

# Estonians in Alberta

By

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"ESTONIA" HAS NEVER BEEN a household word in Alberta; nor have most Albertans been aware of the Estonian presence in the province. Nevertheless, Estonians have been a small but significant part of Alberta's development since before the turn of the century. The relative obscurity of Alberta's Estonian community is partly due to the small size of its ancestral country. Estonia is one of three small Baltic nations (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) situated on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea in northern Europe. Albertans have not been alone in their general ignorance of this tiny country; it has never had a high international profile.

In 1899 two Estonian brothers, Hendrik (Henry) and Kristjan Kingsep and their young families immigrated to Canada and settled in central Alberta, just east of Sylvan Lake. Their arrival was important, both to the overall history of Estonians in Canada, as well as to the development of parts of central and southern Alberta. The settlements that the Kingseps and other Estonians founded at the turn of the century were the only significant concentrations of Estonians in Canada until after World War Two. In large part, the history of the organized Estonian community in Canada prior to World War Two is a history of Estonians in Alberta. Though small in numbers, the Estonians were able to make a notable contribution to the development of several communities in Alberta through their agricultural and technological inventiveness, their strong interest in cooperatives, and their emphasis on music and education.

When the Kingsep families decided to emigrate from Estonia, they left behind a country of about one million people which was under the control of the Russian Czarist regime and which faced many economic, political and social problems. For the rural sector of Estonia's population, economic conditions throughout the 19th century had been harsh, indeed often hopeless. Serfdom of the peasants had been abolished prior to 1820, but their working conditions were difficult, their wages were low and they had to pay high rent to German landlords for use of the land they till-

ed. For the majority of Estonian peasants, to be able to pay their debts to their landlords and become independent was only a distant dream. One of the few ways to achieve this dream was to emigrate. During the mid-1800s, many did so, moving to southern Russia where people were needed to colonize the vast, empty lands of the Crimea. But by the late 1800s, those who had emigrated to the Crimea were equally dissatisfied with conditions there; consequently, like many of those who had remained in Estonia, they were eager for new opportunities. Nor were conditions favourable for Estonia's aspiring urbanized middle class. Increasing numbers of young Estonians were graduating from universities in the late 1800s with aspirations of social and economic advancement, but their mobility was often blocked by the powerful presence of the Baltic Germans, who owned the land, the factories and most of the businesses, and also dominated the professions.

In addition to general economic hardship, by the late 1800s, Estonians were also faced with the Czarist policy of Russification — a heightened attempt by the Russian regime to assimilate them. These policies were very unpopular in a country which was in the throes of a national awakening. Dissatisfied with their situation, a number of Estonians, like the Kingsep families, decided to emigrate and some were attracted to the free homestead lands of western Canada.

Around the turn of the century, opposition to the Russian Czarist government took the form of both Estonian nationalism and socialism. Social and economic tensions made the country receptive to revolutionary ideology and Marxism spread rapidly among the intelligentsia, the landless peasants and the workers. Their demands for self-government and greater personal freedom became more and more outspoken. 1905 was a particularly explosive year, with the

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A group of Estonian pioneers was photographed during a summer outing in the Linda Hall district.

Japanese defeat of Russia and the Russian revolution spurring a revolt in Estonia against the Czarist regime and the German landlords. Suppression of this revolt and subsequent Czarist persecutions led to the exit of a wave of political refugees, many of whom made their way to the United States. Still others came to Canada, some joining their countrymen who had settled just a few years before in central Alberta. The combination of political and economic factors motivating their emigration meant that there was a wide cross-section of occupations among the migrants. They included sailors, industrial workers, tradesmen, several teachers, and a few peasants. But despite their varied backgrounds, they all settled on the land when they arrived in Alberta.

