

OPTIMISM AND COMPETITION IN SASKATCHEWAN'S RURAL GOTHIC REVIVAL CHURCHES IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

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A lone church is buffeted by the strong Prairie winds and bleached by the sunlight; its days of glory are long gone but it remains and now serves purely as a monument to a bygone era. This is the fate of many of Saskatchewan's rural churches that were constructed in the early twentieth century.¹ The communities that once surrounded them have long since gone but the churches remain, alone and mostly unused yet still tended to. These ephemeral structures are in many cases the only remaining evidence of the built heritage of these communities. Unfortunately, this area of Canada's built heritage has received very little academic attention. Given that architecture preserves the original intentions of the culture that produced it, this lack of study results in a gap in Saskatchewan's history.² Therefore, understanding the few structures left from that period is all the more important. Two such structures, Kaposvar Roman Catholic Church [Rural Municipality (RM) 183] (fig. 1) and Bekevar Presbyterian Church [Rural Municipality (RM) 94]³ (fig. 2), are excellent case studies to show how important architecture can be for understanding the nature of Saskatchewan's culture. In particular, the design and construction of these two churches reveal the optimism and competitive spirit that were driving forces in Saskatchewan's rural early twentieth-century society.

One of the reasons that Saskatchewan's built heritage has received so little attention is that it differs greatly from eastern Canadian architecture in terms of its growth. Saskatchewan's growth was rather slow and it did not have a



FIG. 1. VIEW OF THE WEST FAÇADE OF KAPOSVAR ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH, KAPOSVAR, RURAL MUNICIPALITY (RM) 183 (SK), 1906-1907, UNKNOWN ARCHITECT, PIROT STONEMASONS. | KRISTIE DUBÉ.



FIG. 2. VIEW OF THE WEST FAÇADE OF BEKEVAR PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, BEKEVAR, RM 94 (SK), 1912, UNKNOWN ARCHITECT. | KRISTIE DUBÉ.



FIG. 3. VIEW OF THE SOUTH SIDE OF HOLY TRINITY ANGLICAN CHURCH, STANLEY MISSION (SK), 1854-1860, UNKNOWN ARCHITECT. | KRISTIE DUBÉ.

sufficient population to acquire provincial status until 1905.⁴ While eastern Canadian cities were burgeoning, Saskatchewan was just beginning to exit its pioneer and fur trade phases. However, the early twentieth century was a period of rapid expansion for Saskatchewan with new settlements springing up from the bald Prairie landscape at a rapacious rate.

Saskatchewan's rapid growth was partly the result of the characterization of the Prairies as a land of boundless opportunity. It was commonly thought that the West would have "a population of 100 million; it would be the bread-basket of the world; it would become the centre of gravity of all Canada; and... would lead the world."⁵ Clifford Sifton, Minister of the Interior (1897 to 1905) in Wilfrid Laurier's Liberal government, was able to further this perception through an aggressive propaganda campaign to attract settlers to the Prairie West just as good, cheap land was becoming difficult to find in the long-favoured American West.⁶ Typical of the government's efforts was *Western*

Canada: Delegate's Reports and Settlers' Experiences; it consisted of one hundred and forty-four pages of reports and settlers' descriptions of the prosperous and inviting nature of the Prairie West.⁷ Travelers' accounts and novels published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also conjured up an image of a "wonderland [where] a new start, success, equal social status, and a comfortable environment" were possible.⁸ Another form of literature that helped create a favourable impression of the Prairies was "Booster" literature. However, it differed from travelers' accounts and government pamphlets, which focused on the entire Prairie West. "Booster" literature instead made boastful, idealized statements about an individual city in order to attract investors who could help the city realize its destiny. These pamphlets provided inflated figures concerning population size, agricultural, and natural resources potential, land prices, and economic growth. Booster pamphlets were driven by an optimistic belief in the unlimited growth potential of the West,

which needed only an influx of capital to be realized.⁹ While boosterism was divisive on a regional level, it also served to unite the businessmen in a particular town or city behind the common goal of civic expansion.¹⁰ The utopian image of the Prairie West portrayed through government pamphlets, travelers' accounts, and booster pamphlets was a by-product of the population boom but also served to perpetuate it by appealing to settlers who were seeking better prospects.¹¹

