

Location, land, and tenure: Factors in the success and failure of three Jewish agricultural settlements in Manitoba, Canada.

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Abstract

Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe established settlements on the western Canadian prairies before 1914. Mostly they obtained homesteads under the terms of the Dominion Lands Act, whose regulations mandated dispersed settlement. This was antithetical to Jewish religious observance and maintenance of a full Jewish life. Jewish settlements saw rapid decline in the 1920s. Some were completely abandoned. The settlement trajectories of three Jewish settlements in Manitoba, explain the extent that religion, land tenure, and geographic location determined the longevity of Jewish settlements.

Introduction

The closing years of the nineteenth and opening decades of the twentieth centuries saw the western Canadian prairies settled by a polyglot mixture of peoples drawn largely from Europe and eastern North America. The Indigenous population, which occupied the territory for thousands of years before the arrival of Europeans, was geographically and politically marginalized, confined to Reserves, denied the right to acquire land beyond them and their political voice silenced. An imperial myth of an empty land awaiting occupation by European settlers dominated immigration propaganda issued by the Canadian government and railway companies. Sir John A. Macdonald boasted of ‘having one great country before us to do [with] what we like.’¹ The region was promoted to potential white settlers as the land of the second chance, where riches and financial independence awaited those prepared to take advantage of its undeveloped resources.

Among those who came to settle these “empty” lands were Jews fleeing persecution in eastern Europe’s Pale of Settlement. These refugees mostly had backgrounds in the trades or were small merchants and clerks. In Russia, Jews were not allowed to own land, so few had any farming experience, other than managing estates for nobility or eking out a living on small holdings of a few hectares. Without farming experience, and with skills and social needs more suited to urban

¹ *Debates of the House of Commons*, 1883, p. 874.

life, refugee Jews tended to remain in eastern Canadian urban centres, until pushed to the prairies by Jewish philanthropic associations in eastern Canada overwhelmed by penurious refugees. Initially, Jews were pushed rather than pulled into the region.

From the early 1880s onwards, Jews established agricultural colonies on the prairies. There is now a substantial body of literature examining these Jewish colonies from a variety of standpoints.² As yet, none have addressed why some suffered catastrophic collapse while others endured as viable communities well into the twentieth century.

Comparative analysis of Jewish settlements in western Canada is complicated by the fact that unlike most other ethno-religious groups, Jews showed no preference for a specific ecological environment or geographical location. In contrast, Ukrainians and Poles, for example, displayed a strong preference for the northern parkland, whereas Metis favoured riparian locations and Mennonites preferred open prairie land.

Any attempt to reconstruct the past or to fully understand the present, as Clifford Geertz argued, cannot be based solely on the supposedly hard facts of social existence.³ What he termed the soft facts: what people and societies imagined human life to be all about, how they thought one should live, what grounded their beliefs and legitimized their decisions, and how they constructed their reality, are crucial to our understanding of the past. Migrants make decisions in a milieu unique to each social group, place, and time. The context within which they operate is always complex and for Jewish settlers it was exceptionally so, since unique economic, social, and religious concerns affected their settlement decisions.

This paper examines three Jewish agricultural settlements in Manitoba: Camper (also known as New Hirsch) Bender Hamlet (also known as Narcisse) and Pine Ridge. Their settlement trajectories of growth and decline illustrate the importance of location, settlement pattern, and land tenure, on the ability of Jewish settlements to endure.⁴

² See, for example, Anna Feldman, "Sonnenfeld - Elements of survival and success of a Jewish farming community on the prairies 1905-1939," *Canadian Jewish Historical Society Journal*, 6 (Winter: 1982), 33-53; and "Were Jewish farmers failures? The case of township 2-14 W2nd," *Saskatchewan History*, 55 (1: 2003), 21-30; Anthony Rasporich, "Early twentieth century Jewish farm settlements in Saskatchewan: A utopian perspective," *Saskatchewan History* 42 (1:1989): 28-40; Yossi Katz and John C. Lehr, "Jewish pioneer agricultural settlements in western Canada," *Journal of Cultural Geography* 14 (1: 1999), 49-67; Howard Gontovnick, "Planting the seed of identity," in Barry L. Stiefel and Hernan Tessler-Mabé (eds.), *Neither in Dark speeches nor in similitudes: Reflections and refractions between Canadian and American Jews*, Montreal: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2016, pp. 53-66; Eric Wilkinson, "The success of Jewish agricultural colonies in western Canada," *The Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, 28, (2: 2022). doi 10.608/HJEAS/2022/28/2/8; and John C. Lehr "Outside the Colony: Jewish Farmers on the Prairies," *Canadian Jewish Studies*, 36, (2023): 79-88;

³ Clifford Geertz, *After the fact: Two countries, four decades, one anthropologist*, Cambridge Mass. Harvard University Press, 1995, 43.

⁴ This study relies on data obtained from the *Census of Canada*; archival and printed materials in the Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada, Winnipeg; the Archives of the Municipality of Springfield, Oakbank, Manitoba;

The Dominion Lands Act and Settlement.

Settlement in western Canada was undertaken under the regulations of the Dominion Lands Act (DLA) of 1872. Although the Act underwent minor modifications in subsequent years, its basic requirements remained essentially unchanged. Under the Act, land was surveyed into Townships comprised of 36 sections, each of one square mile. Each section was further divided into four quarter-sections of 160 acres, which was the basic unit for settlement (Fig. 1). To compensate the Hudson's Bay Company for surrendering the territory to the Crown, one-and-three-quarter sections in every Township were given back to the Company. A further two sections were set aside as school lands. In much of the Prairie West alternate sections were given to railway companies to compensate them for laying track. Thus, in many townships only 65 of 144 quarters were available for homestead settlement.⁵

Any quarter section open to settlement could be claimed by a male over 21 or a head of a household, and entry secured by payment of a \$10.00 fee. Full title, or patent, was not granted until claimants demonstrated they were bone-fide settlers by residing on the quarter for three years, clearing and cropping 30 acres, building a habitable dwelling of specified dimensions and making other improvements to the land. Full title was then granted once applicants obtained British citizenship. Only then could the land be mortgaged or sold.⁶ The residency requirement made it well nigh impossible to establish the agricultural villages which facilitated the provision of religious and secular community institutions.

Jewish society, culture, and agricultural settlement in Canada.

