

The Success of Jewish Agricultural Colonies in Western Canada

Eric Wilkinson

<https://doi.org/10.30608/HJEAS/2022/28/2/8>

ABSTRACT

This article assesses the history of Jewish agricultural settlements created in Western Canada in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The first settlements were founded following the 1881 Russian pogroms, at which time Canada's Jewish community tried to resettle refugees in Western Canada. The result was the establishment of over a dozen farming colonies at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By examining the documentation produced by the colonists and the organizations that facilitated their settlement, it is possible to reconstruct the lives of the colonists in each community. This study investigates documents available for twelve different communities that span the Prairies. Settlers report several impediments to their success, including inexperience, poor soil, natural disaster, anti-Semitism, poor administration, and financial hardship. However, the decisive factor which brought an end to the colonies was upward social mobility. They were victims of their own success, unable to maintain their numbers as younger generations moved away, and parents joined them when they retired. The analysis of the farm colonies reveals the causes of their decline and provides grounds for re-evaluating their legacy. (EW)

Keywords: Western Canada, Jewish, agriculture, farming, social mobility

The history of Jewish agricultural colonies in Western Canada is often recounted as one of failure. As Harry Gutkin wistfully remarks, "all these colonies begun in hope and determination, dwindled into extinction . . . the dream of a Jewish agricultural society had vanished" (66).

Never was there a mass agrarian movement, and by the mid-twentieth century each of the Jewish farm colonies had disappeared. The question of whether the history of these colonies is one of failure can be answered by juxtaposing the farmers' goals with the conditions that led to a decline in Jewish agriculture in Canada. This requires examining each colony's history and identifying the reasons for its decline. If the goals of the colonists are compatible with the ultimate demise of their communities, then the colonies should not be called a failure. As the colonists primarily sought religious freedom and the opportunity to build a better life—rather than the utopian agricultural project envisioned by some of their supporters—it is possible they achieved this end without the colonies surviving into perpetuity. This reframes the history of Jewish farm settlement in Western Canada as a generational success.

1. Planning the agricultural colonies

The history of Jewish farm settlement in Western Canada begins with the Russian pogroms that themselves began in 1881. In the early 1880s, Imperial Russia was pervaded by anti-Semitism that coincided with an economic recession and weak, irresolute tsarist governance (Aronson 235). Following the assassination of the moderate Czar Alexander II in 1881, Jews in Russia became the targets of violent rioting fueled by the erroneous, anti-Semitic conspiracy theory that claimed that the Jewish community was responsible for the Czar's assassination. Moreover, on May 10, 1882, the Russian government imposed the May Laws, limiting the rights and mobility of Jews in Russia. These events prompted the mass emigration of Jews from the Russian Empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Aronson 62), with many of the emigrants traveling to North America.

In response to the pogroms, the Lord Mayor of London, John Whittaker Ellis, organized a meeting at Mansion House in February 1882. In attendance was Sir Alexander Galt, Canada's High Commissioner in London. This meeting established the Russo-Jewish Committee, with a

mandate to resettle Jewish refugees. Galt proposed large-scale Jewish colonization in Western Canada and lobbied the Canadian government to create a dedicated district in the Prairies for Jewish colonists, while conferring with Canada's Jewish community (Sack 193–94). At Galt's urging, the committee would in 1884 finance the founding of the first Jewish farm colony in Western Canada: Moosomin.

In 1881, Hermann Landau, a Jewish philanthropist who had made a fortune on the London Stock Exchange, independently conceived of a colonization scheme for Jews facing the pogroms. Landau would directly finance the Wapella settlement and provide his friend the Baron de Hirsch with funding for the Young Men's Hebrew Benevolent Society (YMHBS) in Montreal (Chiel 55). Landau imagined creating a large-scale Jewish society in the Canadian West through agricultural settlement and promoted the idea to Canadian lawmakers. In 1897, Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier is alleged to have said to Landau: "If you will take up the question seriously and select any part of Manitoba, the Dominion will grant the Jews a measure of self-government as will enable them to make their own by-law, substituting Saturday for Sunday" (Chiel 55). The idea of a large, autonomous district in Canada would prove enticing but elusive to those coordinating the Jewish farm colonies.

Montreal's YMHBS began receiving financing from Baron Maurice de Hirsch in 1890. To honor their patron, the YMHBS was renamed the "Baron de Hirsch Institute" in 1900 (Belkin 39). The organization met with Prime Minister John C. Abbott and his Minister of Agriculture in 1892 to discuss the mass settlement of Jews in Western Canada. After the meeting, the Institute submitted a fourteen-point memorandum asking if there was land for 2,000 families or 10,000 Jewish persons. The government responded positively and recommended the colonists select land from that which was already allocated for settlement (Sack 225–26). However, nothing came of the proposal for a mass settlement due to a "lack of synchronization between the major forces involved" (Chiel 55). While the Canadian government was open to permitting

immigration of individual Jewish settlers, they opposed the creation of the autonomous district desired by those funding Jewish colonization.

The Baron de Hirsch would also create the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA) in Paris in 1891, with the mandate to found agricultural colonies throughout the world for Jewish refugees. JCA Director Dr. Sigmund Sonnenfeld was receptive to the YMHBS project aimed at mass Jewish settlement in Western Canada (Leonoff, *Jewish Farmers* 24). Although the JCA became the main organization providing support to the Jewish farm colonies in Western Canada, the relatively autonomous Jewish district imagined by the JCA and YMHBS never materialized. When historians lament the demise of the dream of a Jewish agricultural society in Canada, it is often the dreams of these groups to which they refer, as the aspirations of colonists were different.

