



# 100 Years of AGRICULTURE

## "Brownlee of Alberta"

by Doris J. MacKinnon

Most Albertans are familiar with the UFA as a farm supply depot. Many are less familiar with the origins of the United Farmers of Alberta as a populist political movement, inspired by the ideologies of Americans such as Henry Wise Wood. Wood's American-style populism was particularly embraced by Alberta farmers, not only because of the high number of Americans among them, but also because Alberta's farmers carried the largest debt loads and paid the highest transportation costs in comparison to other provinces.

Originally formed in 1909, as an advocate for the interests and welfare of farmers, the United Farmers of Alberta eventually emerged as a political force to form the government from 1921 to 1935. Indeed, when the results of the 1921 election were revealed, the United Farmers of Alberta were likely as surprised by the outcome as were the Liberals and Conservatives. While having garnered a majority of seats, the UFA found itself without a political leader and many expected Wood, who served as president, to accept the position of premier.

When Wood declined, the premiership went briefly to farmer Herbert Greenfield. However, interestingly, the man who would lead the populist farmer's movement for the longest period of time, and who would establish the foundation for the emergence of Alberta as a major political force, was himself not a farmer, but a reserved Ontario-born intellectual who studied the classics, John E. Brownlee, who served as Attorney General from 1921 to 1925, and as leader of the UFA government from 1925 to 1934, was referred to by Mackenzie King as "Brownlee of Alberta," in recognition of his dedication to his adopted province.

With a strong background as solicitor for farmer-owned cooperatives, Brownlee quickly emerged as sole spokesperson for the UFA government, and was responsible for the passage of what many see as a wide array of "compromise" legislation. In 1923, responding to pressure to end prohibition, Brownlee compromised by creating the Alberta Liquor Control Board, which subsequently operated outlets for seventy years. Brownlee also played a crucial role in the establishment of the Alberta Wheat Pool, which eventually joined with pools in Saskatchewan and Manitoba to create a

central marketing agency, the Canadian Wheat Pool, as a tool to shield farmers from the continuous boom and bust cycle.

Brownlee quickly secured a deal to gain control of the majority of provincial rail lines, accomplishing what predecessors had been attempting since the creation of Alberta in 1905. Brownlee later negotiated a deal with CPR and CNR to sell the rail lines at a tremendous profit to the province. However, the legacy for which Albertans may be most indebted to John Brownlee, was his foresight in negotiating an agreement with the Federal government in 1930, which gave control of Crown lands and natural resources to the province. Brownlee's agreement was an important step in bringing Alberta to a position of equality. In fact, the legislation

drafted by Brownlee was relied upon fifty years later by Peter Lougheed, during battles with the Federal government over oil and gas revenues.

Even without realization of the full potential of Brownlee's agreement, Albertans celebrated the recognition of equal partnership and the immense inheritance of 89 million acres of land, sweeping forests, the world's largest coal reserves, and enormous hydroelectric potential. Unfortunately, shortly after Brownlee's monumental agreement, world events which brought many governments to defeat also affected Alberta. The market crashes of the Great Depression left many impatient and desperate for instant relief, and a mere five years after being hailed a hero, Brownlee was forced to resign and the United Farmers of Alberta were swept out of office by the Social Credit party.

Photos & timeline courtesy of Red Deer & District Archives.



## Timeline

### AGRICULTURE

1905: June 2 - Red Deer led the Dominion in homestead entries for May, with 353 people being granted homesteads.

1915: Fall - The largest bumper crop in the history of Central Alberta was harvested.

1919: Mar 18 - Provincial UFA (United Farmers of Alberta) conference in Red Deer, delegates decided to take political action and held a convention in June to select a provincial candidate.

1921: May 16 - James Bower died, age 62. He was the first president of the UFA.

1921: Jul 18 - The UFA won the provincial election.

1924: Apr 1 - An egg pool was set up at Red Deer under the Farmer's Cooperative Marketing Association and in August, a Dairy Pool was organized.

1925: 50 per cent of Alberta's wealth came from agriculture.

1929: Apr 14 - 400 district farmers attended a meeting of protest against the Dominion government's announced wheat policy.

1929: Apr 21 - Milk producers asked the Public Utilities Commission for an increase in the prices of milk and table cream.

1953: Dec 23 - The Honourable David Ury, Minister of Agriculture and MLA for Red Deer, was killed in a motor vehicle accident.

1963: Jan 7 - More than 800 cattle were reported dead in Southern Alberta due to cold and deep snow.

1992: Jul 9 - Two mysterious circles in a field near Hobbema attracted throngs of baffled residents.

1992: Aug 27 - Only an estimated 20 per cent of all cash crops survived a -6°C killer frost, the worst in 50 years.

1993: Sep 27 - Root vegetables are stacked up in a cellar on the Michener Centre grounds as farmers and gardeners turned over produce to the charitable Grow-A-Row program.

1993: Dec 9 - North America's first case of mad cow disease was discovered on a farm near Red Deer, leading to Agriculture Canada to destroy a local rancher's 270 purebred cattle.

1996: Jul 20 - The Alberta Wheat Pool demolished grain elevators in Haynes, Clive, Leslieville, Rimbey and Eckville and planned to close down others.

1998: May 21 - A fire destroyed a barn and 3,500 hogs at Bacon Acres hog farm, south of Bentley.

1998: Jul 25 - An onslaught of grasshoppers made its way west from East Central