Most Jews immigrating into Canada from Eastern Europe were religiously observant. They adhered to Jewish dietary laws, attended the synagogue on the Sabbath, gave their children a Jewish education, and ensured their children married within the faith. Observance was difficult to reconcile with the dispersed settlement pattern imposed by the Dominion Lands Act. To read the Torah on the Sabbath required a *minyan* of ten adult males but the rules of kashrut precluded travelling more than a mile from one's home. Furthermore, travelling by horse or in a conveyance was also forbidden on the Sabbath. A Jewish community also required the services of a *Mohel* for circumcisions, and a *shohet* (ritual slaughterer) to provide kosher meat. A *miqvah*, a ritual bath, was also necessary for normal sexual relations. These facilities and services could only be easily provided when the population was tightly clustered, an impossibility under DLA regulations. Even secular Jews preferred living in nucleated Jewish

the Manitoba Archives, Winnipeg; and the Alex Dworkin Canadian Jewish Archives in Montreal. The latter holds the Jewish Colonization Association's inspection reports on individual Jewish colonists and Jewish settlements in Canada. Information on homestead entries was found in the Township General Registers. Township Plans and the Homestead Records held in the Manitoba Archives. Pioneer reminiscences were supplemented with field visits and interviews with former residents of Pine Ridge colony.

⁵ Chester Martin, 1973. *"Dominion Lands" Policy*, The Carleton Library No. 69, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 16-19.

⁶ Ibid, 137-56; Kirk N. Lambrecht, *The Administration of Dominion Lands 1870-1930*, Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1991, 22-3.

communities where it was easier for their children to receive a Jewish education and to find a suitable marriage partner.

Religious Jews also faced other barriers to successful homestead settlement. Under Jewish dietary laws animals had to be slaughtered in a specific fashion by a *shohet*. Certain animals, were *treif* (not-kosher). Pork and shellfish, for example, were forbidden to be eaten. This precluded them from supplementing their diet by hunting small or large game.⁷ It was only possible to hunt using live traps and slaughtering the catch according to the rules of kashrut, but that was not practical and rarely possible. It is not surprising that in 1885 the Montefiore Agricultural Aid Association concluded that to have any chance of success Jewish settlements should be nucleated.⁸ In Canada, there was a way for this to be achieved: Clause 37 in the Dominion Lands Act, known colloquially as “the hamlet clause,” permitted a community – usually religious – to settle together and fulfill homestead duties without physically residing on the quarter sections for which they had entered. Mennonites and Doukhobors benefitted from this concession when they established settlements in Manitoba and Saskatchewan.⁹ Jews took advantage of this privilege only twice, at the short-lived village of Gruber (1899) and Bender Hamlet (1903), both of which were surveyed and occupied without government authority. The legality of these settlements was questioned and since the settlers living in the communities had technically not fulfilled their residency requirements, bureaucratic chaos ensued. In both cases the Department of the Interior retroactively granted the Hamlet Clause. Gruber was abandoned after barely seven years but Bender Hamlet endured for over twenty-one.¹⁰

That Jews took advantage of the Hamlet Clause only twice, illustrates a lack of a coherent overarching Jewish leadership structure. Other groups, such as the Mormons, Mennonites, Poles, Germans, and to a lesser extent, Ukrainians, had religious hierarchies to advance their interests. Lacking a hierarchical religious structure, Jewish settlers were reliant on the political advocacy of international Jewish philanthropic agencies that lacked political clout. The most powerful of these, the Jewish Colonization Association, funded by Baron Maurice de Hirsch, was based in Paris, and focussed its settlement endeavours on Argentina, never considering Jewish settlement in Canada to be more than a sideshow.¹¹

⁷ Dennis Preager and Joseph Teluskin. *Why the Jews? The reason for antisemitism*, New York: Simon and Shuster. 2003, 18.

⁸ Arthur Daniel Hart, *The Jew in Canada*, Toronto and Montreal: Jewish Publications Limited, 1926, 67.

⁹ John Warkentin, “Mennonite agricultural settlements in Manitoba,” *Geographical Review*, 49 (3:1959), 342-68; F. H. Epp. *Mennonites in Canada 1786-1920: The history of a separate people*, Toronto: Macmillan, 1974. Carl Tracie, *Toil and Peaceful Life: Doukhobor Village Settlement in Saskatchewan 1899-1918*, Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1999.

¹⁰ John C. Lehr. Rabbi Eliezer Gruber’s Jewish agricultural settlement schemes in Manitoba, *Prairie History* No.10 (Spring: 2023) 20-33; Richtik and Hutch 1977, 32-35).

¹¹ Haim Avni, “The Jews of Canada and Argentina before World War II: The impact of immigration and industrialization on formation of two diasporas,” *Canadian Jewish Studies*, 3: 1995: 1-54; See also Matthias B. Lehmann, *The Baron Maurice de Hirsch and the Jewish nineteenth century*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022, 223-262.

Social structures were most easily transferred from the homeland to the New World through group migration, when organized social groups emigrated as discrete units. Chain migration also aided the successful transfer of social networks, but not of social structures. Chain migration drove Ukrainian settlement, drew migrants from specific regions and enabled the replication of homeland social geographies in Canada.¹² In contrast, Jewish immigrants were of varied nationalities, came from disparate regions and, often, different socio-economic backgrounds. Their settlements reflected this. Other than their religion, Yiddish, the lingua-franca of eastern-European Jews, was a rare common element.

The occupational backgrounds of Jewish immigrants on the prairies differed markedly from those of their Gentile neighbours. Before 1914, for example, Slavic immigrants were mostly peasants and knew nothing other than farming, but Jewish immigrants were drawn from a plethora of occupations. In eastern Europe's Pale of Settlement, although there were some 97,000 Jews who farmed, "the overwhelming majority of economically active Jews were engaged in pre-industrial artisan production, the provision of services and unskilled labour, or they were petty traders and small merchants."¹³ This was reflected in the dominance of artisans and merchants among settlers in Canada's Jewish colonies, few of whom had any farming experience.

While they lacked strong central leadership, Jewish settlers in Canada were eligible to receive assistance from the Jewish Colonization Association underwritten by Baron de Hirsch. The Baron believed that direct cash grants led to a culture of dependency, so the JCA provided aid in the form of chattel mortgages -- loans secured against the recipients' property.¹⁴

Population, commodity prices and prairie agriculture.

¹² John C. Lehr, *Community and frontier: A Ukrainian settlement in the Canadian parkland*, Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2011, 44-46.

¹³ Arthur Ross, *Communal solidarity: Immigration, settlement and social welfare in Winnipeg's Jewish community 1882-1930*, University of Manitoba Press, Winnipeg. 2019, 8.

¹⁴ Lehmann, *The Baron*, 201-203.

In the five decades following 1870 the population of the prairies grew consistently through immigration. In the 1920s rural areas began to move towards an accommodation with economic capacity, resulting in loss of population in some longer-settled areas, even while some frontier areas were still being homesteaded and their population increasing. Despite immigration into the region and overall population growth, the percentage of the rural population declined in the twentieth century, while prairie urban populations increased.¹⁵ The spike in commodity prices during the First World War encouraged many farmers to mechanize their operations, assuming debt to do so. When grain and livestock prices slumped in the post-war years, debt repayment became difficult for many and impossible for some. Many farmers cut their losses and retreated to the cities, a process that gathered force with the onset of the “dirty thirties.”