No people are homogenous in their aspirations, so describing the dreams of the Jewish farm colonists collectively is impossible. Nevertheless, there are basic commonalities in their narratives. Rarely did the Jewish colonists, most of whom were fleeing pogroms in Eastern Europe, envision a movement spanning the Canadian prairies. The dreams of the agriculturalists were more modest. The perspective of the farmers is typified by the stated goal of an anonymous colonist at a meeting in Edenbridge, who had “hoped to build a home in this country where, when he was older and not so strong, he could live without fear of being driven out” (Usiskin 46). Jews fleeing Eastern Europe sought freedom, and the opportunity to build a future for themselves and their children. The virtue of agricultural living from a social perspective—championed by *Am Olam* and similar movements that associated farming with Jewish religiosity—largely did not motivate the colonists (Belkin 53).

The zest for freedom that grounded this common sentiment had its roots in the oppressive societal conditions the colonists were escaping. William Leonoff describes this shared attitude: “My father said he wouldn’t want his children to live the type of life that he

lived. The government was corrupt. A Jew had no chance whatsoever. And he said he doesn't care what he's going to do—if he has to carry stones” (6). In addition to illustrating a desire for liberty, this quote exemplifies how the colonists understood their work to be an extension of their freedom. As an unnamed Edenbridge farmer explained: “Here there is always plenty of work, and the fruits of my labour at least belong to me” (Usiskin 38). The Jews connected the hardships of farming to the freedoms and equality they had in their new home. Another anonymous farmer insisted that “[t]here is no place on earth where people are more equal than right here” precisely because the hardships of farm life were considered equalizing (Usiskin, 30).

A Jewish settler could aspire to positions in society that were unheard of in Eastern Europe, and even difficult to attain for Jews elsewhere in Canada. For instance, some colonists at Rumsey-Trochu became Justices of the Peace or School Board trustees, while those at Edenbridge became reeves (equivalent to mayor) and Justices of the Peace (Rubin 334). Not only were Jewish colonists free to practice their religion, but they reported that their gentile neighbors treated them with respect. The challenges of farm life required cooperation that transcended religion, ethnicity, or language.

Additionally, the colonists sought to maintain a Jewish life, though Orthodox Judaism was difficult to maintain in the farming colonies. The formation of a *minyan*, which is meant to consist of ten adult Jews—usually men for Orthodox practitioners—was necessary for prayer and reading the Torah (Katz and Lehr 52). There was also the need to maintain the synagogue and *mikveh* (ritual baths). A functioning community also required a *shochet* (ritual slaughterer), a *mohel* (one qualified to perform circumcisions), and preferably a rabbi. Finally, there was a need for education, requiring schools. Many Orthodox settlers made short term concessions while working towards the creation of the institutions necessary to fully practice their faith. Every colony approached these challenges differently. As the colonists intended to live freely

as Jews, these were all crucial.

Understanding the aspirations of the colonists is key to assessing whether the colonies can be considered failures. There are seven factors which affected the decline of the settlements:

Factor:	Description:
• Agricultural experience	The degree of agricultural training that colonists arrived with
• Quality of the land/soil	The suitability of the allocated land for farming
• Frequency of natural disaster	The frequency of fires, frosts, droughts, and other disasters
• Relationship to neighbors	Support from neighbors, and the incidence of anti-Semitism
• Religious institutions	The capacity of a settlement to offer a Jewish religious life by maintaining a synagogue, <i>mikveh</i> , <i>rabbi</i> , <i>shochet</i> , <i>mohel</i> , etc.
• Colony administration	The quality of administration and available financial support
• Population replacement	The ability to attract new colonists or train the young

In both the autobiographical writings of the colonists and records of the organizations promoting Jewish settlement, these seven factors emerge as the chief challenges facing the Jewish colonies. By understanding which of these factors were decisive in the ultimate decline of the settlements, it is possible to determine whether the aspirations of the colonists were frustrated and unrealized.

2. The farm colonies

Discussing the historical record of the Jewish farming colonies in Western Canada is made complicated by two factors. First, the settlements were collections of loosely aligned family farms with no clearly demarcated outer boundaries. Secondly, the names used for the same colonies differ depending on the source and were often changed. Settlements like Edenbridge, where the colonists founded their own community, are exceptional for being referred to by a single, recognized name. Frequently the names for settlements were borrowed

from the village or town nearest to the farms. For instance, the Qu'Appelle colony took its name from the existing municipality of Qu'Appelle. However, some sources call the Qu'Appelle colony Cupar or Lipton, two *different* nearby towns.

In what follows, the colonies that were adjacent to each other, such as Sibbald/Alsask/Empress or Rumsey-Trochu, are counted together because they shared educational and religious institutions. Though some documents and maps differentiate between these colonies, the fact that they were located alongside each other and shared their institutions makes differentiating between them unnecessary. When the names that refer to the same locations are consolidated, we are left with thirteen colonies.

Name of Colony:	Date of Establishment:
• Moosomin / New Jerusalem	1882
• Wapella	1886
• Hirsch	1891
• Pine Lake	1892/1893
• Qu'Appelle / Lipton / Cupar	1901
• Bander Hamlet / Narcisse	1902
• Rumsey-Trochu	1906
• Edenbridge	1906
• Hoffer-Sonnenfeld	1906
• Sibbald / Montefiore / Empress / Alsask / Eyre / Compeer	1910
• Camper / New Hirsch	1911
• Winnipeg Settlements	Various

Of the thirteen colonies, the colony of Rosetown is omitted from the present analysis. It is only known to exist on one map, and no other information is available about the settlement beyond

it being located near the municipality of the same name in Saskatchewan (Katz and Lehr 51). There were also at least seven minor colonies surrounding the city of Winnipeg, which are assessed here collectively as the economic structure and institutions of these individual “colonies” were shared.