Henry Kingsep was born in the district of Võru, Estonia, in 1870 to a farm family of comfortable means. As a young man, he graduated from the University of Tartu and went on for post-graduate studies at the University of St. Petersburg in Russia, where he became fluent in several languages and trained to become a teacher. He also became involved with a group of radical students who were plotting to overthrow the Czar. Later when he was 24 and teaching school in the town of Nuustak, he married Emilie Saar, daughter of the village shoemaker. But Henry was dissatisfied with conditions in Estonia and he also feared reprisals for

his political activities. He had read and heard about freedom and vast lands in North America and his brother, Christian had visited Montreal as a sailor and told him stories about Canada. Henry became convinced that the best future for himself and his young family lay in Canada and he began to learn English and make other preparations for the long voyage to North America.<sup>1</sup>

In 1899 the Christian and Henry Kingsep families set sail for New York and continued their journey to Canada by train. The two brothers decided to settle in the Sylvan Lake area and took up adjoining land in the virgin bush and forest. Two factors were probably involved in their choosing this particular land. Like other Nordic people coming from wooded countries with access to water, the Kingseps were sensitive to the need for land which could provide both ample timber and water. Also in 1899, following the visit of a delegation of Finnish promoters, the Canadian government reserved for a period of three years a tract of land west of Red Deer for Finnish settlers. It was to this area that the Kingseps came. Though they were not Finns, the Estonian and Finnish peoples are closely related both linguistically and culturally.

When Henry and Emilie Kingsep and their baby daughters finally arrived at their remote destination, they were faced with the formidable task of making a living for themselves in a vir-



tual wilderness. The only clearings in the densely wooded landscape were those that had been made by forest fires. Roads were non-existent. The family's first task was to build a temporary home for themselves, and they soon erected a small shack which, though crude, provided shelter from the elements.

The Kingsep families were not to remain alone for very long. They were soon joined by other Estonians, many of them friends and acquaintances from the Old Country and by 1903 they and the other settlers had partially cleared 16 farms and had named the area "Livonia" in remembrance of their homeland. Even the topography reminded them of their homeland. August Posti, one of the early settlers in the community, noted in his diary six days after his arrival in the area in the spring of 1903 that "what I see here is almost the same as in my home country."

Like all Alberta pioneers, the first Estonian settlers had to work hard to survive. Clearing the land was an enormous task; raising crops in the area's cool, wet climate was beset with difficulty and the isolation and loneliness were at times overpowering. In these difficult pioneering circumstances, it soon became clear that co-operation was essential to survival. This inescapable fact, combined with the left-wing sympathies of many of the early Estonian settlers, prompted them to attempt co-operative farming. In the plan which they formulated, households and gardens were individually owned, but the land was used collectively. Besides growing vegetable gardens, the settlers raised flax and wheat and established dairy herds. They also raised pigs and chickens, but these often fell prey to coyotes and bears. Because of the uncertainties of the early years, hunting and fishing were essential to the group's survival. It was also necessary for the men to get winter jobs working for the CPR or for the coal mines in the distant Crow's Nest Pass to subsidize incomes.<sup>2</sup>

Gradually the little settlement near Sylvan Lake assumed an appearance of permanency. By 1903, it boasted 22 Estonian families, a new school and an English-speaking teacher, hired to make it easier for the children to feel at home in their new country. However "Livonia" was not to remain the major Estonian settlement in Alberta. The area was quickly being settled by people of various nationalities and quarter sections were becoming scarce. It was soon obvious that "Livonia" could not expand to accommodate

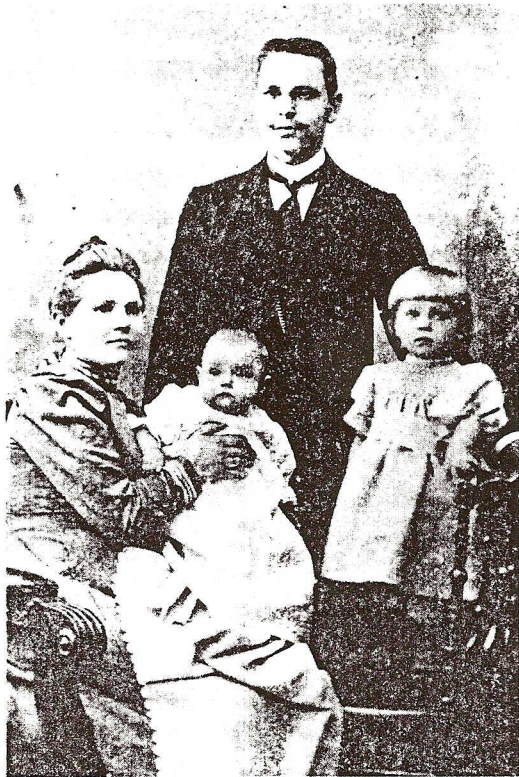
further Estonian settlement. Consequently, Henry Kingsep, who was a natural colonizer, began looking elsewhere for land that would be suitable for additional Estonian settlers. He chose land in the Medicine River valley, near what was to become the town of Eckville, and in 1903 he and his family moved to this new site. The Kingseps were soon joined by other Estonian families from the Sylvan Lake area. Still others from the original "Livonia" settlement moved east to Stettler, founding what was to become another sizeable Estonian settlement.<sup>3</sup>