Bender Hamlet (Narcisse)

The three major Jewish settlements in Manitoba: Bender Hamlet, Camper and Pine Ridge, were established within a decade: Bender Hamlet in 1903, Pine Ridge in 1907, and Camper in 1911. All were occupied by Jews from similar socio-economic backgrounds but they differed in location and the land tenure system under which they were founded. Bender Hamlet and Camper were located in Manitoba’s Interlake region (Fig. 2) in areas where land open for homestead settlement became more attractive when the Canadian Northern Railway announced its intention to build track through the area.¹⁶

Unaware of the role played in agricultural settlement by the Young Men’s Hebrew Society’s [YMHBS] or the JCA, Jacob Bender approached the Canadian Department of the Interior in 1902 proposing to establish a Jewish agricultural colony in Manitoba’s Interlake region along the lines of a European *stassendorf* or line village. Bender’s proposal was couched in utopian terms, stressing the co-operative nature of the colony. He minimised the difficulties of homesteading, and portrayed the scheme as a philanthropic initiative on his part.¹⁷ His motives, though, were pecuniary. He entered for a homestead, subdivided it into lots and sold them to settlers he recruited from Jewish communities in England and Ukraine. Under the terms of the DLA such a sale was not allowed, since Bender had not yet obtained the patent to the land and could not legally sell any part of it. After considerable

¹⁵ Marvin McNess. “Elements of population change,” Plate 28 in Donald Kerr and Deryck Holdsworth, (eds.) *Historical Atlas of Canada III*, Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press 1990; William Carlyle. “Rural population change on the Canadian prairies,” *Great Plains Research* 70 (1999):

¹⁶ Jack Tennenhouse, “Personal Recollections: The Jewish Past on the Prairies,” *Jewish Life and Times*, 1993, 6, 15.

¹⁷ Jacob Bender, Winnipeg, to Baron de Hirsch Institute and the Hebrew Benevolent Society, Montreal, 10 July 1907, JHC 1 F8

bureaucratic confusion, exacerbated by Bender's willful disregard of DLA regulations, the land was retained by the Crown, resurveyed and lots sold to Bender's settlers (Fig.3). As a compensatory gesture Bender was granted a nearby quarter as a homestead.

Bender Hamlet's early years were anything but utopian, marked by confusion about property lines, rapacious behaviour by certain settlers, allegations of corruption and collusion with officials in the Department of the Interior, and legal disputes over property. There were financial problems too. Settlers misdirected their financial resources constructing unnecessarily substantial houses, leaving them with insufficient funds to develop their homesteads. Upon learning the JCA was assisting Jewish settlers elsewhere, Bender appealed to it for financial assistance to enable his settlers to "purchase oxen . . . and some cattle to give them a start in stock raising."¹⁸ The JCA, administering settlements on the prairies from Montreal, and burdened with oversight from Paris, was slow to respond but eventually provided financial assistance in the form of chattel mortgages.

The land in the Bender district was later designated Class 5 agricultural land by the 1974 *Canada Land Inventory*, which noted the district was marked by a pattern of stony, wet and moisture deficient soils that had very severe limitations on its ability to produce even forage crops.¹⁹ Even peasant farmers from eastern Europe settling adjacent districts found it tough going. For some years many were forced to retrench into a semi-subsistence lifestyle, working-out seasonally to purchase basic supplies and raise capital to develop their farms. Off-farm work was hard to obtain in the Interlake district and workers were often paid "in kind" rather than with cash. The site's principal attraction was its position on the projected route of the Canadian Northern line along the Principal Meridian, a route it failed to follow when eventually constructed in 1914.²⁰

An initial \$5000 loan from the JCA, and subsequent loans, were a mixed blessing. The injection of capital enabled settlers to buy stock and develop their farms but came with the burden of repayment at four percent annual interest, at a time when cash was in perpetually short supply. JCA inspection reports gave the impression that the colony was doing well and consistently reported a healthy balance of assets over liabilities. This was somewhat misleading since the JCA assigned all homesteads a value of at least \$1200.00, even without the patent granted, so legally the title rested with the Government of Canada. Estimates of assets were grossly inflated.

By 1908 Bender Hamlet consisted of 13 farm families who had only 142 acres cultivated between them. Four farmers had between 13 and 49 acres cultivated, but most had far less.²¹ Within two years another ten families had joined the colony which now had 106 people. The area cultivated doubled but was still less than one per cent of

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ *Canada Land Inventory*, 1974. *Soil capability for agriculture. Manitoba, South Part. 1: 1,000,000.*). Surveys and Mapping Branch, Department of Energy, Mines and Resources, Ottawa

²⁰ Roger J.A. Letourneau. *Manitoba's Railways: A pilot study of the historical resources of Manitoba: The economic past*, Manitoba Historic Resources Branch, Winnipeg, 1979, 11-12.

²¹ CJA 10032; KC; MA1-KC-11

eligible land. The wheat and oat crops were total failures, as were the garden crops of potatoes and vegetables.²² Almost half the colonists carried high debt loads, yet despite these setbacks the colony continued to expand as new families arrived.

When the 19 lots in the hamlet were taken, arriving Jewish settlers simply entered for homesteads in the adjacent area and built their homes outside the Hamlet. Thus, Bender's colony had a village centre, an inner core of empty Jewish-owned homesteads and a sprawling periphery of Jewish farmers residing on their homesteads (Fig. 4). Progress was slow as the land was hard to clear and break. After nine years in Bender, Morris Green, for example, had three oxen, five cattle and 50 poultry but only 17 acres of his 100 acres suitable for cultivation were broken, five of which were in wheat and 12 in oats. He was indebted to the JCA for \$450.00 with over-valued assets of \$2475.00.

The more fortunate Bender Hamlet settlers had their quarter sections adjacent to the village but many homesteads were located some distance away. For some to get to their homestead entailed a walk of five or more miles. Initially, this did not appear to be an issue, since cultivation of their 8.5- acre plot in the village counted toward fulfillment of their homestead obligations, and few homesteaders in Manitoba's bush country managed to clear and cultivate more than two or three acres in the first year or two. Only later did the difficulty of clearing land off-site become increasingly apparent. Jewish farmers who elected to live outside the hamlet, on their homesteads, were socially disadvantaged but economically advantaged.