2.1 Moosomin (“New Jerusalem”)

Following the meeting at Mansion House in 1881, Sir Alexander Galt wrote Prime Minister John A. Macdonald recommending the admission of Russian Jews to Canada. Galt suggested using land in Western Canada that had been set aside for Mennonites or private colonization companies and reallocating it to the Jewish settlers. The first twenty-seven Russian Jews arrived in Winnipeg on May 26, 1882, with two-hundred and forty-seven more arriving six days later. The government was slow to provide homestead lands, and many drifted into other occupations before the land was ready in 1884. Twenty-six families settled twenty-five miles southwest of the town of Moosomin in what would become Saskatchewan. The colony was given the moniker “New Jerusalem” either by the Jewish colonists themselves, or their neighbors (Paris 223; Leonoff 2–3). The Russo-Jewish Committee gave the colony \$15,000 in loans, with each farmer receiving between \$259 and \$485.

The history of the colony was one of successive disasters (Gutkin 57). In 1884, there were early frosts and the settlers’ shelters were inadequate when faced with the cold, wind, and snow of winter. Another early frost in August 1885 caused more crop failure, and general drought swept the region in 1886. Between 1885 and 1886 the colony made some progress, constructing a small synagogue and Hebrew school, but these advances were lost when the settlement’s rabbi and teacher was stuck in a blizzard and had his feet amputated due to frostbite. The settlement held on until 1889 when its hay crop was consumed by a wildfire. The colonists suspected arson and were dissatisfied with the police investigation. By 1890, the

colony was depopulated, with many leaving for Winnipeg. Of the two-hundred Jews who had settled at Moosomin, only one remained by 1901.

Adversities that would be overcome in later settlements were encountered at Moosomin in greater magnitude. Among these were inadequate funding, lack of training, and perpetual disaster. The Russo-Jewish Committee was not prepared to provide financial support to the settlers beyond the initial \$15,000. Future colonies that found themselves without funding would have access to umbrella organizations that offered consistent financing. A lack of agricultural training was common among Jewish farm colonists in Western Canada, but all subsequent colonies included at least some settlers who had some experience before emigrating or had some assistance from gentile farmers. Finally, while virtually all of the Jewish farm colonies would face natural disasters, there remained occasional periods of success and relative prosperity. The Moosomin colony never had a reprieve that would have enabled it to shore up resources against future periods of adversity. Each of these factors, which would later prove individually surmountable in other colonies, were faced at once and to a more devastating degree at Moosomin. Colonization efforts in the area by other ethnic groups failed for similar reasons in the same period despite greater expertise and support (Rosenburg 218).

2.2 Wapella

When looking to establish a Jewish farm colony, Hermann Landau handpicked the Heppner family of two men and three women, as well as six men who knew English and were familiar with farming (Leonoff, *Early Jewish Agricultural Colonization* 3). This group settled six miles northeast of the town of Wapella in 1886. In 1887, Wapella's Liberal Conservative Association complained to the government that "[n]ot only are Jews an undesirable class of settlers but they are keeping a number of desirable settlers out" (Leonoff, *Jewish Farmers* 10). An inspector was dispatched to assess the colony and later reported from Moosomin that "the

English settlers speak highly of these Jews, and don't desire better neighbours . . . A class of settlers such as these men cannot but be beneficent to the country" (Leonoff, *Early Jewish Agricultural Colonization* 6). Within a year of settlement, the six men had departed in search of brides, leaving only the Heppner family. Luckily, in 1888, Abraham Klenman came from Bessarabia to Montreal with his family, including his son-in-law, Solomon Barish. Klenman had overseen an agricultural estate while Barish came from the Russian-Jewish colony of Dombroveni (Leonoff, *Wapella* 4). Klenman learned about the Heppner family and traveled to join them, bringing more experience to the colony. Between 1889 and 1892 twenty-eight other Jewish families joined them in Wapella.

The Wapella colony began without financial aid. Not until 1901 when crops were destroyed by frost did twenty-seven farmers obtain loans from the Jewish Agricultural Society of New York, which were repaid within seventeen years (Leonoff, *Jewish Farmers* 16). In 1889, Edel Brotman and his sons took up homesteads at Wapella. Having been a rabbi in Galicia, Brotman would provide religious services to the colony. With no synagogue or *mikveh*, Wapella had limited religious institutions compared to other colonies. The colony peaked at fifty families and potential for expansion was limited because of a lack of homesteads available in the district and rising land values (Leonoff, *Wapella* 32). When Jewish soldiers from the Russo-Japanese War of 1905 passed through they only found temporary work before moving on to find cheaper land. The colony lasted until the 1960s when Klenman's son had died and Barish's sons retired (Leonoff, *Jewish Farmers* 17), but at least one fourth-generation family still farmed in the district in 1984.

The success of Wapella contrasts with Moosomin, which was only thirty miles away. The land was forested with fertile black soil (Leonoff, *Wapella* 4), which made it both suitable to farming and provided lumber. Though the protestations of the Liberal Conservative Association constituted an instance of organized anti-Semitism, it was ineffectual. Once

established, the settlers befriended the neighboring farmers, including some signatories of the anti-Jewish resolution (Leonoff, *Jewish Farmers* 17). The independence of Wapella also facilitated its success, with Leonoff claiming that the involvement of government and aid organizations in the founding and maintenance of other colonies caused them to get “bogged down in official red tape” compared to Wapella (Leonoff, *Jewish Farmers* 16). Despite never having its own institutions other than basic religious services, retaining these basic religious activities was key to maintaining its viability as a Jewish community.

