The Landscape Of Ukrainian Settlement In The Canadian West

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To journey through parts of the western interior of Canada at the turn of the century was to experience the cultural landscapes of the peasant heartland of Europe. Nowhere was this more true than on the northerly fringes of the parkland belt and across the southern reaches of the boreal forest pioneered by Ukrainian immigrants from the Austrian provinces of Galicia and Bukovyna.

Between 1892, when the first small group of seven Ukrainian families settled in Alberta, and 1914, when the outbreak of war in Europe terminated immigration from Austria-Hungary, more than 120,000 Ukrainians settled in Canada. Almost all of these people were of peasant stock and most sought land on the agricultural frontiers of the West. Driven by a resolve to secure the wide resource base essential for subsistence agriculture, they avoided the open prairies and gravitated to the unsettled lands on the northern reaches of the parkland belt where wood, water, and meadowland were available in abundance. Their uniformity in appraising the resources of the land and their strong desire to settle close to compatriots, friends, and kinfolk led to the formation of a series of large ethnically homogenous block settlements that eventually spanned the West from southeastern Manitoba to central Alberta (Fig. 1).

THE ESTABLISHED FRAMEWORK FOR SETTLEMENT

Since the great majority of Ukrainian immigrants lacked the capital to purchase improved lands in settled areas, of necessity they sought out the “free” homestead lands on the edge of settlement. There they faced a wilderness of unbroken land and uncleared bush. To the European mind, accustomed to the manicured order and serenity of the long-established landscapes of the Old World, the Canadian frontier seemed wild and untrammeled. But it was a bounded and ordered wilderness; dominion surveyors had slashed section lines through it with geometric precision, dividing the land into townships of thirty-six square miles, each subdivided into mile-square sections, which in
turn were quartered into the 160-acre units deemed to be the efficient size for agriculture in the new territory. 3

Few settlers of any nationality ventured beyond the limits of the survey. Squatting, the illegal occupation of land ahead of the survey and not yet opened to settlement, was not a common practice. The Canadian West knew no equivalent of the claim clubs of the American West. Although the survey had made accommodation for those established in the territory prior to its acquisition by Canada in 1870 (for example, the long lot surveys granted to the Metis), the government was determined to impose an efficient, regular, and uniform system of land subdivision across the western interior. For a settler to move ahead of the survey was risky. He stood to lose everything if his improvements were found to lie on a road allowance or on lands later selected by a railway company as part of land grant. 4

The venturesome but not foolhardy peasant immigrants stayed within the bounds of the institutional framework marked by the lines of the survey. The basic infrastructure of settlement—the layout of roads, spacing of farm units, and spacing and placement of settlements—was preordained for them. The patterns enshrined in administrative ordinances, even if not yet manifested on the ground, reflected the interests of the corporate and governmental elite of English Canada. The immigrant was forced to accommodate to this institutional framework which bound his actions, determined the spatial layout of his landscape, and molded his society in the new land. The Dominion Lands Act required that any settler claiming homestead land had to reside upon his quarter section for at least six months per year for three years before a patent was obtained. 5

The act thus precluded nucleated settlement in newly settled areas and made *einzellhof*, or dispersed settlement, the norm throughout the western interior. By opening only alternate

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**FIG. 1. Ukrainian block settlements in western Canada, 1914.**
sections to homestead settlement and by reserving in each township two sections for school lands and one and three-quarters sections for the Hudson's Bay Company, the Dominion Lands Act also ensured low densities of settlement across the West.

Ukrainian immigrants were accustomed to village settlement. Both nucleated villages and strassendorfs, or street villages, were common in the western Ukraine. Their society was tightly knit in both physical and social senses, so the immediate concern of many Ukrainian settlers was to achieve dense settlement and thereby replicate the social interaction of the old-world village. Since village settlement was impossible within the terms of the Homestead Act, Ukrainian pioneers sought to increase settlement density by petitioning to settle on both odd- and even-numbered sections, and even resorted to the illegal subdivision of homesteads into 80-acre holdings. For the most part their efforts were of little avail. Though the crown agents responsible for Ukrainian settlement were sympathetic to their wish for dense settlement and suggested the adoption of alternative strategies in placing Ukrainians on the land, their superiors in Ottawa were not receptive to any departures from standard practice. Nevertheless the determination of Ukrainians to live closely together led to the creation of unusually dense settlements in many areas, sometimes because the government permitted homestead settlement on both odd and even sections, but more often because, in order to live near their friends and kin, the Ukrainians were prepared to homestead on lands refused as land grants by railway companies and bypassed by other nationalities.

