machinery was rarely paid for outright but in instalments over a number of years. In 1888 Kahkewistahaw's band, for example, made its first payment of fifty-five dollars to Massey Harris for a self-binder from the proceeds of the sale of wheat.

Bands were in debt to local merchants not only for machinery but for vital items such as binding twine. The Indian agents oversaw and kept account of these transactions. In 1887 members of one Crooked Lakes band entrusted their agent to purchase four self-binders for them, which they were to pay for out of that season's crop. In 1889 Little Black Bear's band bought a self-binder, which the agent acquired from a settler in the vicinity, and that same year the Touchwood bands purchased a self-binder. Bank loans, available to all settlers who had proof of title, were not open to Indian farmers, as they could not put up their property against a loan.

In 1885 MacDonald arranged with the Massey Manufacturing Company to act as agent for implement sales within the Crooked Lakes. He received a commission of 10 per cent of sales, which
he invested in further equipment or supplies, such as binding twine, or used to pay for repairs on the Indians' machines. MacDonald was originally given authorization for this arrangement by Hayter Reed, and it continued for six years.

Indian farming in Treaty Four continued to suffer from a scarcity of threshing machines, although this was to some extent ameliorated during the years 1885–90. Agents and instructors appear to have discouraged the Indians from threshing their grain with cattle and ponies, and instead waited for the use of a community's threshing machine. But reserve residents were often among the last to have the use of one. For example, in October 1889 a farmer living near the Piapot reserve noted that when threshing was completed on his farm, the last to be done in the district, six Indians arrived with their oxen on the last night to take the machine to the reserve.27 Often a machine was not available until December or January. In 1887 the Crooked Lakes reserves did not acquire the use of a threshing machine until March.28 Until this process was completed, the crop was of no use to the farmers, either in flour or in cash proceeds. Threshing in winter created a number of difficulties. It took longer so that costs increased, and it also resulted in loss of grain. On reserves it involved "camping out" both for the men and for the horses, as there were no stables or houses near the stacks. When temperatures were thirty degrees below, as in January, threshing was almost impossible. The sheaves were simply frozen mounds of snow, and when they were heaved up, ice and snow covered the men.29 The engine would often refuse to start in the bitter cold. Sheaf racks were mounted on sleigh runners in the winter, and because of the short days, lamps had to be lit to allow the pitchers to see where to throw the sheaves.

By the late 1880s distant department officials were recognizing the need, long felt by those on the spot, to have readier access to threshing machinery. The acquisition of a small steam thresher for two bands in the Carlton agency was approved in 1888.30 The engine was also to be used for a grist mill. Each farmer contributed one dollar toward the purchase of the engine. A similar arrangement was approved for the Battleford agency the following year. In 1888 agent MacDonald of the Crooked Lakes purchased a steam engine and a separator from the Bell Farm.31 The want of threshing machinery was still keenly felt, however, on the File Hills, Muscowpetung, and Touchwood reserves. Where threshing machines were available, the Indians soon became proficient at operating them, dispelling the concern of some officials that they lacked the ability to operate them properly. In 1889 Inspector Wadsworth visited a
band engaged in threshing and noted that "these men have become expert in working a thresher; the farmer was there directing and going about the machine with an oil can, but the driving, feeding and other expert duties connected with working the machine, as well as the laborers' part, were being satisfactorily performed by the Indians."³²

As well as pressing for more machinery, agents and instructors had for years lamented the fact that grist mills were seldom located near reserves. It was generally felt that the Indians' cultivation of wheat was to no purpose if it could not be ground, and it was believed that some bands could be entirely self-supporting if they had access to milling facilities.³³ Officials also felt the Indians could not fully appreciate the value of farm work until grist mills were established in the neighbourhood, as it was only then that they could actually see and consume the results of their labour. Upon obtaining a grist mill, one agent wrote that it had "effected greater practical results among the Indians than a thousand sermons preached to them on the benefits derived from labour; the prospect of raising their own bread supply has given an impulse to the efforts of all, and has made the hitherto idle ones obedient and industrious."³⁴

In the mid-1880s the Department of Indian Affairs began a program of granting bonuses to individuals who would establish mills in the North-West. At Moose Mountain in 1885, for example, Captain Pierce and Robert Bird constructed a saw and grist mill with the "patent roller process" for flouring. The two thousand dollar bonus from the department secured for the Indians of the district precedence in grinding their grain for ten years. Rates of toll were to be one-quarter less than those paid by ordinary customers for the first two years and one-eighth less for the remaining eight years.³⁵ This appears to have been the first of such bonuses, and the system was extended in the ensuing years. The mills did custom work for farmers, with the miller securing an income by collecting grain as his customary fee. The larger merchant mills were less concerned with custom work than with the purchasing and marketing of grain. The miller graded the flour; first-class wheat might be graded "Strong Bakers," while coarse flour, gristed perhaps from badly frozen wheat, would be considered xxx.

Indian farmers of the Crooked Lakes agency took their grain first to a mill at Indian Head, then to one at Whitewood, and eventually to a department-subsidized mill at Wolseley. Muscowpetung agency farmers took theirs to a mill in Fort Qu'Appelle, and likely the File Hills Indians did the same. The nearest mills to Touchwood Hills residents were fifty-five and sixty-five miles away, vast distances to haul grain during a severe winter. The agents and instructors, as
part of the effort to promote a sense of individual pride in the Indian farmer, had each present the miller with his own amount of flour, so that he could actually see and appreciate the return, despite the fact that in some cases it was nearly all returned to the agency warehouse, mixed, and issued as rations.\textsuperscript{36}

The business of milling was open to much abuse in the North-West. Millers' tolls were not regulated by law, and it was found that the Indians, like the other farmers, lost a good deal to satisfy the "greed" of the miller.\textsuperscript{37} Inspector Wadsworth complained that both the yield and the quality of flour from these mills were unsatisfactory, even at the subsidized mills, where the spirit of the contract was not always carried out. The charge of grinding was more than the Indians could pay. At the Wolseley-subsidized mill, Wadsworth found in 1890 that the Crooked Lakes farmers were returned only thirty-three pounds of flour to the bushel of No. 1 hard wheat, which was ten or twelve pounds less than it would yield with good milling.\textsuperscript{38} He estimated that in the same year the Muscowpetung Indians lost 33 per cent of their crop in their transaction at the Fort Qu'Appelle mill. In some cases the miller reckoned the market value of the wheat, then deducted his toll, and paid the balance in flour and bacon at retail prices. Wadsworth found this to be a most unfair way of doing business, "for if the Indian sold his wheat for cash he could invest the whole money in flour and not have to pay for grinding that he never receives." He described the quality of much of the flour as poor and unwholesome: the File Hills Indians were eating bannock the colour of mahogany, and he "grieved" for the Indian farmers who had to eat these as the fruit of a hard summer's toil.\textsuperscript{39} The agent admitted, however, that in this case he had mixed the Strong Bakers grade with the xxx.

Some owners of subsidized mills found it frustrating to grind for the Indians. Hillyard Mitchell at Duck Lake announced that he would do no more gristing for the Indians, for if he continued to do so, he would lose money.\textsuperscript{40} Their grain, which they brought in small amounts of little more than half a bag, was "as a rule, dirty and full of smut, and they expect me to take these drib drabs and grind them for them."\textsuperscript{41} Complaining that the mill was a source of trouble ever since it was erected, he stated in 1891 that he would be pleased to open negotiations with the government to take it off his hands.

