

PRAIRIE PERSPECTIVES: GEOGRAPHICAL ESSAYS

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# Preface

## Introduction

Each volume of *Prairie Perspectives: Geographical Essays* is published in coordination with the annual meeting and conference of the Prairie Division of the Canadian Association of Geographers (PCAG). The year 2015 marked on the 39<sup>th</sup> occurrence of the PCAG gathering, which was hosted jointly by the University of Winnipeg and Lakehead University and held in Kenora, Ontario over the 25<sup>th</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> of September. A total of 84 members gathered for a weekend consisting of paper presentations, a poster display, field trips, and PCAG business meetings. The research papers reflected the diverse interests of prairie geographers: three concurrent sessions on borders and regions; geographical techniques and methods; and hydrology were held early on Saturday morning, while another set on culture and environment; geography and society; and climate took place in the late morning.

This was the first year that PCAG was held in Ontario. The decision to gather in Kenora reflected the important role of Lakehead University in the association and gave geographers from the prairie institutions a chance to broaden their perspectives by visiting a region of the Canadian Shield. The choice of Kenora also reflected the longstanding PCAG tradition of gathering annually in smaller towns, celebrating an interest in local culture and seeking out places for geographic inquiry that are 'off the beaten track' from major centres. In accordance with these goals, two field trips were held on Saturday afternoon. Marc Vachon led the cultural geography excursion through the town core to recount Kenora's history, consider the evolution of architectural forms, and explore the development of public space along the Lake of the Woods waterfront. Participants also learned to see the town's place through the lens of territorial disputes between Manitoba and Ontario. The physical geography trip was directed by Nora Casson, who led members to the Experimental Lakes Area (ELA) 35 km southeast of the town site. The ELA is an outdoor research centre consisting of 58 lakes. By manipulating the lakes under controlled conditions, scientists are able to study the effects that human-induced factors such as climate change and nutrient loading have on freshwater ecologies. The ELA was also featured later in the evening at the gala banquet where the association's honorary speaker was Michael Rennie, resident biologist at the site and professor at Lakehead University. Dr. Rennie's talk was warmly received by the audience. It ranged across the history of the ELA and its importance in a number of leading studies, its public role in disseminating scientific research, and its relationship with First Nations' use and land claims in the area. He also reflected on the ELA's recent transition from federal direction through Fisheries and Oceans Canada to new management under the International Institute of Sustainable Development, an independent non-profit organization. Following Dr. Rennie's talk, the association welcomed CAG President Theresa Garvin and thanked her for

attending the divisional meeting. The evening concluded with remarks from Derrek Eberts (PCAG President), the annual slide show competition, and an awards ceremony that saw Weldon Hiebert receive the John Welsted Award for Service to Geography in the Western Interior.

## Prairie Perspectives

*Prairie Perspectives: Geographical Essays* is maintained by PCAG and functions as a proceedings of the annual conference as well as an edited, peer-reviewed journal. The articles within are often papers presented at the PCAG meeting but are also drawn from a wide community of scholars including association members, geographers working at prairie institutions, and those not based in the region but working on topics relevant to prairie geography. In this volume the article by Baidoc and Cromwell, both contributions by Lehr and McGregor, and the field trip by Casson et al. were elements of the PCAG 2015 meeting in Kenora. The article by Beattie and the two field trips by Wiseman and McGinn arose out of the 2014 meeting at Elkhorn Lodge in Riding Mountain National Park, hosted by Brandon University.

Volume 18 groups articles into three thematic sections. The first set reflects geographic techniques and research methods. We open with Brian McGregor and John C. Lehr's article, which problematizes past analyses of the 'frontier' concept often used to understand European settlement of the North American west. The authors charge that the convention of using census and postal information to map the geography of settlement leads to inaccuracies, since these records do not necessarily reflect the reality of who was living on the western frontier. Instead, McGregor and Lehr find school district formation a more realistic measurement of established settlement. They employ a GIS model of the movement and evolution of prairie settlement, building a series of maps to illustrate how schools track the transformation of western Canada. Next, Aaron J. Kingsbury's article also describes a project that combines GIS and schools, this time to identify locations meeting classroom placement requirements for P-12 teacher education candidates at Mayville State University (MSU) in North Dakota. Because of the rural location of the university and the demographic homogeneity in many of the surrounding towns, MSU administrators found it difficult to identify placement locations that would expose teacher candidates to ethnic diversity in the classroom. Kingsbury describes how a GIS-based spatial decision support system was able to improve the placement process for the candidates. In the following article, Gina Sylvestre is likewise concerned with the use of research methods to meet institutional and social needs. She describes a project directed by the City of Winnipeg to create *Surefoot*, a bulletin designed to raise awareness and communicate changing winter sidewalk walking conditions to city residents. Sylvestre argues that a geographic mobilities paradigm brings to light new questions about the experience of friction and walking in winter environments. She also examines the ultimate discontinuation of the *Surefoot* program, concluding that hierarchies of mobility exist between car travel