Since the immigrants were unable to transfer the basic element of their cultural landscape—the system of village settlement—to western Canada, their new cultural landscapes were comprised of elements that were either ephemeral or destined to be transient in the long term. Patterns of settlement and communication are physically entrenched into the landscape, but other elements of material culture, such as vernacular and religious architecture, farm layouts, and fence types, are subject to the inevitable decay of material. Furthermore, they are affected by the pressures of cultural assimilation and the rate of economic progress. Hence they are all highly vulnerable to change.

Despite these limitations on the transference of material culture, the Ukrainians quickly impressed their presence upon the landscape. In the first few years of settlement the sectional survey had little influence over the pattern of communications. Local topography and Indian trails determined the first pathways; only after some years and the organization of local government districts did a road system following the lines of the survey materialize. It was during those first fifteen or twenty years that the landscape of Ukrainian settlement most closely resembled the landscape of their homeland. Not only were vernacular forms transferred, but there was also a return to the more simple folk forms of earlier times, because in the frontier environment few pioneers could afford to invest the time and capital required to replicate the relatively elaborate forms of their previous houses.

THE DOMESTIC LANDSCAPE

Effective shelter, quickly and cheaply built, was the immediate concern on the frontier. Some immigrants resorted to cavelike dwellings in riverbanks but most built a small one-room hut, or sod-roofed earthen dugout, called a zemlyanka or borday. These temporary huts were strongly reminiscent of the chimneyless chorna khata (black houses) common in the Carpathian region in the eighteenth century but seldom encountered by the end of the nineteenth century. The dugout was similarly based upon a largely defunct folk form, the mountain hut, or staya, of the Hutsul shepherds of the Carpathians.

The first shelters were built as temporary dwellings and although most were used for only a few months (Fig. 2), some were occupied for several years. When the second, more substantial, house was built, almost always in
the traditional style, the first shelter was usually relegated to the function of store house or summer kitchen (komora). As such, some survived for decades.

It was the second house, built in the traditional style, that constituted a major element in the cultural landscape of the Ukrainian settlers. Despite some variation in appearance reflecting the different regions of origin of Ukrainian settlers, there was a unity in the pioneer houses that revolved around the incorporation and integration of several elements of form and decor. Most obvious of these were a southward orientation in a single-storey, rectangular house. Virtually all of the houses had two or three rooms, a central chimney, and a gable, hipped-gable, or hipped roof (Fig. 3).¹¹

Almost all of these houses were made of logs and other locally available materials. Horizontal log building was the most common, with saddle-notched corners on logs left in the round, and dovetailed corners on square logs. In areas of poor timber, post-and-fill construction (Red River frame) and vertical logs (stockade walling) were also used. Details of construction were not always evident, as the Ukrainians commonly plastered the walls with mud and lime-washed the exteriors of their houses.

In the frontier era most Ukrainians thatched their house roofs. Thatches ranged from the crude and slapdash to the proficient, reflecting the degree of familiarity with the art. Whereas in the old country rye straw was the thatching agent, settlers in western Canada used slough grass. For practical reasons, a thatched roof was either of hipped or hipped gable construction and was invariably pitched steeply to allow rapid runoff. The overall effect was strikingly
different from that created by the buildings of other nationalities settling the West. Anglo-Canadians visiting the Ukrainian settlements commented upon the distinctive cultural landscape, particularly the folk houses. In 1911 a visitor to the Lamont area of Alberta wrote, we entered a district as typically Russian [sic] as though we had dropped into Russia itself. Here and there beside the winding trail loomed groups of buildings, lowbrowed, and usually thatched. These always faced south. The houses were all of rough logs, rough hewed and chinked with a mortar made of clay and straw. Some were plastered on the exterior, and almost all of them had been limewashed to a dazzling whiteness.12

The landscape was Ukrainian, not Russian, of course, and was more typical of the Carpathian highlands and foothills of the western Ukraine than of the wide, flat steppelands of central Russia. But apart from the frontier rawness and the dispersal of farmsteads, the landscape was essentially European.

