

Early History of the Mamornitz Area

The history of the Mamornitz area began with the first wave of immigration to Canada in 1897. Archival records of the Department of the Interior show that at the beginning of April 1897, immigrants from Bukovyna, lured by the promise of “free land” by immigration and steamship agents, were pouring into Winnipeg, the centre of colonization. And it was no easy task to manage them, reported the immigration officials. They demanded the “free land” they had been promised. On May 29, the immigration officials made special arrangements with Walter Reginald Baker, president of the Manitoba and Northwestern railway Company to take the balance of immigrants, housed in sheds in Winnipeg – and all those forthcoming – to Yorkton, Eastern Assiniboia, NWT, to take up land at once. Ranges 6, 7, and 8 had been surveyed by 1882. Yorkton was the place of a Dominion Land Office where immigrants could register their homestead claims.

“The year 1897 saw the first large immigration of Ruthenians (nearly 4000),” reported the *Yorkton Enterprise* on September 9, 1909. “They brought a whole trainload of these people to Yorkton, said one incensed rancher,” writes Dr. Thomas Patrick (1864-1945) in his memoirs. “They were clothed in sheepskin coats, the women had their hair tied over the top of their heads with tight scarves. They looked strange and spoke a strange language.” The plight of thousands upon thousands of these strange people, who converged upon this remote hamlet of Yorkton, aroused the ranchers, who were about to be ousted by the homesteaders from their ranch lands on which they paid no taxes. “Soon this ‘Great Lone Land’ became one large grain field where all you could see was smoke pouring upward from thousands of *izbas* [sod shanties],” writes Dr. Patrick, a horse and buggy doctor from Yorkton, who in his light rig pounded over the trails of the indigenous peoples to treat the sick immigrants. This set the historical stage for all subsequent immigration. Families joined families. Fellow countryman joined fellow countryman. Soon, the Yorkton-Canora-Sheho area became one of the largest Ukrainian speaking bloc settlements in the area. The first settlers to the Mamornitz area in 1897 were the families: Ivan Hladyi, Vasyl Hudema, Gora Hnatiuk, Stepan Khabajlo, Vasyl Hutsuliak, Tanasko Moskaliuk, Ivan Prokopetz and Stepan Rusnak, Georgij Pidhornyi, Simeon Lopashchuk and others. They arrived in Canada with a few precious belongings packed into their little black *kuferek*, a wooden trunk, neither speaking nor writing English and signed their homestead papers with an “X”. Many of these immigrants were family men with children. Some had sons old enough to take up homesteads of their own. Once the settlement was started, the community developed rapidly. By 1904, 25 homesteads were settled; and by 1917 all the homesteads in the townships 29, 30 and 31 of Ranges 6, 7 and 8 were occupied, according to the 1917 Cummins Rural map. The Ukrainian settlers had firmly established their presence in the Mamornitz and surrounding area, once home to the roaming buffalo, the Assiniboia and Cree peoples, and the cattle and horse ranchers.

There were no roads, schools, or churches then and they were miles away from the hospital in Yorkton. The settlers’ first priority was to build a temporary dwelling for themselves - a subterranean *burdei* with a dirt floor and sometimes even sharing their living quarters with animals. Their priorities were also to break and crop a few acres of virgin land and fence their homestead. As early as 1897, we see clusters of settlements according to kinship, village ties and religious affiliation. Despite the poverty and isolation, this clustering of settlements produced a sense of solidarity. Living on the edge of the wilderness, these Bukovynian homesteaders, fortified with faith and dogged determination, quickly learned all about survival under formidable living conditions. Since many settlers arrived as early as 1897, well before the birth

of Saskatchewan in 1905, many children of the first immigrants were left without any formal education. The need for a church and cemetery was equally crucial for the mortality rate was high. “Measles broke out everywhere among them,” writes Dr. Patrick, and “measles contracted in the damp dugouts often meant broncho-pneumonia and death.” The building of a church and the organization of a school district with a one-room rural school in 1910 marked the beginning of the establishment of a very cohesive Ukrainian rural community with its own distinct identity. Their dazzling white-washed houses, straw-thatched stables, unique church architecture, design of the memorial crosses, the naming of their church and school – Mamornytsya after their ancestral village in Bukovyna, and Mamornitz for the school – all constituted a visible domestic element of the prairie landscape. The story of Mamornitz and the story of the surrounding area is the story of the beginning of the development in 1897 of one of the largest Ukrainian bloc settlements in Saskatchewan.

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