

CANADA AT THE TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY: SETTLING THE WEST

At the beginning of the twentieth century, many new people came to Canada to settle, and many of these went to the Prairie provinces. These immigrants left their homes for many different reasons: Europe was overpopulated, there was not enough land for people who wanted to farm, cities were overcrowded and dirty, there was high unemployment, taxes were high, some were forced to serve in armies, some were denied political rights, and some left because of natural disasters. Once they had decided to leave, many chose Canada over other possible countries because Canada offered political and religious freedoms, free land (160 acres) and the U.S. had run out of free land, and Canada had a railway to transport goods. **Clifford Sifton**, Canada's Minister of the Interior, advertised a great deal to try to get people to settle in Canada's west, which he called **the Last Best West**. To promote Canada, Sifton paid for American newspaper editors to visit the Prairies and lavishly entertained them so they would print nice things about Canada. Sifton also circulated posters and pamphlets in the U.S. and northern Europe in the languages of those countries. In central Europe, he hired agents to recruit immigrants and paid them \$5 for every healthy person who arrived in Canada.

European immigrants who decided to come to Canada faced difficult travel conditions. Most immigrants could not afford deluxe accommodations on the ship, and were placed in **steerage**, which was very overcrowded, below deck, without windows or running water (ewww!). During the two week voyage, some travelers became sick and some died before reaching Canada. Once at Halifax or Quebec City, immigrants had to pass inspection at immigration. If allowed to enter Canada, they then had to purchase train tickets to Canada's west, or remain in a city and find work. Those that headed west endured a week-long journey in drafty rail-coaches with uncomfortable wooden benches, a shared small stove for cooking meals, and a cistern at the back. Once at a western town or small city, they had to apply for a **homestead**, buy supplies, and find their land. The next few years promised backbreaking work, as most farms were started from scratch on very little money. A minimum of \$250 was needed to begin a homestead, and some farmers worked for other farmers, or left their families to work in lumber camps, railway camps, or in mines just to bring in a few extra dollars. Farmers also had to deal with hailstones, drought, dust storms, grasshopper plagues, and howling blizzards. Some farmers gave up and lost their homesteads, but many stayed and helped build the Prairie provinces.

Even though Sifton wanted immigrants, not every immigrant was welcome. Those who were unhealthy or unfit were turned away, even if a disabled child was separated from the family. Officially, Canada did not exclude African-Americans, but they were often turned away at the border with the excuse that they were unfit for military service or the climate.

Asian immigrants also had a difficult time getting into Canada. To restrict immigration from China, in 1903 the Canadian government placed a **head tax** of \$500 on each Chinese immigrant. Asians who did settle in Canada faced discrimination: they could not vote, they were prevented from careers in law, pharmacy, teaching, and the civil service, and many cities passed regulations making it difficult for Asians to make a living from laundries and stores. In 1907, the Asiatic Exclusion League marched on Vancouver's city hall and attacked Chinatown and Little Tokyo to show their hatred for this group. Despite the hate, some business owners encouraged Asian immigration because they provided cheap labour in jobs that most Whites considered too unpleasant (e.g. packing fish) or dangerous (e.g. hauling coal, building railways).

Although Canada now has a reputation for acceptance of different races, religions, and languages, Canadians were not always so welcoming. Even the immigrants that Sifton actively advertised to, such as Ukrainians, were treated without respect. Canadians at this time knew very little about other cultures, so they behaved in an **ethnocentric** manner, and were suspicious and fearful of 'foreigners' and their different customs and languages. Instead of trying to understand them, some Canadians believed the **stereotypes** about groups of people, which were incorrect.