Farm layout, fence types, water-drawing arrangements, and even types of crops bespoke European influences. Few survived for more than several years. The typical fence of the western Ukraine, a kind of woven willow, was used to protect kitchen gardens, but in the wooded areas settled by Ukrainians, split logs or sawn boards were cheap and barbed wire was soon readily available, so the old types of fences quickly faded from the landscape.

The layout of farms was also affected by changing technology. In the old country, and in many early homesteads, farm buildings were arranged in the form of a square enclosing a
yard. In the Hutsul *hraszda* found in the Carpathian highlands, the buildings were joined by a wall, but this stockade form was not transferred to Canada by Hutsul immigrants. One reason may have been that the form was redundant because the stock no longer needed such close protection, but a more likely explanation is that the farmers realized that the arrangement was totally incompatible with the technology of North American agriculture. Lack of capital obliged many immigrants to retain traditional methods of farming for some years, but the ownership of farm machinery such as binders and swathers was desired for economic advantage and prestige. The acquisition of farm machinery made the old square farm layout inconvenient, and it became increasingly so as mechanization proceeded and the turning circles of implements widened. A building arrangement suited to a farm operation dependent upon herded stock and hand-harvested grain was inappropriate for team-drawn implements and totally impractical for fully mechanized operations.

The choice of crops soon came to reflect the new realities of western Canada. Rye, a popular crop in the western Ukraine, was gradually replaced in Canada by the new early maturing wheats. Hemp, widely grown for its fiber and oilseed yields, declined in importance as cheap commercial products quickly replaced home-produced rope and cooking oil. Increasing integration into the market economy of North America further ensured conformity with Anglo-American norms of crop production. Only the kitchen gardens associated with every Ukrainian farmstead reflected the dietary and aesthetic predilections of the western Ukrainian peasant farmer.

The well sweep, or *zhuravel*, a device for drawing water from shallow wells, was widely used by the Ukrainian settlers and other immigrants. Well sweeps are closely associated with the Ukrainian cultural landscape because many of the farms were located on marshy marginal land where water tables were high, rising to within a few feet of the surface. In southeastern Manitoba, for example, the well sweep remains a prominent element of the landscape today, retained for utilitarian reasons by second- and third-generation Ukrainian farmers (Fig. 4).

**THE SACRED LANDSCAPE**

Religious architecture usually appeared in the pioneer landscape within three or four years of settlement. In most cases the settlers who built the early churches replicated the styles of their homeland as they remembered them. The most apparent influence was seldom the ancient traditional style of the Carpathian Mountains but rather the more Russified Byzantine architecture which was then replacing the older forms in the western Ukraine. Like many other churches, the Ukrainian structures were divided into three parts—porch, nave, and sanctuary. They were distinguished by two major features, an onion-shaped dome and a separate bell tower. Domes grace the churches of other European cultures as well, but the distinctive form of the Ukrainian church domes, more pear-shaped than rounded, became
so generally associated with the Ukrainians in Canada that it has functioned as a hallmark of Ukrainian-Canadian church architecture (Fig. 5). It was certainly seen as such by the pioneer community. If an early church was hurriedly built without the cupola, it was generally added at a later date.

Less obvious, but always present, was the separate bell tower, which was kept apart from the church building for traditional and historic reasons, not through structural necessity. Other features were the large cross denoting consecrated ground, always prominently placed before the church, and, on Greek Orthodox churches, the distinctive cross of orthodoxy (Fig. 6). On the latter a crescent often lies below the slanted bar of the cross, signifying the ascent of Christianity over Islam.

The Ukrainian church has been a prominent element in the landscape from the pioneer era to the present. Except for the grain elevator, the church was often the largest and tallest building in the pioneer countryside. The split of the Ukrainian immigrant community into two groups on the basis of religious affiliation led to an increase in the number of church buildings. Almost all immigrants from the province of Galicia were adherents to the Greek Catholic (Uniate) Church; those from Bukovyna were mostly adherents to the Greek (Russian) Orthodox Church. Both groups were suspicious of, if not openly antagonistic toward each other, and only in rare instances could they agree to share a building of worship. Even in the early days of settlement, therefore, the landscape contained two parallel systems of churches.

More Ukrainian churches appeared after the events of 1917: the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, the decline of the Russian Orthodox church, and the founding of the Ukrainian Orthodox church in Canada. Rival
congregations sought the allegiance of a politically, culturally, and religiously fragmented community. The legacy of this turmoil is apparent in the landscape. In many areas, even decades later, up to four churches still watch over a community of dwindling congregations.