2.3 Hirsch

In 1891 the YMHBS, with financing from the Baron de Hirsch, dispatched two non-Jews, Charles McDiarmid, the manager of the prospective colony, and Ignatius Rotth, to scout land for a settlement (Belkin 71). Although they liked the land at Moosomin where the earlier farm colony had been, the land had reverted to prairie and the district was twenty-five miles from the railroad. In 1888, the Jewish farmer Jacob Pierce had settled at Oxbow in what would become the southeast corner of Saskatchewan. His son Ascher Pierce recommended the area to the YMHBS. Land was selected twenty-one miles west of Oxbow, and the new colony was named Hirsch in honor of the Baron de Hirsch, and sometimes called Oxbow-Hirsch in recognition of the settlers at Oxbow.

In April, the first twenty-seven men arrived by rail from Montreal. With more coming from Montreal, Winnipeg, and Regina, there were forty-nine families in Hirsch by the end of the month (Leonoff, *Jewish Farmers* 28). By July there were seventy-three homesteads in the colony. The first three years proved difficult; the YMHBS Colonization Committee in Montreal had underestimated the capital needed to establish farmers. The JCA in Paris, who were providing the funding, were also ignorant of the costs of maintaining the colony. There were three years of crop failure from drought, hail, and grasshopper plagues. Many colonists left or

relocated closer to Oxbow, although others refused to be dislodged. In 1892 the school and the first synagogue in Saskatchewan were built. In the fall of 1895, the fortunes of the colony finally turned around with the harvest of their first bumper crop. This continued with another good harvest in 1896 and the arrival of five more families from Red Deer (Belkin 73). In November 1899, Rabbi Marcus Berner arrived with another fifteen families. He would serve for thirty-two years as rabbi, *shochet*, school board chairman, and municipal councilor for the colony. The JCA would take direct administrative control in 1900 before transferring that authority to the Jewish Agricultural Society of New York in 1903. By the time of Louis Rosenberg's survey in 1939, there were two schools and synagogues in the community (220). Descendants of the original colonists were still farming in Hirsch in 1984.

Hirsch faced early challenges from natural destruction of crops. Additionally, the YMHBS in Montreal and the JCA were too far removed to understand what was necessary for its success, leading to mismanagement. Nevertheless, the inexperience of the colonists was overcome through help from the preexisting Jewish farmers at Oxbow. The establishment of a synagogue and arrival of Rabbi Berner also marked a turning point for the colony. Hirsch illustrates how inexperience, natural calamity, and poor management could be overcome if a colony could survive until a strong harvest. The establishment of religious institutions is also notable, as the settlers would have been less likely to have persevered if they did not at least have access to the basic rudiments of Judaism.

2.4 Pine Lake

Pine Lake was located in central Alberta, far from Moosomin, Wapella, and Hirsch, which were all located in south-east Saskatchewan near the Manitoba border. The colony was established in either 1892 or 1893. While the precise date of its founding is unknown, it is known that nobody lived in the vicinity of Pine Lake in the spring of 1892 (Dawe 8). Fifteen

Jewish families with seventy individuals settled in a rough ring around Blank's Lake. Rabbi Blank, the community's leader, had a modest cabin built on the southwestern lake edge. The settlers had no farm training and only seed potatoes, no seed grain. Henry Alford tried to assist by supplying the settlers with wild game, but others purportedly gave the Jews pork they had said was deer meat as a cruel joke (Dawe 10). The local Dominion Lands agent Jerry Jessup disparaged the Jewish colonists and withheld assistance. In May 1894, the Russo-Jewish Committee, having learned about the colony, sent them \$400. The Committee would send more funds in the spring, but after a poor potato crop and a frozen oat crop from the previous season, only six residents remained, with the remainder leaving that year. Rabbi Blank would settle in Winnipeg while the others are speculated to have also returned to Winnipeg. Some moved to the United States and took up poultry farming in California (Armstrong, Par. 10).

The colony's isolation relates to the Dominion Lands Act, which controlled colonization. The Act required immigrants to claim a quarter-section of land they would improve, reside on for at least six months every year, and receive full title to only after three years. This system effectively settled the prairies, but the residency requirement precluded the formation of the sort of settlement the Pine Lake colonists preferred. Those at Pine Lake had sought to create a communally governed colony under the leadership of a rabbi (Armstrong, Par. 9), modeled after the *shtetls* of Eastern Europe. This explains why they traveled so far, as they correctly assumed that the remoteness of the colony would discourage interference from the government. A later attempt to emulate a *shtetl* at Bender Hamlet has also been scrutinized for being impractical for farming in Canada (Chiel 55). Thus, the structure of the colony contributed to its demise, along with inexperience, disaster, and antipathy.

2.5 Qu'Appelle/Lipton/Cupar

Qu'Appelle was the "first and only attempt in Canada to delegate to Government

officials the founding and administration of a Jewish agricultural settlement” (Rosenburg 220). The JCA approached the Canadian government about establishing the colony and it was determined that the immigration agent in London would select a number of Romanian Jewish families and the JCA would pay for their travel. A thousand francs were provided to the government by the JCA for each family in order to purchase livestock, farm equipment, and building materials. A district twenty-five miles north of the railway station at Qu’Appelle was selected with conditions “suitable to mixed farming” (Belkin 76). A first group of forty-nine Jewish families arrived in 1901, and with the assistance of the nearby Métis community they constructed houses and prepared for winter.