In other quarters there was considerable lobbying and scrambling to obtain the government bonus toward the construction of a mill. In February 1890 a Mr Thorburn of Broadview travelled to Ottawa to ask Dewdney for a bonus toward a mill in his town.\textsuperscript{42} In that year, however, the program of granting bonuses was ended. It was
decided that it would be better to establish mills on the agencies, as
the "excessive toll which is taken in the Territories is avoided, the
Indians get the full benefit of their industry, are saved the loss of
time consumed in going to the mills and hanging about them waiting
for their grists, and a feeling of pride and independence is engen-
dered."43 Officials believed that trips to the mill allowed the Indians
to loiter about town; a mill on the agency would further confine the
Indians to their reserves. The agents and instructors could also see
that all the grain was properly used by the Indians. They could grind
for each family what it needed for a specific time, which would
provide a lesson in economy.

With the government’s bonus program ended, a mill was estab-
lished on the Crooked Lakes agency in 1890. Deputy Superintendent
General Vankoughnet remained reluctant about this move and won-
dered “whether in view of the uncertainty of growing wheat in the
District, the department would be wise in incurring any great ex-
pense in affording facilities to the Indians for grinding grain.”44
Commissioner Reed, however, disagreed, as he believed the pros-
tpects for growing grain were “hopeful,” and he felt the mill would
encourage the Indians in their efforts.45 On a recent visit of Governor
General Stanley, the Indians had asked for a mill, and Reed wished
to see this request complied with. The Crooked Lakes residents
constructed the mill themselves. They cut and drew the logs,
freighted materials and machinery, and built the mill and engine
house. Indian farmers, however, still had to pay for the use of the
mill to “cover the cost of working expenses.”46 They were charged
in wheat bran or cordwood at the rate of eight cents a bushel. The
toll for off-reserve customers was twelve and one-half cents a bushel.

After 1885 the department displayed greater concern to supply
the services of blacksmiths, which bolstered the agricultural oper-
ations of the Indians. Blacksmith shops were built on some agencies,
and skilled blacksmiths either visited or took in work from the re-
serves. In the past much time had been lost in sending repair work
to the nearest town’s blacksmith. During the critical brief periods of
seeding in spring and harvesting in fall, breakdowns of implements
and wagons were frequent and could cripple operations. Although
wooden parts were sometimes replaced by the farmer, the breakage
of metal parts was much more serious. Blacksmiths were also re-
quired to point, or sharpen, ploughshares. Allan MacDonald re-
ported in the spring of 1889 that his agency’s blacksmith, John
Pollock, was kept constantly employed repairing ploughs and wa-
gons and pointing shares.47 Very little time was lost, as the farmer
had to wait only a few minutes for the work to be done.
In 1885 a shortage of work oxen remained an acute problem on most reserves in this district of Treaty Four. By 1890 most bands had much larger herds, which included work oxen, cows, steers, heifers, bulls, and calves. Much of this increase must have been due to the system of cattle on loan. In 1889 the File Hills agent reported, for example, that there were 281 head on all the reserves, four-fifths of which the Indians “owned” under the loan system. In the tabular statements for most years, cattle were listed as under departmental control, which meant that the animals were branded ID and could not be sold, bartered, or slaughtered without the consent of the agent. Yet the livestock were held or owned by individuals, not in common by the band. In Kahkewistahaw’s band, for example, the 110 head under departmental control were held by twenty-one Indians. Some had work oxen only, others had cows only, while some had a variety. These individuals were likely involved in the cattle on loan program. As previously noted, owners of cattle thus acquired were to regard the beasts as their own, but the agent still retained final control in that the animals could not be disposed of without his consent. The advantage to the owner, besides the use of the work oxen and cows, was that from time to time he was permitted to sell or slaughter. Officials remained convinced that the Indians could not be trusted to dispose of their cattle in a prudent, wise manner. The judgment and discretion of the agent were seen as essential. The system eroded the practice of holding cattle in common, except perhaps for bulls, but it did not give the owners a full degree of proprietorship.

Indians could and did obtain private cattle that were not under departmental control. These were acquired by purchase, by an increase of private stock, by gift for “loyalty,” by exchange for horses, or by “dickering” through some sort of barter. On the Ochapowace reserve, for example, there were in 1890 twenty-eight private cattle along with the eighty-four head under government control. By the mid-1890s Inspector Wadsworth regarded it as a matter of alarm that private herds of livestock were on the increase in the North-West. Stock which the Indians could use, trade, sell, and kill as they chose, without reference to the agent, would be a “hard matter to control and contend against.” The inspector noted that the private stock “not only receives the best care, but it increases more rapidly than that ‘under government control.’ I think if it is not regulated now, it will become a monster hard to contend against.”

The complexities of the issue were highlighted at branding time when the Indians were intent on establishing their private ownership. One agent complained that it was a “brain twister” to establish
the proprietorship of private cattle: "to trace some of these through the twistings and turnings to their present owner is more difficult than pleasant." The agent found that, at the "palaver" before branding, "it would take a man like Tallyrand [sic] to dodge some of their questions," although it usually ended with the cattle under the agent's control. It appears that department officials insisted on branding all cattle ID, but the Indians made some private mark of their own on their animals, usually a slit or hole in the ear. In the mid-1890s permission was granted to Indians in "good circumstances" with a number of cattle to acquire brands of their own, but these were to be used in conjunction with the ID brand.

Despite all of the confusions of the cattle on loan system, and the thorny question of the private ownership of cattle, the problem of a scarcity of working oxen on the reserves was to some extent ameliorated during these years. Shortages, however, still existed at certain times of the year. In the spring of 1890, just at harrowing time, for example, the File Hills agent had to send most of the teams to three destinations for seed potatoes, seed rye, and feed oats. The teams were gone for five days, and because of bad roads, the oxen were in poor condition on their return and were unfit to work for two or three days.

In the period 1885 to 1890, all settlers in the Qu'Appelle region were in the process of learning to cope with the environment. It was a time of experimentation, discovery, and adaptation of dry-land farming techniques. The drought of 1886 pointed out the hazards of growing grain in the district and suggested that tillage operations would have to be carried out more carefully and changes in techniques would have to be made. Indian farmers participated in these innovations.

Farmers in the Treaty Four area were among the first in the North-West to experiment with summer-fallowing. The practice was widely adopted on reserves in Treaty Four as a means of conserving and replenishing soil fertility and of overcoming some of the problems of inadequate rainfall. Credit for the discovery of the technique has been variously assigned to Angus McKay, an Indian Head farmer; W.R. Motherwell, an Abernethy farmer; and the Bell Farm at Indian Head. In any case it was discovered in 1886 in the district of Assiniboia that during the drought of that year certain fields, those that had been ploughed but not planted the previous year, yielded considerably better than the others. A good number of fields were in this state because in the spring of 1885 farmers who had been engaged in the transport of troops and supplies to the north did not return in time to seed. The higher yield on land that had
lain fallow throughout the previous summer pointed to the conclusion that, in areas of little rainfall, it might prove feasible to plant crops only every second year. In that way the crop could use the moisture from two seasons.\textsuperscript{58} It was also found that fewer weeds grew on land that had been summer-fallowed.

Fall ploughing of the stubble fields was also recommended as a method of ensuring better yield. Both summer-fallowing and fall ploughing were found to improve yields on farms specializing in wheat. There was simply not enough time in the spring alone to prepare an adequate seedbed over large acreages. In the short run, however, until new fields were broken and ready, the adoption of summer-fallowing meant that less land was seeded, since fields were used only every second year. Summer-fallowing did not mean that fields were simply abandoned for a year; they were cultivated, harrowed in one direction, and several weeks later harrowed in the opposite direction, usually in June after the rest of the land had been seeded.