The prominence of the Ukrainian church in the landscape reflected its position in pioneer society. In the absence of a Ukrainian state, the churches served as the guardian of cultural and ethnic identity. In this role the church was symbolic not only in a spiritual but also in a national sense, and unlike most aspects of the Ukrainian material culture, church architecture was relatively immune to the acculturative influences of Anglo-Canadian society.

The church and the house were the two elements in the Ukrainian pioneer landscape that most faithfully reflected the level of acculturation in immigrant society. Because of its unique role, the church was buffered from many acculturative influences. Thus the question of building churches in accordance with Anglo-Saxon tastes could never arise until the sense of national consciousness had faded within the Ukrainian-Canadian community.

**PATHWAYS OF CULTURAL CHANGE**

The sheer size of Ukrainian block settlements, some spreading over hundreds of square miles, tended to delay the penetration of Anglo-Saxon influences into immigrant life. In the most remote and often poorer areas, Anglo-Saxon influences were weak and folk architectural styles changed little for decades after settlement. In contrast, those living on the fringes of the block settlements began to incorporate alien traits into their houses within twenty years of settlement. By 1919 in the
Star district of Alberta, for example, most of the recently built houses were described as "entirely Anglo-Saxon in design, well built and with sufficient windows." Nevertheless, many traditional elements survived in these houses, most of which were architectural hybrids. There was often a conscious effort to embrace Canadian styles and an attempt to eliminate some of the more flamboyant aspects of the traditional style, so that houses became more austere and simplistic in appearance than their traditional counterparts.21 The superficial stylistic elements were discarded first. In some cases the addition of an extra half or even a full storey gave the profile of the house a more Anglo-Saxon appearance, but the basic folk forms did not change. There was little variation in floor plans, wall ratios, door and window placement, and color preferences in the decor of the houses. Nor did construction techniques or the choice of basic building materials change. The new houses, like the old, were all made of logs.

The folk house—indeed, the entire pioneer landscape—clearly reflected the pathways by which alien cultural influences penetrated into the Ukrainian community. Ordinarily it was the men who served as the vehicle of acculturation because they were always more exposed to Anglo-Saxon influences. Journeys to local service centers and the widespread practice of working outside of the immigrant community brought them into contact with the wider Canadian society; they gained prestige among their peers if they were perceived as innovative and progressive. The acquisition of machinery, adoption of Canadian methods of farming, and incorporation of English words into their vocabulary—the trappings of assimilation—all enhanced their status. In contrast, the women seldom left the isolation of the homestead except to engage in in-group social activities, most of which revolved around family and church. They were the bearers, if not the guardians, of culture. Portraits of any pioneer wedding demonstrate this pattern. Inevitably the menfolk are wearing "store-bought" suits, whereas the women are resplendent in their intricately embroidered traditional dress.22 These differences were reflected in the landscape as well. Elements that were the preserve of the men and fell under their jurisdiction proved to have low resistance to acculturative pressures, whereas the domain of the women showed a remarkable capacity to withstand the assault of acculturation. The aesthetics of the house, the arrangement and utilization of space, the decoration of interior and exterior wall surfaces, and the embellishment of the interior through ornamentation, were all largely the preserve of the women and displayed the Ukrainian influence.

Patterns of social behavior within the home largely determined the arrangement and use of interior space. Since the peasant builder always designed from the inside out, the use of space determined the basic form of the folk house. Though alternative and more complex variations of the house plan could be found, a tripartite division of space was the usual pattern.

The western half of the house was typically subdivided into an entrance hall (siny) and a living-kitchen area. The smaller of the two major rooms in the house, the living-kitchen area, was called the mala khata, or the "little house"; the larger room on the eastern side was the velyka khata, or the "big house." These terms reflect the growth of the folk house from simpler antecedent forms.

The uniform arrangement of space within the house had the effect of fossilizing the position of windows, doors, and chimneys. Thus, even when the men changed the folk form by incorporating Anglo-Saxon ideas into the design—adding a second storey or building a lean-to extension on the side of the house—the basic arrangement of space and room plan remained unaffected. Since the room arrangement determined the basic character of the house, the women's impact upon the wider landscape was considerable.