Medicine Valley, with its deep black soil and treed hilly landscape, also reminded them of their homeland and appealed to the Estonians. A daughter of one of the early settlers and community leaders, August Posti, described her father's choice of land as follows:

*. . . it had the Medicine River running through it abounding in fish — pike and suckers. There were spruce trees growing on it, providing logs for his house and the pea vine grew three feet high in the river valley, providing rich nutritious hay for his stock.*

The first settlers in the Medicine River area were joined in 1904 by 25 people directly from Estonia and between 1905 and 1914, 40 more came to the area to make their homes. The earliest Estonian settlers in the area besides the Kingsep family were the Kinna, Koot, Muru, Langer, Matteus (Matthews), Mõttus, Pihuoja, Posti, Raabis and Sestrap families. Several families immigrated to Canada with their brothers' or sisters' families; when they arrived in Alberta, they settled together, developing large extended-family networks. Many of the new immigrants, like Kingsep, were politically radical and disillusioned with the Czarist regime. By 1920, there were 187 people of Estonian origin living in the Eckville area and approximately 40 farms had been established.<sup>4</sup>

As in the first settlement at "Livonia", the pioneering years near Eckville were difficult. The Estonians' first dwellings were log cabins with thatched roofs and clay floors, which were characteristic of their homeland. At first only cattle, chickens and vegetable gardens were raised and dairying was the main source of farm income. Wheat varieties had not yet been developed to withstand the area's cool, wet summers and limited number of frost-free days. Gradually, however, they began to grow barley, oats and rye. Prior to World War One the amount of cleared and cultivated land remained small because of the type of mixed agriculture which



Henry Kingsep was one of the original Estonian settlers in Alberta. He is seen here with his wife and children about 1899.

the Estonians practiced and the area's lack of transportation facilities.

While the Medicine Valley settlement made possible a larger and more homogeneous Estonian community than could have been established at Sylvan Lake, it also complicated transportation problems for the early settlers, since they were now many miles further from the major trading centre at Red Deer. Since there were no roads, a monthly trip to Red Deer took three to four days. When they finally arrived in Red Deer, the settlers sold eggs and dairy products or bartered them for flour, sugar, lard, fruit and salt to supplement their otherwise homegrown diet. Writing about the early years, Erna Doig, one of the daughters of Adam and Anna Matteus, emphasized her parents' self-sufficiency:

*On part of the homestead there were spruce and tamaracks and they cut down enough of the bigger timbers to build themselves a one-room cabin before winter set in again. The cabin had a sod roof and earthen-floor and the logs were caulked with moss and clay. A stove was made of rocks, which were plastered with clay. This was used for cooking, heating and baking. A heavy table and a few benches were shaped from logs. Also the beds were shaped*

*from logs and the pieces were held together with wooden dowels. The mattress bags were filled and stuffed plump with dried, fresh hay. To Adam and Anna this was luxury — a home of their own.<sup>5</sup>*

Gradually, the isolation and pioneer conditions of the settlement were overcome and it became increasingly integrated into the economic life of central Alberta. After a long delay, two competing railways, the Alberta Central and the Canadian Northern, were constructed through the area and between 1910 and 1914 this provided temporary work and facilitated commercial development. For the first time, pig and cattle raising became commercially viable. The small hamlet of Gilby and the nearby town of Eckville developed sufficiently to become merchandising centres for the Estonians. Mike Sestrap, an Estonian settler who had been a tailor in the old country, opened a store and post office in Gilby in 1910. Like so many other such enterprises in rural Alberta, it also served as a social centre for the scattered farming community. By 1911 there was sufficient grain growing for John Kinna to build the area's first water driven flour mill. However, grain growing did not become a major economic enterprise until World War One generated record grain prices.<sup>6</sup>

