

BENDER HAMLET

A Community Enterprise That Failed

by W. J. Sisler

The late Mr. Sisler was at one time principal of Strathcona School and a high school in northwest Winnipeg is named in his honour.



A class at the Jewish school circa 1917-18, with Moses Freidl Lavitt and Itzhak Leverhant.

A PIONEER of this little country village in the Inter-lake District tells the story of a brave attempt by some twenty-five families to establish new homes in the wild bush country sixty-five miles north-west of Winnipeg, during the first decade of this century.

In 1903 when the first colonists arrived, Teulon was the nearest market town and it could be reached only over roads that were no more than trails through tall timbers and scrub. Max Arber, one of the settlers, now living in Winnipeg, tells this story about the origin of the colony.

"I was born in England. My father came from Russia about 1870 and founded a cap manufacturing business in Manchester. A friend, Jacob Bender, came from Russia to visit my father early in 1903. They read the literature put out by the Dominion Government and discussed the prospects for a colony in Canada. When Mr. Bender returned home, he aroused the interest of his friends who had small farms in Russia. These people, together with our family, were the nucleus of the new colony.

We were not accustomed to living in bush country and wanted our homes close together. We secured a concession from the Government and one section of land was divided into eighteen equal strips of about nine acres each. On these we put up substantial log houses — eighteen of them in a row facing the north line of the divided section. Each settler was allowed to take up his homestead of a quarter section near the village.

Some colonists had money but the majority had little or none. We got loans on mortgage from "Ieca," a company directed by Baron de Hirsch. The interest rate was low and terms of re-payment easy. Even so, many were not able

Dear Joe*:

Your wish to preserve the memory of the Bender Hamlet settlers in heartwarming, to say the least. You can count on us for help. It's nice to know that a piece of local Canadian history will be saved from complete obliteration and that the hardships those early pioneers — for in truth they were that — went through will be remembered.

About the Ludwigs — the ones from Bender Hamlet: my father, Hyman, went to the colony about 1909 from Winnipeg, where he had been tailoring for several years, with my mother, Sonya, my sister Becky (who was then 10 or 12 years old) and my sister Edna (then Etta), who was a few years younger. My older brother Albert was born at Bender that year, I came along there in 1911 and my younger brother, Charles, was born there in 1913. According to the old City Directory of Winnipeg, which I checked on my first visit in 1960, our family left Bender about 1917, for I recognized a listed address for us at 637 Magnus Avenue where I had my first recollection of the Strathcona School. W. J. Sisler was principal there at the time and was apparently aware then that vital (to us, at least) history was taking shape around the inter-lake area — for he used to show lantern slides of Bender, describing it as a typical pioneer prairie settlement.

I have a photostat of the original subdivision map filed in 1910 from Bender. As you probably know, each settler apparently farmed a quarter-section, but one quarter-section was divided into 19 approximately 8 1/2-acre strips so that their cabins could be near each other. On this map, for Lot 2, there is a notation "Fr. Lavitt," which must be your Zaide Friedl. Our cabin was at the other end of the dirt road, on Lot 17.

When we first revisited Bender in 1960 after 43 years, we had no idea what we would find. First I wrote to the Travel Bureau, asking for information. They wrote back telling me that the village was extinct, which was pretty shattering to think about. And of course when we drove there from Winnipeg in June of that year we found it only through the help of a Forlanski family at Narcisse, who led us up a dirt road to the remains of the colony, the one cabin — now occupied by another farmer whose name escapes me now — and even walked me through the brush to the cemetery. For that, I'm forever grateful. I'm sorry that I can't give you any information about the cemetery or the graves, but perhaps when we meet I'm sure that in talking to Becky and Edna memories may stir and things may come back.

I did buy Lot 17, the 8 1/2 acre parcel on which our cabin was located, which is part of the NW 1/4 of Section 36, Township 19, Range 1, West of the principal Meridian 59. I got it from the Jewish Colonization Association of Canada, in Montreal. I paid \$350 for it and was most happy to get it, purely for sentimental reasons. M. J. Lister, manager, told me at the time (November 1963) that they still had five lots which they would like to sell to descendants of the former settlers, and which he hesitated to sell to non-Jews. If you write to him, as I'm sure you will, perhaps you can discover on which lot the cemetery is located.

