

Institutional Constraints on Indian Farming on the Canadian Prairies, 1885 to 1920

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Abstract

As Canada's Indians moved onto reserves in the late 19th Century, their old hunting and collecting lifestyle disappeared, along with the buffalo. The obvious substitute, settled agriculture, was desired by both Indians and the Government. Farming however was not a success, and this paper examines the causes and extent of that failure. Indian farmers appear to have been competent, but were hampered by severe restrictions imposed by the Department of Indian Affairs. These constraints were eased after 1897, and Indian farming then grew slowly, to a small commercial scale, but far below that of non-reserve farms.

Introduction

Between the 1870s and the 1890s, Indians on the Canadian Prairies were gradually corralled into reservations. Their hunting grounds were wanted by the Dominion government for wheat farming, and were in any case less useful to the Indians, as whites hunted down the last buffalo. Once on the reserves, a new means of support had to be found, and farming was the obvious candidate. Many Indians tried farming, and some were successful. The majority however were not, and farming failed to replace the previous socio-economic system based on the buffalo, leaving Indians without a sound economic base. This paper looks at the Indian transition to farming, and examines the reasons why it was relatively unsuccessful. It analyzes the hypothesis that Indian farmers were competent, but faced a variety of institutional constraints. Some of these constraints were formal, but many quasi-legal restrictions were created by the Department of Indian Affairs.

Carter states that the "standard explanation for the failure of agriculture on western Canadian reserves" was that "Indians could not be convinced of the value or necessity of the enterprise." (Carter, 1990, *ix*) Her opinion, backed by thorough descriptive evidence, is that Indians were interested in agriculture, but were prevented by a variety of devices from succeeding. She focuses mostly on the 1880s and 90s, during which Indian farming progressed only slowly. The picture however changed after 1900, when Indian farming began to generate a commercial surplus, albeit much smaller than that on white farms. Carter blames Hayter Reed¹ for many of the problems. "Because the banding together of Indians on reserves militated against their conversion into

¹ Indian Agent, Battleford, 1881-1883; Assistant Deputy Indian Commissioner, 1883-1884; Assistant Commissioner, 1884-1888, Indian Commissioner, 1888-1893; Deputy

citizens, Reed's ultimate answer was to see the reserves broken up". (Carter, 1990, 145)
Similarly, Anderson and Lueck regard the traditional explanations of failure in the US to be "insufficient access to capital markets, low levels of education, poor endowments of natural resources or Indians' goals and attitudes. (Anderson and Lueck, 1992, 147)

Indian Perspectives on Property Rights.

The previous Indian socio-economic system had been based on the right to acquire resource flows. The Indians had no concept of the ownership of resource stocks, such as buffalo herds or land. Their lifestyle was wandering and nomadic, because of the movement of the natural resources on which they lived, so they could not accumulate possessions. Beyond one year's needs, there was no possibility of accumulating stored food, so once those needs were met, there was no point in continuing the hunt. The Indians' human capital also was appropriate for the mobile life, but less so for a settled existence. The important exception was their intimate knowledge of climate, and perhaps of soils. When choosing reservations they were guided both by their knowledge and by the understanding that their previous communal existence would continue. It is not clear though whether the land they chose was well suited to sedentary agriculture.

Property rights for white settlers were different from those of Indians. A white settler received the standard 160-acre homestead for a nominal \$10 fee, which after a three-year proving-up period became fully privately owned. The settler could then use his land for collateral when buying equipment, animals and building materials. There were also preemption and railway lands available as and when the farm needed to expand. Status Indians were not permitted to apply for homestead land, and so were

restricted to their reservation, where there was also no spare land onto which they could subsequently expand their farms.

There was a fundamental misunderstanding between the Indians and the incoming whites, with Indians assuming that the reserve was a base for activities in the surrounding areas, and whites thinking that the Indians would obtain their living within the confines of the reserve². Europeans saw the reserves as an intermediate step towards assimilation or annihilation.

The principal issues about reserve agriculture centre around property rights. The Indians who agreed or were coerced into moving onto reservations believed that they would continue to live and provide for themselves communally, since that was their primary experience³. Whilst each band was restricted to their reserve, property rights on that land were poorly specified. The band, under the coordination of the Chief, essentially owned the land, but it not outright, since all reserves were held in trust by the Department of Indian Affairs. Indian chiefs however did not have authority over the members of the band - their function was to coordinate band activities through common counsel - bands functioned communally, through the explicit support of members. The effect of this was to make it difficult to organize farming activity. Though not used to private land ownership, if Indians were to succeed, they had to learn to function as economically individual units, rather than collectively as a band. In practice, they would have had to do this without the ability to control many of the inputs essential to farming.

