

GOING WEST

*A story of immigration and homesteading in the
Canadian west as told by a modern Canadian woman
through the journals of her pioneering grandmother.*



*from
People
Words
&
Change*

GOING WEST

from
People, Words & Change

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Introduction



GOING WEST IS ABOUT AN IMPORTANT TIME in Canadian history. Many immigrants came to Western Canada between 1885 and 1914. The Canadian Pacific Railway was completed right across the country in 1885. Then, in 1914, the First World War started and settlement stopped for several years.

There are two story tellers in this book. One is Mary McColl. She was born in 1889 in Edinburgh, Scotland. She came to Canada with her family in 1901 when she was twelve years old. Like thousands of others, they came to Western Canada to start a new life.

Mary McColl grew up and became a teacher in her small prairie town. Later, she married and had her own family. She kept a journal and wrote about her experiences in her new country.



Mary McColl writing in her journal.

The second story teller is Mary's granddaughter, Ann Sawchuk. Ann grew up in the same prairie town as her grandmother. She also became a teacher, and married a farmer. Her husband's grandparents came to Western Canada from the Ukraine.



Annie McColl Sawchuk

Mary McColl died in 1972 at the age of 83. She left her journals to her granddaughter, Ann. Ann is now a grandmother herself!

As a teacher, Ann knew her grandmother's stories were part of Canada's story. Her special interest was the women settlers and what life was like for them. She was also very interested in how the lives of the Plains Indians changed when the settlers came.

Before 1870 Western Canada was a wilderness, but it was not empty! The Plains Indians had lived there for thousands of years before explorers and settlers came from Europe.

White fur traders and buffalo hunters also lived in that huge area. Some lived like the native people and even lived with them.



Plains Indians



Plainsman with his Indian Guide

When the white man first came, the Indians showed them how to survive on the land. They showed them how to find food and make their own shelter and clothing.

They guided the explorers in the long hard journeys that opened up Canada for the fur trade and for settlement.

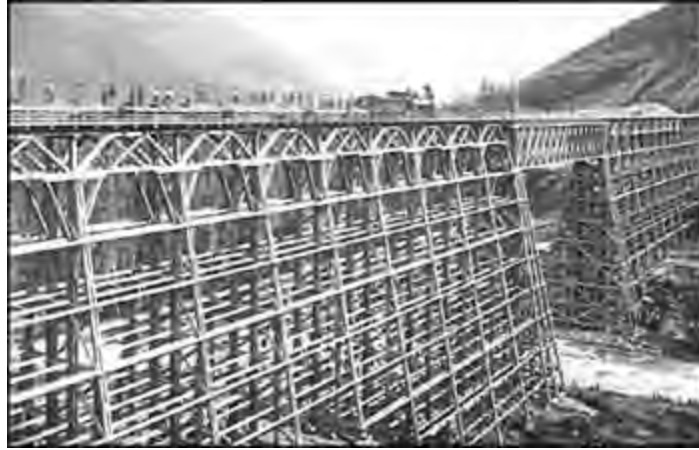
In the winter, the native people taught the white man how to use snowshoes, toboggans and dog-sleds to get around in the deep snow. In the summer, they showed them how to build birchbark canoes, light enough to carry but strong enough to go through rapids.



Canada's native people understood they were part of nature. The land belonged to no one. It provided for all. The white man's idea that people can "own" the land was new and strange to them. It caused problems that continue to this day.

Starting in the 1880's, the Canadian government wanted to turn the huge area of Western Canada into a farming community.

They offered a deal no one could refuse! For ten dollars you could buy 160 acres of farm land, called a "section". To get a section, you had to build a house and start farming the land within three years. This was called "proving up the section."



Railway through Rocky Mountains

To get people to come to Western Canada, the government decided to finish building the railway all the way west from Winnipeg, Manitoba to the Pacific Ocean.

It was a huge challenge. One group of men laid rails across the flat prairies from Winnipeg to the start of the Rocky Mountains. It took them two years.

The second part was much more difficult. It went through the Rockies to Vancouver. Men had to blast tunnels through the mountains. They built bridges across deep gorges and rushing rivers.

The work was very dangerous. Many of the workers were immigrants from China. They were paid low wages and many lost their lives.



Putting in the last spike

The tracks joined up in British Columbia in 1885 and the Canadian Pacific Railway was finished. Before, the only way was to travel for weeks in wagons pulled by oxen or horses.

Now people could travel from east to west in about a week!

The next thing the government did to bring settlers to the Canadian West was to advertise in countries such as the United States, Great Britain, the Ukraine, Germany, Poland and Russia.