With the most difficult stage of pioneering behind them, the Estonian settlers turned their attention to the establishment of organizations to meet their social, economic and educational needs. Central to all of these endeavours was the co-operative ethic which they had brought with them to Canada and which had enabled them to develop a cohesive community. Realizing the need for their children to learn English and to obtain an education, the Estonians, joined by a few Finnish and Scandinavian settlers in the area, united in 1909 to establish Estonian School District No. 1760, and with volunteer labour, they built a school. The school board was made up mostly of Estonians. The Estonians' strong interest in education is evidenced in the following comment by a second-generation Estonian from the Eckville area:

*So intense was the interest in education that a pact was made that each family should try to educate one child as a teacher. Their efforts in this commitment were outstanding. Six of the founding families did produce a teaching member.<sup>7</sup>*

The second major community project was the establishment of an Estonian society. Anna Tipman (nec Posti), daughter of one of the pioneer families, later described the origins of community



activities which led to the formation of the society.

*The first neighbourhood meetings had been held in the Posti's living room. Here agriculture problems were discussed, such as grain varieties, methods of tilling, marketing of crops and, of course, politics. Community singing was enjoyed. Physical training was provided by a "trapeze" hanging from ceiling beams.<sup>8</sup>*

On April 24, 1910, the settlers founded The Medicine Valley Estonian Society, which was to play a key role in the community's social and cultural life for decades. The minutes of the first meeting, chaired by Henry Kingsep, reported that the pioneers debated the question of whether the objectives of the association were primarily social or economic. They concluded that both objectives were essential, and the subsequent history of the organization shows that both were pursued. The group eventually built its own hall in 1918.<sup>9</sup>

The group's social activities included dramatic productions, a mixed choir and a string ensemble which performed at concerts and dances. Choirs and singing festivals were an important aspect of life in Estonia and the settlers in Alberta continued this musical tradition. Several of the settlers could play various musical instruments, but the Kinna family was particularly talented. Arthur Kinna, who had come to Alberta at the age of 14, had studied violin in Estonia and he organized the Kinna orchestra, which played for many community events. Later, Arthur would

play with the Calgary and the San Francisco symphony orchestras. Henry Kingsep also had experience in Estonia as a choir master, so it was he who organized and directed the choir.<sup>10</sup>

Adult education and political concerns were as important to many members of the group as entertainment. The society maintained a sizeable library of books on politics, economics, history, and literature. Using its own group as a source of talent and information, the community also heard lectures on education, literature, farming and politics. As with other aspects of community life, Henry Kingsep, being widely read and fluent in five languages (German, Russian, Estonian, Finnish and English) was very much involved in adult education, giving lectures on subjects as varied as education, the co-operative movement, the plight of native Indians in Canada, and "The Harmful Effects of Alcohol and Tobacco." But many other settlers were also actively involved in adult education and political activity. For example, according to the minutes of the Estonian society, in the winter of 1910-11, the following talks were given: Henry Kingsep — Farm Organizations and Farm Management; Henry Kinna — Alberta Politics; Peter Kost — Socialism; August Posti — Estonian Literature; Sam Kinna — the Russian Parliament, and K. Onton — Scientific Discoveries. The subjects reflected both their old and new world interests. By 1912, speakers were being warned to keep their speeches to one half hour, since meetings,



The Estonian women of the Linda Hall district were photographed during a meeting at the hall.



which included programs and entertainment, were lasting until 3:00 a.m. Talks in the winter of 1912-13 included "Blacks and Socialist organizations in the U.S.," "German Landlords in Estonia," and "St. Augustine." After the outbreak of World War One, several members of the organization gave talks denouncing the war as resulting from the ruling class' desire for profits. Not all of the Estonian settlers in the community were left-wing politically, but the main community leaders were, and the activities of the Estonian society had a definite left-wing orientation.<sup>11</sup>

The Estonians who settled in Medicine Valley had a noteworthy penchant for co-operative endeavours, as evidenced in the foundation of the Eckville and Gilby co-operative company (1912), a mutual fire insurance company, a cattle sale co-operative, a savings and loan co-operative bank, and strong support for the new Alberta farmers' organization, the United Farmers of Alberta. And like Estonians who settled in other parts of the province, they were also a particularly innovative, pragmatic and self-reliant people. They were determined to improve themselves and their surroundings and had a strong sense of responsibility, not only to other Estonians but also to the larger rural community of which they became a part. They did not allow a lack of technology to hinder their progress; when they faced a technical problem, they simply built their own machines. Henry Kingsep attached his horse and oxen to a power shaft to create the power for sawing lumber and milling grain; he also built his own threshing machine and designed the community's first horse-drawn brush cutter, which enabled them to clear land much faster than could be done with an axe. With equal ingenuity, Martin Sestrap organized 20 families into a barbed-wire telephone system. A switch located in his house enabled him to transfer calls for neighbours, which he and his family did as a public service, along with delivering urgent messages to neighbours who were without phone service. Thus, with its gardens and livestock, its wealth of practical skills and its inventiveness, the Medicine Valley community was remarkably self-sufficient.<sup>12</sup>