While the general adoption of the practice of summer-fallowing in the North-West was slow, it appears to have been widely in use on reserves as early as 1886. Agent MacDonald reported that on the Crooked Lakes reserves a good deal of the old land was being summer-fallowed, and by 1890 he noted that the Indians had land under crop for no more than two years in a row and then it was summer-fallowed.\textsuperscript{59} On all the agencies wheat was no longer sown on "dirty" or "foul" land that was weedy. Instead it was left fallow. Breaking and fencing of new land continued, but, in the interim, the seeded acreage of the Indian farms did not increase during this period. Officials placed a great deal of confidence in the possibilities of the new farming techniques. In his annual report of 1887, Dewdney proclaimed that the disappointments of the past were due to imperfect systems of cultivation. He estimated that the area under cultivation on reserves was about one-tenth less than that in the previous year but explained, "This reduction of area is to be attributed to the teaching of experience which has convinced the best farmers in these Territories that success can only be hoped for from the more careful cultivation of a smaller acreage and the retention of a proportion of the land unseeded in order to allow of its being summerfallowed."\textsuperscript{60}

As noted previously, fall ploughing was encouraged since the early days of reserve agriculture. It allowed earlier sowing in spring, although in later years the method came under much criticism.\textsuperscript{61} At the time no one knew with certainty which techniques were most appropriate for the environment, and therefore controversy over
methods arose. Passing through the Touchwood Hills in 1886, Inspector McGibbon noted that a problem on the reserves, and one common among white settlers as well, was that because fall ploughing only skimmed the ground, in a dry season the roots did not get the nourishment they needed. Hilton Keith, the Touchwood Hills agent, attempted to regulate the depth of the furrow according to the moisture of the soil. There was some deep ploughing as well as shallow on the reserves. Keith explained that many practical farmers in the district believed that deep ploughing did not produce good returns. During years of extreme drought, when the ground was dry and hard, the land could not be worked and little fall ploughing was done on the reserve farms. This situation was widely reported in 1886 and 1889.

In the years of almost total crop failure, the success of one or two fields served as a source of encouragement and inspiration. In 1889, for example, crops were disastrous throughout the Qu'Appelle Valley, but on the Cowessess reserve several fields yielded remarkably well. This success convinced MacDonald that wheat, oats, and barley, with proper cultivation, could be grown in the district. He believed the methods used on these fields could serve to guide future operations.

Besides the interest in new farming techniques, experiments with various kinds of seed grain were also conducted during this period. In prairie agricultural circles, the debate over the use of hard or soft wheats continued throughout the 1880s. Some farmers were convinced of the superiority of hard Red Fife, which, because of its hard kernel and flour strength, commanded a high price. Red Fife, however, required a fairly lengthy growing season. It germinated slowly and had to be sown very early, often before the frost was fully out of the ground when the soil could not be properly worked. As it was often sown after just the surface of the land was worked, the young plants were in a poor condition to withstand a dry season. Its long maturation time also made it subject to frost. Soft White Fife could be sown later, when the soil was better worked, which produced more vigorous, healthy plants. It generally ripened before the frost and was less prone to rust or smut than Red. With the evolution of a system of farming that permitted earlier seeding and harvesting, however, Red Fife became by the 1890s the dominant variety of wheat grown on the Canadian prairies. It was still too often caught by early frost, however, and experimentation with other varieties continued throughout the prairies.

Reserve farmers experimented with both Red and White Fife, as well as other varieties. Agents and farm instructors communicated
with William Saunders of the Central Experimental Farm in Ottawa, established in 1886. In 1889 Saunders supplied the Crooked Lakes reserves with eight bushels of “Russian” seed wheat, which the farmers experimented with, planting half on new land backset and the rest on deeply ploughed stubble. Quite likely this was a sample of Ladoga, which Saunders brought from Russia in 1887 and which was tested extensively by farmers. It ripened in advance of Red Fife but yielded much less. It was found, however, not to be a marketable wheat. In milling and baking tests of 1892, Ladoga produced a bread which was yellow in colour and coarse in texture. News of its shortcomings spread quickly through the agricultural press and grain buyers became prejudiced against it. In 1892 the Department of Indian Affairs considered acquiring this unmarketable grain from settlers left with supplies of it, since it could be obtained at a greatly reduced price. Dewdney claimed he could not understand why the buyers were not interested in Ladoga; he felt that it surely made good flour.

Between 1885 and 1890 complaints about the late arrival of seed in the spring, and the lack of sufficient quantities for the acreage prepared, declined considerably. For the most part Indian farmers saved enough seed from their crop of the previous year, and seed was issued only to those just beginning to farm. During some years, however, the seed was not worth saving for the spring, for example, when it was touched with frost.

In the adverse climatic conditions of these years, seed grain relief was provided to the Indians that required it, as well as to the other settlers in the North-West. Seed grain relief to new settlers was widespread before 1896. In 1886, for example, the government set aside $46,884 to supply seed to settlers in Saskatchewan. As frost had destroyed much of the crop of 1885, the government had to supply, besides seed, foods, fuel, and other provisions to impoverished settlers. The North-West Mounted Police identified the needy and distributed relief in winters of extreme want, sometimes having to establish temporary posts for that purpose. In some years Indian farmers were able to retain seed for the spring when other settlers in the district had to be supplied by the government.

Reserve residents experimented not only with seed grain, but with varieties of bushes for their gardens, such as currant, gooseberry, and raspberry, sent from the Central Experimental Farm. Vegetables grown included potatoes, turnips, carrots, onions, beets, peas, beans, squash, pumpkins, and Indian corn. Time and effort were also spent in tending ornamental gardens and in making their surroundings more pleasant. In 1886 it was reported that some of the
Crooked Lakes residents showed "considerable taste" in laying out the grounds around their houses. In one case an attractive tree-lined avenue formed an entrance to a house and garden. Inspector McGibbon reported in 1889 that on the Pasquah reserve "some of the Indians have very tastefully laid out gardens, neatly fenced with flower beds and gravel walks, and borders of cobble stones. Currant bushes and many other plants, useful as well as ornamental, could be seen, the whole displaying considerable taste." Agent MacDonald carried out his own experiments with trees, fruit bushes, and plants such as strawberries and rhubarb in his agency garden. In 1888 he planted Indian corn procured from the Gros Ventre. He believed his garden was instructive: "there is hardly an Indian visits the office without examining the garden before leaving."

On some reserves individual farmers were more prosperous than their neighbours. As indicated previously, this situation was particularly noticeable on the Cowessess reserve where several outstanding farmers had emerged by 1884. In the late 1880s Louis O'Soup, Alex Gaddie, Nepahpahness, and Andrew Delorme were among the successful. A visitor to the reserve in the late 1880s was especially impressed with O'Soup's farm. "His two large log houses, joined together by a smaller, which served as a vestibule to both, were clean, tidy and well furnished." O'Soup had a splendid field of wheat of thirty to forty acres. The observer thought that O'Soup's house and farm "instead of being like those of an Indian, suggested the thought that they might belong to someone white enough to be called O'Brien or O'Grady."

