

Early days of settlement

Research conducted by J. Ross and Associates in 2011

An historical analysis of change in settler society

The farms and other enterprises operated by the Bremner and Schroter families provide intriguing local examples of the boom, bust and rescue stages of settler agriculture described by James Belich in the article “Exploding Wests.” Charlie Bremner took full advantage of the initial boom period that typically occurs as incoming settlers supply each other’s needs, but also suffered from the downturn that often follows as markets oversaturate. His death came at the beginning of the “export rescue” period, when a newly settled area is mature enough to begin exporting goods. Like many area farmers (but unlike Charlie Bremner), the Schroter family ran a mixed agricultural operation, relying on diversity (as well as hard work) to make ends meet during tough times. For several decades, they added dairy to the mix, as did many other area farmers; like most, they eventually sold their cows and concentrated on growing grain.

Bremner arrives to start a new life in a new frontier

When J.C.C. (Charlie) Bremner stepped down from the Calgary-Edmonton stagecoach in Edmonton in October 1885, he knew that he had arrived in a nascent society and economy that had barely emerged from a major political and social upheaval, the Riel Uprising. Bremner had no way of knowing then that during his lifetime his new homeland would experience explosive growth that would see the population of Alberta skyrocket 412.6 per cent, from 73,022 in 1901 to 374,295 in 1911. The First World War slowed Alberta’s growth, but the province nevertheless continued to grow more than 57 per cent between 1911 and 1921. As drought in parts of the province and economic readjustments took place following the war, Alberta’s growth slowed over the next 10 years. Yet, the province still managed an impressive 24-per-cent increase. Unbeknownst to Bremner and other settlers was the fact that such unprecedented growth was happening more or less simultaneously across western Canada and the United States, and in other frontier societies: New Zealand, Australia, Siberia, Argentina and South Africa. What was happening in Alberta was part of a worldwide demographic shift that saw hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people, mostly from Europe, pull up stakes to resettle in new societies.

Between 1890 and 1914, Alberta experienced an unprecedented boom. Boom frontiers were, according to James Belich in his “Exploding Wests¹” article, net importers not exporters of goods and capital. According to Belich’s model of settler societies, a frontier economy would experience a boom, then a bust, followed by what he called “export rescue.” Frontier booms created vibrant economies, but they were ultimately local in nature; earlier settlers made their wealth in supplying the next year’s newcomers with everything from draught horses to “grubstakes.” It was also during the frontier boom phase that the infrastructure needed to pull a frontier society into the national mainstream—railways, roads, land survey and institutions such as banks, schools and export businesses—was established. This explosive growth, though, could not be sustained. After a boom period of 15 or 20 years, most settler societies faced a severe downturn in their economies and often a net loss in population. Belich estimates that fully one-half of boom-time farms and businesses declared bankruptcy.

The third phase in settler societies is, what Belich terms, “export rescue” where these societies regrouped after their crash and over time became net exporters of staples such as wheat and resources such as coal, oil and natural gas.

Reference: Belich, James. *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-world, 1783-1939* Oxford [England]: New York: Oxford University Press, 2009

Alberta's boom-bust cycle is a well-known fact, and governments and the citizenry have struggled with this cyclical nature of the province's economy. The first boom, bust and export rescue scenarios were acted out during Bremner's lifetime. His death in 1928 at the height of a mini boom in North America and Europe known as the "Roaring Twenties" occurred just prior to the western world's most severe economic crisis. It would be hard-working farmers such as the Schroters who experienced the bust and the slow recovery that followed.

Governments scramble to manage settlement, growth and development

Struggling to keep ahead of the phenomenal population explosion in Alberta's first "boom" were the governments of the day. For the first 20 years that Bremner farmed at "The Mount", the name he gave to his farm, he lived under the government of the North-West Territories. It was responsible for the entire prairie west with the exception of the "postage stamp" province of Manitoba. Growth at first was painfully slow. The completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway, the land survey, telegraph service, and settlement of the aboriginal population on reserves lay the groundwork for settlement, but a world-wide depression that settled over western economies beginning in 1873 suppressed Ottawa's attempt to attract large numbers of immigrants.

It was only in the mid-1890s when a change in government in Ottawa and the subsequent change in government immigration policy coincided with an upturn in the world economy and the demand for wheat on the world market that created the setting for explosive growth. Prior to this, the Territorial Government was able to do little other than establish Herd and Fire Districts, Local Improvement Districts and, germane to north-central Alberta, the Cooking Lake Forest Reserve.

Agricultural policy and research in livestock and poultry breeding, irrigation schemes, the practice of summer fallowing and the establishment of creameries were not addressed by the Territorial Government; rather, these needs were filled by the federal Department of Agriculture. In 1886 it established five Dominion Experimental Farms, one each in Ottawa; Nappan, Nova Scotia; Brandon, Manitoba; Indian Head, North-West Territories (now in Saskatchewan); and Agassiz, British Columbia. It was at these farms that scientists tested livestock and poultry breeds for climate suitability; attempted to isolate and find a cure for their diseases; and experimented with finding new strains of wheat, oats and barley that would ripen earlier and be disease free.