Despite the marginal quality of the land settlers at Bender Hamlet made progress, albeit with difficulty and slowly. They were helped somewhat by high grain and livestock prices during the war years, but the total cropped area was limited, with only 32 acres of wheat, 81 of barley, 10 of rye and 328 acres of oats grown in 1917. Livestock were the principal source of income. The colony then had 238 cattle and 737 poultry and a number of draught animals. Socially things looked better. The colony had a shochet, a synagogue, and a school. With assistance from the JCA, a credit union was in the process of being formed and a creamery established.²³

In the early 1920s the settlement suddenly collapsed. By 1924 it was deserted. The settlers later attributed this precipitous decline to bad roads, stony land, low dairy and livestock prices, an aging population that was losing the ability to endure hard manual labour, and the decisions of the younger generation to seek better futures elsewhere.²⁴ They did not mention the JCA's inflation of the book value of their land, which led to high taxes, and its failure to respond to requests for aid in a timely manner.²⁵

²² CJA 10032; KC; MA1-KC-12

²³ CJA. 10032 KC MA 1-KC-103

²⁴ W.J. Sisler, Notebooks. AM. MG 14-C28 Box 1 File 5.

²⁵ *Israelite Press*, 14 June 1923.

Camper. (New Hirsch).

The Camper district became accessible in 1911 when the Canadian Northern Railway pushed its Oak Point branch line northward from Warren to Gypsumville. At first access to Camper was by train to Oak Point, then by railway pumper car to the halt at Camper. Shortly thereafter, the community became served by a daily passenger service (except Sunday) bringing Camper within a five-hour journey from Winnipeg.²⁶

A reconnaissance party mistakenly judged the area to be fit for arable farming. In fact, it was subject to flooding, with “most of the ground . . . under water for a large portion of the year.”²⁷ The difficulty of bringing the land around Camper under cultivation was evident from the reports of Government Homestead Inspectors who checked on the claims of improvements made by those who were applying for patents to their land. One noted that “one acre of this land is harder to break than two acres of prairie land, owing to scrub and stones.”²⁸ Other Inspectors were even more damning in their view of the difficulties of bringing a Camper homestead under cultivation. A 1915 report described the land as “scrubby and very stony, one acre of it in breaking is equivalent to five of prairie land.”²⁹

A high proportion of Camper entries were cancelled after settlers gave up on their homesteads. In one Township alone there were 226 cancelled entries. Many quarters were entered, cancelled and re-occupied by a different settler, only to be abandoned when the new entrant realized the land was unworkable. To put this in context, in Township 1 Range 6 WPM, in southern Manitoba, which included some rugged country along the Pembina Valley, there were only 100 cancelled entries, 27 of which were on three sections where rugged topography made for difficult farming. Abandoned quarters near Camper were later claimed by the Soldier Settlement Board and offered to soldiers who had served in the First World War. They had no more success than their previous entrants.³⁰

Those who managed to hack a homestead out of the stony bush of the Camper district, did so by setting modest goals: engaging in stock raising, planting gardens putting in months of back-breaking labour and returning to a semi-subsistence lifestyle.³¹ Marketing cream became a major source of cash income. Camper’s Jewish population grew

²⁶ Ashern Historical Society, *Taming a Wilderness: A history of Ashern and district*, Ashern MB.: Ashern Historical Society 1976, 82-83; *Waghorn’s Guide*, Winnipeg, 1911, p. 61

²⁷ CJA, JCA KB 9, “Inspector’s report, New Hirsch, and Narcisse,” pp.1-2, and 17.

²⁸ MA, RHE, NE17-24-6 W.

²⁹ MA, RHE, NW9-24-6 W.

³⁰ MA, Township General Register, Range 6 W, Townships 1-38.

³¹ Ashern Historical Society, *Taming a Wilderness*, 83-104.

quickly from 88 people in 21 families, in 1912, to 202 people in 56 families in 1916. Of their 9120 acres, less than one per cent was cultivated. The principal crops were oats and potatoes.³²

The fluidity of the settlement made it difficult for the JCA Inspectors to get an accurate assessment of the number of Jewish settlers at Camper at any one time. Their farms sprawled across several townships (Fig. 5) and many settlers were absent from their homesteads for prolonged periods, seeking off-farm work, so it was difficult to determine which homestead entries were abandoned and which were active. Entries were often abandoned before any improvements were made. Settlers came and went, entering for homesteads, cancelling their entries after a few months, and moving to adjacent quarters that they thought had better potential. Nevertheless, JCA Inspection Reports and the Department of the Interior's records of homestead entries and cancelations, suggest Jewish settlers were a significant presence in the district, and they were no less adept at farming marginal lands than were their Gentile neighbours.

By 1921 German Lutherans, with a sprinkling of Roman Catholics of various ethnicities, predominated, the remaining 15 Jewish families comprised 92 people. Most were listed as living on their own farms; two families resided in Camper village and two families were merchants in the village of Mulvihill, 13 kilometers south of Camper.³³ Although these Mulvihill families were merchants operating general stores, they were intimately connected to the Jewish rural community socially and economically.

Between the arrival of the first group of Jewish settlers and the departure of the last Jewish farm family in the mid-1920s, more than 100 Jews, many of whom were heads of families made homestead entries in the district.³⁴ Most of these were eventually cancelled before patent was obtained, but at the colony's height there were more than 20 Jewish families residing on –and working to develop –homesteads in the Camper district.³⁵

Camper began to erode in the early 1920s when agricultural prices dropped, and the tax burden increased as the Rural Municipality began to improve the infrastructure. In part, the pressure to improve roads came from ex-soldiers who took land under the Soldier Settlement scheme. As most were on inferior land, the rate of abandonment was high. Remaining settlers were burdened with rising taxes. Settlers in sub-marginal areas always struggled to raise enough cash

³² CJA 10032; KC; MA1-KC-113. JCA Camper Survey, 1912.

³³ *Census of Canada*, 1921, Manitoba, Selkirk, District 35, Sub-district 41.

³⁴ John Plantz "The Jewish community of Camper," Unpublished typewritten manuscript. n.d. 1-2. JHC 557.

³⁵ *Census of Canada* 1921, and MA. RHE. 1870-1930.

to pay taxes; most fell into arrears, abandoned farming, and moved into urban centres. By 1924 few Jewish families remained, and by 1925 all had quit farming.³⁶ The JCA, which had granted mortgages based on unrealistic assessment of land values, was left with several quarter sections and a synagogue building, without any prospect of disposing of them without significant financial loss.

Pine Ridge.

Pine Ridge's location attracted Jewish settlers more than the quality of the land. The complex fluvio-glacial surficial geology of the area meant that its agricultural potential varied widely. Its sands and gravels determined its classification as mostly class six land, suitable for grazing and with low potential for arable farming.

This territory had been first permanently occupied in the early 1870s after the area was first surveyed and opened to settlement. Land in the area was alienated under different provisions: as homesteads, Manitoba Bounty Grants, and Half-Breed Grants. Most of the initial settlers were born in Manitoba, the North West Territories (which then embraced most of present-day Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta), Ontario, Ireland, Scotland, and England.³⁷ Not until the arrival of settlers from eastern Europe did the area become fully populated. It was not a particularly attractive area for settlers who wished to engage in commercial cereal agriculture, but it held appeal for Eastern European peasants who had little capital and could not immediately contemplate market-oriented agriculture. They were more interested in environments that offered a diverse resource base that could support a semi-subsistence economy.