Posters and newspaper ads promised bumper crops, booming cities, a wonderful climate, and a chance for wealth and happiness in the "Golden West of Canada." Some even promised peaches in Saskatchewan!



Ad on a truck

What did they know about Canada, these early settlers from Britain and Europe? Not much, only that there was land, adventure and a chance to start a new life! Most had no idea how to run a farm. They had no idea how big the country was. They had no idea how far apart Prairie towns were or how cold and lonely a Prairie winter could be.

American farmers were happy to buy land for only a few dollars an acre. A farmer could sell his land in the United States for more than a hundred dollars an acre. This was a lot of money at that time!

With this money he could set himself and his sons up in farming. (Women hardly ever owned land then.) He could even buy the latest and best farm equipment!

Many farmers from the American West believed it was safer in Canada. The North-West Mounted Police, who later became the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, did a good job of keeping law and order in the Canadian West. They still do!



Northwest Mounted Policeman

1



The Long Journey



Mary McColl

MY GRANDMOTHER MARY McColl, came to Western Canada with her family in 1901. She was twelve years old. Her parents were Annie and Duncan McColl. There were four children in the family. Mary's brother Andrew was two years older. She also had two younger sisters, Margaret (Meg) and Nan.

In her Journal my grandmother Mary wrote about the trip from Scotland to Western Canada:



Annie & Duncan McColl



Meg & Nan McColl



Andrew McColl

We lived in a workman's cottage in Edinburgh. Dad worked as a clerk in a small store. Mother worked at home as dressmaker. I guess we were poor, but children don't notice such things.

I remember the day Dad came home all excited. He had seen a poster telling how easy it was to get land in 'The Richest Land on Earth' – Canada! My parents had many talks long into the night and once I heard Mother crying. Then one day they told us that we were moving to Canada.

I don't know what my mother really thought. She seemed worried but Dad was so excited. She was a strong woman, but in those days, the man of the family usually made the decisions for everybody.

My father went to Canada a year before we did to see what it was like. He decided it would be a good place to start a new life for his family, and so we went!

In the Spring and take up a Free
Farm of
160—ACRES—160
WESTERN
CANADA
Close to Schools, Churches,
Railways and Markets.

The Richest Land on Earth.
The best climate with the fullest
enjoyment of health.

Men of 18 years and over get a Homestead of
160 Acres Free

Railways Spreading out in every Direction
15,000 Farmers from the Central and West-
ern States took up Homesteads in
Western Canada in 1909.

The Farmers in Western Canada produced
more than one-fourth as much Wheat as the
whole of the United States in 1909.

Special Excursions will leave Detroit, Mich.,
in March, April and May, 1910.

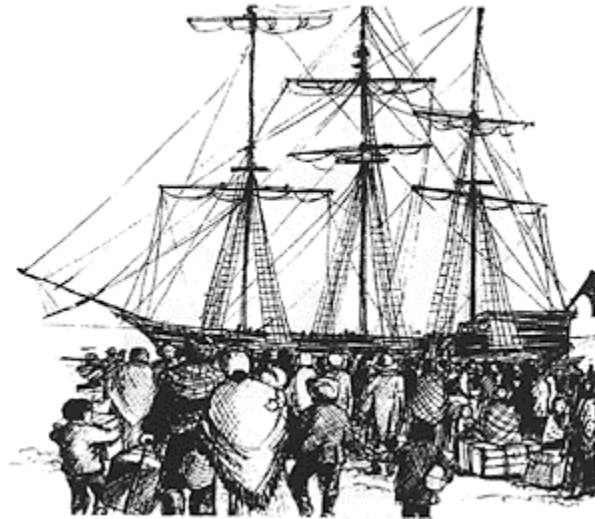
Get in before the Rush, secure a Free
Homestead and become independent.

For all information, Maps, Pamphlets,
Delegation Reports and the low rates, write to
M. V. MACINNES,
Gen'l Canadian Gov't Agent.

Most women didn't know what it would be like in Canada. Some tried to bring all they could from home. They brought fancy clothes, good china, silverware, fine lace and even pianos! Then they would find themselves living on the prairie in an earth house with a grass roof!

Others came with just one change of clothes and a blanket roll.

We were lucky because Dad went to Canada ahead of us. He knew what we should take for the long trip and what was best to bring for our new life on the prairie.



We didn't bring fancy china or lace but we did bring a piano. My mother would not leave her piano behind!

By Ship



We boarded our ship at the port of Oban in Scotland. If you had lots of money, you could pay for a private room on the top deck.

We didn't have much money so we stayed on one of the lower decks. Mother's piano and most of our trunks went into the cargo hold. There were not portholes on our deck so we couldn't see outside.