The women in the settlement were equally self-reliant and adaptable; they worked closely with their husbands in the pioneering venture and were well respected. During harvest season when the men were busy in the fields, the women would hitch up the family buggy and go to town to trans-

act business. They used spinning wheels to spin wool for homemade woolen clothing and bedding; they made pillows and quilts from goose feathers and they devoted many hours to preparing and preserving food for their large families. During the early years, the women also assumed responsibility for handling medical problems, since the nearest doctor was at Lacombe, 30 miles distant. In case of illness, they relied on their own knowledge of herbal medicines and disinfectants. Saunas were a particularly effective remedy for rheumatism and arthritis. At childbirth, they depended on those among them who were experienced midwives, such as Emilie Kingsep, who delivered many of the community's children.<sup>13</sup>

One notable aspect of the Eckville settlement was the absence of both an Estonian church and an Estonian minister. Though other Estonian settlements in Alberta were smaller, they received regular visits from an Estonian Lutheran minister. At Eckville, however, the radical political backgrounds of many of the settlers did not dispose them toward the establishment of a church as the focal point of their group life. In June, 1916, for example, the Estonian society held a debate over whether or not the ruling classes used organized religion as a means of enslaving the masses, with Kingsep arguing the affirmative.

One account of an early visit by the Lutheran minister, John Sillak, to the settlement tells of the minister arriving on a Saturday night to a gathering of the Estonian society, and being angered that the settlers would dance the night before they were supposed to take communion. When his scolding only served to irritate the dancers, "who danced even more wildly," he collected his things, denounced the dancers and departed. For most of the settlers, strong family ties, self-sufficiency (where every effort could be seen in tangible results), community co-operation and a variety of cultural activities provided a rich and purposeful life.<sup>14</sup>

The second major settlement of Estonians in Alberta was located just south of Stettler and was composed primarily of people who had previously left Estonia for the Tver region in the Russian Empire. But the Estonian settlers had found the economic conditions difficult and the climate particularly harsh in this region of Russia, so when they learned about free homesteads and political freedom in Canada, they decided to emigrate. In 1901, three men — John Neithal, John Oro and



Mike Rahu — left for Canada where they joined Estonian settlers at Sylvan Lake. Their numbers were soon bolstered by other Estonian immigrants from the Tver region and they began looking elsewhere for a place to settle. In 1903, some of the men located land ten miles south of what would later become the town of Stettler. Shortly thereafter, they were reinforced by other families from Sylvan Lake and two years later by refugees from the 1905 Russian revolution. By late 1905, there were 60 Estonian households in the area, divided into two groups, the largest being located just south of Stettler in an area which they named "Linda," the other at "Kalev" which was further south near Big Valley. Both areas were named after legendary Estonian figures. Among the earliest settlers, besides the Neithals, Oros and Rahuus, were the Hennel, Kelu, Kerbes, Kets, Klaus, Kroon, Kutras, Olower, Reinglas, Saar and Tipman families.<sup>15</sup>

The early settlement, like the one at Eckville, was isolated. The town of Stettler did not come into being until 1905 with the arrival of the CPR; consequently, in the early years, settlers had to carry supplies on their backs from Red Deer, 80 miles distant. Like other pioneer Estonian settlers, they developed several technological innovations to meet the challenges they faced. For example, one of the early Estonian settlers, Karl Kroon, built his own flour mill of fieldstone, which he chiseled into a revolving grindstone that was powered by a windmill. The gears of the mill were made from hardwood. The men also worked outside the community on railway construction, in logging camps and in coal mines to obtain cash and they worked co-operatively in establishing their farms.

Unlike their countmen at Eckville the Linda and Kalev settlers made religion an important part of their lives. Most of them were devout Lutherans and in 1906, they built a small, simple chapel furnished with their own hand-fashioned altar, pulpit and benches. They had no resident minister, but a traveling Estonian pastor, John Sillak, came from Medicine Hat to preside over their religious services (which were held in Estonian), baptizing children, confirming young people, consecrating the dead, and occasionally officiating at marriages.