Last week I visited Jacob Bender in Los Angeles, now 92, he still has the frame of a handsome, strong pioneer — sporting an army mustache, snow white hair and a twinkle in his eye, he provided one of the best trips one could take down memory lane.

He showed us records of requests from the Baron De Hirsch Institute in Montreal for loans to help Jewish farmers purchase oxen to break land, plows, barrows, wagons, mowers, rakes, etc. . . . correspondence with the late Max Heppner, a well known western Canadian and Montreal family . . . and with government agencies in the province . . . all give evidence of a breed of men and women who battled the fierce prairie elements to take root in a new land.

I hope this gives you partial answers to some of your questions.

MORRIE LUDWIG

* Joe Lavitt has been gathering information and exciting interest on the part of descendants of Bender settlers. This is part of correspondence he has been receiving.

237 Elm Street,
San Mateo, California,
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to repay their loans. Between 1912 and 1920 the colony was at its best. There were about twenty-five families constituting a population of 100 to 125. We had a good school and no child was more than a quarter of a mile from it. The school building was used for community meetings as well as for religious and educational purposes. For some years Bender Hamlet was an interesting and fairly prosperous community, but the young people, as they grew up, left. Then some of the original families followed. Now they have all gone."

Nathan Arber, who entered the colony in 1903, told of making trips to Teulon with an ox team taking a load of wood. "We took two days each way to make the trip. The cord of wood was exchanged for some flour, tea, sugar and a few other things, but we got no cash at all."

Max Weinstock recalls working in the saw mills in exchange for lumber. There was good sized timber — poplar and spruce — but bush fires destroyed a good deal of it. Settlers could not get cash for wood or for work in the saw mills. They had to go outside to work on the railway, on farms, or in some small business.

Some names of early settlers recalled by the Arber brothers and Mr. Weinstock were: Mayer Weinstock, Nathan Weinstock, Joseph Gordon, Ben Gordon, Charles and Magnus Gordon, Jacob Bender, Melanchuk, Warshovsky, Feldman, Posen, Green, Dickson, Lavitt, Winegratsky and Jacobson.

Some of the settlers appear to have made a good living, but as their families grew up the young people saw better prospects in other places. One of the old-timers gave as reasons for the decline of the colony the following: 1. bad roads; 2. stony land; 3. low

(Cont. on page 25)

A SAGA OF THE NORTHWEST

by Yrachmeil Shaar-Hair

STORIES of the establishment, development and demise of Jewish pioneering in the Sonnenfeld Colony — Hoffer, Hirsh, the Estevan region, and areas such as Willow Creek — Edenbridge, Brooksby, Gronlid — even Prince Albert — are the real "meat and marrow" of the pioneering saga of Jewish community life on the prairies. Recently the rural area of Willow Creek in northern Saskatchewan celebrated its 50th anniversary, and in recapturing its past paid respect to those hardy and industrious people who helped settle the wild northwest.

Who were these people who came by wagon and team or oxen, with few possessions and little money, to start life in a new, forbidding country. Perhaps it might be worth recalling that to obtain a homestead, a pioneer went to the land office at Prince Albert to make his claim. At the end of five years on his 160 acres of land, he was eligible to receive a title to the land, and could pre-empt another quarter section to work. His immediate needs, however, involved more than building a home for himself and his children. He had to help build a community and civilization. Some Jews came with the help of the Jewish Colonization Association which saw great hope in such settlement as at least a partial solution to the "Jewish problem" and who could look to

In the Carrot River area, they found water, acres and acres of lush timber, and very fertile land. This was the nucleus of what was later to become the Edenbridge colony. Soon after, this group was joined by others from all parts of the world. Settlers arrived from Latvia, South Africa, Russia, Poland, England and other parts of Europe.

During its 60 years Edenbridge has experienced dramatic changes, but progress has been erratic and frequently interrupted.

When a post office was established in 1906, the name Edenbridge was agreed upon, as a derivation of the word "Yidden" and the bridge which spanned the Carrot River to the colony. Progress in most respects, however, was slow, and such disasters as the hail-storm of 1916, and the devastating flu epidemic of 1918 severely

tested the courage and industry of everyone. Improvements continued in spite of drought, rust, hail and spring floods, and gradually better communications, modern homes, electrification (1949) brought more of the amenities to the district.