In the years 1885 to 1890 Indian farmers continued to participate in the agricultural fairs held annually throughout the Territories. The Indian women displayed samples of their preserves, bread, butter, knitting, sewing, and weaving, while the men exhibited livestock and farm and garden produce. The Indians generally participated in their own separate category, with individuals competing for prizes for the best produce or livestock. The judge for the competition was very often a department official from one of the reserves. The department contributed a sum to the territorial agricultural societies toward the payment of prizes to Indian exhibitors. It was widely believed that if the Indians were to compete in the general categories, against all other contenders, they would find the fairs a disheartening, discouraging experience. When the Indians did compete with the white settlers, however, they appear to have taken their fair share of prizes. At the Broadview fair in 1888, for example, Louis O'Soup took first prize for the best milk cow and for the best pair of three-year-old steers, and he won a
special prize for the fattest steer. That same year an Indian farmer from Pasquah’s band took the second prize for wheat against all competitors. At the Prince Albert fair to the north, farmers from the Okemasis and Beardy reserves took first prize for wheat against all contenders. At the Regina Agricultural Fair of 1890, the first prize for White Fife in the general class was won by an Indian.

The Department of Indian Affairs actively promoted Indian participation in the fairs and exhibitions of this period. They were viewed as a means of stimulating a healthy spirit of competition. It was hoped that rivalry at the fairs might to some extent replace former pastimes such as gambling, horse stealing, and tribal warfare. Indian participation in the fairs was also seen as a means of displaying the worthy work of the department. Concrete evidence of Indian “progress” and “advancement” was exhibited for all to see. Newspapers favourable to the government applauded the Indians’ exhibits and praised the department’s efforts. At the fair in Regina were found “a thousand evidences of what the Indian Department is doing for the wards of the nation.” The Indian exhibits were complimented at great length in hopes of silencing the East’s “cynics and slanderers” of government efforts. On 25 October 1887, for example, the Regina Leader reported from Qu’Appelle:

If any one wants any proof of the wisdom of the policy and the energy which is shown by the Indian Department he need only have attended the Agricultural Shows to be made certain that they are working out a grand result. The Indian exhibits have been simply grand and to see the interest taken in the competition by the Natives themselves, must be a great inducement to the Commissioner to not only foster, but increase the opportunities for exhibits by Indians. A bloodthirsty brave could not have exhibited greater joy when waving aloft a dripping scalp and recounting the engagements in which he had secured it, than at these shows did the now peaceful chief who would lead you gently to his exhibit and show with the greatest glee that he had obtained the scarlet ticket or first prize. All honor to the Lieutenant-Governor and his Indian agents for showing up this spirit of peaceful emulation amongst the different tribes.

Aside from their propaganda value, the agricultural fairs exposed the Indian farmers and their instructors to the latest innovations in farm improvement. The primary function of these annual gatherings was to disseminate new ideas. Fairs were showcases for farm knowledge. Countless demonstrations and displays dealt with a variety of topics: tillage methods, agricultural machinery, seed grain varieties, dairy farming, cheese-making, and stock-breeding. Practical
agriculturalists exchanged opinions at these gatherings, drawing on their own experiences. Fairs were the prime media of farm improvement in the 1880s. Farmers could obtain both elementary, fundamental information to make their farm operations more successful and the latest in technological and scientific information. But for the white farmers as well as the Indians, rivalry engendered by competition was seen as the key to farm improvement, as it would teach the losers important lessons. “Moved by criticism of their exhibits, the also-rans and the ignorant would, in theory, discard their shoddy workmanship and inefficient ways, their inferior crops and defective seeds, their second-rate machinery and scraggly stock. Soon they would become paragons for others to follow.”

CONTRIBUTIONS OF INDIAN WOMEN

The exhibits at the agricultural fairs indicate that, like all farm women, Indian women were partners in the farm enterprise. The division of labour on prairie reserves was much the same as might be found on neighbouring farms. Men performed the tasks associated with field agriculture and the care of stock. They also freighted, lumbered, constructed dwellings and outbuildings, and hunted larger game and fur-bearers.

Indian women made essential economic contributions, both by drawing on their traditional talents and by learning new skills. They produced food for home consumption and to a limited extent marketed goods they manufactured or processed. In the unstable environment of the plains, women’s work was crucial to “risk reduction,” as they were largely responsible for diversifying the economic base of the farm. According to Cree informant Joe Dion, the economic contribution of particularly the elderly women in the mid-1880s was vital. When resources as well as spirits were low on the Onion Lake reserve, on the North Saskatchewan in the Treaty Six district, “much of the inspiration for the Crees came from the old ladies, for they set to work with a will that impressed everybody.” The elderly women were “an example of industry and thrift” and “they could always be depended upon, especially in times of stress.” “Everything that the elderly ladies gathered and stored away during the summer months was for the enjoyment and benefit of others,” Dion wrote. “Theirs was the satisfaction of making their loved ones happy. Their cheerfulness could not help but be infectious, thus everyone was soon striving to do his share and the Crees were able to look on the bright side of things.”

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Foraging activities continued, although they were more localized than in pre-reserve days. The plant food gathered varied according to terrain. The river and creek valleys provided a variety of wild fruit every spring, including saskatoons, raspberries, strawberries, black currants, and chokecherries. The fruit was dried or sold fresh by the pail. Kinnikinnick, a tobacco substitute, was gathered. Wild rhubarb was a favourite in soups. In the early spring sap was gathered from maple and birch trees, boiled down, and, according to Dion, “carefully stored away as a treat and soother for grandmother’s pets later on.” Roots such as wild turnip were collected, peeled, and dried. There was a market for seneca root, an ingredient in patent medicines, and for wild hops. Women cleaned and smoked fish that came up the creeks in spring and also caught fish through holes in the ice in winter. They snared small animals and birds such as prairie chicken. During moulting season wild fowl were killed in great numbers and women assisted in this. Much of the game was dried, smoked, and stored for the winter. In the fall the more northerly Cree women gathered muskeg tea and quantities of moss, which they dried to make moss bags for babies. Excursions organized by the women, whether for picking berries, hunting rabbits, collecting maple sugar, or raiding the creeks were like “happy picnics,” according to Dion. Such a trip, however, was “usually a well organized affair, every detail being prearranged, hence there was never a hitch in the work once the location was reached.”

On the reserves women hauled most of the water for household use and collected firewood, which they carried on their backs. They manufactured and repaired clothing. In winter they wove mats, baskets, and straw hats from rushes and willows gathered in the summer. A market was found for their tanning skills, as neighbours brought hides onto the reserves and paid for this process. Considerable labour was expended on grinding grain into meal in the years before access to grist mills.

Indian women proved eager to receive instruction and readily adapted to new skills and technology. They did much of the work in the vegetable gardens. Women and children also worked in the grainfields, especially during peak seasons such as haying and harvesting. As these operations usually coincided, women helped so that the men lost no time with the hay. In 1887 a neighbouring farmer visited the Assiniboine reserve and observed the harvest of “the best wheat I had seen this season. It was cut with a reaping machine and there were about 20 men and women, all Indians, going behind it and binding it into sheaves, and after them were papooses or children gleaning or gathering up the stalks and heads that had...
been left, and binding these up into small sheaves.”

Some Indian women were active in all aspects of the farm enterprise. In 1889–90, for example, it was reported that widow Sears of Day Star’s reserve had built an addition to her house, summer-fallowed five acres, and purchased with her private means a new mower and horse rake.

Many new skills such as milking, butter-making, bread-making, and knitting were taught, and Indian women responded positively to the activities. Instruction was not always systematic in the early reserve years, consisting of what could be learned from the agent, farm instructor, teacher, missionary, or wives of these men. By the late 1880s the wives of many farm instructors acquired the title instructress. They held regular classes in “housewifery” and made visits to the Indians’ homes. The women welcomed the new skills and were at times overly anxious to learn. Mrs Slater, an instructress in the Touchwood Hills, reported in 1891 that “early in the spring the women commenced to make butter with so much enthusiasm and success that it was found they were starving the calves, so half had to be called and the calves were turned out with the cows.”

