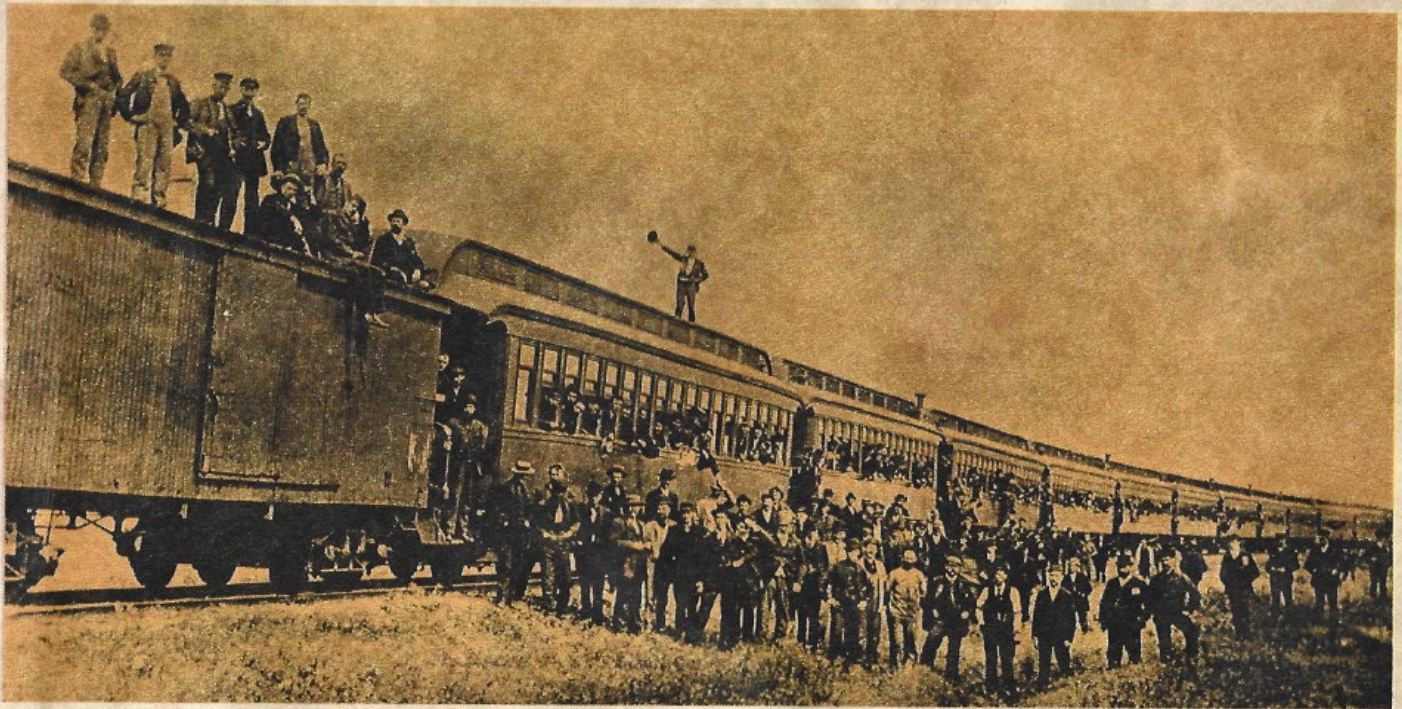
BY MAGGIE GRANT

THE HARVEST EXCURSION

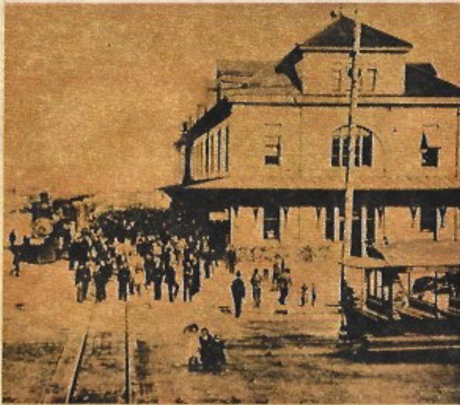
Before the combines came to the Prairies, a man could seed half a section of wheat by himself but he needed another ten men to help him harvest it. The west wanted labor desperately. It paid top wages and men even crossed the ocean to help with Canada's huge crop. They worked hard in the fields and they drank hard on the trains. And they built a rollicking tradition