There was no privacy and this was hard for Mother. Many families slept in one large area filled with rows of bunks. The beds were two or three bunks high. Everyone slept two or three to a bed. I had to sleep with Meg and Nan.

Mother had brought lots of blankets and we were always warm. She hung blankets around our bunks at night and we thought it was great fun!





We ate, slept and played in the same room. Everyone ate together at long tables. Men dumped food on the table in large wooden bowls. Mother called the "waiters", but they didn't look like waiters to me! Our parents taught us to have good table but it didn't work on the ship. Everyone grabbed as much as they could.

On the third day, we ran into a storm. The ship rolled back and forth for a day and a night. Everything rolled around on our deck and everyone got seasick! It was horrible. People were moaning, babies were crying. Some older people were so sick they died and never reached Canada.

Everyone was so happy when the storm was over. People started singing in different languages and some even played musical instruments!

My brother and I had a great time. We ran all over the ship and played games with the other children. It didn't seem to matter that we didn't speak the same language.



Land-ho!

The ocean trip took ten days. Finally someone yelled that they could see land ahead. That afternoon we landed safely in Halifax. We were in Canada!

By Train

Ships landed in different Canadian ports such as Halifax, Quebec City and Montreal.

Once the ship landed, everyone had to go to the Immigration Sheds. Doctors checked to see that people were healthy. Government agents checked that everyone had the correct papers. Some people never got any further. A few died there and some were sent back. Most people made it, however.



Waiting for the train

Some families bought large wagons and a team of horses, mules or oxen to go the rest of the way.



Prairie "Schooners"

The trip out west by wagon was long and hard. It took several weeks. Usually three or four families would go together. By the time they arrived at the* new home, they had already learned a lot about their new country.



Mule train going west.

Most people travelled by the new train in special Colonist Cars to Western Canada. The seats were hard with no upholstery. There was a coal stove at one end of each car where everyone did their own cooking. There were sleeping bunks which folded up above the seats. They were hard too!

My mother knew there would be no blankets or food on the train. We had our own blankets and she bought food and supplies for the train trip west.

Lots of people did not speak English. They couldn't ask if there would be blankets or food on the train. Mother tried to help, but she had us to look after. she also had to get our trunks and the piano off the boat and onto the train.

It was hard to talk to other people on the train because there were so many different languages. There was nothing to do. Night-time was the worst. Babies cried, people snored and coughed. The seats and bunks were hard. We were glad to have the blankets Mother had brought for us.



Colonist Car.

I remember sitting and looking out the train window. There was nothing but trees day after day. Was this what Canada was like? Mother didn't say much, but I think we were all a bit scared. Dad had written to us a few times but said nothing about where we would be living.

The trees began to disappear when we reached the Prairies. we couldn't believe how flat the land was! It seemed as if we could see forever.

Whenever I read my grandmother's journals, I think about her mother, Annie. What did she think about as the train crossed that wild, lonely land?



First view of the prairie.

She had left behind her home, friends and family. She was on a train in the middle of nowhere. She had no idea where she was going and what it would be like. Her four young children depended on her. She hadn't seen her husband in a year. She hadn't had a good sleep in weeks.

I think about all the women on those trains, women from the Ukraine, Russia, Germany and Poland. They didn't even speak English. Were they excited? Were they frightened? Were they hopeful?



Starting a new life

I also wonder what the native people thought about the trains going across their land. What did they think about the changes to their way of life?

Going west was a new start for my grandmother's family. It was a new start for Canada. But it was an ending for the native people.



Chief Crowfoot, middle row, centre

My brother and I wanted to see some Indians. They were like heroes to us. Dad had told us stories about Chief Crowfoot and Chief Big Bear.

He told us that chief Crowfoot had tried hard to get fair land treaties for his people.

Chief Big Bear didn't like the treaties. He knew the treaties and the reservations were not good for his people. Some of his band became violent. Chief Big Bear tried to stop them but nine people were killed by Indian warriors. He gave himself up and died in jail.

We thought we would see Indians everywhere – riding horses, wearing beautiful feathers.



One day we saw some shacks near a river. We could see some people and children playing. Someone said they were Indians and that was a Reservation. I felt sad when I saw them. they looked tired and dusty, just like us.



Native man and woman.



*A little while
and I will be gone from among you,
whither I cannot tell.*

*From nowhere we came,
into nowhere we go.*

What is life?

*It is a flash of a firefly in the night.
It is a breath of buffalo in the wintertime.*

*It is the little shadow
that runs across the grass
and loses itself in the sunset.*

*Chief Crowfoot
Blackfoot Chief
Alberta 1890*