Cultural and social activities were also important to the Stettler-area Estonians. In 1910 they organized an agricultural club and the following year they built Linda Hall in the centre of the

settlement. They used the hall for social and farm meetings, dances, Estonian plays, concerts, weddings and various other community gatherings. They also established their own brass band and developed a large library. Initially, activities were limited to Estonians, but as the first generation acquired greater fluency in English, members of the surrounding community began to participate in their Saturday night socials and card games. During special celebrations, such as the annual St. John the Baptist Day festivities, the Stettler community was joined by Estonians from the Eckville area. The Estonian pioneers were anxious to have their children learn the Estonian language and keep up their traditions, but use of Estonian was forbidden in the public schools which they attended. The second generation, anxious to overcome the stigma of being considered "foreigners," learned English quickly and used Estonian only with their parents.<sup>16</sup>

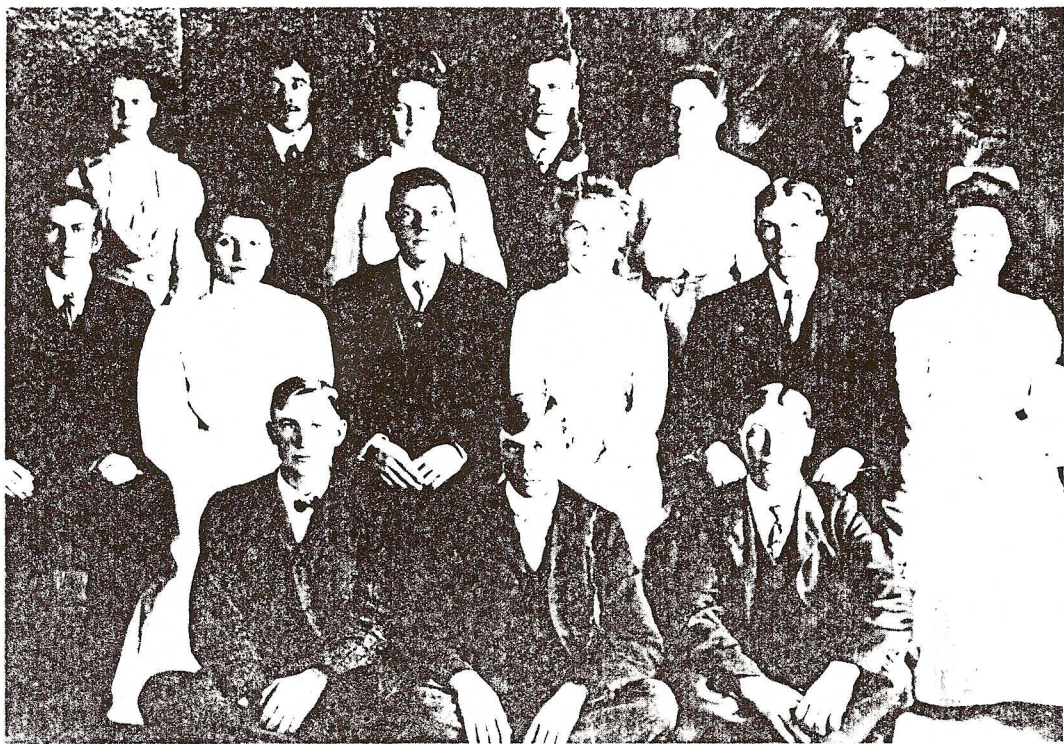
Unlike the Eckville settlement, the Stettler area community did not experience continued growth. Indeed, as early as 1913, 15 families left for the United States and Australia, hoping to find better economic conditions. Until World War Two, the Linda Hall retained its Estonian-Canadian identity, since many second and third generation descendants of the original pioneers remained; but with their increased assimilation (most of the second generation married outside of the Estonian community) Linda Hall gradually came to be used as a community centre by people of many different ethnic backgrounds.

Despite the community's limited growth during the 1920s and 1930s, the Estonian people of the Linda Hall area made an important mark on the Stettler area both as a community and as individuals. They sent many of their children on for higher education, and they made an important contribution to the development of the wheat pool and co-operative movements in the Stettler area.