The first Jewish settlers purchased land around Pine Ridge in 1905, at the same time that Poles and Ukrainians also began to purchase land in the area. These Jewish farmers were independent settlers without formal ties to any sponsoring organization. Very little land was available for homesteading so they rented or purchased small holdings between 10 to 80 acres, though most were about 20 acres (Fig. 6). It was several years before the JCA learned of their presence and sent out inspectors to submit reports on their progress. Just a short distance to the west a small cluster of Jews settled at Bird's Hill on long lots flanking the Red River. The JCA's initial reports were positive, its inspectors thinking the light sandy soil of the locality was admirably suited for growing rye and potatoes.³⁸ Despite having smaller farms Pine Ridge farmers sowed acreages comparable to and sometimes greater than those of Camper or Bender Hamlet. In 1917 Jewish Pine Ridge farmers seeded only one acre of wheat, but sowed 148 acres

³⁶ Jack Tennenhouse, "Personal Recollections: The Jewish Past on the Prairies," *Jewish Life and Times*, 1972, 15
Tennenhouse, Isaac. "I remember," *Tennenhouse stories*. JHC. Tape 557; Tennenhouse, Leslie. 1972, "Transcript of interview, 10 March 1972. JHC. Tape 217.

³⁷ *Census of Canada* 1891.

³⁸ CJA, JCA 10032 KC, MA1-KC-117 "Pine Ridge."

of rye, six of barley, 48 of oats and 38 of potatoes.³⁹ The Winnipeg market, only 20 kms away, was easily accessible. Produce was easily shipped there, even in an era when roads were poor.

Most Jews who farmed at Pine Ridge had initially worked in Winnipeg as artisans, merchants, peddlers, or general labourers. After becoming established some sought to become farmers. Purchasing or renting land absolved them from the residency requirements of homesteading, making it possible to be a seasonal resident or to periodically retreat to the city to work to raise capital, as many did.

Over the four decades when Jews farmed at Pine Ridge/Birds Hill, it is doubtful that there were ever more than thirty Jewish families at any one time. Fluidity was the hallmark of the Jewish farming population there. Farmers came and went. Some stayed only for a year or two, others bought land but never farmed it, yet others were seasonal residents who lived on their property in the summer but retreated to Winnipeg after the harvest was in.

The first Jewish farmer at Pine Ridge was Abraham Slobinsky, who bought his farm in 1905. Five more Jewish families arrived in 1906, with others entering the district in the following years.⁴⁰ The Jewish community at Pine Ridge peaked around 1914-15 when some twenty families were listed on Municipal Tax Rolls.⁴¹ Families were large, on average having two adults and five children.⁴²

It was difficult to make a living on 20 acres of poor sandy land, especially if without any cattle or an off-farm job to provide a cash income. Those who, for whatever reason, did not receive aid from the JCA, or who were unable to secure off-farm work, fared poorly. For these, the easiest course was simply to walk away, sell their land, and return to Winnipeg, where they could live once again in a Jewish milieu, and perhaps resume their original occupation. Max Solodoff, for example, who settled on an acreage in Section 17, Township 12, Range 5 East in 1910, left his farm in 1915, moved to Winnipeg, and worked as a horse dealer.⁴³ Others, without livestock, spent minimal time on their farms becoming seasonal residents at Pine Ridge, working during the winter months in Winnipeg.⁴⁴

Despite the fluidity of Pine Ridge's Jewish population, a spatially distinct Jewish community, commonly known as "Jew Town" emerged.⁴⁵ By 1915, Pine Ridge School #608, established in 1889, had a polyglot student body with 21 Ukrainian, 19 Jewish, 13 Polish, 10 German and four English-speaking Irish pupils. Instruction was in English, with 1½ hours each day in Ukrainian and German. Since Jewish students were conversant in (German-based) Yiddish, they could understand the German portion of English-German bilingual instruction. The Polish-born teacher,

³⁹ CJA, JCA 10032 KC, MA1-KC-121.

⁴⁰ Springfield Rural Municipality Archives, [SRMA] Tax Rolls 1905- 1915.

⁴¹ SRMA, Tax Rolls, 1905-1921.

⁴² *Census of Canada*, 1916. Springfield Sub-district 11.

⁴³ CJA, JCA Pine Ridge 1913; Springfield Rural Municipality Archives, 'Voters Lists, Winnipeg 1935.'

⁴⁴ CJA. JCA reports 1915; *Census of Canada* 1916.

⁴⁵ Edward Lazar, Interview by author, Winnipeg, 21 June 2017.

Nicholas Pilcha, claimed English was the language generally used in the playground, though the Inspector responsible for bilingual schools was very skeptical of the claim.⁴⁶

A synagogue, the *Beth Shu'al*, was established in 1912 on land donated by Nathan Lazar and Samuel Maslovsky who both farmed in the settlement. It had a founding congregation of 12 families.⁴⁷ Some of the listed founders do not appear to have been permanent residents at Pine Ridge, but maintained their principal residence in Winnipeg.⁴⁸ As the Jewish population declined through the 1930s, the synagogue fell into disuse and was demolished around 1960.

In 1917 almost 55 per cent of Jewish-owned land in Pine Ridge was cultivated. The principal cash crops were rye (148 acres), oats (48 acres), potatoes (38 acres), barley (six acres) and one acre of wheat. Oats were grown as feed for horses; hay was gathered for cattle feed. In the mid-1920s the acreage planted to oats declined as draught horses began to be replaced with gasoline-powered tractors and trucks. Most Jewish settlers kept poultry and shipped eggs to the Winnipeg market. Those who arrived with capital, or who obtained loans from the JCA, bought cattle, and shipped milk to Winnipeg via the railway that passed through Oakbank four miles south of the settlement.

Despite continual turnover at least nine Jewish families remained in 1925. The decline was masked somewhat by the children of the initial settlers acquiring their own land in the district and entering farming but Jewish families continued to drift away. In 1930 there were six Jewish farm families; in 1940 only three farmers remained, none of whom relied totally on farming.⁴⁹

Most Jewish colonists at Pine Ridge originated from the Pale of Settlement but their path to Pine Ridge varied. David Spivak [Spewak] emigrated from a small town near Moscow to South Africa before the second Boer War. With his business partner, Nathan Lazar, originally from Latvia, who had also emigrated to South Africa, he ran a successful livery business until the British restricted ownership of horses to control Boer rebels. At age 33, accompanied by his wife Sarah and three children, he moved to Canada.⁵⁰ By 1911, Spivak was farming in Township 4 Range 5E and was one of the founding members of the *Beth Shu'al* synagogue in Pine Ridge. Within five years he left farming and moved back to Winnipeg with his family, where he worked on his own account as a “commissioner” and cattle dealer.⁵¹ Nathan Lazar, also immigrated into Canada via South Africa and moved directly to Pine Ridge where he bought 20 acres. His family remained farmers in the area until the mid-1940s.⁵²

David Cohn, with his half-brother Ben Jacob, emigrated from Komenobrod, near Kyiw in 1907, where he worked as a furrier. After arriving in Winnipeg, he purchased 10 acres in Pine Ridge, where he farmed for several years before

⁴⁶ MA., Inspection Reports, Department of Education, “Bilingual Schools,” 1915. GR 1633, A0059, 3284.