² This stemmed in part from the Robinson Treaties of 1850, in which Indians " . . . retained full and free privilege to hunt over the territory now ceded by them and to fish in the waters thereof, as they have been heretofore in the habit of doing". (Dickason, 1990, 232). This stipulation was not included in any of the numbered treaties, although it was mentioned in the discussions leading to several of them. (Morris, 1880)

³ Some of the pressure to create reserves came from the Indians themselves, who were

Major Crops on Reserves

The data used in this paper come from the Annual Reports of the Department of Indian Affairs between 1883 and 1922, the Census of Canada for 1890, 1900, 1910 and 1920, and the Census of the Prairie Provinces for 1885, 1905 and 1915⁴. Areas and outputs used for Census farms are net of the areas and outputs of Indian reservations. The data for census farms are biased downwards due to the rapid growth of the urban population, particularly in Winnipeg. We have information on the number of farms on reserves for each year only between 1887 and 1895, when the Department of Indian Affairs listed the activities of each Indian farmer separately⁵. Otherwise the denominator for output has to be the overall population of the reserve or Census area, so we have therefore have only imperfect indicators of relative output⁶. Given the rapid growth of European settlement, dividing by population numbers deflates the census sizes.

The major commercial crops were wheat and oats, and the most important root crop was potatoes, so the analysis focuses on these. Varying amounts of other field and root crops were grown, but in small amounts. Animal husbandry was not a significant source of income for Indian farms during the period, though many Indians kept one or two cows.

TABLES AND FIGURES ABOUT HERE

afraid that otherwise they would be swamped by white settlers.

⁴ There was no census of the Prairie Provinces in 1895.

⁵ Canada: Sessional Papers, Reports of the Department of Indian Affairs, 1888 to 1896.

⁶ Once the census identifies rural and urban population separately, rural population is

Wheat

The area of wheat grown per capita population increased slowly until 1900, from 0.09 to 0.22 acres per capita. (Table One, Figure One.) During that period the area on farms outside the reserves grew from 3.1 to 6.39 acres per capita. (Table Two, Figure One.) Figure Seven shows the increase in the aggregate area of wheat on reserve farms, which is again slow until 1905. As Figure Ten shows, wheat made up a substantial proportion of the total cropped area on reserve farms - not as much as on those off reserves, but averaging about thirty percent throughout the period 1885 to 1920. Figure Two shows the yield of wheat on and off reserve farms. Yields on reserve farms were initially low, but again after 1900 they closely mirror those on non-reserve farms. Yield data (Figure Two) imply that the main issue for Indian farms was size rather than productivity.

Carter's suggestion that Indians did not participate in the market economy is not correct. (Carter, 1990, 13) For self sufficiency Indians would have needed about one bushel of wheat per person, and by 1920 the average output was over six and a half bushels. Table Three and Figure Eleven shows how wheat production increased, particularly after 1920.

Oats

Most of the observations on wheat apply also to oats. More oats than wheat would have been retained on the farm, for animal feed, particularly for horses. Table One and Two, and Figure Three show the area of oat crops increasing slowly until 1900, and then more rapidly. Areas are far lower on reserve farms than on those off reserves. Yield similarly are lower, but mirror those on non-reserve farms, though less strongly than for

used as the denominator.

wheat. Again, though, the main divergence is in cropped area rather than yield. The principal problem for Indian farms therefore appears to be the area of the crop, rather than the competence of the farmers at growing it.

Potatoes

For potatoes, reserves and census farms also show similar trends, though the differences in the levels of output is less pronounced. (Figures Five, Nine and Eleven and Tables One and Two.) Potato acreages were low on both reserve and census farms. Potatoes are very labour intensive to grow, and while some would have been grown for subsistence purposes, farmers didn't have the time to grow much for market. Potatoes though can be planted and harvested after the grain crops, and therefore do not compete for scarce labour. Yields were consistently higher on census farms than on reserves. (Figure Six).