In the industrial schools Indian girls were taught the arts of housekeeping, including mending, soap-making, gardening, milking, and caring for poultry.

Journalist Eleanor Brass, from the File Hills, wrote that a farm instructor, E.C. Stewart, first taught the “miracle of butter” to the women there in the 1880s. Stewart, who was fluent in Cree, arranged milking classes and lectured on the food value of milk products. Every morning and evening in springtime he would call out tooh-toos-ah-poo! (milk time) several times until it was heard all over the camp, and he became known by that name. According to Brass, “the women would come out of their tents and teepees with pails to get their lessons in milking cows. With much laughing and joking among themselves, they became quite adept at mastering this new task.” The lesson in butter-making that followed “delighted” the women.

Theresa Gowanlock, wife of a Treaty Six farm instructor, found that the women were easily taught and quick to learn. “I would do each special thing for them from cleaning, scrubbing, washing, cooking to sewing, fancy work etc. and they would rival each other in learning to follow me.”

The milk, butter, and cream produced in the early reserve years were mainly for home consumption – most families kept only one cow – but some women sold cream and butter. As new skills were acquired, such as the raising of poultry, surplus goods were mar-
keted. Women learned to bypass the permit system by raising things for which a permit to sell was not required.96

Upon learning to knit and crochet, reserve women made comforters, socks, mittens, and other garments. On reserves where sheep were kept, women were taught to card and spin yarn and weave it into cloth. With a chronic shortage of raw materials, however, it was difficult to apply what they had learned. There were no buttons, for example, for the dresses the women made, unless an instructress purchased them herself.97 During a visit to the File Hills in 1891, Inspector Wadsworth remarked that “although I was informed that many of the women can knit I failed to see one of them engaged in that useful occupation, and the agent informed me that he had not any yarn to issue to them this year.”98 Instructress Gooderham reported from the Touchwood Hills that “her greatest drawback in accomplishing much is their extreme poverty, their lack of almost every article of domestic comfort in their houses, and no material to work upon.”99

Indian women were to apply their lessons in housewifery in dwellings that with few exceptions were described as “huts” or “shacks.” These were low, one-storey, one-room log structures with mud roofs and mud fireplaces. Many had flooring by the late 1880s, but few had amenities such as glass windows, bunks or bedsteads, cooking stoves, box stoves, chairs, dishes, and coal-oil lamps. The open fireplace, made of upright posts covered with a thick coating of clay mixed with water, provided both heat and light. The chimney, always open, served as ventilator. The sleeping places were seldom more than a bundle of rags on the floor. One instructress remarked that it was “hard to be a neat and tidy housewife in a 7 by 9 log hut, without a floor, where the whole family live [sic], cook, eat, sleep and use as a nursery.”100

Inspectors continually lamented about the state of housing on the reserves. On some there was the problem of a lack of suitable timber for housing, but it was also reported with regret that Indians spent their surplus money on farming equipment and livestock rather than on the materials necessary to improve their domestic surroundings.101 Although farmers everywhere were notorious for purchasing implements before attending to their homes and families, department officials saw this tendency as peculiar to Indians.102 The barns, stables, byres, and corrals were generally found to be clean and comfortable, which prompted Wadsworth to remark often that the animals appeared to be better off than their owners. The tidy barns and stables proved plainly to the inspector that “the men
attend to their part of the business better than the women do to domestic matters.” Many department officials shared Wadsworth’s view that “the present generation of Indian women are almost impracticable [sic]. As the men advance in civilization and attention to work, the women’s backward condition becomes more apparent.” Although he believed better housing was necessary to “excite their pride of home and self-respect,” he was also convinced that Indian women wilfully refused to apply their lessons in housewifery. Indian women were often blamed for the squalid living conditions and poor health of reserve residents; their abilities as housewives and mothers were disparaged as were their moral standards. The systemic causes of poverty were ignored and overlooked.

There is little doubt that dirt was a prominent feature of these homes as it was in all early prairie farmhouses. Cows and poultry wandered about the yard close to the house. If it rained, mud in the yard could be ankle deep, and the roofs dripped liquid mud. Water for washing and drinking was not always readily available, especially in dry seasons when sources dried up and prairie residents had to wait for rain. Under such conditions baths were a luxury, as one well-to-do British woman discovered during a visit to the prairies. “Time was when I thought — with my class — that ‘poor people’ could at least keep themselves and the houses clean, for water was cheap. I know better now.” Personal cleanliness was particularly difficult for reserve residents, who, as one instructress remarked, “have only the clothes they are wearing daily, and many are but scantily clad.” Few reports of agents and inspectors failed to mention that the Indians lacked adequate clothing and footwear.

As Cree author Edward Ahenakew has written, the accusation that the Indian woman was a poor housekeeper was a “hasty judgement.”

In the first place, what house has she to keep? Only an extraordinary being could manage to keep her family, herself, and her habitation clean, when that dwelling is a one-room shanty of falling logs, mud-chinked, that has to serve as a bedroom, dining room, play-room and sitting room all in one. She might scrub every day, and sweep all the time, but it would still be impossible to keep that one room neat and clean. It discourages her, and she abandons the effort that had been hopeless from the beginning. It is these shanties that have killed all natural regard for cleanliness, the regard that any right-minded Indian woman had in the teepee life of long ago. Even I can remember how the women would cut fresh grass each morning to spread over the ground inside the teepee, and the encampments were moved frequently.
Although serious effort was made from 1885 to 1890 to overcome some of the difficulties of farming in the Treaty Four district, the period can scarcely be described as one of agricultural success. In 1885 the Indians' promising crops were severely damaged by a general frost in August. In 1886 drought occurred throughout the North-West. With few exceptions, crops on all four agencies, File Hills, Muscowpetung, Touchwood Hills, and Crooked Lakes, were a total failure. The crops looked well until the end of June, but they stunted and dried up in the extraordinarily hot, dry weather of July. By August it was clear that the grain was scarcely worth cutting. The harvest was remarkably poor; the File Hills agent estimated that if every bushel of grain on all four reserves was put together, it would not amount to 100 bushels. The instructor on the Muscowpetung reserve reported that the harvest there could be put into two little sacks. Barley and oats were a complete failure as was the vegetable and root crop. The Qu'Appelle River was dry, and because the land could not be worked, no fall ploughing was done.

Agents and instructors reported that the Indian farmers were acutely disappointed and dispirited at the meagre results of their efforts, and the officials seemed to share their despair. On the Day Star reserve, for example, the farmers were very disheartened because they had never had a grain crop after all their years of effort. For several years frost had totally destroyed the crop and then drought produced similar dismal results. Inspector McGibbon reported from the Muscowpetung agency that year that "it is to be regretted that the labor bestowed has not met with more success, not so much for the loss as for the effect it has on the Indians." Agent Williams at the File Hills was ready to give up on farming in 1886. It had consistently been a failure and he saw no signs of improvement.

Severe drought also occurred in 1887. The crops looked well until June but then hot dry winds in July and August severely damaged the crop. Some fields suffered that year from gopher infestation, particularly on Pasquah's reserve. This was followed by wet weather in September, which interfered with the harvest. The 1888 season brought some relief from the drought. That spring a late thaw, cold, and snow delayed the commencement of operations until mid-April so that seeding was late, but moisture may have been preserved into the warmer months. The return of grain and roots on most agencies that fall was satisfactory. The File Hills agent reported that the Indian farmers were very gratified, this being the first year that
they had enough to grist or sell. Hail did a good deal of damage to crops on the Crooked Lakes reserves in July 1888, however, particularly on Kahkewistahaw's reserve. The chief was reported to be very downcast; his wheat had looked promising but the damage was complete. The hail cut the ears off the wheat as if by a scythe. All but two farmers on the reserve totally lost their crops.