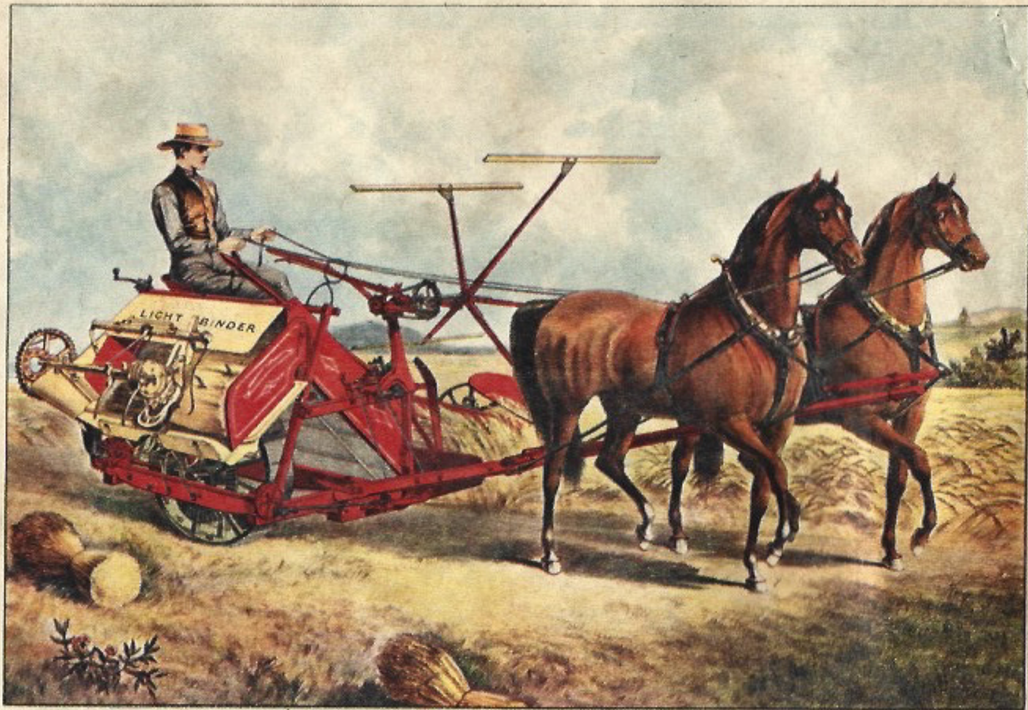
WITH TOOT OF WHISTLE and hiss of steam, two high-stacked locomotives tugged at the unprecedentedly long train while a third locomotive pushed. The wheels began to turn and the first Harvest Excursion got under way. The date was July 28, 1891.

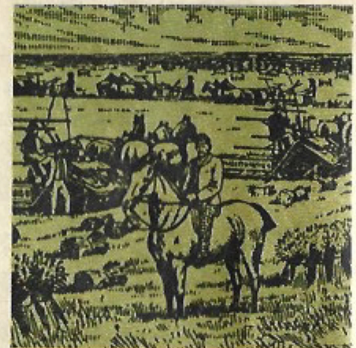
Few Canadians under middle age have ever heard of the Harvest Excursion scheme, yet this was a phenomenon peculiarly our own. From that 1891 beginning it grew to a tremendous yearly movement of manpower, equalled only in time of war. Sometimes referred to as the annual tide, it seemed so fixed in the national way of life that few considered it remarkable and only a handful thought to record it.

What brought it about in the first place? This simple fact: one prairie farmer could seed half a section, or more, single-handed, but he needed ten more pairs of hands to reap the resultant harvest. The thinly populated wheat country had no such help to offer. Harvesting was a race against time. In a scant few weeks the grain had to be cut, stooked, threshed and hauled to railway shipping points before the enemies – frost, rain and snow – could get it, before a possible glut could cause the price to drop, before ice closed Great Lakes shipping. By 1891, the problem of meeting these deadlines had grown to the proportions of a national emergency. That summer, western agriculturists and railroad officials /*continued on next page*

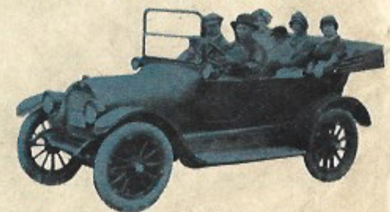


After a boisterous train ride from the east, a swarm of harvesters arrives in the Winnipeg of 1897 (above), probably feeling more like a rest than a hard day in the fields. To help them, there are wonderful machines like the one at right, described in one advertisement as "th- mighty monarch of the harvest field."