The major commercial crop on the Prairies was wheat, and prior to 1900 Indian farms produced too little if any to sell on the market. A bushel of wheat, one-and-a-half of potatoes and a few turnips were only enough to feed one person. The oats and barley, with some prairie hay and fodder, would have been needed to feed the animals. There are two questions to analyze - why did Indian farms do so badly before 1900, and what changed then to enable them to increase their output? Even after 1900, Indian production per capita remained far below that on non-reserve farms.

Institutional Constraints on Indian Farms

What factors held back the development of Indian farms? Why didn't they compete? Was it a lack of motivation, or were there constraints that prevented reserve

farmers from producing enough crops for market to enable them to prosper? It was not that the Indians were unfamiliar with the concepts of commercial transactions - they had been trading both with each other and with Europeans for a very long time. Nor was it a lack of interest – with the buffalo gone by the late 1870s they were very concerned about their food supply. They also had enough land – the reserves were initially more than sufficient in size. Property rights to land though were complicated. When the reserves were first established, the land within the reserve was in effect common property, treated as land was before the reserve was set up. Some informal division took place internally, though the details are not recorded. Reserve Indians did work the land, but it is not clear whether they established individual “farms”, or whether their product belonged exclusively to those who did the work. It appears probable that it was shared communally, as food had been prior to the move onto reserves, and it is very likely that at first all the food remained on the reserve.

In 1886 Dewdney, the Indian Commissioner, was instructed by the then Prime Minister, John A. Macdonald, to give land to individual Indians. Plots ranged from 40 to 160 acres, with 80 acres being typical. There was a major advantage to the government in breaking up the reserves in this way, in that once every Indian had been allotted land, the remaining area of the reserve could be declared ‘surplus’, and sold to white settlers. Since the reserves were not Dominion land, this subdivision into farms had no foundation in law, which further complicated the Indian farmers inability to use ‘their’ land as collateral for loans or mortgages. Since Indians were not allowed to buy land off the reserves, they were economically captive.

The aggregate number of Indians was relatively small, and they had little political voice, so their needs were largely ignored. Hayter Reed pushed the policy of subdivision as hard as possible. By breaking the reserves up into small, individually owned parcels, with the stated intention of providing Indians with private farms, the reserve as an institution could be eroded. Similar measures to break up Indian reserves were undertaken in the US. The General Allotment Act of 1887 permitted the President to break up reservations and assign the land to individual Indians. (Anderson and Lueck, 1992, 429).

Overtly the Department of Indian Affairs was supposed to assist the Indians in establishing a new independent way of living, with the focus on agriculture. All the numbered treaties included the provision of implements and farm animals, at the insistence of the Indians. Treaty Four, the Qu'Appelle Treaty, states:

It is further agreed between Her Majesty and the said Indians that the following articles shall be supplied to any band thereof who are now actually cultivating the soil, or who shall hereafter settle on these reserves and commence to break up the land, that is to say - two hoes, one spade, one scythe, and one axe for every family so actually cultivating; and enough seed, wheat, barley, oats and potatoes to plant such lands as they have broken up; also one plough and two harrows for every ten families so cultivating as aforesaid; also to each Chief; for the use of his band as aforesaid, one yoke of oxen, one bull, four cows, a chest of ordinary carpenters' tools, five hand-saws, five augers, one cross-cut saw, one pit saw, the necessary files, and one grindstone; all the aforesaid articles to be given once for all, for the encouragement of the practice of agriculture among the Indians. (Morris, 1880, Appendix, 333.)

One plough for each ten families was insufficient, given that all needed to plough at the same time of year. A single yoke of oxen for the entire band was grossly inadequate - a plough and a yoke of oxen were the first equipment that a white settler

acquired. Under the Indian Act (1876), Indians were excluded from liens and mortgages, which meant that they couldn't use their land as collateral for loans.

The main problem facing reserve Indian farmers appears to have been access to non-land inputs. This arose because of the attitudes of members of the Department of Indian Affairs. Hayter Reed in particular systematically used whatever powers he had at his disposal to obstruct agricultural development. Reed wanted to destroy the reserve system, and declared that he wanted to integrate the Indians into white society (Carter, 1990, 146.)

In 1889 Hayter Reed, then Indian Commissioner, announced a new 'peasant' policy for Indian reserves. (Canada, House of Commons, Sessional Papers, 1889, Vol. **23** #12, p 48.) The target was one acre of wheat, a few roots and one or two cows, using only hand tools - a hoe, rake, sickle, cradle and flail. This would yield a bare subsistence standard of living for the Indians, with no prospect of improvement, but, on the other hand, isolated from the uncertainties of the market economy. (But with a precarious existence, at the mercy of the weather.)