The drought returned with a vengeance in 1889. That year on the Crooked Lakes reserves every care had been taken to see that the land was well ploughed, properly seeded, and harrowed. Anticipating a wet season, the Indians had seeded a larger than usual area in wheat, although not as much seed per acre had been sown. Agent MacDonald boasted in May that he had never seen the land in better shape. Hot dry winds soon appeared, however, and by June it was clear that many farmers would not even get back their seed. Crops were almost a total failure except for one or two fields on the uplands. When the threshing was finished, they had one thousand bushels instead of the eleven thousand expected in June. Agent MacDonald noted that not only the Indians but he and the instructors, were discouraged. They were not, however, defeated. He reported at the end of July that the Indians were turning the land over for another trial the next year, as "they say we must get wet years soon."

The same dismal story prevailed throughout the district. The grain crops were a total failure, and the roots fared little better. Aside from the drought, frost was reported in some areas two or three times in July. When threshed and fanned, the File Hills harvest consisted of 135 bushels, much of which was "frozen at that." The potatoes were no larger than marbles, and the Indians did not even realize the seed. The agent described the farmers of the reserves as "all disheartened at seeing no prospects of any return for their work done in the spring, in the way of crops."

The 1890 season was more favourable. Spring was late and seeding delayed, but by July the growth of grain was extraordinary because of ample rainfall. In midsummer agent MacDonald anticipated that if the crops escaped hail and frost, the Indians would for the first time be well paid for their work and would be encouraged to go more extensively into farming. Hail hit other farms in the vicinity but avoided the reserves. Crops were splendid on the reserves along the valley and ready to be harvested early, but then wet, cold weather set in. Because of long, continuous rains, the grain remained in stooks for several weeks and it shrank considerably. Some frost also touched the grain in August. Damage was particularly severe
in the File Hills. Just as the harvest began there in September, heavy snow and high winds broke down all the uncut grain, which had to be salvaged with scythes and sickles. For the most part, however, the 1890 crop was a vast improvement over that of other years.

Like other settlers in the Qu’Appelle district, reserve residents experienced problems wintering their cattle in the years from 1885 to 1890. In springs when the cattle emerged too weak to work properly, farming operations were greatly affected. An adequate supply of hay was often difficult to procure. It was scarce during excessively dry seasons; abundant sloughs one year might be completely barren the next. On some reserves during years when hay grounds were poor, arrangements were often made to allow Indians to cut hay on another reserve. Some bands had to obtain hay land off the reserve. Pasquah’s band had a hay camp in the Touchwood Hills, eight miles east of Gordon’s reserve. The band members wintered their stock there, building stables and houses for the families who stayed. Some of the File Hills bands often had difficulty obtaining enough hay on the agency to winter all of their stock. In 1889 thirty-four head were sent to the Pelly agency to winter at the Coté reserve. Little Black Bear’s band wintered stock at the Beaver Hills, about thirty-five miles from the File Hills, where houses and stables were built. Hauling supplies from the agency over the hills in midwinter involved great hardship. The agent complained in February 1890 that it took three yoke of oxen four days to freight six bags of flour and two quarters of beef to the Beaver Hills.

The predominantly dry weather of these years also created a serious hazard, particularly between 1885 and 1896. The grasslands were extremely susceptible to prairie fire, and many haystacks, as well as houses, stables, fences, and timber, were consumed. Dropping a lighted match or emptying a pipe could begin a fire, but sparks from the locomotives of the CPR were responsible for many, as it was only in later years that the railway was required to maintain fireguards on either side of the track by ploughing furrows. It was the Indians of the North-West who had pioneered the practice of burning the grass to form fireguards around the boundaries of their land in springtime, just after the snow had melted. In the period before reserves, Indians protected valuable stands of trees by burning off the surrounding grass cover, just before the snow melted in the timber, reducing the risk of lightning igniting the grass and spreading into the adjacent timber.

It was only when settlement in western Canada became sufficiently dense to control fires that they ceased to be a major hazard.
In the 1880s, however, autumn was an anxious time. As one Qu’Appelle pioneer described it:

The prairie grass is, after the summer heat, dry as tinder, and, once started, the devastating fire will burn in thin lines of flame, spreading in all directions, for weeks at a time if no rain comes. It increases in volume as it grows, and with increasing heat creates its own wind. Sometimes, having decided that it is far enough away, and the wind in the wrong direction for it to come upon us, we went to bed, to be awakened an hour later to find it right upon us, a sudden change of wind having brought it down with a rush ... Twice we lost our winter supply of hay through these awful fires, and the year before we left, three horses were burnt so badly that the only humane course was to shoot them.  

Haystacks were particularly vulnerable. Ironically burning fireguards around them was one of the major causes of fires. Fires also reduced the grazing capacity of large areas.

The drought of 1889 in particular was accompanied by disastrous prairie fires. The Muscowpetung agency lost 572 tons of hay to fire. A fire started that summer at the Beaver Hills hay camp destroyed at least 100 tons of hay. In December the agent for the File Hills stated that this same fire was still burning, “as incredulous as my statement may seem.” In June 1889 surveyor Nelson, who was in the File Hills, reported temperatures of 104 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade, with fires raging in the woods, hay swamps, and surrounding prairie. The surface soil was burned in many places to a depth of six or eight inches. Nelson speculated that “bush and prairie fire probably cause more damage than frost and drought.”

Prairie fire swept through Okanese’s and Star Blanket’s reserves in July 1889 and destroyed buildings. The residents were forced to run with their children, tents, and belongings to the edge of a lake. As the fire occurred in the midst of haying season, haying could not be attended to. After the harvest, little fall ploughing was done because most residents had houses, stables, and fencing to construct. If fencing was weak or damaged, cattle could break into the stacks, resulting in the loss of much hay. Prairie fires thus hampered the ability of reserve farmers to carry out the whole cycle of farming operations.

Because of the scarcity of hay during some seasons, the Indian farmers found themselves in competition with other settlers for hay land.
Areas where the Indians customarily cut hay off the reserves became the subject of disputes. For years the Indians of Muscowpetung agency cut hay on a tract of land on the north side of the Qu’Appelle River. Reserve residents came to rely more and more on this tract as hay became scarce elsewhere. Local department officials believed that this land, although not strictly part of any reserve, was for the exclusive use of the Indians and for the department’s horses and cattle. Confusion over who actually owned the rights to this land emerged in the late 1880s when settlers began to encroach, having acquired permits to cut hay there from the Dominion Lands agent in Regina.

In August 1888 J.B. Lash of the Muscowpetung agency confronted a number of settlers at the site. He warned them that they were trespassing, told them that their permits were cancelled, and stated that he would seize the hay already cut. Refusing to recognize his authority, the settlers would not return the permits until they had cut the full quantity of hay their permits allowed. It turned out that the odd-numbered sections of this hay land were owned by the CPR, who refused to relinquish the land because it was “required by a number of settlers for their hay.” The secretary of the CPR informed Deputy Superintendent General Vankoughnet that the Indians did not really require the hay for their own use, since in the past they had sold large quantities of hay. Agent Lash vehemently defended the right of the Indians to sell hay, arguing that by doing so, they relieved the government to the extent of their earnings and made a step toward becoming “independent and useful members of the Commonwealth.” The agent’s chief ground of objection to the withdrawal of hay land was in fact the existence of this industry. “These Indians have with no small difficulty been brought to throw themselves heartily into the business of making and selling hay and to deprive them of those lands which they have cut there unquestioned so long that they regard them as their own, can hardly fail to have a discouraging effect.” The dispute over the rights to this tract of land continued for many years. In such disputes, despite the best efforts of agents in defending the interests of reserve residents, those of the other settlers usually emerged as paramount.