From 1891 to 1929, thousands of people, many from as far away as England, came to work the prairie fields. The workers in front of the Manitoba farmhouse (above, left) operate the thresher at the far side of the picture, and the big, horse-drawn steam engine on the right. The engine powers the thresher. The print above is of a harvest supervisor—you can tell because he's on a horse. The car below is a McLaughlin.



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put their heads together. The exact number of laborers needed was estimated and in July big yellow posters began to appear in British Columbia and the East urging able-bodied men to join the crusade. The pay was excellent for those days, $1.50 a day.

Then railroading showed its hand. A search through yellowing copies of The Toronto Mail turns up this advertisement, which first appeared on July 15, 1891 and ran every second day on into mid-August:

Railways.

CANADIAN PACIFIC RY.

LABOURERS WANTED IN MANITOBA and NORTH-WEST.

To enable labourers to reach the bountiful harvest of Manitoba and the North-West, the Canadian Pacific Railway will make the following low one-way rates:—

From any station in Ontario to

DELORAINE,
METHVEN,
HARTNEY,
BINSCARTH,
MOOSOMIN,

$15

Going July 28th and August 4th.

Purchasers of these tickets to receive Certificate to enable them to return up to November 30th, 1891, for thirteen dollars each, providing they have been working as farm labourers for one month previous to their return.

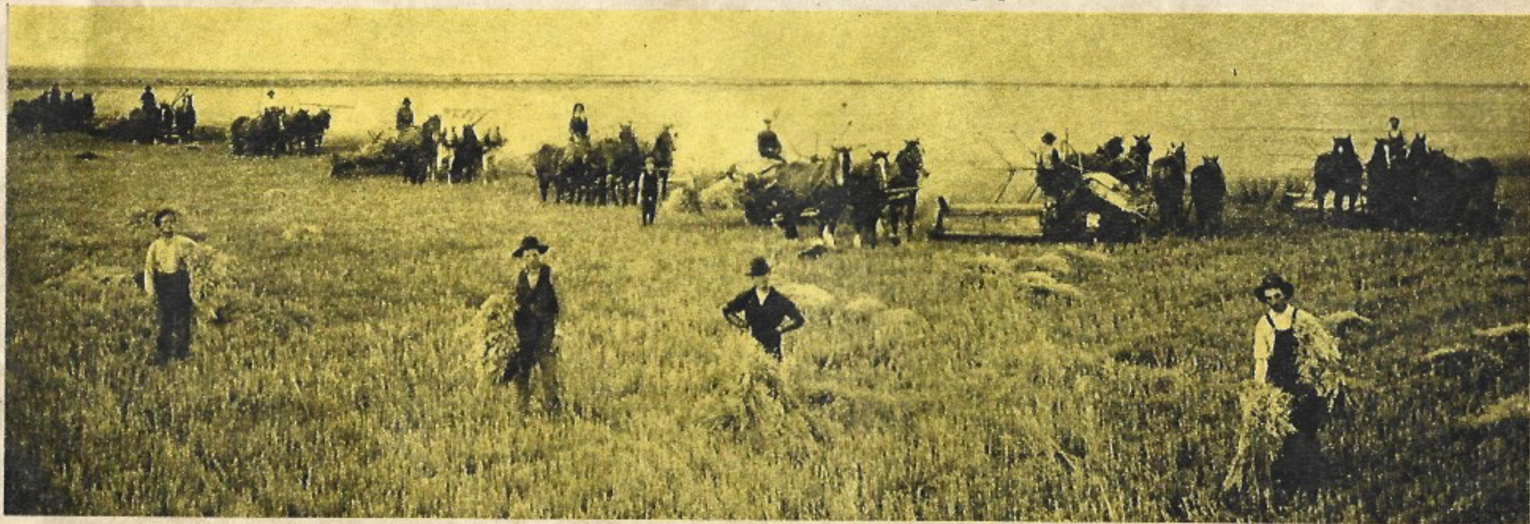
For particulars apply to any Canadian Pacific Railway Agent.

On July 25, the Grand Trunk Railway began to run an ad of its own, making an identical offer, with trains leaving on the same dates. And from Manitoba came a news item announcing that sample wheat stalks were being taken to Toronto to arouse further interest. The stalks were six feet, eight inches high.