⁴⁷ Rosalie Lazar, “The Beth Sha’ul Synagogue,” Unpublished typewritten manuscript 2011.

⁴⁸ SRMA. Tax Rolls; List of Electors, RM of Springfield 1910-30; *Census of Canada* 1911, 1916 and 1921.

⁴⁹ SRMA, Voters lists; Tax Rolls, Springfield RM; *Census* 1916; and 1921; E. Lazar 2017).

⁵⁰ R. Lazar, Interview, 2017.

⁵¹ *Census of Canada* 1911 and 1916.

returning to Winnipeg to re-enter the furrier business. He retained his property as a hobby farm until the early 1960s, when it was expropriated for the construction of the Red River Floodway.⁵³

Not all Jews in Pine Ridge farmed. Samuel Cohan, for example, bought a small holding in Township 11 Range 5 E where he practiced his former occupation as a general merchant, “working on his own account.”⁵⁴ Tax Rolls and Voter’s lists suggest other Jews acquired land but never settled in the community. Although evidence is scanty, it is probable that some occupied their farms for a year or two before retreating to Winnipeg to pursue more lucrative business opportunities. Settlers came and went, some moved within the settlement seeking better locations, others left for Winnipeg. Of those who left, some sold out, some kept their holdings and rented them to others, both Gentile and Jew. Israel Schwartzman contemplated leaving his small acreage at Pine Ridge to obtain a larger farm in the new colony at Camper, but after viewing the land there he thought better of it and informed the Dominion Lands Office he would remain in Pine Ridge. He did so, and became one of the longer-lasting settlers in the area.⁵⁵

Some Jewish landowners in Pine Ridge saw an opportunity to speculate in real estate. By 1923 the Ripstein family held four quarters in Township 11 Range 5E, an area greater than that held by all other Jewish Pine Ridge colonists. The Ripsteins “built a house which they abandoned very quickly. They were not on their farm long enough to even put in a garden.”⁵⁶ David Ripstein was a well- established property owner in Winnipeg, where he owned the Occidental Hotel on Main Street, then the centre of Winnipeg’s business district.⁵⁷ When he acquired his Pine Ridge property, he was well past the age when pioneering on a bush homestead was a realistic proposition, so it is likely his purchase was speculative. Two adjacent quarter sections were owned by Joseph Rosenstock who stayed in the community for only two or three years, although he retained his land ownership for much longer.⁵⁸ If he ever had his principal residence on his land, like his neighbor Ripstein, it was only for a short time.

Unlike Camper and Bender Hamlet, where collapse was precipitous, Pine Ridge declined gradually and more closely paralleled the decline seen in all prairie rural communities. The proximity of Winnipeg and off-farm work opportunities mitigated the difficulties of life on a small acreage, enabling a Jewish farming community to survive until the mid-1940s, with at least one Jewish farm enduring until the mid-1960s.

Conclusion

⁵² E. Lazar, Interview, 2017.

⁵³ David Klass, Telephone interview by author, Winnipeg, 23 March 2017.

⁵⁴ *Census of Canada* 1916 District No 12, sub-district 11.

⁵⁵ MA, Records of Homestead entry. Schwartzman, to Dominion Lands Office, Winnipeg, July 7, 1915.

⁵⁶ E. Lazar, Interview by author, 2017.

⁵⁷ *Census of Canada* 1916 and 1921; SRMA Tax Rolls, Springfield Rural Municipality.

⁵⁸ *Cummings Rural Directory Maps*, 1923. Sheet Nos. 50, 51, 80, 81; and List of Electors, Springfield Rural Municipality.

Jewish immigrants who settled in Camper, Bender Hamlet and Pine Ridge shared many common attributes. Very few had any background in farming, though four Camper settlers were former farmers from Russia. It is difficult to discern any real difference, social or economic, between the three groups of settlers. Most were former artisans or merchants without any agricultural experience and all saw a future in agriculture when they moved on to their land. Although the character of the land differed between the three areas, none of them could be considered to have much potential for arable farming. Indeed, the greatest difference between them was their distance from Winnipeg and the systems of land tenure, the latter depending on whether land was acquired by homestead or purchase. The small parcels of land at Pine Ridge enabled settlers to achieve a propinquity impossible for those who settled under the homestead system at Camper and Bender Hamlet. For Jews, this was a crucial element. It enabled those at Pine Ridge to more easily remain observant, and adhere to many, if not all, of the rules of kashrut. Proximity to Winnipeg, only 12 miles to the southwest, made for easy access to a robust Jewish life.

None of the three settlements were located on land suited to arable farming. Camper's and Bender Hamlet's homesteads of 160 acres gave the illusion that extensive agriculture could be practised. In reality, only a fraction of the area of any homestead there had the potential to be brought under cultivation. Most was suitable only for pasture. Much of that was liable to be under water for part of the year. On the other hand, while Pine Ridge farms were far smaller, some only of ten acres or so, their sandy and gravelly soils were not subject to flooding and a greater portion of the land could be productive.

The debt to asset ratio as reported by JCA inspectors suggested little difference between the three settlements.⁵⁹ Statistics, though, do not always tell the entire story. JCA inspectors listed the book value of homesteads, which bore little resemblance to the actual market price. Furthermore, many homesteads at Camper and Bender Hamlet not yet patented and hence not legally the property of the entrant, were valued as if they were liquid assets. On the other hand, Pine Ridge properties were purchased, and thus could be mortgaged or sold. They had real value. JCA valuations of Pine Ridge farms were thus more realistic. The debt to asset ratio in Pine Ridge, which at first glance appears similar to the other two settlements was, in fact, far better.

The evidence suggests that nucleated communities fared better than those composed of scattered farms, though nucleation alone was no guarantee of long-term survival. The form of land tenure was more significant in that it affected farm size and the consequent density of settlement. Larger land holdings of a quarter section or more did not necessarily imply economic viability since the area cropped was more significant than total farm acreage. The economic collapse of Camper and Bender Hamlet resulted from the convergence of social and economic forces beyond the control of those who had chosen to locate there. They were handicapped from the outset by marginal agricultural land, a remote geographic location, and inadequate market access. These were barriers that even the village format of Bender Hamlet could not surmount. Small farms on purchased land and proximity to the Winnipeg market for dairy and agricultural produce, were crucial for the perpetuation of Jewish farm life at Pine Ridge.