The supervisors chosen for the colony were anti-Semitic and could not communicate with the colonists who spoke Yiddish, Romanian, and German (*Belkin, 76*). They misspent money, buying food instead of farm equipment. Several families departed, but the colony was replenished by more arrivals in 1902, raising the total population to three-hundred and sixty-five. The colony attracted some Jewish immigrants from Russia who brought their farming experience and capital. The JCA constructed three schools and recruited a *shochet*. No synagogue was in the colony itself, although one was built in the town of Lipton and religious services were held in schools (Rosenburg 221). The government was relieved of responsibility for the colony in April 1903, and the JCA had its New York affiliate reorganize the colony on a more productive basis. In 1906, the Canadian Pacific Railroad extended fourteen miles north of the colony causing new stations to appear at Lipton and Cupar. The portions of the colony nearest either station came to be referred to by the village names. The colony persisted into the mid-twentieth century, though its decline seems to be undocumented.

The takeaway from Qu’Appelle relates to administrative mismanagement. While in Hirsch there was a disconnect between the colony and the distant YMHBBS and JCA, neither were anti-Semitic or wholly incompetent like the initial government managers at Qu’Appelle.

The assumption of administrative control by the JCA in 1903 alleviated this issue, and Qu'Appelle was fortunate not to face any major natural disasters during its early history. Like Hirsch, the institutional strength of the colony helped it flourish after the construction of schools, a synagogue, and a rail line nearby.

2.6 Bender Hamlet/Narcisse

Founded in 1902, Bender Hamlet attempted to emulate the *shtetl* communities of Eastern Europe: single-street villages with houses on one side, fields on the other (Katz & Lehr 52). Jacob Bender, who hailed from a *shtetl* community in Ukraine, arrived in Winnipeg in 1902 and traveled to the Interlake region in search of land. Bender was impressed by the brush of the area since wood was coveted in Ukraine, but the chosen land was poor for farming. He went to England and Eastern Europe to recruit eighteen families who arrived between 1902 and 1904. They sought government approval to divide a quarter-section of land into nineteen strips of eight and a half acres each. The settlers built their houses in a row on these sections, and each took up a homestead on the perimeter.

In December 1912, the Canadian Northern Railway built a station two miles north of the colony which the colonists named after Narcisse Loven, President of the JCA. The railway would help the farmers ship their goods to Winnipeg. The colony peaked in 1915 with thirty-nine families enjoying relative prosperity. However, a severe economic blow would be dealt by the fall in cattle prices after the First World War (Chiel 64). Lehr believes these economic difficulties caused the population to drop below the threshold required to maintain a Jewish religious life, leading to an exodus (25). After three years of torrential rains washed out crops between 1924 and 1926, the last of the colonists left in 1927. This combination of poor soil and falling cattle prices affected not only the Jewish colony, however, as nearby Ukrainian and Scandinavian colonies were also abandoned.

Unlike the two other Jewish colonies that dispersed before the 1930s—Moosomin and Pine Lake—Bender Hamlet suffered not only from natural conditions but also market ones. Katz and Lehr argue that the communal *shtetl* arrangement was uneconomical as farmers had to commute to their homesteads every day (139). Some colonists even ended up relocating to their homesteads. In response to the poor quality of the soil the colonists adapted by focusing on livestock. However, this left the colony more vulnerable to the interwar fluctuations in cattle prices. This caused the population losses that would put the community below the threshold needed to maintain a Jewish religious life, and with religious rites unavailable within the colony the remaining settlers departed.

2.7 Rumsey-Trochu

A colony was created in central Alberta near Trochu in 1906. The JCA had sent seventeen Jews from Montreal to farm the fertile land along the Red Deer River (Gutkin 64). A year after the initial group arrived, another group appeared just east of Trochu at Rumsey. Although identified by some authors as separate colonies, they shared the same religious institutions and functioned as one colony. The colony lacked a *shochet* or a rabbi, but a homesteader, Judah Shumiatcher, served as Hebrew teacher (Rubin 333). Rumsey-Trochu would become one of the more successful colonies—in 1906, there were only eleven homesteaders, but within three years this number doubled.

J. A. Guttman and Max Waterman were appointed as Justices of the Peace and trustees of the Tolman School District, becoming the first Jews in Alberta to hold such positions (Rubin 334). In 1916, the JCA funded the construction of a synagogue and a school; the colony proved unable to attract a rabbi, but the synagogue still served religious and social functions. After the First World War the colony absorbed several Polish Jews, though a lack of farming experience, combined with drought between 1921 and 1923, led many to leave. A serious blow to the colony

was how farmers had overextended their credit as a result of a land boom that followed the First World War. In 1922, a JCA inspector described the case of one farmer who purchased a half-section of land for \$20,000 and still owed \$10,000 despite the land now only being worth \$6,000–7,000 (Rubin 334–35). The colony lost over half its families in the twenties, with most moving to Calgary because of debt, and their children leaving the colony for education or spouses (Armstrong Par. 13). The Depression would wipe out the remaining colonists, and by World War II only two Jewish families remained.

Rumsey-Trochu suffered from its small size, which made its existence precarious when too many individual farmers left. The failure to attract a rabbi limited its ability to attract new Jewish colonists, as despite the synagogue and some other facilities, the colony could not provide the kind of religious life many emigrants expected. This weakness made the colony susceptible to the credit crisis its farmers faced in the interwar era, which depleted it in a manner similar to Bender Hamlet.