Canada's various religious denominations were an integral part of Saskatchewan's boom-period society. Their efforts in trying to absorb or service the large numbers of Eastern European settlers who immigrated to the province helped shape the fabric of the new communities. Generally speaking, the various denominations focused on strengthening their respective positions within a society that was drastically shifting in terms of its ethnic composition. In the early twentieth century, a great number of Eastern European Catholic immigrants—such

as Russian Greek Catholics (Catholics of the Eastern/Byzantine rite), Galician (Ukrainian) Catholics, Hungarian Catholics (Latin rite), and German Catholics (Black Sea Catholics)—began to arrive in the Prairie region.¹² The Russian and Ukrainian Catholic immigrants were at first left without priests due to an 1894 edict from Rome that forbade married Eastern-rite priests from immigrating to Canada.¹³ In 1902, the Vatican finally allowed unmarried Eastern-rite priests to emigrate from Galicia, but their number was insufficient to meet the religious needs of these immigrants.¹⁴ And so, Protestant and Catholic denominations alike attempted to absorb these Eastern- and Latin-rite Catholics.¹⁵

Each denomination responded differently to the boom of Eastern European immigrants. However, an examination of two rural churches in the same region, built by different denominations but with analogous architectural styles, indicates that there were indeed a number of similarities. First, the general lack of resources available to church builders is notable. As many of these rural communities were newly founded, it was difficult to have access to trained architects, various building materials, and adequate funds. Secondly, a generally fast growth rate demanded an equally fast increase in church capacity. These similarities undoubtedly helped form components of Saskatchewan's society during that period, but they have not received scholarly attention.

Both Kaposvar Roman Catholic Church and Bekevar Presbyterian Church are constructed in the Gothic Revival style. While Gothic motifs were in use since the 1790s (possibly the 1780s) in the eastern portions of the country, they were not used in Saskatchewan until the 1850s in churches like Holy Trinity Anglican Church at Stanley

Mission (fig. 3).¹⁶ In Saskatchewan, the use of the Gothic Revival style stretched well into the middle of the twentieth century and became synonymous with church architecture for many denominations. The initial associations of that style go back to when a widespread reaction against the perceived ills of the industrial society developed. Architectural styles from the past came to be venerated for their closer relationship with nature and piety in direct contrast to the perceived artificiality and skepticism of the industrial society.¹⁷ This Romanticism was joined with Antiquarianism, which held that the past could be re-experienced through antique objects or buildings.¹⁸ The Victorian Revival styles sprang from these commonly held beliefs thanks to literary works such as Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin's *Contrasts*, which championed the use of the Gothic Revival style as a way to return to a more natural, pious, and pure society.¹⁹ This association with purity allowed the medieval revival styles in particular to become associated with religious structures. In the Prairie West, this association was particularly strong and difficult to displace (by the popular styles in eastern Canada at the time).

The preference for the Gothic Revival remained strong despite the ethnic diversity of the congregations during the early twentieth century in Saskatchewan. The Kaposvar community, near Esterhazy, was primarily a Hungarian and French settlement. It was formed in 1886 as part of a series of Hungarian settlements arranged by immigration agent Count Paul Oscar Esterhazy.²⁰ Following a government pamphlet produced by Sifton and Esterhazy in 1902, the original settlement of thirty-five families grew drastically in the early twentieth century.²¹ This pamphlet contained settlers' testimonials that downplayed the appeal of the United States and inflated

the appeal of the region with optimistic depictions.²² The pamphlet was a success and not long afterward Kaposvar and Esterhazy boasted nine hundred settlers, two hundred homesteads, and fourteen thousand acres of land under cultivation.²³ However, Hungarians were not the only immigrants in the settlement: French-speaking Roman Catholic priests had been involved with the settlement since its inception. Their efforts resulted in a strong Roman Catholic community with a congregation that comprised eight hundred of the nine hundred settlers by 1906.²⁴ That Hungarian community led by French-speaking priests chose the Gothic Revival style when they constructed their first major church.

