RESEARCH ON
THE CANADIAN PRAIRIES

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Researching ancestors on the Canadian Prairies is different from research in other areas of Canada – for one thing, settlement was later. That means that the provinces will not show up in early census records, for example. On the other hand, the late settlement means that researchers in the West are less likely to find those annoying gaps that make family history research in other areas so frustrating.

A vast amount of genealogical information from Western Canada has been placed on the Web. One resource that spans the Prairies is superb – it is the Peel Collection, based at the University of Alberta, with thousands upon thousands of scanned documents.

The usual sources – including the census, vital statistics, land records, newspapers, directories, local histories and voters lists – all come into play when working in the West. Be warned, however, that there are major differences between the provinces when it comes to genealogical records.

Some quick history

Manitoba became a province in 1870, although it was much smaller than it is today. The federal government also established provisional districts to administer the Prairies. The names of two of those districts, Saskatchewan and Alberta, were used when two provinces were created in 1905, replacing the districts.

For more than a century, people of European descent moved into the Canadian West, transforming the land forever. The four provinces are distinctly different from each other, as they have been since they were settled. Organized settlement in Western Canada was on a distinctly patchwork basis, with dozens of ethnic groups found in specific areas.

Manitoba drew tens of thousands of people of English, Irish, Welsh and Scottish descent, second- or third-generation Canadians from Ontario. But there were substantial pockets of Europeans, such as the Icelandic settlement at Gimli and Mennonites next to the American border.

Saskatchewan had a strong mix of national origins, including Hungarians near Esterhazy, Russian Doukhobors in three areas, Mennonites near Saskatoon and the Barr Colonists from England and Wales near the Alberta border. For several years, Saskatchewan was the most populous province in the West.

Alberta saw large-scale settlement after Saskatchewan, and had a significant migration from the United States, where good free land was no longer available. There were Europeans as well – including Germans from Russia in the Medicine Hat area and many people from western Ukraine around Edmonton.

The role of the railway

The transcontinental railway was vital to the settlement of Western Canada. It made it easy to get to and from the region, and to move goods and agricultural products from place to place. The routes chosen by the early railway builders helped shape the geography of the west, since the locations of the lines and the communities next to them have been driving land-use decisions to the present day.

The construction of the first transcontinental railway, the Canadian Pacific, was part of a string of developments that helped bring settlers to the Prairie provinces. The land was turned over to the federal government in 1870, and the Dominion Lands Act of 1872 allowed for free homesteads in fertile areas. This was important, since no more land was available in the agricultural regions of Ontario.

In 1873, the North-West Mounted Police force was created, bringing the order of law to the region, and the Department of the Interior was established, helping to encourage the movement of settlers. In 1886, regular service started on the Canadian Pacific, and transportation and travel was immediately easier and less expensive than before.

Once the railway was in operation, settlement followed its route. The Canadian Pacific Railway had an interest in the arrival of new settlers, since the railway had been built in advance of a business need. If more people could be brought to the region, the railway would become more profitable. Beyond that, the railway had been given a substantial land grant, about 25 million acres, and as the free homestead land was taken, the railway could sell the land as another source of revenue. Half of the land in a 48-mile belt, including all of the odd-numbered sections, was in the hands of the railway.

The Canadian Pacific built branch lines to serve additional areas of the Prairies, and by 1891 a railway linked Calgary and Edmonton. Other companies also took an interest in the region, including the Canadian Northern and the Grand Trunk Pacific. Several small railways were nationalized in the 1920s, and combined into the Canadian National Railway company.

Sources

Manitoba and Saskatchewan have placed early vital statistics indexes on the Internet. Alberta has not done that yet, but the Provincial Archives of Alberta provides copies of death registrations older than 50 years, marriage registrations older than 70 years, and birth registrations older than 120 years. A link is on the CanGenealogy Alberta page.

Census records are available only until 1921, so researchers will need to turn to substitutes – primarily directories and voters lists.