⁵⁹ CJA 10032 KC-MA-KC 19;103; and 122.

Acknowledgements

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Figure 1

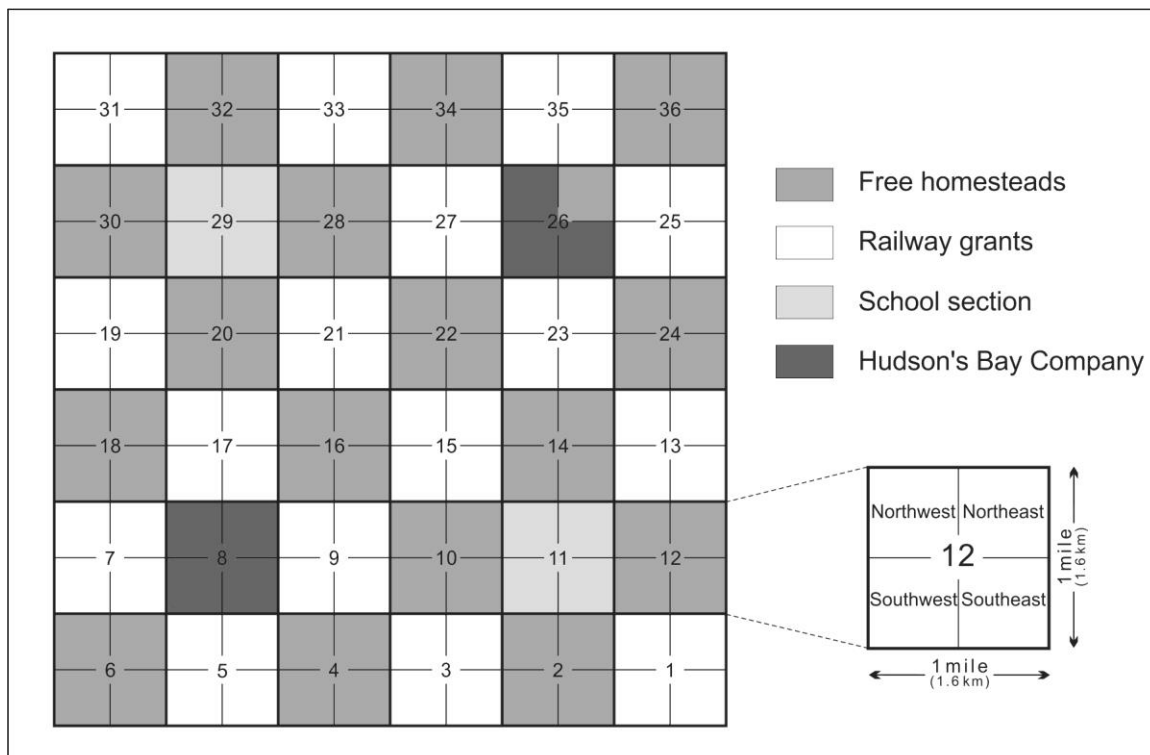


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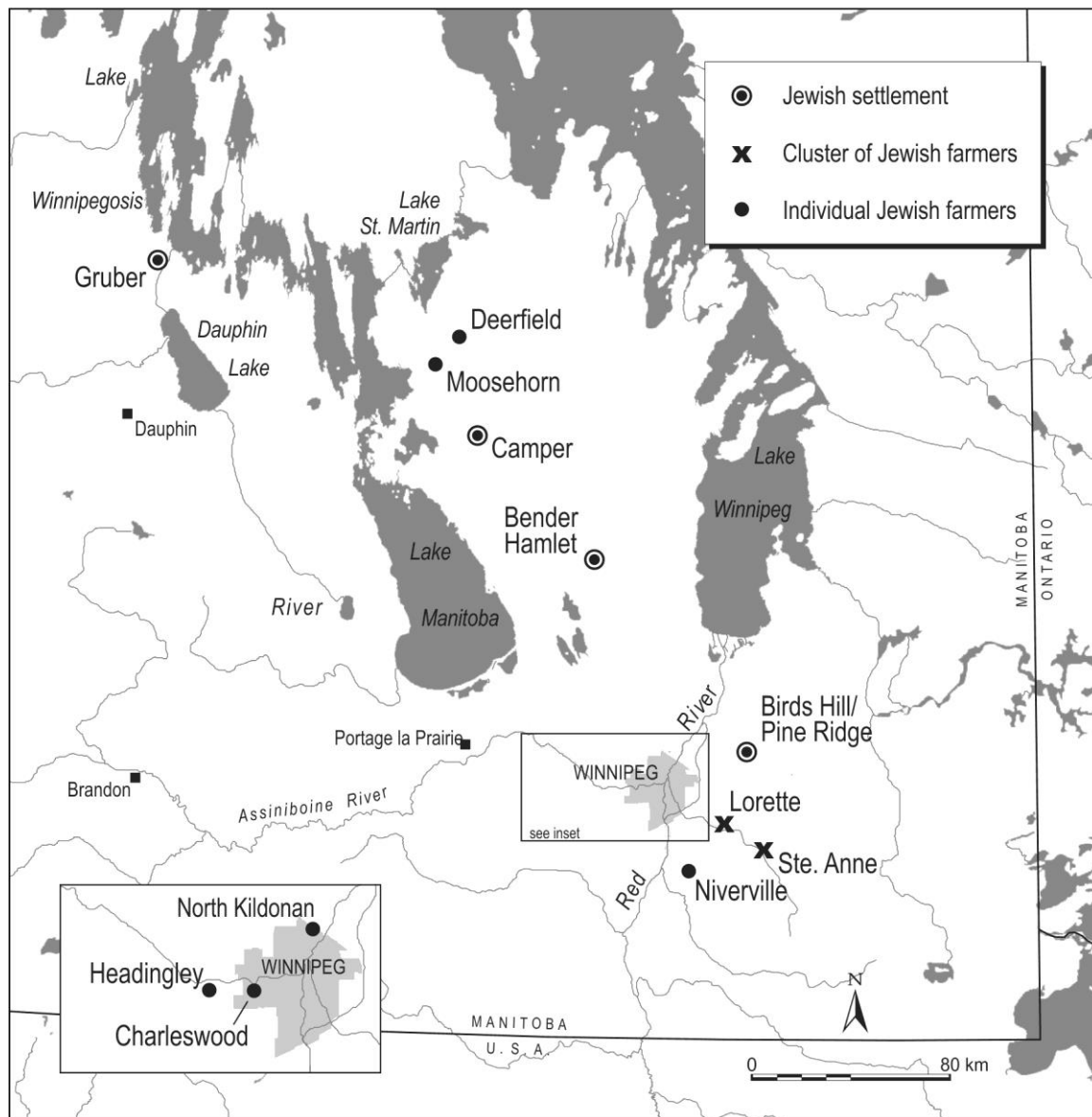