The construction and style of the Kaposvar Roman Catholic Church reveal much about Saskatchewan's boom period society. The design and construction of the church were the responsibility of Kaposvar's priest, Jules Pirot. In 1906, Pirot returned to his native Belgium to obtain plans for the church and convince his stonemason brothers (Alphonse, Camille, Lucien) and brother-in-law (Octave Willaume) to come to the province to construct it.²⁵ While the architect who designed the church is unknown, the design does suggest a certain level of familiarity with common Gothic Revival stylistic elements. In particular, the design of the church reflects Belgian medieval sources that would have been familiar to Pirot and his brothers. One feature associated with Belgian sources is Kaposvar's triple lancet windows in an ABA pattern (fig. 4). This feature was common to thirteenth-century Gothic churches from the Scheldt/Tournai region of Belgium (St. Jacques' and St. Marie Madeleine's churches in Tournai both use the feature in their transept windows).²⁶ The triple lancet chancel windows in the well-known Church of Our Lady in Pamele



FIG. 4. VIEW OF EASTERN AND NORTHERN SECTIONS SHOWING HEXAGONAL CHANCEL AND ABA LANCET TRIPARTITE WINDOWS, KAPOSVAR ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH, KAPOSVAR, RM 183. | KRISTIE DUBÉ.

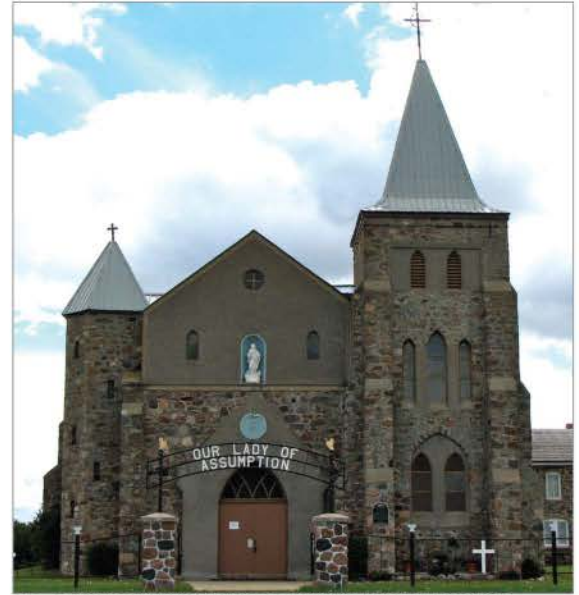


FIG. 5. VIEW OF THE WESTERN FAÇADE SHOWING DISPROPORTIONATE DOUBLE TOWERS, KAPOSVAR ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH, KAPOSVAR, RM 183. | KRISTIE DUBÉ.

in Oudenaarde (1234-1264), in particular, was a likely source of inspiration. In 1883, a published monograph, complete with engravings, focused entirely on the church.²⁷ As such, knowledge of the church would have been fairly well disseminated and it is likely that Kaposvar's Belgian priest Pirot would have had some knowledge of the structure. The use of a Belgian Gothic motif is indicative of Pirot and his brothers influencing the design of the church for the otherwise French and Hungarian congregation. The Belgian feature was most likely chosen because it allowed Pirot to maintain a connection to his homeland in the harsh new Prairie landscape.

Other components of Kaposvar's design and style are less easily tied to any one particular source of inspiration and thus reflect simply a general knowledge of Gothic/Romanesque motifs and the desire to quickly house the booming congregation in a suitable structure. Kaposvar's Gothic style delineated hexagonal chancel, disproportionately sized towers in

the picturesque tradition, large stepped buttresses, and twin-tower façade serve to create the impression of a large and solid structure (figs. 4 and 5). However, the massive proportions of Kaposvar Catholic Church (which are part of the sublime tradition) and the small size of some of its square tower windows are reminiscent of the Norman/early Romanesque Revival style (fig. 6). For Presbyterians, the Norman/early Romanesque style provided a link to Scotland, the homeland of Presbyterianism.²⁸ However, for Roman Catholics the association was different: there was a tradition both in England and the United States of using the Romanesque Revival style because it was not as closely associated with High Anglicanism.²⁹ For Roman Catholics, the use of the Romanesque Revival style therefore served to distinguish their churches from those of the Anglicans. Consequently, through the use of both Gothic and Romanesque motifs, Kaposvar's design indicates the connection of the congregation to Belgium and the rejection of Anglican church building practices.