Directories are available for most urban areas. Coverage varies; people of British descent are more likely to be included, while people who did not speak English were often ignored. In Manitoba, farmers were listed in alphabetical order in several directories published in the late 1800s. The listings include the land descriptions of their farms, making it easy to find them in the census returns. Virtually every directory published in Western Canada is available on microform. They are generally available through archives and university libraries.

Federal voters lists are available from 1935 through 1979. They aren't as comprehensive as census returns, but they still represent a powerful source of information. To use voters lists, it's important to determine which electoral district to search. Each district has 100 or more lists for different areas, so a bit of searching may be needed. When a person is found, though, the list will confirm their location and occupation – which could trigger further digging.

Since the railways were anxious to see more settlers arrive, they worked hard to promote the advantages of living on the Prairies. Their promotion work included surveys of settlers, which they compiled into publications extolling the benefits of the region, and ignoring any negative comments. The federal government also published material encouraging settlement, with several editions of a promotional magazine called The Last Best West.

Copies of many of these publications have been included in the Peel's Prairie Provinces digital collection, which is available through the efforts of the University of Alberta. The Peel site is at peel.library.ualberta.ca; search the bibliography for "what settlers say" to find several examples.

The Peel files are searchable, so it is easy to look for the names of relatives. (One of the most important publications done by the Canadian Pacific included answers from two of my relatives, so the idea of looking for family is not far-fetched.) The original questionnaires completed by settlers as part of the survey are on microfilm at the B.C. Archives in Victoria.

Researchers should also consult early directories, which often include references to the legal land descriptions of communities. These can be used to determine which village was close to the ancestral farm. In Manitoba, farmers were listed in alphabetical order in several directories published in the late 1800s. The listings include the land descriptions of their farms, making it easy to find them in the census returns. Virtually every directory published in Western Canada is available on microform, and are generally available through archives and university libraries. They are also on the Internet up to the 1950s.

The early runs of most of the newspapers in Western Canada have been preserved on microfilm, and increasingly, images will be found on the Internet. The largest Western newspaper for the early years was the Winnipeg Free Press, and it is available online in digitized form for a fee.

The newspapers will provide information on the communities they serve, and will note major changes in rail service – vital to the local economy – as well as accidents. Many newspapers included railway schedules as well, which can give a sense of how long it would have taken to get from a farm to a large centre, or to get from the Prairies back home to Ontario.

Another source for schedule information is Waghorn's Guide, a monthly published in Winnipeg from 1884 to the 1950s. A few copies are online. Check the Early Canadiana Online site, http://eco.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.8_04859.

Most rural communities in the three Prairie provinces have produced local histories – in some cases, more than one. These can be superb sources for researching area residents, as they will include maps, photographs and biographies. The information contained in them is only as good as the information provided to the volunteer compilers. These local histories are not as common in British Columbia, but it is still worth checking to see if they have been published.