Although Eastern farmers had been enjoying a bumper wheat crop of their own that year, they had never seen anything like this. Moreover, their harvesting would be completed before that first departure date. Many of them joined the 5,000 who answered the first call. By 1928, the peak year of all, that number had grown /continued on page 7

Though not exactly brimming with good humor, farm hands were kind enough to pose for the occasional picture. This one was taken at Vulcan, Alberta, in 1912.

Eight binders, giants of their day, move down the field and the men who do the stooking are pressed to keep up.



It was a race against time—and frost, rain and snow—to get the crop cut, stooked and threshed.

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On that first train were 1,300 horny-handed men. In the far from luxurious accommodation of the colonist cars of the era, they arranged themselves on slatted wooden seats and one guesses it was not long before dunnage bags and rucksacks began to disgorge cards, dice, musical instruments – and liquor. In the recollection of veteran excursionists, roaring singsongs and free-flowing booze were part and parcel of a rollicking stag party that lasted throughout the journey and established a tradition for the excursions of succeeding years. Unfettered by feminine frowns, humor was crude and horseplay rough, but good fellowship was real.

A thirst for booze

At times highjinks crescendoed to hooliganism. One year, a contingent celebrated the first hour of their journey by breaking every window in the train: they dubbed it the Fresh Air Special and, if the ride was chilly, no one admitted it. A grisly prank was perpetrated by another group of travellers who tied a cow to the rear of the train and at the next stop presented the bloody remains to a horrified telegrapher.

In 1906, 800 Nova Scotia miners won a famous victory over the law. The brawny band had underestimated its own capacity for alcohol and an uncomfortable drought had reigned for so many miles that when the train pulled into the divisional point at Ignace, Ont., there was a stampede for the station saloon, where every bottle was seized. Not satisfied with that, the Nova Scotians wrenched the water coolers from their moorings in the coaches and filled them with draught beer.

The vastly outnumbered railwaymen had been helpless to prevent this foray, but after the train left they wired the scandalous details ahead to Winnipeg. When the miners alighted there, they were awaited by a small army of police who captured the vanguard and thrust these prisoners into a dozen horse-drawn Black Marias.

The next wave of miners quickly rallied. Drawing clasp knives, they cut the horses loose and freed their mates before tangling with the men in blue. Soon policemen, miners and horses were charging about in all directions in the dark night and the representatives of law and order emerged from the fray with not a single arrest to their credit.

In the early years of the excursions, contact between farmer and laborer was pretty well hit-or-miss. Farmers used to line up at wayside stations and try to hire men right off the train in the few minutes it was at a standstill. This gave excursionists further opportunity for highjinks. A favorite prank was to feign incomprehension about the type of work offered and fritter away the precious time in bargaining for positions as butlers and ladies' maids. Station agents at these whistle stops also came in for their share of chivvying and those who failed to accept the banter in good humor ran the risk of being shanghaied aboard the train and not released until hundreds of miles from home. In 1921, authorities decided it would be advisable to maintain a bit of order; and after that four RCMP officers travelled on each harvest train.

The allocation of workers was gradually systematized. All fares were to Winnipeg, where agents from various districts aligned themselves in the station and barked out the number of men needed for each. After an excursionist had picked his final destination, he went to a long rank of booths and bought his ticket at a half-cent a mile. To obtain the same bargain on buying his return to Winnipeg, he had to present a coupon attached to the ticket, duly signed by his employer to vouch he had put in his allotted time.

The handling of the huge rush of ticket buyers was a major operation in itself. Every railway agent in the land who could be spared was rushed to Winnipeg for the influx, and doubtless there are some still living who can recall the work hours – sometimes 36 at a stretch.

After the gaiety of the trip, the men had to buckle down to very real toil. There's no gainsaying they earned their pay. Deemed the highest in the land, it had risen by 1900 to $2 a day, in 1911 to $3.50; in 1915, a bumper year, it was $6 to $8 in some areas; in the 1920s about $5 a day was the average. Today it seems pitifully little for 16-hour days, sweating along behind the binder with a pitchfork to set sheaves in even rows, eight to 10 sheaves together. Or for the threshing, which meant a 5 a.m. rising to groom and feed horses before breakfast, then hitching up to lead your wagon along row after row of stooks, pitching them up onto the wagon. Then, having driven to the threshing point, pitching the load down again. This, with breaks for meals, could go on until well after dark, to the light of burning straw stacks.

The food was almost always plentiful and good, with three squares a day and morning and afternoon snacks brought out to the fields.