Another distinguishing feature of the Kaposvar Church was the use of uncut fieldstone for the large structure. Fieldstone was not a common building material, except on the southern Prairies where building materials were scarce and farmers used the stones removed from the fields for their homes. Moreover, many of these fieldstone homesteads were amateur constructions.³⁰ As materials were generally scarce and often expensive there were also a few churches that were constructed in uncut fieldstone, such as St. Mary the Virgin Anglican Church in Whitewood (1902) and St. Lucy's Anglican Church in Dilke (1914), but these were relatively small due to a shortage of trained stonemasons (figs. 7-8).³¹ Kaposvar's congregation, however, was able to harness both the optimism garnered from its rapid expansion and the expertise of the Pirot stonemason brothers to create an anomalously large uncut fieldstone church. Kaposvar is therefore unusual and indicative of a tendency to innovate as a result of pressures coupled with limitations. The design, style, and

construction of the church allowed the congregation to characterize itself as a powerful, prosperous, and non-Anglican community.

The effect of the Kaposvar Roman Catholic Church on the region was so powerful that Archbishop Adélard Langevin of St. Boniface felt there was no “finer rural church, belonging to any denomination,” in all of western Canada.³² The response to such an assertion by the smaller rival congregation of Bekevar was competitive. The settlement followed in the footsteps of Kaposvar by beginning as a Hungarian colony. However, the chief differences were that it was founded much later (1900 compared to 1886) and was Reformed (Calvinist)/Presbyterian instead of Roman Catholic. Thus, the success of the Kaposvar colony did not inspire the creation of the Bekevar colony; it was rather the success of a similar Reformed colony at Otthon.³³ The natural affinities between the Saskatchewan Calvinist Presbyterians and the Calvinist Reformed immigrants also played a part. From its inception, Bekevar received assistance from James Robertson, superintendent of the Canadian Presbyterian Church, as part of an initiative to assist Hungarian Reformed settlers in Saskatchewan. Hungarian Presbyterian minister Kálmán Kovácsi was sent to Bekevar (1901-1910) and by 1910, the strong relationship between the two groups allowed the Presbyterian congregation to become large and stable enough to warrant the construction of a permanent stone church.³⁴

The intention to construct a permanent stone church as opposed to a more temporary wooden church is indicative of the competitive and optimistic attitude of Bekevar’s congregation. Most of Saskatchewan’s many wooden churches

were originally intended as temporary structures to accommodate a small congregation until larger numbers warranted the construction of a more permanent structure of stone or brick.³⁵ Therefore, the assertion of Bekevar’s founder, Janos Szabo, that a stone church should be constructed to coincide with the congregation’s tenth anniversary, was an indication of his faith in the permanence of the congregation. However, the plans for a stone church involved an estimated cost of “several thousand dollars,” which proved to be too expensive for the congregation. By 1911 a new proposal was approved requiring only “a beautiful and large church that will be worthy of the congregation.”³⁶ Once again, the architect is not known but it is likely that a local carpenter and volunteer labour were responsible for its construction. When finally completed in July 1912, Bekevar Presbyterian Church (fig. 2) was a wooden structure with a capacity of two hundred and fifty to three hundred people that cost some two thousand dollars. The decision to use wood instead of stone could seem like a lack of confidence in the prospects of the congregation, however, this was not the case. Bekevar’s Hungarian Presbyterians were intent on competing with the Roman Catholic Kaposvar colony. This sense of competition is evident through the opulent three-day consecration event (most consecrations lasted only one day) they held to “make a tacit claim for superiority” against the Esterhazy-Kaposvar colony and its impressive church (fig. 1). The Hungarian Presbyterians at Bekevar believed that the presence of Kaposvar’s French Catholic priests threatened their religion, heritage, and language. In response, the congregation at Bekevar constructed a “beautiful” church to indicate that their community and not the rival one at Kaposvar was the bearer of “Western Canadian Hungarian identity.”³⁷

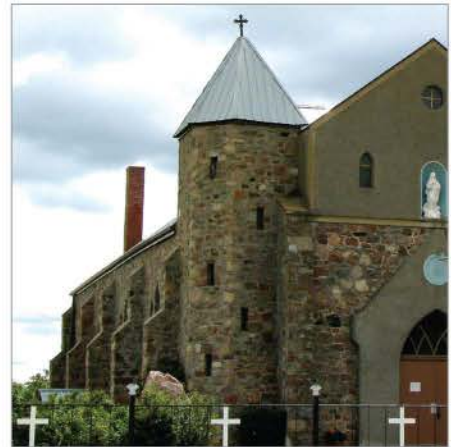


FIG. 6. DETAIL OF NORMAN/EARLY ROMANESQUE REVIVAL WEST FAÇADE TOWER, KAPOSVAR ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH, KAPOSVAR, RM 183. | KRISTIE DUBÉ.