Reed's policy of self-sufficiency required that Indians should not have access to items such as implements and machinery. On this basis Indian agents were not only to refuse to give equipment to the Indians, but were to actively thwart attempts to buy it. The Department of Indian Affairs arrogated to itself the power to approve all transactions, whether purchases or sales, by Indian farmers. Using this extra-legal control, they explicitly refused to allow Indians the tools they needed to expand into commercial scale grain farming. Because the Indian Act excluded Indians from any form of loan or mortgage, merchants could not even advance them even the normal level of

credit traditional in agricultural communities over the harvest cycle. Indians were prevented from buying even such basic items as nails and hinges. (Carter, 1990, 212) From 1885 a pass system was also introduced, ostensibly to prevent Indians from joining the Riel rebellion. This had no legal foundation, but was enforced anyway by the RCMP. To get a pass an Indian had to apply to the Reserve Farm instructor, even for shopping or visiting another reserve.

While white settlers were proving up their farms as rapidly as possible, Indian farm sizes grew much more slowly, as Figure Eleven shows. This was likely due in part to the non-participation of many Indian bands. Those non-participators did not however have alternative means of support, other than the treaty obligations of the Department of Indian Affairs, so the overall picture of Indian production is realistic.

The main natural constraint on wheat production was the short growing season. White farmers were able gradually to overcome this by the use of new labour-saving equipment. (Ward, 1994, 1995) Unable to acquire these, Indians could not increase the size of their fields, and therefore could not compete in the market.

The attitude towards Indians was similar in the US to that in Canada. "Treaties were expedients by which ignorant, intractable and savage people were induced without bloodshed to yield up what civilized people had the right to possess by virtue of that command of the Creator delivered to man upon his formation - be fruitful, multiply and replenish the earth, and subdue it". (Governor George Gilmer, cited in Utley, 1984, 36).

One possibility is that the Department of Indian Affairs wanted to eliminate the Indians as competitors to the white settlers. That seems to have been the outcome of the policy measures enacted, but it is not clear why that should have been an appropriate

strategy. The Dominion government was working hard to attract settlers from elsewhere in the world to develop a commercial grain economy and to provide markets for eastern manufacturers and the CPR. Indians had great potential as farmers, due to depth of their knowledge of climate, vegetation and possibly also soils

Conclusion

The underlying intent of the policies of the Department of Indian Affairs seems to have been to eliminate the Indians as a social and political entity. Once confined to the reserves, there was little that the Indians could do other than farm. However the limitations place on Indian farming made it very difficult for an individual Indian farmer to make a living.

Reserve agriculture got off to a very shaky start in the 1880s and 1890s. Indians tried to adapt to the new way of life, but were hampered by a variety of institutional constraints, some legal, others not. During this period there was continuing hardship on the Reserves, with frequent food shortages. While Hayter Reed exerted his influence, there was little that Indians could do to develop their farms. Once Reed was gone, and with wheat markets developing, farming progressed after 1900, with Indian farms developing a surplus, albeit small. From 1900 on, underlying factors began to constrain outputs.

An important issue was the way in which property rights on the reserves developed. Anderson and Hill observe that it is essential that property rights evolve from the bottom up. "Whether people fight over valuable resources or engage in cooperation and trade depends on how property rights are defined and enforced. (Anderson and Hill,

2004, 14) Robak considers that people are more likely to obey laws that they have agreed to. (Robak, 1992, 7) She notes that in the US: "allotment failed because it privatized the land among individuals without understanding the existing tribal and family structures or the property rights structure that accompanied it." (Robak, 1992, 22).

It appears that, from their protestations at the constraints imposed, Indians wanted to participate in commercial farming. The early years though were sabotaged by the Department of Indian Affairs, and Indian farms never did develop into viable large-scale operations. Some farmers gave up in frustration, and others did not start. A few prospered, but generally had eventually to give up their status and move off the reserves away from the band, in order to acquire the additional land they needed.