In 1886 settlers in the neighbourhood of Moosomin and Broadview began a campaign to have the Crooked Lakes Indians surrender their land that bordered the CPR. They informed the minister of the interior that “it would be desirable in the public interest and in the interest of the Indians themselves that they should be moved back six miles from the railway.” The land was valued especially for its abundant hay. The citizens told the minister that the Indians would
be “quite willing” to have their reserve narrowed if they were com-
pensated. Agent MacDonald strenuously disagreed, stating that
such an act would be looked upon with suspicion by the Indians
and that “no doubt a report would spread throughout the country
that the Indians are being plundered.” MacDonald noted that hay
land north of Sakimay’s reserve might fairly be exchanged for the
land in question, but homesteaders had already settled on the tract
north of Sakimay. The agent felt that if the proposition was carried
out, the Indians would be giving up more valuable land than they
would be receiving. These arguments persuaded Vankoughnet in
1886 that a move to surrender these lands was neither prudent nor
expedient. When pressure was renewed in 1891, MacDonald
voiced the same objections. “If these lands are surrendered by the
Indians, no reasonable money value can recompense them, as their
hay lands would be completely gone, and this would necessitate no
further increase of stock, which would of course be fatal to their
further quick advancement and would be deplorable, and the only
alternative I can see is to give them hay lands of equal quantity and
value immediately adjacent to the Reserves interested, which I do
not think is possible now.” The surrender of 53,985 acres of land
along the CPR was eventually obtained in 1907.

Similar pressure was exerted throughout the North-West, and
very often it began with the settlers’ desire for hay lands reserved
for the use of Indians. In 1889, for example, non-native residents of
Battleford and district objected to any increase in hay land for the
Indians in a petition to the minister of the interior. They claimed
that “the locking up of the best hay lands would be detrimental to
the district at large.” It was further claimed that the Indians had
adequate hay lands and “to tie up more hay land than is really
required is to throttle an important agricultural industry in its in-
fancy.” Settlers who had taken up homesteads at Jackfish and
Round Hill lakes with a view to ranching objected to the reservation
of hay lands there for Indians, so that “pioneer settlers may be
allowed to enjoy the benefit of their enterprise and expenditure.”
In the summer and fall of 1889 hay was particularly scarce because
of drought, frost, and fires that burned large stretches of hay land.
It was also in short supply because for weeks at a time the Indians
and white settlers had been busy fighting fires and could not attend
to haying. In September P.J. Williams, the Battleford Indian agent,
urged Commissioner Reed to take steps to set aside at once hay
lands that had come to the notice of the settlers, as “nearly everyone
who has stock is after these lands.” If the land were not secured,
there was no alternative but to decrease stock on the reserve.
E. Brokowski of the Dominion Lands office, however, did not believe such a large additional area was required, particularly in view of the "evident dissatisfaction of white settlers" for whom cattle had become a main source of revenue because of crop failure. The Department of Indian Affairs agreed to abandon claim to 2,080 acres of hay land, and Hayter Reed informed settlers that as he was "desirous to consider the feelings of the settlers as far as possible," he was endeavouring to dispense with a further 1,600 acres. This did not satisfy the petitioners, however, who claimed that this particular hay land was not the land in dispute. They accused him of playing a "contemptible trick" and of deceiving the settlers.

Stock-raisers at places with limited markets, like Battleford, had good reason to hope that Indians would not become too successful at raising cattle themselves, as the beef supplied to the Indian Department was an important market for their product. In 1888 the editor of Battleford's paper denounced any plan to "set the Indians up as cattle breeders, encouraging them to supply the beef that is now put in by white contractors with the Department."

By the late 1880s farmers in parts of the North-West were complaining loudly about "unfair" competition from Indians. In his annual report for 1888, Commissioner Reed noted that "serious complaint has been made by some settlers of the effect of this competition upon them." As noted previously, it was widely believed that government assistance gave the Indian farmers an unfair advantage. They were provided with equipment, livestock, as well as rations, and did not have to worry about the price at which their products were sold. On 7 November 1884 the Fort Macleod Gazette noted that the potato crop on the Indian reserves was "immense" that season, and that some Indians "have made a pretty good thing selling them to citizens. Some of the farmers justly complain of this, as the Indians, being fed and taken care of by the Government, sell their potatoes for next to nothing." An observer at Battleford in 1889 wrote, "'Tis true the Indian who is fed and supplied with farm implements, seed e.c. [sic] by the Government has the advantage in these respects of his less fortunate white brother." On 2 August 1895 the Gazette lamented that Indians were earning money by "putting up hay with implements supplied by the government; by hauling supplies with wagons obtained from the same source ... in all of which occupations they compete with hard-working white men." The solution, according to the Gazette, was to spend no more money on agricultural implements and to abandon efforts to teach the Indians the "ways of the white man," as the accomplishment of this goal was "hopeless."
Residents of Battleford and district were particularly strident in their objections to Indian competition in the grain, hay, and wood markets. In 1888 they petitioned their Member of Parliament and complained that the "Indians are raising so much grain and farm produce that they are taking away the market from the white settlers." During his visit to Battleford in October of that year, Hayter Reed reported that he was "assailed" by such complaints. He met with a deputation of farmers and one of townspeople and informed both that his department "would do whatever it reasonably could to prevent the Indians from entering into competition with the settlers during the present hard time." Having served as an Indian agent there, Reed had friends in the district, and as a land guide he had urged settlers to consider points as far west as Battleford, assuring them that local markets for their produce existed. Reed presented competition as not in the best interests of the Indians, who were taken advantage of. They were so anxious to find markets that they parted with their products for a "trifling consideration." 

Reed arranged with the Battleford citizens to divide up the limited markets in the district. Trade in cordwood was left to the Metis, which was their mainstay over the winter. The Indians were allowed to supply wood to the agency and for one more year to the industrial school. The sale of grain in the district was left exclusively to the white settlers. Their principal market was the NWMP barracks. Reed claimed that the Indians consumed most of their grain anyway but any surplus in flour might be purchased by the department. A notice in the Saskatchewan Herald on 12 January 1889 warned all persons against purchasing wood, hay, grain, or other produce from Indians without first obtaining written permission from the Indian agent. New policies that Reed introduced later that year further limited the Indian farmers' opportunity to raise and sell a surplus.

The government did offer to buy surplus oats from one reserve in the Battleford district in 1889, but not, however, at market prices. The Indians were offered twenty cents a bushel, although the market price approached twenty-seven or thirty cents. Reed explained that Indians were not given market value because the department provided them with all the necessaries to raise their grain. This was a dubious statement, since Indian farmers purchased most of their own equipment. The Indians protested and threatened to sell their products to other buyers. Clearly they were not willing to part with their surplus for a "trifling consideration" as Reed had claimed. Because of his agreement with the citizens of Battleford, however, Reed could not allow the Indians to market their grain. He therefore authorized the agent to pay the market rate for "oats which we do not wish them to put upon the market."
As the disputes over hay land and markets illustrate, the 1880s saw increasingly strained relations between Indian and white farmers, a situation that was aggravated by the lean times. Local department employees generally came to the defence of the Indians’ interests, while more distant officials appeared more willing to placate the settlers, who were more politically powerful, at the expense of the Indians. The recent arrivals believed that everything should be done to encourage their enterprise, as they were the “actual” settlers, the true discoverers and developers of the country’s resources. It was believed that the government had bought the land from the Indians, and it was now the government’s “right and duty to look after the interests of the settlers, both present and future, for whom the land was bought, and out of whose earnings it is expected ultimately to be paid for.”