2.8 Edenbridge

The first Jews to settle Edenbridge had escaped Lithuanian pogroms by moving to South Africa in the late 1890s (Paris 242). The Vickar family, near the end of 1904, had read an article in an American Yiddish newspaper written by a textile worker who left the city to farm in North Dakota. As there were few homesteads left in North Dakota, he advised Jews to look to Canada (Leonoff, *Jewish Farmers* 48). In February 1906, Louis and Fanny Vickar, their families, and nine other Jews, set out for Canada. Two went ahead to Saskatchewan by rail-line to a stop called Star City, and selected land fifteen miles north along the Carrot River. When the inexperienced homesteaders arrived in 1906, they met two Englishmen, George Ellis and Isaac Brass, who taught them to farm. In 1907 when a post-office was built the Jews were asked to name the colony. The settlers proposed names such as “Israel Villa” or “Jew Town” that were

rejected by the government, who disallowed names based on ethnicities (Usiskin 62). The name “Edenbridge” was selected as a pun on Yidden (Jew’s) bridge, referencing a bridge that had been built by the community across the Carrot River.

A cemetery was registered in 1906 and two years later the settlers constructed a synagogue (Leonoff, *Jewish Farmers* 54). The Beth Israel Synagogue served the community for sixty years until 1968 when a *minyan* could no longer be maintained. The colony advertised in a Winnipeg newspaper to locate a rabbi and Max Shallit responded, taking up a homestead and becoming *shochet* and teacher for the community as well. The colonists also wrote to overseas newspapers in the hope of attracting more immigrants. A group of Jews working in sweatshops in Whitechapel, England, took interest, and the first arrived in 1911. The Edenbridge Jewish Co-operative Credit Union was formed in 1910 and was loaned \$1,000 by the JCA. In November 1912, the rural municipality of Willowcreek, which included Edenbridge, was established. David Vickar served as reeve (mayor) for twenty-two years, as would his son Charles. Edenbridge School No. 2930 was opened during the fall term of 1913, and eventually two public schools served the settlement. The population peaked at about fifty families in the early 1920s. By the late 1970s, the only remaining farmers were two old, unmarried brothers who tended the cemetery and synagogue.

Edenbridge benefited from significant institutional strength. The synagogue, credit union, post office, schools, and services of Rabbi Shallit provided amenities that discouraged people from leaving. The colony was also able to maintain its population by recruiting new farmers in foreign newspapers. Like other successful colonies, its decline was not the result of a natural or economic calamity, but a lack of generational continuity. Although some families farmed for four generations, the children of most farmers eventually left to pursue education (Paris 261). With decreased Jewish immigration and the end of homesteading, there were no farmers to replace those who left or retired.

2.9 Hoffer-Sonnenfeld

In 1906 another Jewish farm settlement appeared in the southwest corner of Saskatchewan. The account of the settlement's founding in most histories recounts how several young men, trained in agriculture by the JCA at its Agricultural School and led by Moses Hoffer, settled in the area (Belkin 61). Anna Feldman challenges this narrative in her essay "Sonnenfeld." She explains that there were Jews already established in the area when the group from the agricultural school arrived; the community was named New Herman after a colonist named Mr. Herman, whose legs had frozen in a blizzard while he protected his young son (38–39). When Moses Hoffer arrived in 1907, he advised the name to change to Sonnenfeld, but "New Herman" was used as late as 1912.

By 1909, the colony had fifty-eight people on twenty-five farms, owning 6,400 acres. In 1910, a post office was built a few miles northeast of the colony. This was followed in 1912 by a building to house a synagogue, a Hebrew school, and accommodations for a teacher (Feldman 43). A credit union was established in 1917 with \$2,000 in start-up capital raised with JCA help. Excellent crops in 1912 and 1913 and high wartime wheat prices were followed by dropping prices between 1920 and 1923, and five crop failures in a row from 1917 to 1921 (41). Encouraged by harvests later in the twenties, the JCA brought in thirty-one families from Eastern Europe. The Depression hit the colony hard. The crops of 1931 and 1934 were failures; those of 1930, 1932, and 1933 were insufficient to meet harvesting costs; and no new settlers arrived as immigration was halted during the following war. Nonetheless, the attrition rate of the Jewish farmers compared favorably to their neighbors. Only four of twenty-six farmers that remained in 1939 had lived in the colony less than nine years, and in 1936, 58.33 percent of farmers' sons stayed on the family farm (49). The colony benefited from strong institutions that helped it retain its population during periods of hardship. Its end only came as children departed for education and their retiring parents joined them elsewhere.

2.10 Sibbald/Montefiore/Empress/Alsask/Eyre/Compeer

A series of adjoining colonies appeared along the Alberta-Saskatchewan border beginning in 1910. These colonies are prone to confusion as authors sometimes distinguish between adjoining communities or use different names for the same communities. Sibbald is often used to collectively refer to these colonies, although some authors who differentiate between the communities use it to refer specifically to some farmers on the Albertan side of the border (Rubin 329). Sibbald is also sometimes called Montefiore, and, confusingly, “Alsask North.” John Lehr’s map of Jewish farm colonies places a community named Empress to the south of Sibbald but identifies it as smaller (Lehr 21). On the Saskatchewan side of the border is Alsask, and Lehr’s map locates Eyre southeast of Alsask. Leonoff refers to this community as “Eyre (Alsask)” (Leonoff, *Jewish Farmers* 70). Finally, Palmer lists “Compeer” alongside the other communities in the area, although it appears on no maps, so the precise location of this part of the colony is unknown (Palmer 128).

This colony was founded by farmers from North Dakota who moved due to poor farming conditions. The land at the new colony also had poor natural vegetation, soil, and rainfall (Rubin 335). The colonists constructed a community hall that served educational and religious functions. A house was also built for a rabbi and the settlement attracted three over the course of its existence. The specifics of the colony’s decline are unclear, though Rosenberg blames the quality of the land (223). The farmers appealed to the JCA for assistance, but during the Depression many colonists fled their farms. Rosenberg reported in 1939 that six Jews still clung to their farms, but the others had returned to the United States to take up poultry farming in the Petaluma district of California.