FIG. 7. VIEW OF WEST FAÇADE OF ST. MARY THE VIRGIN ANGLICAN CHURCH, WHITEWOOD (SK), 1902, UNKNOWN ARCHITECT. | KRISTIE DUBÉ.



FIG. 8. VIEW OF THE WEST END OF ST. LUCY'S ANGLICAN CHURCH, DILKE (SK), 1914, UNKNOWN ARCHITECT. | KRISTIE DUBÉ.

The extent of the desire to compete with the Roman Catholic Kaposvar colony can be confirmed through the design of the wooden church that was constructed at



FIG. 10. VIEW OF THE NORTHWEST PORTION SHOWING THE IRREGULAR CRUCIFORM PLAN, BEKEVAR PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, BEKEVAR, RM 94. | KRISTIE DUBÉ.



FIG. 11. VIEW OF THE SOUTHWEST PORTION SHOWING LANCET WINDOWS AND DELINEATED CHANCEL, BEKEVAR PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, BEKEVAR, RM 94. | KRISTIE DUBÉ.

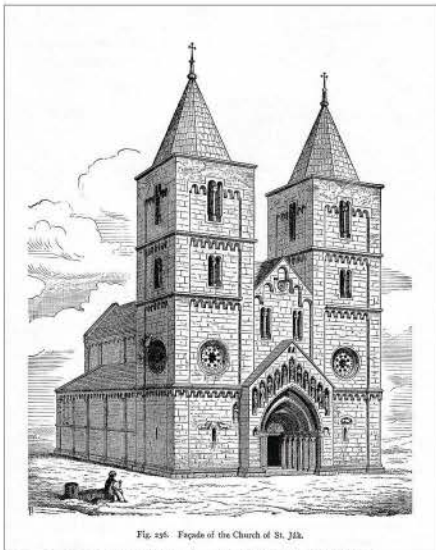


FIG. 9. 1881 ENGRAVING OF THE VIEW OF THE WEST FAÇADE OF ST. GEORGE'S CHURCH, JÁK, HUNGARY. | BENEDICTINE-PENN STATE LIBRARIES COLLECTION.



FIG. 12. VIEW OF WEST FAÇADE OF BALGONIE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, BALGONIE (SK), UNKNOWN ARCHITECT. | KRISTIE DUBÉ.



FIG. 13. VIEW OF THE WEST FAÇADE OF POPLAR GROVE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, UNKNOWN ARCHITECT. | KRISTIE DUBÉ.



FIG. 14. DETAIL OF ARC-SHAPED PEWS, BEKEVAR PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, BEKEVAR, RM 94. | KRISTIE DUBÉ.

Bekevar. Despite limited funds, Bekevar's congregation wanted to create the most arresting façade possible for a small wooden church. In order to succeed, the twin-towered façade of a cathedral church was borrowed. As was common in other churches looking to create an impact, such as Joseph Connolly's Church of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception in Guelph, Ontario (1876-1888), the cathedral motif of a twin-towered façade was used in a small church in order to compete with larger churches.³⁸ With the intention to imitate a cathedral form and reinforce the Hungarian identity of the congregation, it is likely that Hungarian examples, such as St. George's Church in Ják, served as models for the design (fig. 9). The three-aisled twin-towered church was founded by Benedictine monks under the patronage of the influential nobleman Márton Nagy around 1210.³⁹ Prior to Bekevar's construction, St. George's underwent a major restoration (1896-1904) under the direction of renowned architect Frigyes Schulek, who had been responsible for the restoration of Budapest's primary medieval Matthias' Church.⁴⁰ The reconstruction of St. George's by such a prominent architect would have ensured that the church would have been well known and well received

by the Hungarian people. Furthermore, Bekevar's use of St. George's double gable façade nestled between twin towers with round windows reinforces the connection between the two structures (figs. 2 and 9). However, without the benefit of the naturally heavy feeling that stone can give a structure, the church lacked presence and other design elements were used to try to enhance the imposing feel of the structure.

