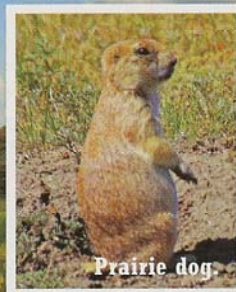


# Saskatchewan

## LAND OF ENDLESS SKY

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Prairie dog.



Antelope play.

**T**he old man hardly moved. Casually putting down his tea and adjusting his red Co-Op cap he told me people forgot to call it Saskatchewan in the 1930s. They simply called it the “Dust Bowl.” There was no rain and dust blew day and night.

The Golden West Hotel Restaurant in Sceptre is on the opposite corner from the Co-Op. While nibbling at today’s lunch special (a grilled cheese and tea), I learned that the Co-Op store really is the hub of the settlement. With a machine shop and an Agro Centre that is more like a hardware store and grocery store under one roof, the Co-Op has pretty much everything you need.

My friend with the red cap told me hardly anybody lives in the town since the school was closed and converted to a museum. Only about a hundred or so people reside in Sceptre now and its surrounding area. I suppose it was cheaper to move elsewhere instead of fixing up the old homes.

There isn’t any dust in the air today. In fact, there’s not a cloud as far as one

can see, and in this part of the country, that is forever. Behind the Golden West Hotel, just past the grain elevator with the faded ‘ghost sign’ that barely indicates the elevator once belonged to the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, an enormous field of bright yellow granola waves gently in the wind. Here’s where the sky merges with the land.

It is difficult to see if all of Saskatchewan fully recovered from the dust bowl days 70 years past. Sceptre is hanging in there, but when its only remaining store closes and the old hotel and restaurant shut down, it may become a ghost town too. The train hasn’t stopped here for years.

Saskatchewan is a place of dramatic contrasts. While one could easily be deceived by the towns and farms that have been abandoned and the rusty rail sidings that disappear somewhere beyond the horizon, it is still naturally beautiful. Here is an outdoor paradise the rest of the world can only dream about. Much of the province is a transition zone from the last few remaining grasslands of

the southwest, interrupted only by the gently rolling farms toward the centre, to the rugged wilderness in the north with its many lakes and rivers.

The dust of the ‘30s has long since settled over southern Saskatchewan. The wind still whispers though the few lonely aspen trees and blows continuously down long, straight roads cutting through the large oceans of green.

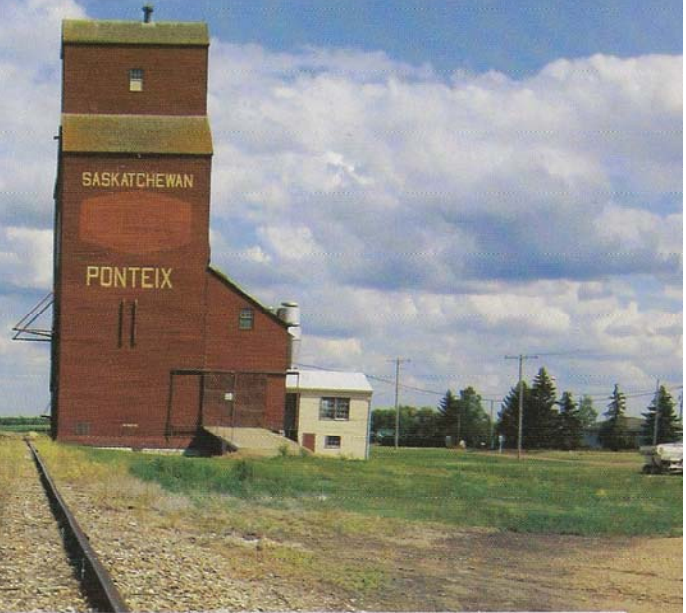
We are amidst Canada’s bread basket. In Saskatchewan, farms are not measured in acres or hectares, but by the quarter (160 acres) or section (640 acres) and most farms consist of many sections. It is also here that the first European settlers worked under unbelievably harsh conditions to produce enough food to feed, not only a young Canada, but much of North America.

It is also unique, because it is one of the last remaining prairie lands in its original state. The Grasslands National Park offers a window to our past. Its proximity to Montana easily transports the visitor back

# hewan



Sceptre, Saskatchewan.



to the days of our forefathers when the first European settlers had to compete with native people as well as outlaws fleeing U.S. authorities.

The immense herds of bison they all tried to contain are now gone. On a good day, badgers, rabbits, antelope, deer and coyotes are more often the common sight. A few large colonies of prairie dogs may show up, but a truly unique experience is spotting the last remaining bison foraging along the banks of the winding Frenchman River. The wilderness, however, remains untamed by man. Time has stood still.

Time certainly did not seem important when we came to the South Saskatchewan River. Without warning, we suddenly ran out of road. There was no bridge, but a ferry was on the other side. With a wave to summon, the ferry came to pick us up. Half way across, the captain noticed our cameras and brought the ferry to a halt midstream. He casually mentioned if we would wait for a few moments, we surely could get some great pictures of white pelicans that were going

to fly over us. They did every day.

The captain's home was a small farm about three miles down the road and he told us we should stop by and say hello to his wife. We couldn't miss the house, he said. It was the only one on the left.

In the Cree First Nation's language, Saskatchewan means fast flowing river. It may have flown fast when Sitting Bull hung out here avoiding the US Cavalry, but when we turned off the road to head for the Leaning Tree Ranch and Guest House, the Saskatchewan was meandering peacefully through a countryside straight out of a western movie.

Not far from here, the Great Sandhills appear unexpectedly, because there seems to be no reason to have dunes like a desert. Immense hills of pure sand cover 1900 square kilometres. Forever blowing with the wind, it creates an amazing landscape of natural and eternal transformation.

As we continue to travel, trees begin to become more plentiful along the rivers and in the valleys. When we crest a hill, a forest of tall lodge pole

pinus appear. It is the Cypress Hills Provincial Park. They would look more at home in northern Ontario than southern Saskatchewan.

The wide-open and flat country, with its never-ending blue sky, vast grain and canola fields gently waving in the wind, and endless straight roads are not all we experienced. The Saskatchewan we travelled, although only a very small section, is a land beckoning to be discovered. There are surprises over every hill and around every bend.

In this area of the country, the driver of every passing car waves to you. Although our great country's early beginning may have started along the shores of the eastern seaboard, it was Saskatchewan that helped bring the nation together. Only a handful of sod houses remain today, built by the first settlers generations ago. The hearts of the people have changed little over time. If you look at a map, you will see that Saskatchewan is at the physical centre and is truly the heart of North America—still kind, still pure and ready to be explored. V