It was in the southern prairies where the Experimental Farms made some of their earliest and biggest impacts. In 1902 the Indian Head farm established a tree nursery to supply prairie farmers with shelterbelt trees, and the early ripening Marquis wheat was developed at Indian Head.

Meanwhile back in Ottawa, the Dairy Branch of the Department of Agriculture noticed that local creameries in the parkland belt of the Territories were struggling financially and from a lack of knowledge and expertise. In 1896 it announced a new policy of assistance. If local farmers formed a co-operative to build and furnish the creameries, the Department would provide a qualified buttermaker, run the creameries and market the product. Most of the creameries established in Alberta were located in a 100-kilometre-wide strip between Edmonton and Calgary. In 1900 a creamery opened in Hortonburg (later Bremner) but closed during the First World War. As no reference to the creamery could be found in the provincial Department of Agriculture records, it is not known whether this creamery was backed by the Dominion Government. If so it was one of only a few that did not survive into the 1920s.

A burgeoning population convinced the federal Department of the Interior in 1905 to carve two new provinces, Alberta and Saskatchewan, from the North-West Territories. It was at this time that Alberta established a Department of Agriculture. It is somewhat difficult to know exactly the extent of its

activities. The bulk of the Department's records found at the Provincial Archives of Alberta date from the 1930s and there are few records dating from before the 1920s. The extant records do reveal that in 1908 the Department established a poultry breeding station to distribute purebred birds to farmers. While it is highly possible that like programs were established for swine, horses, cattle and sheep, the historical record unfortunately is silent. The earliest record for a horse improvement policy, whereby the Department would provide purebred stallions for hire, that could be found dates from 1919.

Bremner specializes in frontier economy, becomes prominent businessman

How the Departments of Agriculture (both federal and provincial) policies and programs affected J.C.C. Bremner is unclear. While most settlers, especially those living in the parkland belt, practiced mixed farming by growing grain, raising a herd of beef and/or dairy cattle, and keeping hogs and poultry, Bremner seems to have concentrated on raising draught, carriage and saddle horses and sheep. In doing so, he very much fitted with Belich's boom model whereby earlier settlers made their living by supplying newcomers with the essentials needed in an agricultural society. It is unknown whether the federal Department of Agriculture during the Territorial period had any herd improvement programs so it may have been up to individual farmers to take the initiative.

Charlie Bremner had the financial resources and the foresight to purchase a purebred Clydesdale stallion that repeatedly took prizes at the Edmonton Exhibition. With this caché, Bremner bred his mares with the stallion selling the offspring to other farmers. He also hired out the stallion for stud services. His saddle and carriage horses, likewise necessary in a frontier society, took prizes at local exhibitions year after year. He also had a thoroughbred brood mare that he bred. "Rosebud III" had the unfortunate habit of producing stallions so his herd of fine horses did not grow quickly but he raced one of her offspring, "Ben More," and kept him as a stud horse. He clipped his flock of sheep for their fleece that he sold to newcomers who spun it to make socks, mitts, hats and scarves, and probably sold the meat to local stores.

An interesting sub-theme that runs throughout the Bremner story is that of his social status. Alberta was a new, raw land—free of many of the social, economic, political and religious restrictions that plagued donor countries. For Bremner the appeal of Alberta may have been the fluidity of its society, a society where he could be free from class restrictions that would have hindered any significant upward movement on his part in British society.

He was not alone. It is a well-documented fact that many of the new political, social and economic leaders who emerged in Alberta and other frontier societies would probably not have otherwise achieved such status due to societal constraints in their home environment. Once established on his farm, Bremner was free to be almost as influential in society as he wished. He joined the Northern Alberta Pioneers and Old Timers Association and was able to be nominated for membership in the prestigious Edmonton Club, both places where he could network. A tall, athletic man, Bremner cut the muster, making the Clover Bar cricket and the Edmonton rugby teams. He was active on the Board of the Edmonton Agricultural Society and the Edmonton Exhibition Society, handy appointments when establishing himself as a supplier of good horses and sheep to new and local farmers.

To be sure, Bremner was helped in his search for influence and prestige by money. It is estimated that at the time of his emigration from Britain, he had inherited today's equivalent of £250,000 (2011). That translates into approximately \$375,000—a substantial amount of start-up money for an 18-year-old. Backed by substantial capital, Bremner speculated in land, buying scrip, school and CPR lands. In doing so, he was playing the same game as wealthy Edmonton entrepreneurs such as John A. McDougall and Richard Secord. Like other land speculators, he was taking the long view. The land at the time of purchase may not have been worth a great deal but, like other boosters and opportunists, Bremner hoped to make

a substantial gain when he flipped the land to newcomers who were beginning to flood north-central Alberta. Money made on land deals and his farm income probably put Bremner in a very comfortable financial position by 1912-1913 when he decided to build a new home, one befitting his position in society.

