

History of Agriculture in Alberta

Our beautiful province of Alberta, which is named after Queen Victoria's fourth daughter, has a relatively short history of Agriculture. When settlers came out west they carved out what we know now as the prairies. Alberta is a diverse province with many different types of vegetation, soil, animal's native and domestic, forests and topography. All these diversities were great challenges to our settlers when they came to this vast land. In 1873 a small herd of domestic cattle was driven out west starting in Manitoba ending up west of Calgary to Morleyville. With the decline of Bison roaming the great plains cattle seemed to be a great fit as there was a steady demand for meat as the main source of protein.

Once the railway was completed in 1885 combined with the Homestead Act (created by our federal government to help settle the West) and an aggressive advertising campaign, the prairies started filling up with landowners. The last frontier, or 'Wild West' as it was often called, saw an influx of settlers right up until the 1920's. The foothills were the perfect place for ranchers to settle in the prairies. Nestled in the hills they were protected from chinook winds and had sufficient wells for watering. Chinooks provided wonderful grazing grounds for cattle and sheep with hills bare of snow they could graze all year round. Senator Matthew Cochrane was a very important businessmen as he captured the expanding beef market in the United Kingdom shipping a lot of meat overseas. He along with other entrepreneurs established some of the largest ranches in Alberta. If the name Cochrane sounds familiar it's because the town of Cochrane was named after him!

One of the many struggles the settlers encountered was creating shelter to protect families from the ever changing climate. On the prairies there is not an abundance of large trees to build log homes so they had to improvise. Thus the lovely sod shack, also known as soddies were created! Native grasses found on the prairies have deep roots creating sod that was very stable and could be cut out in blocks, like an igloo. There is still a sod house standing in Western Saskatchewan (north of Kindersley) that is over 100 years old!



Now that the home was created the settlers had to farm their land in order to keep their part of the deal with the Homesteaders Act. Finding crops that fit Alberta's climate was another challenge. Plants have needs that must be met like a certain amount of frost free days, moisture, heat units, disease and insect resistance. The plant must be healthy enough in the season to produce plant matter and seeds which the farmers harvest and sell. Alberta has a relatively short growing season, and frequently a very dry climate. At

this time farmers were seeding crops that were suited for European climates which are very different from ours! This resulted in many crop failures which meant little profit to the farmer. One of the first farmers in Alberta was Peter Pond. He established a trading post on the lower Athabasca River in 1778 and was known for his fantastic garden and experimenting with European crops and trying to cultivate a crop that was more suited for Alberta's climate needs. One of the first major technological breakthroughs for farmers was the development of early maturing wheat. Early maturing means it takes less time for the plant to grow, flower, set seed and be ready for harvest before a cold frost comes along. Getting the field ready for seeding, pulling weeds, and harvesting was very labour intensive to the farmer. When steam, gas tractors, mechanized plows and threshing machines were introduced, the farmer was able to get their crops off faster and seed larger acres.



Photo Courtesy of Gerhardt Ludwig 1936.

When Canada entered World War I in 1914, grain was needed to help feed the troops overseas creating a demand for grain which increased the price. As a result many farmers bought more land and purchased the latest technology that was available. Unfortunately after the war ended, the demand dropped and so did the price for grain. This caused many farmers to go out of business. With grain prices low and entering the era known as dirty 30's the prairies experienced a severe drought along with a plague of grasshoppers causing more grief amongst the farming community. It was known as the dirty 30's because of all the dust in the air from the current major farming practice known as conventional tilling. This method meant that the soil is exposed with no plant cover allowing winds to cause the soil to drift away. In parts of southern Alberta, soil that holds the nutrients is only 2cm deep so farmers cannot afford to have any soil drifting away.

Photo Courtesy of Saskatchewan Archives Board. Drifting soil on homestead Western Saskatchewan 1937.



The severe drought promoted the creation of Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration in Alberta and Saskatchewan to improve farming techniques. One of the techniques promoted and still used to today is minimal tillage. This means disturbing the soil as little as possible leaving stubble standing in the field (stubble is what is left over once the seeds have been harvested by the combine).

The PFRA is still in place today with different mandates and helps farms and ranches from Manitoba west. Ranchers experienced hard times as well in the 30's but one of the most significant hard times was the winter of 1906-1907. Settlers were used to the lovely chinook conditions every winter but this winter was an exception and the chinooks never came resulting in thousands cattle deaths from lack of feed.

As Canada entered World War II in 1939 the demand for grain increased again driving the price up and helping end the depression. Many new technologies were introduced after WWII from machinery, better crop genetics and efficient farming practices allowing the farmers to grow the best crop possible and on more acres than before.

Many things have changed since the end of World War II but one thing that stays the same is the need to have Agriculture keeping food on the table around the world.