Figure 3

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Figure 4

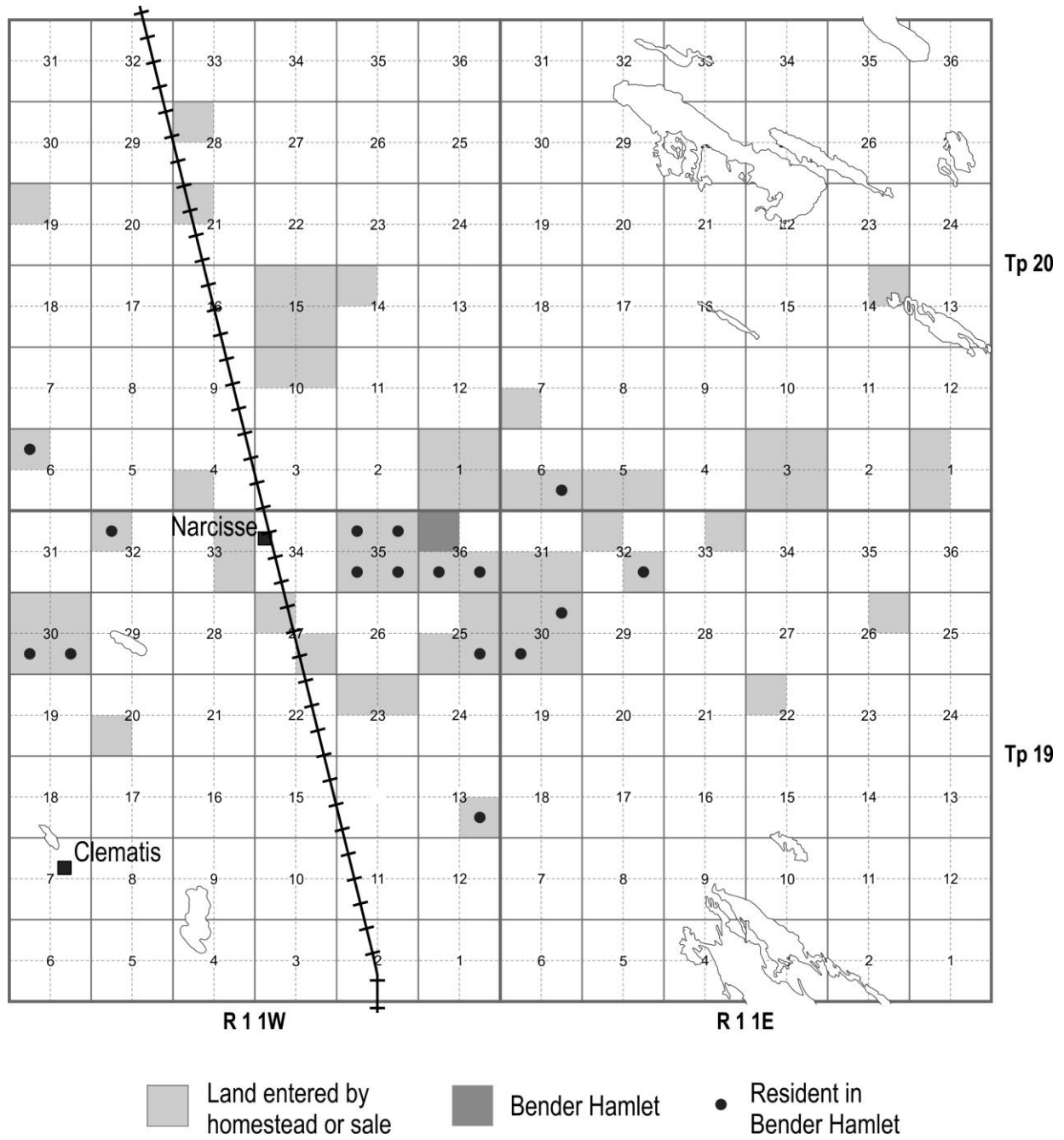


Figure 5

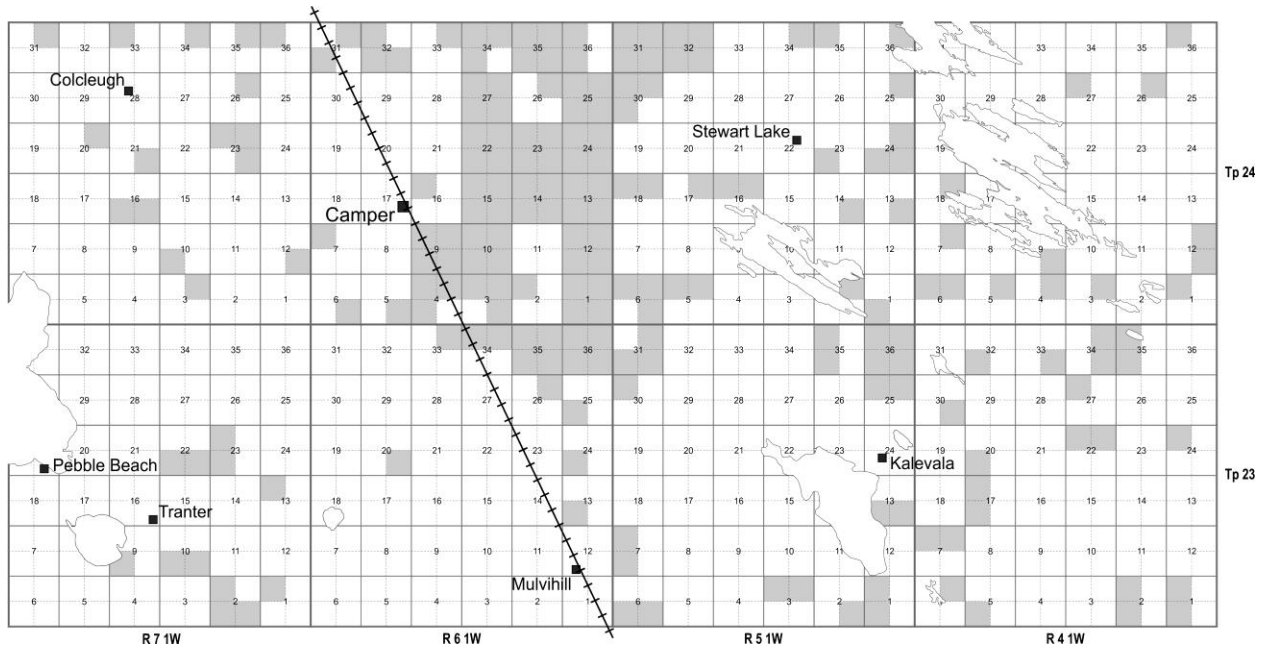


Figure 6

