

Chapter One

The Bienfait Coalfields

I consider the conditions ... very excellent. I do not think there is anything in Western Canada to surpass it.

– J.R. Brodie of Winnipeg, owner of the Bienfait Mine, 8 October 1931¹

I have been disappointed with them, they start grumbling and trying to stir up some kind of trouble with the other men, they are continually talking about how they do in the Old Country and expect us to alter all conditions of working to suit them.

– A.C. Wilson, manager, Manitoba and Saskatchewan Mining, Bienfait, February 1930²

The village of Bienfait sits low on the prairie. It is a fine district for mixed farming, with a supply of water in the nearby Souris River. In 1931 the village was sandwiched between the now disappeared station grounds of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) and Canadian National Railways (CNR). It had eight short streets, bisected by Route 18, the east-west provincial highway connecting it to the town of Estevan, eight miles to the west. As in many prairie settlements, the centre point was Main Street, only two blocks long but twice as wide as the other streets, lined with shops, businesses, and vacant lots; along Railway Avenue, grain elevators of the Saskatchewan Co-operative Elevator Company (known locally as the ‘wheat pool elevator’) and the privately owned Lake of the Woods Milling Company stood sentinel. By then, it bore no memory of the French-language origins of its name;³ the local residents pronounced it Bean-fate.

The hundreds of rural municipalities into which Saskatchewan is divided have a regular shape: square boxes. These squares, each subdivided into divisions and subdivided further into townships (running