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Table One
Acreage and Yield of Major Crops on Reserves

	Wheat			Oats			Potatoes		
	Acres/ farm	Acres/ Cap	Yield	Acres/ farm	Acres/ Cap	Yield	Acres/ farm	Acres/ Cap	Yield
1885		0.09	7.58		0.02	10.2		0.05	67.85
1890	2.53	0.13	11.12	0.80	0.04	8.98	0.37	0.02	67.1
1895		0.18	10.86		0.06	13.85		0.02	72.21
1900		0.22	6.46		0.11	14.37		0.03	71.5
1905		0.35	17.55		0.28	26.67		0.02	77.2
1910		0.47	11.92		0.44	21.64		0.02	82.87
1915		0.66	15.89		0.69	25.42		0.03	76.42
1920		0.77	14.23		0.82	18.83		0.02	65.96

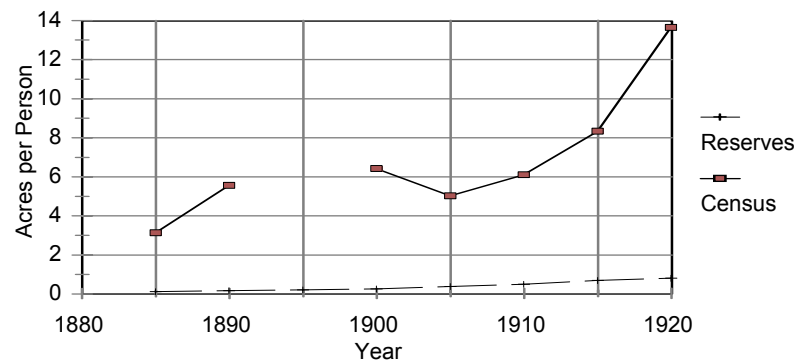
Table Two
Acreage and Yield of Major Crops on Census Farms

	Wheat			Oats			Potatoes		
	Acres/ farm	Acres/ Cap	Yield	Acres/ farm	Acres/ Cap	Yield	Acres/ farm	Acres/ Cap	Yield
1885	17.49	3.1	18.27	7.39	1.31	31.89	0.46	0.08	141.49
1890	31.66	5.53	17.72	9.96	1.74	31.5	0.37	0.06	156.86
1895									
1900	45.99	6.39	9.4	15.21	2.13	20	0.45	0.06	124.9
1905	32.15	4.99	20.15	13.83	2.15	40.59	0.32	0.05	143.29
1910	38.79	6.07	14.01	19.11	2.99	27.37	0.35	0.05	115.87
1915	63.55	8.3	25.78	27.36	3.57	46.67	0.42	0.06	112.41
1920	65.53	13.62	12.33	35.37	7.35	23.94	0.31	0.07	96.88

Table Three
Per Capita Production of Major Crops on Reserves
(Bushels)

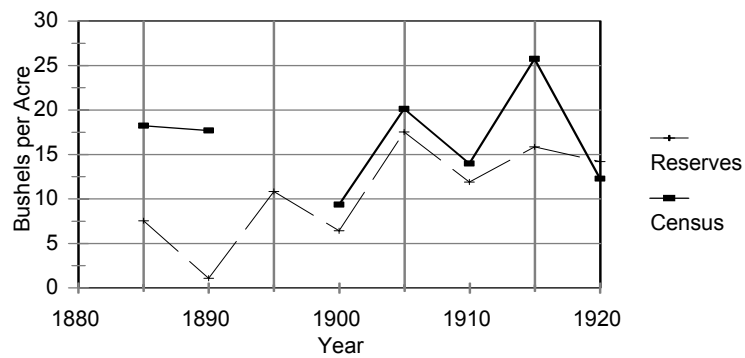
	Wheat	Oats	Potatoes
1885	0.71	0.2	3.71
1890	1.40	0.36	1.24
1895	1.94	0.88	1.49
1900	1.05	1.18	1.76
1905	7.37	8.88	1.98
1910	5.61	9.49	1.22
1915	8.18	13.73	1.52
1920	6.68	13.32	1.70

Figure One
Wheat Area Per Capita



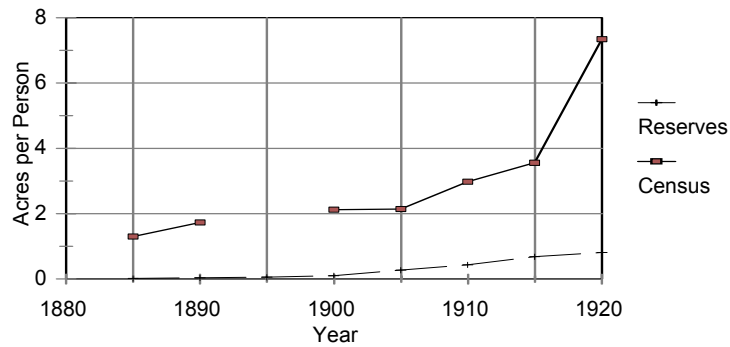
Sources: Canada: Sessional Papers, Reports of the Department of Indian Affairs
Canada: Census of Canada and Census of the Prairie Provinces