Many local histories are available on the Internet, through sites such as Ourroots.ca and the Alberta Heritage Digitization Project.
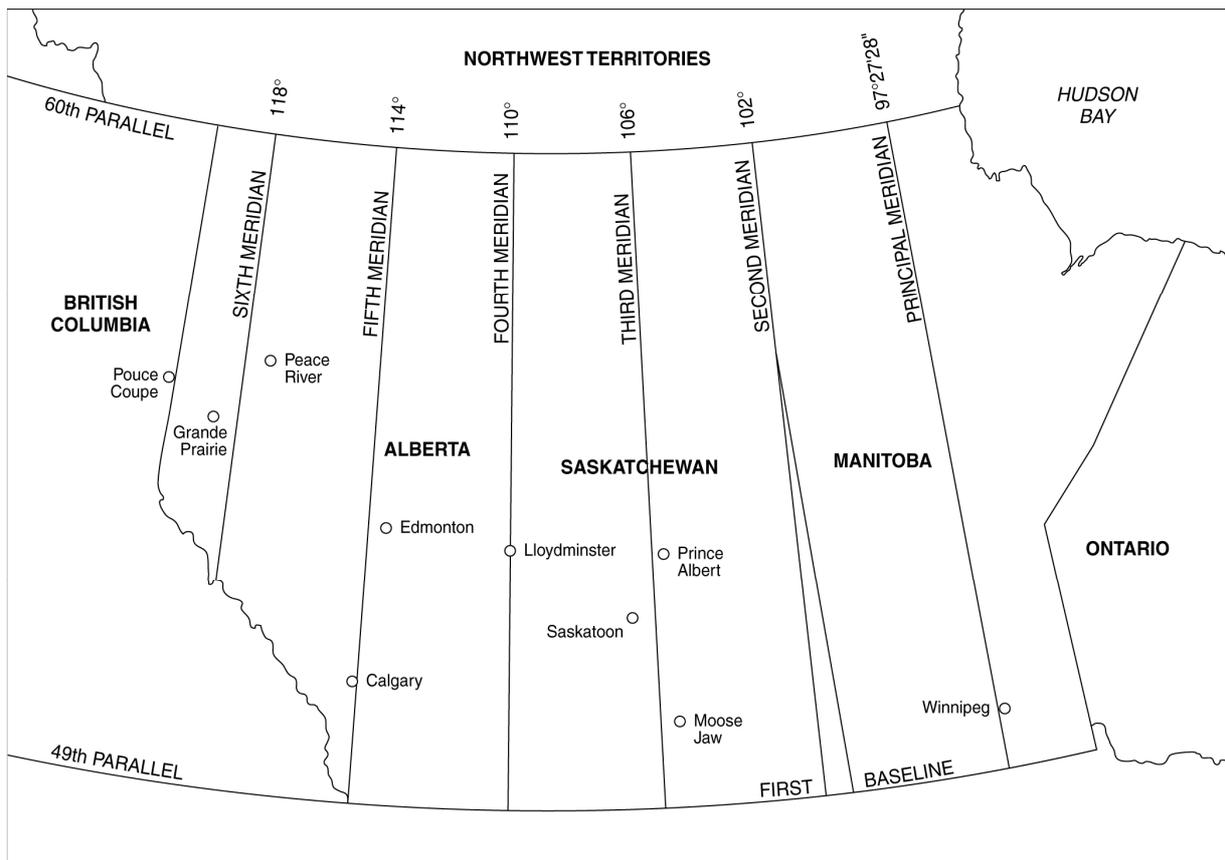
Meridians are vital in finding farm locations

Indexes to homestead records in British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan are on the Internet. The Library and Archives Canada website has a database of land grants – records of successful homesteaders, but not those who failed to meet the requirements to obtain the land, or who simply gave up. A database of people who bought land from the Canadian Pacific Railway is on the website of the Glenbow Alberta Institute in Calgary.

Prairie roots usually involve farms or ranches, so a basic understanding of land records is vital. These numbers are important in doing research in the census and in land grants. In reading a land description, always go from right to left. Each set of letters and numbers provides more precise information about the location of a quarter.

First, determine the meridian. A meridian is a north-south line, surveyed astronomically to the true north, which slices the Prairies into segments. Meridians are generally four degrees longitude apart. The principal meridian is just west of Winnipeg, at longitude 97°27'28".

Next is the range. The range number starts fresh at every meridian, counting off 36-square-mile units of land (known as townships) on an east-west line. The numbering of ranges is based on their relationship to the principal meridian.

The next number refers to the township. The township number locates the township on a south-north line, starting in the south. T1 is on the Canada-United States boundary, T2 starts six miles north of the boundary, and so on. A township is made up of 36 one-mile-square parcels known as sections. These are stacked in rows of six.

Sections are further divided into four quarter-sections, or "quarter" for short. A quarter is 160 acres, more or less, and measures roughly half a mile by half a mile. This amount of land was the basic homestead. A quarter is identified by its location within a section – for example, NE ¼.

31	32	33	34	35	36
30	29	28	27	26	25
19	20	21	22	23	24
18	17	16	15	14	13
7	8	9	10	11	12
6	5	4	3	2	1

The same system was used in parts of British Columbia – in the Peace River area and along the Canadian Pacific Railway line. Around Vancouver, farmland was divided using a similar system, but with a Coast Meridian.