

CELEBRATING 125 YEARS OF UKRAINIAN HERITAGE

First steps on the Canadian steppe: Two men – one vision



Iwan Pylipiw.

■ 125 years ago, on September 7, 1891 two trailblazing Ukrainian pioneers, Iwan Pylipiw, ablacksmith by trade and WasyI Eleniak, a herdsman and logger arrived in Montreal, Canada travelling from the village of Nebiyliw, Kalush region, Galicia/Halychyna (Western Ukraine) through Hamburg to Liverpool, England and eventually crossing the Atlantic Ocean. On the manifest of the S.S. Oregon, scheduled to leave August 28, 1891, the purser recorded Iwan's surname as Pylipiwsky (later shortened to Pylipiw) while WasyI's surname was entered as Illilik. Pylipiw had 600 rynsky (\$240.00) while Eleniak had only 190 (\$76.00)—sufficient funds to cover the cost of travel (\$60.00).

In 1891, Canada's population was 4.8 million, Manitoba's was 152,506 and Winnipeg had a population of 25,636. There were two train stations: CPR and CNR, one Immigration Hall with approximately 150 smaller welcome sites for potential new arrivals.

Arriving from Montreal by train to Winnipeg on September 10th Pylipiw recalls in his memoirs that "it was quite clear that we were traversing a wilderness." Train travel was free for potential homesteads. With a German speaking agent, both men proceeded to scout the open prairies of Saskatchewan. In Langenburg, Saskatchewan Iwan met up with German Mennonite friends who worked under his supervision on log floats down the Limnytsia River in Galicia when Iwan was contracted to deliver lumber for the Austrian government. WasyI's responsibility as foreman was to oversee the raft booms.

Both men liked the soil, however, headed towards Calgary to examine other opportunities for homesteading. At that time, there was no railway connection to Edmonton where in the vicinity Johan Krebs, Iwan's classmate from Galicia was already homesteading. Nevertheless, Iwan jotted down the desired co-ordinates for both WasyI and himself of their desired homesteads in Saskatchewan and returned to Winnipeg in order to pay their individual \$10.00 registration fee. It is with this act of legal registration of land that they both became the first acknowledged Ukrainians to own a homestead in Canada. Circumstances and choices took both rustics in another direction. They did not meet the strict requirements of occupying and developing their quarter sections in the specified time frame before receiving title to their land. Consequently it reverted back to the Crown.

Upon return to Winnipeg, they were hired for threshing during the busy harvest season in **Gretna**, Manitoba. Iwan had previous knowledge, from Galician German colonists (*volksdeutche*) who by this time had relatives in Manitoba, that free lands and eventual prosperity can be secured with the understood, initial sacrifice of hard work and acclimatization to a new land.

He wrote an account of how and why he came to Canada: "Our teacher used to

Wheat Map of the Province of Manitoba, Canada.



WasyI Eleniak.

talk about America and Canada. Later I heard more from Germans who had relatives over there. A lot of people from our village worked on log floats, their people used to talk about Canada. "Do you have your relatives' address?" I asked one German. He said he did. I wrote them a letter. In their answer, they said: "Leave all of your

troubles and come here." "I sold a pair of horses and oxen to get money for the trip. But that still was not enough, so I sold a piece of land too... I went to the village office (*starostvo*) to get a passport. I had them write out the passport for my whole family, including my wife and three children, but I went a lone... with WasyI Eleniak..."

On first impression, **Gretna** struck both men as being prosperous. The fertile black soil was partially wooded, there was a river, a railway and within the Mennonite community the commonality of communicating in either Ukrainian or German.

Iwan and WasyI worked their first harvest for \$1.50/day and room and board. Both men clearly understood that the difficult Galician economic circumstances underscored the fact that they would not be able provide for their kin by continuous subdivision of their limited landholdings. In contrast, Canada offered limitless opportunities. There was no turning back on their initial decision.

WasyI remained in **Gretna** as cattle herdsman unlike Pylipiw who left on December 1st travelling through Winnipeg to Montreal, Boston, London, Hamburg, Berlin Auchwitz, Cracow and Krekhowychi where he hired a carriage and returned to his village of Nebyliv, on January 12, 1892. His purpose was set—to sell his possessions, organize his family and neighbours and to return to **Gretna**.

WasyI Eleniak's new home, **Gretna**, Manitoba (founded in 1883)—north of the 49th. parallel, a short distance from Emerson (former Hudson Bay Company Fort Dufferin) on the Jefferson Highway to St. Paul's, Minnesota, yet, only less than one mile from Neche on the North Dakota border was a bustling center for German speaking West Reserve Mennonite pioneers who arrived here in the 1870s. **Gretna**, strategically located in south central Manitoba touching the Palliser Triangle of arid grassland was a dominant hub of agricultural life—cattle importing and livestock production under the authorized grazing leases in the First Dominion Land Act of 1872. Additionally, wheat/flax cultivation and milling accompanied grain export on the newly constructed CP (Syndicate) Railway through Emerson to eastern Canadian and north European markets. When the Winnipeg Grain Exchange was incorporated in 1887, Winnipeg gained significance as one of the world's great wheat exporters advancing further development of The Northern Pacific, Grand Trunk, Winnipeg-Duluth and Hudson Bay Railways.

Gretna was the site of Ogilvie & Co.—the first stalwart grain elevator on the Canadian prairies. At that time, wheat was an international commodity and the grain elevator boasted a storage capacity of 40,000 bushels of wheat, perhaps, the Galician Red Fife, which was imported by Galician Mennonite farmers and acclaimed for its quality, hardiness and yield in the short prairie growing season.

Gretna, the new CPR town, and the window to Canada's northwest was populated by a proud and determined community of over 600 people. These included: a) *the original pioneers* (Mennonite emigrants from Galicia under Austro-Hungary, from Russia—1870s or families migrating from Kansas). They were fluent in German, several Slavic languages and eventually English, b) *new arrivals (immigrants)*—reunited with families or those adventurous to challenge a new opportunity for prosperity on Canada's frontier. Whether by choice or circumstance, they were seeking the hope and promise of freedom from religious persecution, no conscription for military duty to defend a crown that oppressed them and free land (160 acres, referred to as 113 morgan) tendered by the Canadian government for a registration fee of \$10.00, an offer difficult to pass to tillers of soil with a strong work ethic. In a foreign land where buffalo roamed, tall grasses grew and mosquitos were merciless, success and prosperity was a short 11-18 day trip across the Atlantic Ocean on steam ships used for transporting people, cattle and produce, c) *merchants, tradesmen, businessmen, teachers, preachers, service providers, Americans and anyone* who utilized Neche or Emerson as ports of



Gretna CPR station, circa 1890. P#228