Chief among these elements was the general plan of the Early Gothic Revival Style Bekevar Church. The church's combination of Early Gothic Revival pointed arch lancet windows, cruciform plan, double tower façade, and transepts were uncommon features in Saskatchewan's rural Presbyterian churches during that period (figs. 10-11). Balgonie Presbyterian Church (1901) and Poplar Grove Presbyterian Church (1902) are more typical examples of rural Presbyterian churches (figs. 12-13). The plan of these two churches is essentially a vernacular box. Bekevar Church, by contrast, is laid out in an irregular cruciform plan with oversized transepts. These oversized transepts did serve the interests of the congregation liturgically as it allowed an arc-shaped seating arrangement that surrounded and focused upon the raised pulpit occupied by the pastor (fig. 14).⁴¹ This was a common arrangement for many Protestant denominations; however, the exterior plan of the church was usually in a more traditional basilican form. The congregations would then adjust the arrangement of the interior to better suit their liturgical needs by either sectioning off the seating portion of the church (as at William Hay's St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Guelph, 1857) or shifting it to a north-south axis (as at William Tutin Thomas' St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Ottawa, 1872) in order to place



FIG. 15. DETAIL OF GABLETS MIMICKING MASONRY BUTTRESSES, BEKEVAR PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, BEKEVAR, RM 94. | KRISTIE DUBÉ.

the pulpit at the centre of the width of the rectangle and thus allow the congregation to surround the preacher.⁴² The external representation of this seating arrangement would have resulted in a vernacular preaching-box-styled church though, which was out of favour in larger churches due to the rise of Puginian principles.⁴³ As Bekevar's building committee was intent on casting itself in the same vein as the great cathedral churches, the use of a more rural vernacular box form would not have been desirable. Instead, they chose to keep the cruciform plan but extend the transepts to accommodate the arc-seating arrangement. This approach is without known precedent and consequently indicative of the desire to expand the impact of the façade as much as possible.

The final "great church" design element in Bekevar Church is its external decorative components. It was generally

uncommon for Saskatchewan's rural wooden churches to possess a great number of decorative elements as a result of the aforementioned shortages in funds, materials, and skilled labour. Instead, Bekevar's amateur builders were forced to become creative. As they were looking to Hungarian stone cathedral churches for their inspiration, it is not surprising that Bekevar's design elements are derived from a masonry tradition rather than a wooden building tradition. In particular, the small decorative red gablets on the façade, which are borrowed from masonry techniques, are positioned and decorated in such a manner as to mimic Gothic buttresses topped with gables (fig. 15). As such, the gablets give the impression of a massive stone church that requires buttresses to support the weight of the structure. Despite their inability to construct a stone structure that would rival Kaposvar Church, Bekevar's congregation was able to borrow from "great church" motifs to

create a wooden church that could “dominate and control” its environment as a result of the improvisations.⁴⁴

Saskatchewan’s early twentieth-century rural churches were built by immigrants who had no access to professional architects, and had limited funds and building materials. Consequently, they were forced to become creative in their church designs. Because of the immigrants’ intimate involvement with church design, these churches reveal the struggles and aspirations of their builders better than many urban churches, which expose mostly the architect’s training and popular trends. Kaposvar Roman Catholic Church, for instance, reveals the tendency of boom period settlements to grow rapidly and build equally large churches despite limited resources. The optimism and ingenuity frequently displayed in these churches became a key component of Saskatchewan’s boom period society. Bekevar Presbyterian Church is an even greater example of ingenuity, but it stems from the competitive spirit that was born in the fast-changing landscape. While the competitive spirit that drove the province’s boom period is well known, the extent of its effects in small rural communities devoid of boosters is not. Even a modest study based on only two of Saskatchewan’s many rural churches illustrates the ability of its architecture to shine light on the unknown sections of the province’s society and its built heritage. Saskatchewan’s lone Prairie churches are therefore an integral component of its history and have much to impart before they are abandoned to the encroaching Prairie.

NOTES

1. Some of the research for this article was made possible by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council through their Canada Graduate Scholarship program. The research was completed as part of the requirement for the M.A. in history at the University of Regina under the guidance of Dr. William J. Brennan and Dr. Allison Fizzard. I am also greatly indebted to the guidance and generosity of Dr. Malcolm Thurlby, whose wealth of knowledge I have been privileged to access.
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