



Life IN BLUE & YELLOW

By Margarita Wilson

UKRAINIANS ARRIVE
IN ALBERTA

In the early 20th century, Western Canada became home to thousands of European settlers heading west in search of a better life. Spurred on by the promise of affordable land and boundless opportunity, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians would soon make Alberta home. Facing grueling work, difficult economic prospects, and social discrimination, Ukrainian-Canadians nevertheless began what would become one of Central Alberta's most distinct and vibrant ethnic communities.

Though some historical accounts suggest that Ukrainians may have settled in the Prairies as early as 1817, the first official Ukrainian immigrants to Canada were Iwan Pylypow and Wasyl Eleniak, who arrived in Canada on September 7, 1891. Like many who would follow their lead, they came from Galicia (today Western Ukraine), which at the time was under Austro-Hungarian control. The Canadian government, as well as prominent Ukrainians such as Dr. Joseph Oleskiw, promised a land of opportunity: 160-acre plots of land were available for a \$10 administration fee, so long as the homesteader agreed to farm the land. "This opportunity was difficult to comprehend for the average Ukrainian peasant farmer at the end of the nineteenth century, where the average peasant farmer owned 5 ½ acres of land," says David Makowsky, Director of the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village. "Nearly 95 per cent of the Ukrainian population [at the time] were peasants, and their

farms were generally too small to sustain the people who worked them." Overpopulation, overtaxation, and poverty in their homeland made moving an even more attractive prospect. Entire families—and even entire villages—would make the move to Canada in the ensuing decades.

While Southern Alberta's prairie would have been easier to farm, it would be the aspen parklands of East Central Alberta that were most attractive to homesteaders. These forested regions offered plenty of wood for tools, buildings, and fuel. Back home, access to wood was monopolized by wealthy landlords. "Portions of East Central Alberta, especially the rolling hills on the north side of the North Saskatchewan River, also reminded the Ukrainian settlers of the topography in Western Ukraine," Makowsky says.

Ukrainians in Alberta primarily settled in the area northeast of Edmonton, in an area stretching east of present-day Elk Island National Park along Highway 16 to Innisfree. The bloc settlement stretched north across the North Saskatchewan River, and on the north side of Highway 28 near Smoky Lake, Vilna and Spedden. This area, known as the Edna-Star colony or the Ukrainian Bloc Settlement, was the first and the largest Ukrainian settlement in Canada, reaching an area of almost 6,500 square kilometres by 1930. Smaller Ukrainian enclaves also developed near the town of Leduc and in Camrose County, and

a smaller number of Ukrainians working as labourers and domestic staff settled within Edmonton itself. Between 150,000 and 170,000 Ukrainian immigrants had arrived in the region by 1914.

Following the end of World War I, a second wave of Ukrainians arrived, consisting of those fleeing the Soviet Union's occupation of Ukraine. They found an already-established community of fellow Ukrainians in East Central Alberta, working not only as farmers but as miners, construction workers, and labourers on the expanding railway lines. Further immigration following the Second World War brought over 30,000 more Ukrainians to Canada; however, these newcomers mostly settled in the industrial hubs of Ontario and Quebec. By this time, the descendants of the homesteaders had begun to move towards urban centres, including Edmonton. By the 1980s, Alberta had the largest Ukrainian population in Canada.



Separations & Connections

For the first Ukrainian homesteaders, establishing farms and communities came with a host of challenges. Firstly, the land had to be cleared of trees and bush, and the resources available for these tasks were scarce at first. "Half of Ukrainian immigrants arrived to Canada with no capital, and 42 per cent arrived with less than \$500," David says. Using simple hand tools, homesteaders had to clear land and build adequate shelter before the harsh winter set in. In order to make a living before their farms were viable, many men sought employment away from home, working as labourers and miners. Many of those working in Edmonton lived in the "Galician hotel", a network of camps and shacks built along the north bank of the North Saskatchewan River. This left many women in charge of raising families and clearing the land for the majority of the year. Furthermore, the vast tracts of land provided led to feelings of isolation within these families, so far away from one another within the Bloc.