and pedestrianism that impact policy decisions. The next article describes the application of geographical tools to commercial silviculture. In this two-part study, authors Ashley Greenley, Mandy MacRae, William Paton, and Dion Wiseman worked with an industry partner to assess opportunities for commercial production of red osier dogwood (*Cornus sericea*) in Brandon, Manitoba. Interest in this particular plant comes from its neutral derivatives, which may provide considerable benefits to human and animal health. In their article, the authors first describe a study to understand and meet the considerable difficulties of propagating red osier dogwood in nursery conditions. The second part describes how a GIS model was developed to locate optimal propagation sites by considering a variety of overlapping concerns including soil suitability, distance to markets, and labour supply.

The next set of articles showcases how a range of questions may be addressed using methods in physical geography. Though the research reported on is drawn from study sites ranging across Canada, a connecting thread between the three articles is their illustration of anthropogenic impacts on the natural environment. This group is led off by Robert Baidoc and Adam R. Cornwell, who describe their efforts to determine the future probability of forest fires in the eastern boreal forest region of Canada. Their analysis relied on factors affecting moisture content in fine debris found at the forest floor: higher temperatures will dry the material, increasing its ignition potential, whereas precipitation will have the opposite effect. Using these indicators, Baidoc and Cornwell model a future climate change scenario, determining that the probability of fire will increase significantly as climate change continues toward the end of the twenty-first century. The next study, by Melody Caron, David Lobb, Jim Miller, Kui Liu, and Phillip Owens, takes place in Alberta in the Lower Little Bow River (LLBR) watershed. Here, sediments in the river are a growing concern. Silt and soils in the water cause a variety of problems: they transport pollutants, can negatively affect river ecology, and damage the irrigation pumps used by farmers. Controlling the influx of sediments is thus a main concern of conservation and management in the LLBR. In their article, Caron et al. explain how it was possible to use the presence of radionuclide cesium-137 as a means of 'fingerprinting' the origin of sediment found in the river. They found that surface erosion sources like agricultural fields are far less impactful on the river than subsurface sources, such as irrigation return flow channels and cuts into streambanks feeding the river. The third physical geography paper returns to the central prairies to an agricultural research facility in Brandon, Manitoba. Here, Brandice Hollier, Christopher Malcom, and Melanie Dubois report on a study of the effects of agricultural land use on small mammal populations. Their results speak directly to diminishing biodiversity – in comparisons between cropped and natural areas, the study found heavy agricultural land use corresponded with the diminished variety of small mammal species.

The final set of articles concern human and cultural geography. Becky Hamilton begins with an article on French and Belgian farming settlements in southwestern Saskatchewan.

Her question is straightforward: did settlers from these communities always choose the best possible land when they arrived in the Canadian west? To answer this, Hamilton merges nineteenth-century accounts of pioneers with Canada Land Inventory (CLI) maps compiled in the mid-twentieth century. She examines the influence of cultural factors found in letters and archives, such as prior European origins, attitudes toward landscape, and religious structures against the information in the CLI maps, including the capability of soils for agriculture, the availability of wood, and the proximity of water. A second article by Lehr and McGregor follows, again on the historical geography of prairie settlement. In this case the authors provide a study of prairie place names, also known as 'toponymy.' They recognize that the story of how a place gets its name is a demonstration of history and heritage, but argue that toponyms also reflect power and politics, human-environment relationships, and illustrate social evolution over time. Offering a wealth of examples, the authors show how some prairie place-names reveal the influence of Indigenous cultures, some were employed as symbols of corporate power, and how some enabled immigrant communities to either preserve their traditions or weave themselves into dominant settler society. The final research article moves forward in time to examine a moment in prairie history when new uses of the rural landscape were being promoted. Hillary Beattie offers a case study of the Manitoba Bureau of Travel and Publicity's efforts to make the province's natural environment attractive to American campers and sport anglers during the 1950s. Here she finds a consistent message to would-be tourists that a return to nature could regenerate people stressed by modern industrial life. Beattie claims these 'anti-modern' beliefs about the healing power of nature were actually a means by which the modern world was transposed to the wilderness: the same gender and social codes of the city and the workplace were written into experiences of camping and fishing. The historical geography of tourism in Manitoba, she suggests, reflects a broader pattern of antimodernism across North America.

Many of the articles in this collection make important contributions to geographical knowledge or reveal new ways to study human-environment relationships. The volume as a whole demonstrates both the broad interests of PCAG members and the strength of the regional association over its 40-year history.

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