Similarly, the decor of the Ukrainian folk house was remarkably constant from the pioneer era onward. With the exception of a few settlers who came from the highlands of
Bukovyna, most Ukrainians plastered and limewashed the exteriors of their log houses. Limewashing the outside walls was always the woman's task. It was usually done several times a year, and always before Easter celebrations. The women determined the precise color of the limewash by adding washing blue to the lime to obtain the dazzling whiteness characteristic of Ukrainian folk houses. In the pioneer era they often made geometric designs in blue on the house walls. Later this custom disappeared, but the people from Galicia painted all wooden trim and doors in the same sky-blue color, whereas those from Bukovyna frequently used a distinctive shade of green.

Differences in susceptibility to acculturative pressures were also apparent in areas of Galician and Bukovynian settlement. Although the two groups often settled together, they tended to retain their separate identities. Colonization agents regarded Bukovynian immigrants as more bucolic and backward than their compatriots from Galicia. The Bukovynians possessed a folk tradition that seems, at least to non-Ukrainian eyes, more colorful, flamboyant, and expressive. Whether it reflects a deeper commitment to folk culture, a generally slower rate of economic progress, or simply the geographical location of their settlements is a matter for conjecture, but the Bukovynians showed more reluctance to incorporate Anglo-Saxon elements into their landscapes. As a result, the Bukovynian landscape, though fundamentally similar to that of their Galician fellows, retained a greater distinctiveness in the postpioneer era.

In both Galician and Bukovynian areas it was only after decades of settlement that Canadian tastes were clearly reflected in the domestic landscape. When it occurred, the change was often dramatic, because it involved the adoption of Anglo-Saxon “pattern-book” house designs and a complete loss of continuity with traditional architectural forms. But the stoutly built folk house did not disappear from the countryside; it merely descended the social scale and occupied a new role as storage shed for equipment or grain.

**CONCLUSION**

The obliteration of the landscape of Ukrainian settlement has been accelerating. Pressures toward assimilation always accompanied the legitimate economic aspirations of the immigrants. Too often “progress” bred a disdain for the traditional, which was associated with the unsophisticated, while it heightened regard for the modern—the North American—whether in clothing or house design. In this respect the landscape of Ukrainian settlement in western Canada was always under pressure for change from within as well as from without.

The Ukrainian pioneer was in a powerless position in Canadian society. He was manipulated; seldom did he manipulate. Even the place names in Ukrainian settlements were established by English-speaking administrators, surveyors, and railway builders. The immigrant’s position is reflected in the paucity of Ukrainian toponyms in their areas of settlement. They gave Ukrainian names to a few schools, some school districts, and some small settlements on the outer fringes of the ecumene. Most service centers were the products of the railway companies; it was only in later years that Ukrainians drifted off their homesteads into the towns and villages along the railway lines. For this reason, even in small urban centers in the heart of Ukrainian block settlements, such as Vegreville in the Alberta block, or Gardenton in southeastern Manitoba, there is little evidence in the form of architecture or place names that the communities have long been predominantly Ukrainian.

Because the Ukrainian settlements in western Canada were designed to serve the commercial farmer and the interests of the institutional elite of eastern Canada, it was inevitable that Ukrainian pioneer landscapes would lose their distinction and become homogenized by the onrush of Anglo-American technology and tastes. As rural depopulation, farm consolidation, and abandonment further hasten the obliteration of what is left of immigrant material culture in the 1980s, the church remains the embodiment of Ukrainian culture in the
countryside. New churches designed by architects in the past decade convey the traditional architectural elements only in an abstract or stylized fashion (Fig. 7). But they fulfill their role well and will endure when all other elements of the Ukrainian landscape have faded from the scene.

NOTES


14. After two years of settlement in the Stuartburn district of Manitoba, only two acres of rye were cultivated by Ukrainian pioneers, compared to 49 acres of wheat and 32½ acres of barley. Public Archives of Canada, RG 76, vol. 178, file 60868, pt. 1.

15. Personal communication, Ivan Dolychnuk, Caliento, Manitoba, July 4, 1974; Fred Kraynyk, Sirko, Manitoba, May 14, 1976; and John Pamachuk, Arbakka, Manitoba, July 15, 1975.


18. A lawsuit between the Greek Catholic and Russian Orthodox factions contesting the ownership of a shared church building, erected near Star, Alberta, by the Greek Catholic community, was fought to the level of the Privy Council. The costs to both sides were many times the value of the disputed church. For a view biased toward the Orthodox case, see James G. MacGregor, *Vilni-Zemli/Free Lands: The Ukrainian Settlement of Alberta* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969).


