

The Impact of WWI on Canadian Agriculture

One Hundred years ago in November of 1918, WWI ended. How did one of the bloodiest Wars that lasted four long years impact farming in Canada?

War gave rise to wheat board and a new political party by Amanda Stephenson, astephenson@calgaryherald.com Calgary Herald Originally published: June 19, 2014

<http://ww1.canada.com/home-front/canadian-farms-felt-the-impact-of-war>

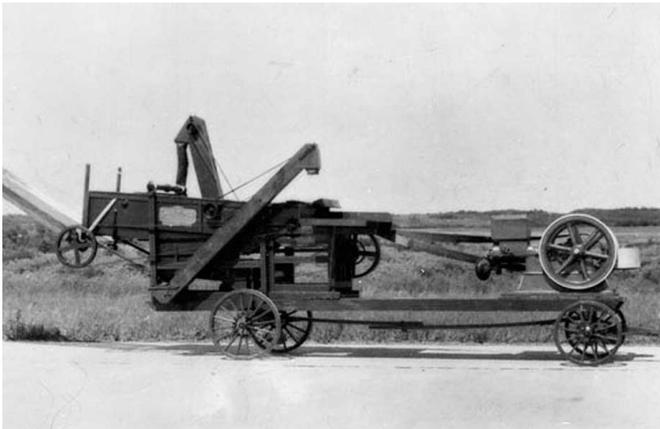


PHOTO: Western Development Museum, Library and Archives Canada
No segment of Canadian society was left untouched by the First World War, even agriculture.

Food Will Win the War. That was the message to western Canadian farmers as Allied forces fought the Germans for inches of ground during the height of the First World War. Under huge pressure to provide wheat to feed soldiers at the front, farmers in Alberta and the other prairie provinces were encouraged by the Canadian government to expand their acreage and maximize their output.

They did just that, even as their own sons went off to the trenches and farm labour became scarce. During the period from 1914 to 1918, agricultural production in Canada grew rapidly and many farmers benefited from high prices and strong global demand for food.

“In a sense they were responding as rational economic actors, but also they thought they were doing something that was helping to win the war,” says Eric Strikwerda, professor with the Department of History and Classics at the University of Alberta. “They weren’t going overseas to fight, but they were helping by staying in Canada and growing

wheat ... There was, in no small way, a sense of loyalty to the Empire.”

But the war that led patriotic-minded farmers to produce bumper crops also had long-term ramifications for Canada’s agriculture industry. In 1917, farmers were furious when Prime Minister Robert Borden introduced conscription. They felt that after three years of working hard to feed the war effort, they were being slapped in the face by a government that now wanted them to leave their farms and go to the front.

Some of that anger, says Strikwerda, fuelled the rise of the United Farmers of Alberta, which went on to form the provincial government in 1921. On the federal scene, the Progressive Party of Canada – which became the official Opposition in 1921 – was also born out of farmer discontent.

The First World War also gave rise to an iconic institution – the Canadian Wheat Board. Established by the federal government as a temporary measure in 1919, the CWB was meant to ease the transition from wartime to peacetime and help farmers navigate falling commodity prices. It worked, at least in the short term – for the 1919-1920 crop year, western Canadian farmers received \$2.63 per bushel for their wheat while their American counterparts were trading at \$2.25 per bushel.

Some historians have suggested that the First World War even had environmental consequences for Canadian agriculture. Strikwerda says many people believe the rapid push to expand acreage and intensify production during the war years contributed to soil exhaustion – something that would come back to haunt prairie farmers two decades later.

“This soil exhaustion meant that, with the aridity and dryness of the 1930s, the topsoil on the prairies blew away,” he says. “And that’s when we had the Dust Bowl.”

Canadian farmers contributed tremendously to the war effort and showed great patriotism and personal sacrifice. Sadly, the 20 years that followed World War I would bring the worst environmental disaster of the 20th century. The resilience and perseverance shown by the Canadian farmer to adapt to such difficult conditions had a great impact on the industry and helped shape Canadian agriculture into what it is today.