A need for food

Especially noted for hearty fare were the threshing rigs. By 1908, many of these were being hauled by the new steam tractors, behemoths with water boilers fired by coal. The monsters weighed 12 to 20 tons and their six-foot-high rear wheels with iron-cleated track measured up to five feet wide. They snorted across the land pulling a small train in their wake, including bunkhouses for crews of 20 to 25 men – and the cookhouse.

Mrs. Henry Penner, who served several stints as threshing rig cook in the 1920s, told a Winnipeg newspaper about it many years later. Her mobile domain, she recalled, was 20 feet long by 10 feet wide, a space that not only accommodated the old-fashioned cookstove, a work table, and the dinner table and its benches, but her sleeping accommodation. At 3:30 each morning Mrs. Penner would crawl out of bed to get the stove going, then crawl back again for the few minutes it took to start radiating warmth. By 4 a.m. she would be "right into things" and, when the men came clumping in at five, there would be porridge on the table, bacon and eggs, coffee, hot buns or biscuits and jam or syrup.

The rest of the day was a bustle of baking and the roasting of huge joints. One year she worked 48 days at this arduous round, but to her "it was sort of a challenge. I really enjoyed it."

A demand for workers

One may be sure Mrs. Penner's endeavors did not go unappreciated. Not all women in harvesting lore won unanimous approval, however. There was the prim, elderly spinster who was put aboard a harvester special by mistake. The disconcerted men who shared her coach were so awed by her forbidding mien that they finally collected enough money for a first class ticket and offered it to the lady, with protestations of concern for her comfort. She replied that she was perfectly all right where she was, thank you, and her male companions finished out the trip shrouded in gloom.

A scheme for alleviating the manpower shortage of First World War years by enlisting women workers was quickly shelved after one trial. Lots of women volunteered. But unfortunately too many of them were the – er – sort who preferred caressing to threshing.

Although peace returned, the need for harvesters remained acute. Universities and high schools encouraged student workers by allowing them to register by mail and report in late for classes. And for several years British labor pools were canvassed. Here's a news item from London, dated July 27, 1923:

"Shipping agents throughout Great Britain continue to be flooded with applications for passage to Canada for harvesting work. Three hundred will sail on the Melita from Southampton on Aug. 2, followed by contingents from the Midlands and the north on Aug. 3, leaving Liverpool on the Montclaire. On the same date the Marburn sails from Glasgow, calling at Belfast, with Scottish and Irish labourers. Every part of the British Isles is contributing its quota. Some are going more for a holiday than for the sake of the wages they will earn.

"Applicants include men who have been in Canada before as labourers or farmers who intend to stay there *[continued on page 10*

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after the present harvest season. One man is a veteran of the Riel Rebellion. Large queues are to be seen waiting at London shipping offices daily. While they are a very good type on the whole, some men look too weakened by prolonged unemployment in England to be capable of hard labour."

Like the Britishers, some Canadians looked upon the excursions as a sort of holiday, or as a means of seeing the country, to which end New Brunswicker and British Columbian would swap return coupons, arranging to swap back at harvest time the following year.

Still others used the excursions as an escape from home, and many a successful prairie citizen of today still treasures the return coupon he never used. Many a Horatio Alger-type story had its beginning on a Harvest Excursion. Notable is that of 17-year-old Jimmy Gardiner, who went west in 1906, leaving behind a life of farm drudgery. Since the age of 12 he had worked as hired boy for as little as $5 a month. With him he took a burning ambition to improve his Grade 7 education and to make his mark in the world.

That the late Rt. Hon. James Garfield Gardiner, B.A. succeeded beyond his wildest dreams is now history. Respected as a scholar, athlete, human being and fearless politician, he was twice premier of Saskatchewan and moved on to become Minister of Agriculture in the Mackenzie King government.

Another excursion alumnus was the late Hon. John Campbell Bowen, Lieutenant-Governor of Alberta from 1937 to 1950. He, too, made a bit of history by refusing royal assent to bank and press control bills the legislature had passed. The Social Crediters peevishly decided to close Government House. Again Bowen proved unco-operative, stating the official residence could be abolished only by order-in-council. His sit-in at the luxurious mansion made lively news for weeks until the necessary document was produced. As King's representative, His Honor thereupon signed it. He retired unbowed at the age of 77.

And where are the Harvest Excursions now? Gone, vanished, kaput. The combines did that, giant machines that thresh as they reap. The need for human muscle waned in 1929. In 1930 it was no more.