2.11 Camper/New Hirsch

In 1911, several Russian Jews took up homesteads near Camper, Manitoba, in the Interlake region. The colony was named New Hirsch but is also referred to on occasion by the name of the nearby town of Camper. The soil quality of the land was poor (Belkin 82), so the farmers devoted themselves to cattle-raising and dairy-farming. Like Bender Hamlet, New Hirsch suffered from the fall in cattle prices following the Second World War (Chiel 56). The colony had dissolved by 1924, with most farmers relocating to Trancona and Kildonan, Jewish farm communities near Winnipeg.

2.12 Winnipeg settlements

According to Arthur Chiel, the “Jewish farmers in Manitoba that were most successful for the longest period of time were those who settled near Winnipeg” (56). These colonies included Gimli, Rosenfeld, Bird’s Hill, Transcona, Kildonan, Rosser, Lorette, and Ste. Anne (Katz and Lehr 51; Leonoff, *Pioneers* 10). These farmers focused on dairy farming, poultry raising, and truck-farming to supply Winnipeg. Due to their proximity to the city, they had access to the Winnipeg Jewish community, which alleviated the pressure of isolation. Even so, Bird’s Hill and Kildonan were large enough to have their own synagogues constructed. At its height Kildonan— also called “West Kildonan”—had fifty farm families and supplied a large portion of Winnipeg’s milk supply (Leonoff, *Pioneers* 11). The eventual decline of the Jewish farms around Winnipeg is attributable to a lack of continuity. The Depression hurt farmers generally, and with a city nearby the enticement to leave was magnified. Immigrants aspiring to be farmers were more likely to seek out larger, isolated colonies, so the continuation of the Winnipeg colonies depended on the children of the existing farmers, but few children chose to continue in the farming tradition.

3. The decline of the colonies

My examination of these colonies reveals what conditioned their success or failure. While most settlers were inexperienced in agriculture, this impediment did not itself cause a colony to fail. On occasion, some settlers would bring farming knowledge with them, such as Abraham Klenman and Solomon Barish at Wapella, or the trained arrivals at Hoffer-Sonnenfeld. Some colonists were also assisted by their neighbors, including the Métis at Qu'Appelle, or English farmers at Edenbridge. Finally, many learned from trial and error. In no instance did inexperience cause a colony's demise.

The quality of land and soil presented a related challenge to the colonists. Although lands were occasionally chosen by the JCA or other organizations, frequently farmers selected land for themselves, the quality of which varied from colony to colony. This, however, was not a decisive factor for survival: Moosomin and Wapella were founded close to each other, both on rich soil, yet the former failed and the latter prospered. Bender Hamlet and New Hirsch, founded on poor soil, persevered by diversifying through livestock farming, though this hurt them when the cattle market collapsed. Land quality was reportedly the main factor in the decline of Sibbald, though this is not well documented. The quality of the land was therefore rarely decisive, although it definitely contributed to the demise of Bender Hamlet and directly to Sibbald.

Natural catastrophes, including frosts, droughts, torrential rains, and grasshopper plagues, damaged several colonies but were not usually deciding factors in their demise. The only colony where natural forces prevailed entirely over farmers was Moosomin, which faced worse conditions than any other colony. Hirsch and Rumsey-Trochu survived periods of crop failure spanning years through outside financial support, institutional strength, and eventual successes. A more pertinent factor for some colonies was financial disaster. In Rumsey-Trochu this involved the over-extension of credit during the land boom of the First World War, whereas

the fall in cattle prices hurt Bender Hamlet and New Hirsch. While the Depression would see the general deterioration of the colonies, even during that period Jews were less likely to abandon their farms than other farmers in Canada.

The fourth factor affecting the colonies was anti-Semitism, and general relations with non-Jews. Recorded instances of anti-Semitism included the rumored arson that ruined the Moosomin colony, and the complaints of the Liberal Conservative Association at Wapella. The anti-Semitism encountered often sprang from ignorance rather than malice, however, and was mitigated through contact. This is typified by one anecdote about a Jewish settler working as a farmhand before establishing his own farm (Paris 245). The farmhand declined to attend church with his employers, explaining that he was Jewish. The family did not believe he was Jewish because they believed that Jews had horns. They produced a biblical image of Abraham, and the farmhand found that they had confused the placement of Abraham's hands for horns. Instead of attending church, the gentile couple ended up staying home to learn about their Jewish neighbors from the farmhand. This episode captures the kind anti-Semitism Jews encountered in Western Canada where most had never encountered a Jewish person before and revised their view once they encountered the colonists. Incidents of anti-Semitic cruelty like that experienced at Pine Lake were rare, and settlers more often recorded being helped.

The administration of the colonies also contributed to success or failure. The lack of "red tape" allowed Wapella to flourish, as it avoided seeking outside support for five years after creation. The administration of Hirsch by the YMHBS and JCA was inhibited by distance and their lack of understanding the realities in the colony. Likewise, the Canadian government's administration of Qu'Appelle was hampered by the managers' anti-Semitism. The successful colonies were largely independent but received arms-length support in difficult times. Additionally, colonies organized to emulate the *shtetls* of Eastern Europe proved uneconomical in Western Canada (Rosenberg 224). At both Pine Lake and Bender Hamlet, this form of colony

failed, although Simon Belkin speculates that “[h]ad it been on a larger scale and in a better agricultural area, it would have perhaps produced much better results” (79). Regardless, sound administration had an impact on a colony’s success.