Things take a turn for the worse

In 1912 Edmonton and Alberta were at the height of their first major boom. It seemed as though the good times would go on indefinitely. So it is not surprising that Bremner, no doubt through connections that he had built up over the years, diversified his investments. He slowly moved out of land speculation, perhaps reflecting Alberta's maturing frontier, and became heavily involved in a number of resource companies. By 1907 he may have been involved in a small coal mine in Edmonton and have formed his own Bremner Coal Company. If so perhaps his experience with the mine stood him in good stead when, with help from his brother Alexander Hamilton (Hampy) in Great Britain, Bremner negotiated a million-dollar deal that saw the development of the Mountain Park Coal Company in 1911. As a consequence, he was given a place on the coal company's Board of Directors and awarded \$75,000 plus another \$50,000 in shares. Steam coal was important to the railways and Bremner may have sunk a portion of his "thank you" money back into the company. His family connections probably led him to invest in two mines, the Lucky Jim zinc mine near Slocan, B.C. and the Salmon River Gold Mining and Milling Company, headquartered in Spokane, Washington.

It was, though, a new resource that caught his fancy. After several years when different horseless carriages were tried out, the industry had settled on the combustion engine. This was where the future lay, Bremner reasoned. So, possibly before 1912, Bremner invested in oil exploration companies and the refining of the oil. One such company in which he invested was the Northern Alberta Exploration Company. It tried, unsuccessfully, to drill the oil sands. Not discouraged by this gummed up experience in northeastern Alberta, Bremner invested heavily in the Maple Leaf Oil Company that was drilling for oil in the Wainwright area and sat on its Board. He also invested in Refineries Distributors and was a Director on Alberta Refineries Ltd.

Bremner would live through all three phases of Belich's model, the boom frontier, an economic crash and the slow rebuilding of the economy after the First World War.

Alberta's economy could not sustain its madcap growth of the first decade of the 20th century. Even before the outbreak of war in Europe, the real estate market in the province crashed, sending land prices south while many land speculators were caught, holding land purchased at ridiculously high prices, now almost worthless. The war wreaked its own havoc, closing European markets. The immediate aftermath of the war was a continuation of difficult times. Inflation was rampant, world markets were still fragile as Europe rebuilt from the devastation of the war, and labour unrest plagued industry and governments.

The first half of the 1920s was a period of painful readjustments. By the late 1920s, these readjustments seemed to be paying off. Grain and resources prices rebounded, markets opened and land values were slowly increasing. Alberta was entering another boom period. This one, though, was bound to be different than that experienced by Bremner earlier. Alberta had matured beyond a frontier society and was engaged in export rescue, shipping grain around the world through the auspices of various farmer-owned pools. Money was not to be made as it had been during the first boom, building infrastructure and supplying newcomers. Rather, investors had to look to the future.

Although it may appear that Alberta's resource industries indicate that the province's economy had moved from that of a frontier boom to one where staples and resources were being exported, in fact that had not completely happened. The coal was used mostly internally by the railways, and the oil companies

and refineries were in such a nascent stage of development that they produced actually very little product for export. So when Bremner sunk large amounts of money into oil exploration and refining, it was a brave new world that he embraced. From his perspective, these investments put him on the ground floor of a potentially hugely successful industry, one that would ensure his financial security and his social standing in the community.

It was, though, not to be. The oil and gas industries were embryonic to say the least. It would be decades before new technologies and the emergence of trained scientists with a far better understanding of the province's geology would transform Alberta's economy from strictly agriculturally based to a more diversified one. Bremner's involvement on decision-making boards that knew little if anything about the oil and gas industries would not stand the companies, or him, in good stead. Even as he saw his investments either fail or at least not reaping the dividends he needed to remain financially solvent, Bremner remained proud, over-confident and prone to self-aggrandizement.

Yet, at the time of his suicide, reputedly prompted by an incident at the auction of another "big" farmer in the area, A.R. Gillies, Bremner was at the end of his financial rope. He had sold most of his land for much needed cash; his investments were worthless; and he had accumulated more than \$10,000 worth of debt, no doubt in an effort to keep up appearances. Perhaps it was his embarrassment at having his insolvency made public at the auction that drove him to take his own life.

Whatever the reason Bremner's lifestyle and temperament best suited the boom years. When the crash came in 1913-1914, he must have struggled as land prices plummeted and the value of his investments withered. Even as the economy picked up briefly in the last half of the 1920s, investor confidence was climbing the wall of worry. Shares in Maple Leaf Oil tumbled, losing up to four-fifths of their face value by 1927, two full years *before* the infamous Wall Street crash. Bremner would not have been able to survive financially long enough to witness this final calamity.

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