Throughout the North-West there occurred numerous incidents of encroachment on Indian land, principally for timber and hay. Some were more serious than others. In 1889 a disagreement over hay on the Little Bones reserve at Leech Lake became very tense. Settlers had been given permits to cut hay on the reserve, but the chief was convinced that they were cutting more than allowed. He raised the matter with a Mr Arthur Moore, who later claimed that, in the heat of the conversation, Little Bones threw his right hand behind his back as if to draw a knife. Agent MacDonald and three constables were called to the scene and the matter was settled without violence. MacDonald believed Little Bones’ denial that he had never attempted to draw his knife, and he warned Moore not to come to hasty conclusions with Indians without a proper interpreter.

During the late 1880s settlers continually trespassed on the Crooked Lakes reserves, removing logs and rails for fencing. In 1887 the body of a trespasser was discovered on the Kahkewistahaw reserve. He had nearly completed cutting a load of rails, which were piled near the body. Nearby settlers were convinced that the murder had been perpetrated by the Indians, as the chief of that reserve had on several occasions displayed annoyance at the theft of logs or rails. To see that justice was done, the police and a party of citizens began crisscrossing the reserves, hunting out the “murderers.” These actions did little to soothe a tense situation. Agent MacDonald was certain he could trace the crime to two individuals and clear the Indians.

Reserve residents often found themselves blamed for incidents that enraged the settlers. In the fall of 1886 a Touchwood Hills farmer lost through fire 500 bushels of potatoes, stacks of oats, 40 tons of hay, and all his stables and granaries. He presented the Department of Indian Affairs with the bill, claiming that he had observed three
Indians ride by his stable that day in search of a stray bull. One of the Indians had been smoking. This settler was angry, not only at the Indians, but also at the weather, the country, and the whole business of farming. He had lost his first three crops to frost and his next to fire. Appealing to the prime minister himself, the Touchwood farmer stated that he would have to leave the country unless the department made good his loss. In an incoherent postscript he informed Macdonald that “I have had to batch it and live alone ever since I left Scotland, over eight years ago all through the loss I sustained by this fire which is the most miserable life under the sun.” The department refused to compensate the settler. The Indians in question claimed that they were many miles away when the fire had begun.

CONTINUING DIFFICULTIES

Besides their disputes with white settlers, a number of other problems plagued the Indians during the years 1885 to 1890. A lack of adequate clothing and footwear continued to make it difficult to do much work. Secondhand clothing was periodically sent by church societies in the East, for which the agents generally appeared grateful. Inspector McGibbon objected, however, on the grounds that the department was trying to teach the young to be tidy and industrious, a goal that could not be accomplished with old, secondhand clothing. Convinced that old clothing belonged to dead people, some Indians were prejudiced against wearing it. The health of the Indians also continued to be poor. They suffered from influenza, consumption and scrofula and were often reported to be too weak to work.

Opportunities to earn money varied according to the reserve, but remained difficult for some from 1885 to 1890. The Muscowpetung and Crooked Lakes agencies enjoyed some decided advantages over the File Hills and Touchwood Hills. Land on the former reserves was better suited to agriculture and closer to the railway and to settlements where their products could be marketed. Greater access to milling and threshing facilities also existed. On the Muscowpetung agency the Indians cut dry wood, which they sold to the grist mill at Fort Qu’Appelle, and they sold hay in years of heavy yield. They also began to freight their own supplies of bacon and flour from the railway. It appears that it was up to the discretion of the local agent to decide which band needed, and was in a position to fill, a contract. One agent explained that he kept the cordwood market reserved for Indians who did not have flour of their own.
They borrowed oxen during the winter from the farming Indians who had flour.\textsuperscript{162}

The Crooked Lakes Indians also earned money from the sale of hay and wood and from freighting. Some burned lime to sell to settlers at Grenfell. Others dressed hides, attended to cattle for settlers, collected seneca root, and sent cream to the Broadview creamery. Some worked on larger farms in the district, such as the chickory fields of the Count de Raffignon at Pipestone Creek. The Indians of the Crooked Lakes and Muscowpetung agencies had some cash and therefore were in a better position to acquire the wagons and machinery that could benefit their farming, freighting, and other small industries.

The residents of the Touchwood Hills and File Hills reserves were in a more difficult position. The problem was particularly acute in the Touchwood agency. Inspectors, agents, and instructors continually lamented that these people had absolutely no opportunity to earn money, since they were situated sixty to eighty miles from any settlements. The Touchwood Hills Indians were not permitted to do their own freighting of supplies. An added disadvantage in this district was that merchants charged exorbitantly high prices for all items because of the distance from the railway. The same situation prevailed in the File Hills, although chances to earn money were slightly better. In the late 1880s, for example, the File Hills residents were awarded a contract to provide cordwood to the Qu’Appelle Industrial School.

Local officials associated with the Touchwood and File Hills agencies urged the department to buy cattle from the Indians instead of importing bacon for rations. Indians would be able to earn some money and the cattle industry would be encouraged. The File Hills agent believed it could be a means of dispelling the despondency that existed.\textsuperscript{163} This suggestion, however, was not approved. Nor would the department authorize local agents to allow the Indians to exchange their wheat, potatoes, hay, or other items for provisions such as tea or bacon.

Reserve residents had few options but agriculture. The hunt for fur-bearers, badgers, fox, ermine, lynx, wolves, and otter, continued only to a slight extent in the Qu’Appelle district during the 1880s. Hudson’s Bay Company clerks reported that part of the problem was a growing scarcity of animals, but it was also regretted that hunters were paying more attention to farming.\textsuperscript{164} In 1889 it was noted that there were still some good hunters on the Crooked Lakes reserves but “the hunting grounds are some distance away, and if they have any crop very few of them leave their Reserve.”\textsuperscript{165} Former
hunters paid their debts to the Hudson’s Bay Company in livestock rather than in furs. By 1891 Fort Qu’Appelle was no longer regarded as a fur-trading district.

Despite drought, frost, prairie fire, and hail, Indian farmers in the Qu’Appelle region made advances in the 1880s. Many problems that had hampered Indian farming in the past had to some extent been ameliorated, such as shortages of oxen and the scarcity of threshing and gristing facilities. Indian farmers were beginning to acquire the means and methods of expanding and promoting their enterprise. They were learning the techniques of dry-land farming, and they were acquiring the machinery their agents and instructors agreed was essential given the conditions of prairie farming. They were moving in the direction of commercial farming with specialization in wheat culture, although not always in conformity with the individualistic model of the independent homesteader. Bands pooled their resources for the purchase of implements and on many reserves tilled the fields in common. Local department officials found this system to be preferable to the cultivation of small, individual tracts of land. Inspector McGibbon felt it was better to have four or six men working a good-sized field than to have small patches here and there. Agents and instructors found that larger fields were easier to supervise than small separate fields.166

Indian farmers had survived the grim 1880s and were willing and had few options but to continue trying, unlike at least half the homesteaders who had become discouraged and left. Local white farmers remember the year 1890 as “the turn of the tide; after that all went well.”167 Although disappointing years lay ahead for the Qu’Appelle farmers, they were nothing like the string of misfortunes that had plagued them in the 1880s. All did not go well for Indian farmers in the 1890s, however. They did not make the leap to large-scale commercial farming, despite earlier indications that they were moving in this direction.