Figure Two
Wheat Yields



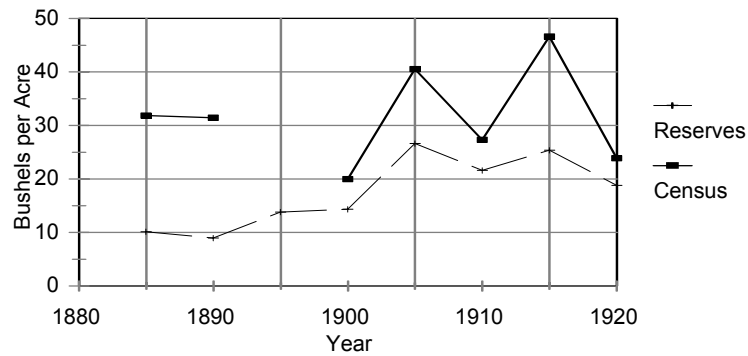
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Canada: Census of Canada and Census of the Prairie Provinces

Figure Three
Oat Area Per Capita



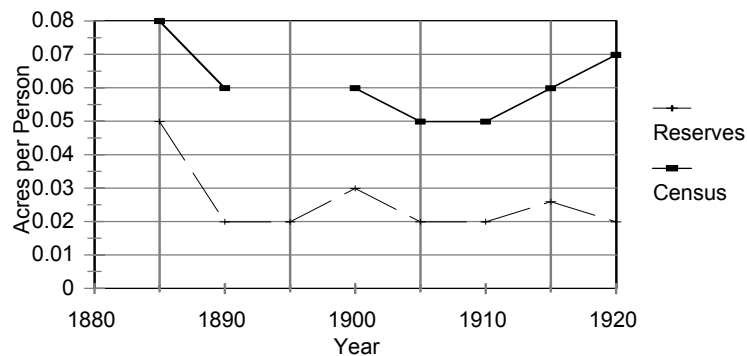
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Canada: Census of Canada and Census of the Prairie Provinces

Figure Four
Oat Yields



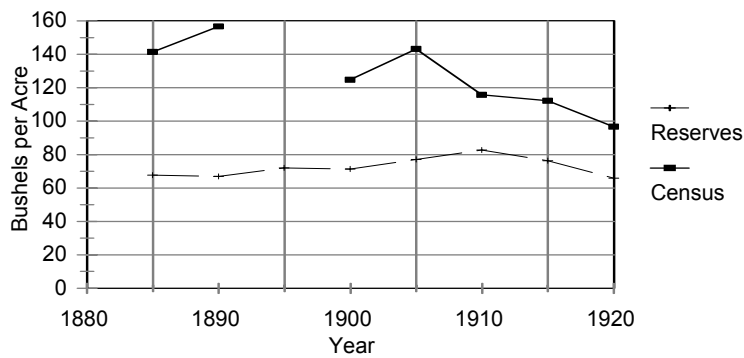
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Canada: Census of Canada and Census of the Prairie Provinces

Figure Five
Potato Area Per Capita



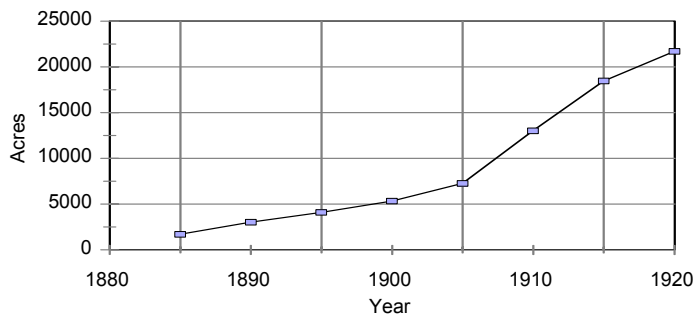
Sources: Canada: Sessional Papers, Reports of the Department of Indian Affairs
Canada: Census of Canada and Census of the Prairie Provinces