On June 28, 1931, the Edenbridge Colony celebrated its 25th jubilee. It had reached a peak of 90 families. People from many parts of the world with a variety of dialects, traditions, and habits and strange to the land had settled a wild area and in a relatively short period had produced successful Jewish farmers, merchants, clerks, teachers, students of the arts, agriculture, science, commerce, medicine, law, politics, and businessmen. Members also served as trustees, councillors, Reeves and municipal secretaries.

Some of the earliest pioneers were H. Rander, S. Buckwold, K. Fenster, L. Vickar, D. Vickar, S. Vickar, P. Gordon, N. Bricker, S. Plotkin, A. Plotkin, B. Mazalov, A. Nosofsky, J. Sweiden, I. Broudy, J. Cramer, M. Solomon, Z. Golden, A. Wolfovitch, E. Wolfovitch, R. Rosenberg, J. Springman, A. Springman, R. Springman, H. Frazes, M. Usiskin, W. Cohen, I. Cohen, I. Taback, H. Fredman, J. Broudy, J. Ratner, A. Turner, B. Siegel, M. Gordon, H. Levinton, Rev. M. Shallit and I. Sukonick.

A survey a few years ago revealed that among the pioneers still living in the district are Teddy Freedman, Ratner; Maurice Duchovnick, Mrs. Ruby Springman, Philip Springman, all of Ridge-dale; Henry White, Charles Vickar, William Vickar, Morris (Little) Vickar, Sam Gordon, Mrs. F. Broudy, Maurice Broudy, Isadore Broudy, all of Brooksby.



Original home of Vickar family, this log cabin later served as a hotel. It became a point of congregation for settlers.

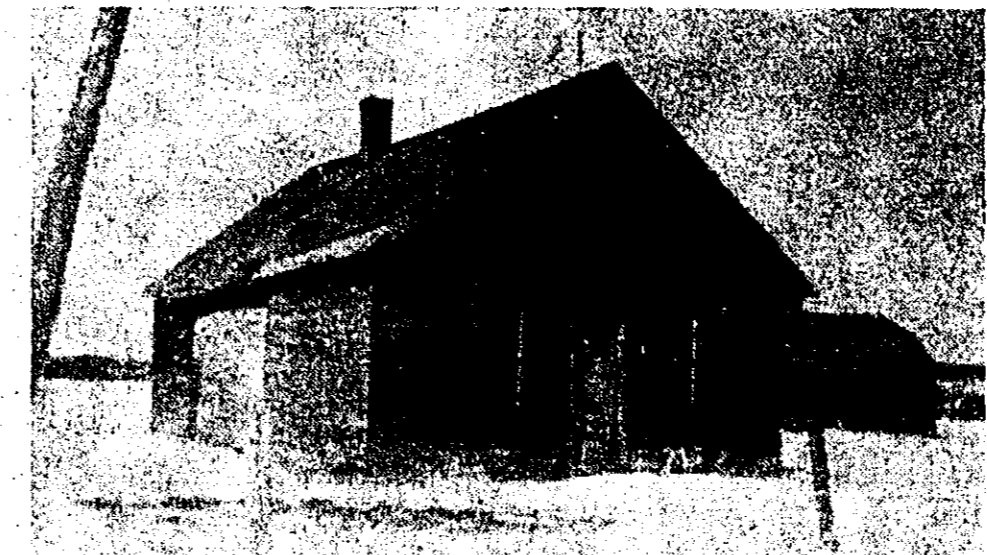
Two brothers who contributed a great deal to the development of this settlement were Sam Vickar and the late David Vickar.

The late Mr. Vickar was born in 1877 in Latvia. He emigrated to Cape Colony, South Africa, at the time of the Boer War at the age of 20. Attracted by the opportunities of homesteading in northern Saskatchewan he helped form a Jewish "on to the land movement" of people to whom this appealed because they had been denied the possibility of owning land in Europe. So in 1906 he and his brother Sam, accompanied by their sister and her husband, Fraidl and Jacob Sweiden, sailed for Canada. A sister, Anna, the late Mrs. R. Rosenberg, joined them later in Saskatchewan.

From 1908 to 1910 David Vickar and his sister operated the Charles McLarns dairy in Melfort. He then returned to help his brother who, with other members of the group, had settled north



David Vickar came to Saskatchewan in 1906 and served as reeve of Willow Creek for a total of 22 years.



R. Rosenberg erected the first store on his quarter in 1910. It served as a shopping centre for settlers, and a stopping point for farmers en route to Star City.