The maintenance of religious institutions was also crucial. The survival of Hirsch despite a prolonged crop failure is owed to the construction of a synagogue and the recruitment of a rabbi. At Edenbridge and Sonnenfeld, multiple synagogues and schools were constructed. Communities that provided religious and social institutions were more successful, as they encouraged settlement and prevented colonists from leaving to find amenities their colony lacked. The relationship between the presence of religious institutions and colonists was indeed reciprocal: without sufficient institutions colonists would leave, and without a “critical mass” of colonists the Jewish religious institutions and rites could not operate (Katz and Lehr 63), which further disintegrates a community.

The Depression depleted the colonies not because Jews left their farms in greater numbers than their neighbors, but because when the population fell below the threshold necessary for basic religious services, the remainder would often leave all at once. This happened more often during the Depression because, in addition to the associated hardships, restrictions on immigration meant that nobody was coming to replenish a colony’s numbers. After the Second World War and the eventual establishment of Israel, Jewish immigrants no longer looked to Western Canada as a destination. The only remaining source of continuity was the children of previous farmers. As the colonies only offered an elementary education, children often left and remained in cities rather than return to the farm. Most colonies thus faded away as farmers retired and moved to the city to join their children.

Having uncovered the conditions of decline for the farm colonies, it may be asked whether this amounts to failure in light of the goals of the farmers. The Jewish farm colonists sought liberty and equality, and despite setbacks they found this in the farm colonies. More

crucially, the colonists sought to build a better life for their families through agriculture. When one observes that the cause of decline for most colonies was that the children of the farmers left the colonies to pursue a better education and find employment, the effort of the colonists to ensure a better life for their families cannot but be said to have been a success. Success for the colonies did not consist in their existing in perpetuity. In any case, the family homestead only existed for a time before being replaced by large commercial farms. The decline of this way of life was inevitable, yet the colonists achieved what they intended to before its demise. Insofar as the dream of Jewish farm colonists was carving a better life out of the soil of Western Canada, their history is that of heroic generational success.

McGill University, Montreal

Works Cited

Primary Sources

Hoffer, Clara, and F. H. Kahan. *Land of Hope*. Saskatoon, SK: Modern Press, 1960. Print.

Rosenberg, Louis. *Canada's Jews*. Montreal, QC: McGill-Queens UP, 1993. Print.

Usiskin, Michael. *Uncle Mike's Edenbridge*. Trans. Marcia Usiskin Basman. Winnipeg, MB: Peguis Publishers Limited, 1983. Print.

Secondary Sources

Armstrong, J. A. "From Pogrom to Prairie: Early Jewish Farm Settlements in Central Alberta."

Alberta

Museums.

[https://wayback.archive-](https://wayback.archive-it.org/2217/20101208180652/http://www.albertasource.ca/aspenland/eng/society/article_pogrom_to_prairie.html)

[it.org/2217/20101208180652/http://www.albertasource.ca/aspenland/eng/society/articl](http://www.albertasource.ca/aspenland/eng/society/article_pogrom_to_prairie.html)

[e_pogrom_to_prairie.html](http://www.albertasource.ca/aspenland/eng/society/article_pogrom_to_prairie.html). Web. 1 Sept. 2022.

Aronson, Michael. *Troubled Waters: The Origins of the 1881 Anti-Jewish Pogroms in Russia*.

Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh UP, 1991. Print.

Belkin, Simon. *Through Narrow Gates*. Montreal, QC: Eagle Publishing Company, 1966. Print.

Chiel, Arthur A. *The Jews in Manitoba*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1961. Print.

Dawe, Michael. "Blank's Lake Jewish Colony." *Heritage* 11.3 (Summer 2009): 8–10. Print.

Feldman, Anna. "Sonnenfeld: Elements of Survival and Success of a Jewish Farming Community on the Prairies, 1905–1939." *CJHSJ* Vol. 6, No. 1 (1982). 33–53. Print.

Gutkin, Harry. *A Journey Into Our Heritage*. Toronto, ON: Lester & Orphen Dennys Ltd, 1980. Print.

Katz, Yossi, and John C. Lehr. "Jewish and Mormon Agricultural Settlements in Western Canada: A Comparative Analysis." *The Canadian Geographer* 35.2 (June 2008): 128–42. Print.

---. "Jewish Pioneer Agricultural Settlements in Western Canada." *Journal of Cultural Geography* 14.1 (1993): 49–67. Print.

Lehr, John C. "A Jewish Farmer Can't Be': Land Settlement Policies and Ethnic Settlement in Western Canada 1870–1919." *Jewish Life and Times* IX (2009): 18–28. Print.

Leonoff, Cyril Edel. "Early Jewish Agricultural Colonization in Saskatchewan." *Saskatchewan History* 36 (1983): 58–69. Print.

---. *Pioneers, Ploughs and Prayers: The Jewish Farmers of Western Canada*. Vancouver, BC: The Jewish Historical Society of British Columbia, 1982. Print.

---. *The Jewish Farmers of Western Canada*. Vancouver, BC: Jewish Historical Society of British Columbia, 1984. Print.

---. *Wapella Farm Settlement*. Winnipeg, MB: Manitoba Historical and Scientific Society, 1975. Print.

Paris, Erna. *Jews: An Account of Their Experience in Canada*. Toronto: Macmillan of Canada,

1980. Print.

Rubin, Max. "Alberta's Jews: The Long Journey." In *Peoples of Alberta*. Ed. Howard & Tamara Palmer. Saskatoon, SK: Western producer Prairie Books, 1985. 328–47. Print.

Sack, B.G. *History of the Jews in Canada*. Trans. Ralph Novek. Montreal, QC: Harvest House, 1965. Print.

Archival Sources

Alex Dworkin Canadian Jewish Archives, Montreal

Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa

Uncorrected Proof