Ukrainian-Canadians also had to face extensive, systemic discrimination. With low levels of literacy, lower socioeconomic status, and cultural traditions that differed from Anglo-Canadians, Ukrainians were condescended to as "stalwart peasants in sheepskin coats" and were considered second-class



citizens. During the First World War, with a homeland largely under control of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, over 8,000 Ukrainian-Canadians were placed in internment and work camps as "enemy aliens," some until as late as 1920, almost a year after the Treaty of Versailles. After 1923, Ukrainians were classified as "non-preferred" immigrants by the Canadian government; only those who already had family in Canada, or were working as farmers, domestic help, or labourers, were permitted entry.

This is not to say that the Ukrainians had no one to reach out to. "They settled in close proximity to former Germans who worked as loggers in Galicia, and who had left for Canada several years earlier

to settle near Fort Saskatchewan,” says Makowsky. “Ukrainian settlers also benefitted from helpful advice from Indigenous people who, for example, taught Ukrainians to pick for Seneca root that could be sold. The relationship between Indigenous peoples and Ukrainian settlers is only being examined in greater detail *now* by historians and academic circles.” And, of course, they had their community. At the “Galician Market,” an area just north of Jasper Avenue up to 96 and 97 Streets, Ukrainian homesteaders and those within the city met to conduct business, catch up on the latest news, and reconnect with friends and family.

Churches also provided not only a gathering place, but also a stronghold of Ukrainian culture and tradition—the distinctive “onion domes” of the Basilian monastic order are still a familiar sight across the region. Starting in the 1950s, fears of the cultural ‘Russification’ of Soviet Ukraine would mobilize Ukrainian-Canadians to further promote their language and culture, including the establishment of the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, run jointly by the University of Alberta and the University of Toronto, in 1976.

Celebrating Ukrainian Culture Today

Today, Ukrainian-Canadians are not only fully integrated into the fabric of local culture; many of their traditions have come to shape the local arts and culture scene. From ornately decorated *pysanky* (Easter eggs) to hallmark Ukrainian foods such as borscht, cabbage rolls, and perogies, you don’t have to go far to find the lasting impact of Ukrainian settlement here in Edmonton.

One of the most colourful aspects of Ukrainian culture in Edmonton is Ukrainian dance. In Ukraine, each *oblast*, or district, has its own unique style of dance as well as dance costumes. Canadian-Ukrainian dance, too, has developed its own style. Like many aspects of Ukrainian-Canadian culture, it marries many aspects of Ukrainian dance with Canadian and contemporary elements for a performance style

To support Ukrainian national refugees in Alberta, the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village’s Wagon of Hope program will be collecting non-perishable food items during the 2022 summer season. They are also working with local organizations offering settlement support to provide complimentary admission passes for Ukrainian refugees to visit the Village!

that emphasizes bright colours, high-energy feats of strength, and plenty of storytelling elements. Of the over 200 Ukrainian dance schools in Canada, one of the most well-known is Shumka. Meaning ‘Whirlwind,’ this group dazzles crowds in Edmonton and across Canada every year with performances ranging from classic folktales like *The Mosquito’s Wedding to Ancestors & Elders*, a collaboration with the Running Thunder Dancers that brought both Ukrainian and Indigenous dance to the same stage to honour the historic connection.

The history of Ukrainian settlement in Central Alberta is brought to life by the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village, a Provincial Historic Site located 50 km east of Edmonton. Since 1971, the village has served as a ‘living museum,’ where visitors can explore over 30 different restored buildings and meet costumed interpreters reenacting life in the small towns and homesteads that made up the region. Special events will resume this summer, along with *Make, Mend, and Modify: Ukrainians Adapting in Alberta*, a special exhibit focusing on how settlers repaired and modified their meager possessions. “The ‘making do’ theme of the exhibit resonates with many of our audiences, who have their own experiences of making-do over the past two years due to the pandemic,” says Makowsky. These connections are the heart of the Village: “Here, history is brought to life through personal stories and experiences, which families always seem to connect with.” ☺

Ukrainian Adventures Await

Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village | ukrainianvillage.ca

Alberta Council for the Ukrainian Arts | acuarts.ca

Shumka Dancers | shumka.com

Uncle Ed’s Restaurant | stawnichys.com/uncle-ed

Taste of Ukraine | tasteofukraine.com

Plus, visit InfoEdmonton.com for more hidden gems and road trip ideas.