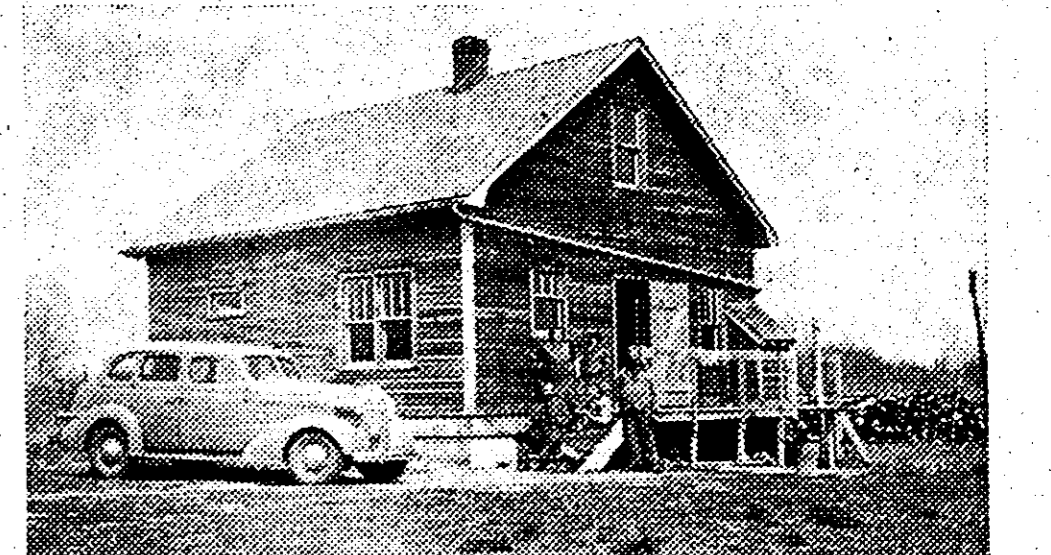
South America and elsewhere for its rationalization of this position. Some came on their own, attracted by the opportunity that a ten dollar payment to register for virgin land could afford those rugged individualists who sought such opportunities.

Edenbridge Settlement

In 1905, a pamphlet issued by the Canadian Department of Immigration was noticed by the late Louis Vickar in Capetown, South Africa, offering settlers 160 acres of virgin land for ten dollars and the privilege of owning their own homes. That year, 56 Hebrew families left South Africa to seek independence in Canada. After considering other available areas, they decided to come to the northern part of the province because of its access to forests and water.



Edenbridge School No. 2930 was built in 1912. It opened in 1913 with 19 students. The first-school board included R. Rosenberg, chairman; Louis and David Vickar, and H. Shipley, trustees.



Here is the Loeffler family, a Jewish refugee family from Germany, seen in 1939 on a typical homestead in Edenbridge area.

of Brooksby. In years to come the brothers' activities expanded to include a general store at Ratner. Later, additional retail outlets included the newly formed hamlets of Brooksby and Gronlid.

In 1912, D. Vickar married Sophia Gelman of Winnipeg, and they had five sons and one daughter. The youngest son, Dr. Joseph Vickar, died in Vancouver. The rest of the family reside in the Carrot River Valley.

David Vickar served a total of 32 years on local school boards, and was one of the first trustees of Edenbridge school when the district was formed in 1912. He also served on the Athol school board. He was the first postmaster of the Edenbridge post office and was also postmaster of the Ratner post office.

He was perhaps best known for his keen interest in the municipal field. He served 22 years as reeve of the Willow Creek R.M. No. 458. He first held office in 1915 for three years, and was re-elected in 1928 and served until 1946, when ill health forced his retirement. He was instrumental in introducing to this municipality one of the first medical and hospital schemes in the province.

The two brothers also helped organize and build the synagogue north of the Carrot River. David Vickar served as an elder until his health failed him. Like his brother Sam, he helped organize the Co-op elevator system and later the Saskatchewan Pool elevators system. He was one of the 135 delegates in the "On to Ottawa" march, held for the purpose of requesting dollar wheat for farmers in 1941. It was common for him to appear, successfully, in debt adjustment tribunals for his neighbors when eviction threatened. He died October 30, 1953, at the age of 76, with

(Continued on page 22)



Sam Vickar, who also came to Saskatchewan in 1906, served as reeve of Willow Creek for 10 years.