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Not all immigrants considered equal in early days of Saskatchewan

Certain ethnic groups shunned and banned under government's Anglo-Canadian ideal

By Alicia Bridges, CBC News   Posted: Aug 13, 2016 5:30 AM CT | Last Updated: Aug 13, 2016 5:30 AM CT

Not all immigrants were considered equal in the early days of Saskatchewan. (Tim Van Horn)

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Canada takes pride in its values of multiculturalism but not all immigrants were considered equal in the early days of Saskatchewan.

In the early 20th century, certain ethnic groups were shunned, banned and arranged into an order of preference for immigration.

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As the federal government sought to promote agricultural development in the prairies about 100 years ago, it did so with a focus on fulfilling an Anglo-Canadian ideal.

Immigrants wanted, with conditions

According to Saskatoon historian Bill Waiser, Canada's leaders were looking for a certain type of immigrant.

"They wanted people that would settle the land, that had some agricultural experience, that would persevere and last and stick it out during those years of homestead hardship, for one or two generations," said Waiser.

But their search was guided by stereotypes about ethnicities.

British labourers were not welcomed because it was believed they would move into cities and take jobs from Canadians. Jews were not considered good farmers.

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In the early 20th century, Canada's leaders were looking for immigrants that would have agricultural success but their decisions were guided by stereotypes. (CBC)

Some banned, some shunned

People of colour were also discouraged, and even banned, from moving to Canada.

"No sooner is the Canadian Pacific Railway completed through Chinese labour, they introduce a head tax on Chinese immigrants," said Waiser.

"It's $50 in 1885, it's $100 in 1900, it's raised to $500 in 1903.

"So if you come to Canada as a Chinese immigrant you have to pay that head tax and then in 1923, they're banned completely."

Some black immigrants did manage to settle in Saskatchewan, including families who moved to Maidstone, Sask.

Their graves can still be found at the Shiloh Baptist Church cemetery, and their descendants include star Canadian NFL player Rueben Mayes, who grew up in North Battleford.

Cultural differences not welcomed

Waiser said even the government's preferred immigrants had a tough time after they arrived in Saskatchewan.

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"This was to be an Anglo-Canadian stronghold and so they didn't want people from continental Europe simply to come and start farming, they wanted them to assimilate," he said.

"They wanted them to leave their cultural baggage at the border because these people were different."

Slow to change

Waiser said it was not until after the Great Depression and the Second World War that Saskatchewan adopted the idea of being a multicultural province.

By that time, there was a large population of locally-born residents from immigrant families living in the province.

"These children and grandchildren of these immigrants are part of the Saskatchewan fabric and it's not until the 1960s-'70s that we really embrace this multicultural idea," said Waiser.

"I'm not saying we are completely there, we have a way to go, but it's completely different from the attitudes of the early 20th century."

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