Figure Six
Potato Yields



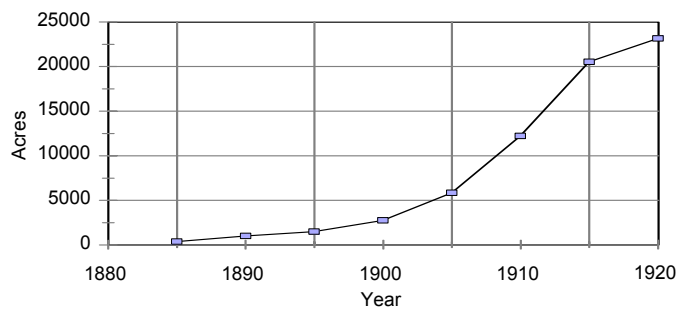
Sources: Canada: Sessional Papers, Reports of the Department of Indian Affairs
Canada: Census of Canada and Census of the Prairie Provinces

Figure Seven
Total Wheat Area on Reserve Farms



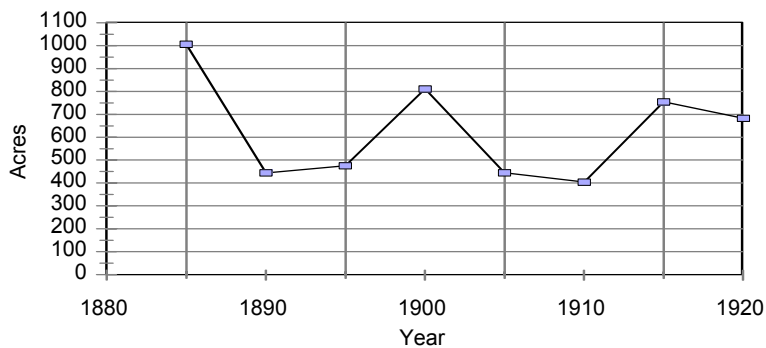
Sources: Canada: Sessional Papers, Reports of the Department of Indian Affairs
Canada: Census of Canada and Census of the Prairie Provinces

Figure Eight
Total Oats Area on Reserve Farms



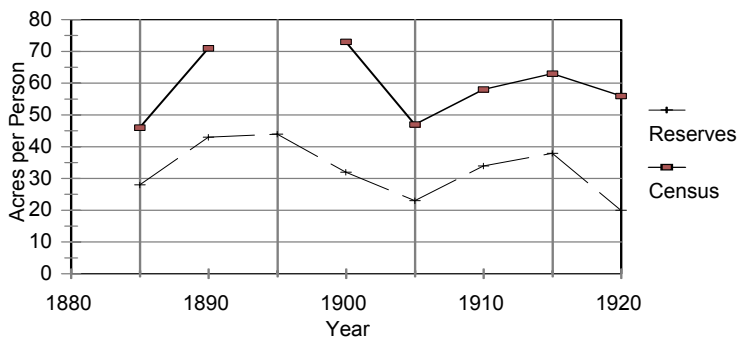
Sources: Canada: Sessional Papers, Reports of the Department of Indian Affairs
Canada: Census of Canada and Census of the Prairie Provinces

Figure Nine
Total Potato Area on Reserve Farms



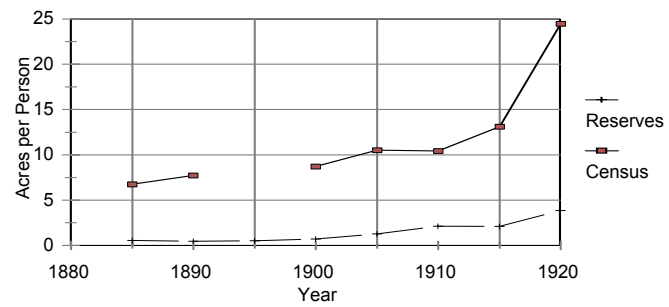
Sources: Canada: Sessional Papers, Reports of the Department of Indian Affairs
Canada: Census of Canada and Census of the Prairie Provinces

Figure Ten
Wheat as a Percentage of All Crops



Sources: Canada: Sessional Papers, Reports of the Department of Indian Affairs
Canada: Census of Canada and Census of the Prairie Provinces

Figure Eleven
Total Area of Crops Per Person



Sources: Canada: Sessional Papers, Reports of the Department of Indian Affairs
Canada: Census of Canada and Census of the Prairie Provinces