The third largest Estonian settlement in Alberta was located at Barons, in the heart of the province's southern wheat growing plains. The Estonian settlers who came to Barons had first settled in the Crimea, where they were engaged in mixed farming before migrating to South Dakota at the turn of the century and from there to Canada. Lisa Silverman, one of the daughters of Jacob Erdman, a Barons pioneer, described their coming to Alberta:

*... it was 1901 in May, when we landed in New York. From there, by railroad, we went to Fort Pierre,*





The Estonian young people's group at Barons included many pioneer families of the area. Taken prior to 1908, this photo includes, left to right, front row: Gus Kulpas, Gus Kiwi and John Kulpas; middle row: George Mustin, Lisa and Robert Erdman, Julia Reinstein, Ed Kiwi, and Maria Reinstein; back row: Annette Uswell, Jacob Malberg, Natalie Kewe, Gust Erdman, Mary Uswell, and Alex Kewe.

*South Dakota. We were met there by our old friends . . . In this group of ours were Jacob Erdman and family of eight persons, Anton Kulpas and a family of four persons; Peter Lentsman and wife, Mrs. Reinstein (a widow) and two daughters.*

*We stayed in South Dakota one and one half years. Then we decided to look for a better place to live. Four of the men went to look for better homesteads. They were: J. Erdman, G. Erdman, A. Kulpas and P. Lentsman. None of these men could speak any English, so they asked Mr. John Kewe to accompany them as an interpreter. They went by train to Oregon, but the land there was already settled. There they met a Finlander who knew that in Alberta, Canada there was still good land available for homesteads, so they travelled to Claresholm, where they were met by eager land agents who drove them out eastward.<sup>17</sup>*

By 1908, 26 Estonian families, most of them from the Crimea, had settled in Barons. They were soon able to become large scale farmers, specializing in grain growing and cattle raising. The Estonians at Barons formed a tightly-knit community, with many of them being connected by family ties. Like the Estonians at Linda Hall, they organized church services to keep alive their Lutheran heritage, and like the Estonians at both Eckville and Linda Hall, they were noted for their musical abilities, their support of the co-operative

movement, their emphasis on education, and their technological inventiveness.

There were two other Estonian settlements in southern Alberta, but due to unfavourable climatic conditions, they were short-lived. Like those who settled near Barons, the seven (mostly related) Estonian families who homesteaded in the Foremost area south-east of Lethbridge beginning in 1906, had originally come from the Crimea and had lived temporarily in South Dakota. But these families, including the Meers, Lindermans, Krasmans and Mursas, were not as fortunate as the Barons settlers had been in their choice of land; the area they chose was dry and rocky and a homestead and preemption were much too small to support a farm in an arid area. Finally, during the 1920s there was a general exodus from the area. Twelve Estonian families also settled at Walsh, east of Medicine Hat, between 1904 and 1906, but the land there was too arid and the settlement was soon abandoned.<sup>18</sup>

This first of three waves of Estonian immigration to Alberta was the largest and had the greatest impact on the province; by 1916, there were approximately 500 Estonians in Alberta.



living in several small, scattered rural settlements. During the inter-war years, a second and smaller wave of Estonian immigration arrived from a newly-independent Estonia and was, for the most part, absorbed into the existing settlements.

Forty-six immigrants came to the Eckville area during the 1920s and 1930s. Some of those who came at this time married children of the pioneers. Most, however, remained only temporarily before leaving to find work in the cities of Alberta, British Columbia and Ontario. Those who were not able to earn enough to establish their own farms, but remained in Alberta, fell into a pattern of working as farm labourers during the summer and autumn and then leaving for the cities, where, during the winters of the depression years, they subsisted on relief. The newcomers had arrived just before the outbreak of the Great Depression, and it was extremely difficult to purchase and establish farms of their own during the depression years. A few of the newcomers were able to establish their own farms with a combination of help from newly-acquired wives and fathers-in-law, and endless work. Most, however, left for other parts of Canada; by the early 1940s, 29 of the 46 who had arrived in the Eckville area in the inter-war years had left.<sup>19</sup>

The major demographic and social change among Estonians in Alberta during the 1920s and 1930s resulted not from the arrival of new immigrants, but from the dispersal, urbanization and assimilation of the second generation. To be sure, Estonian activities continued to flourish in the main rural settlements; indeed, the Estonian Young People's Society at Eckville reached its peak of activity during the Great Depression, when many young people had ample free time because of restricted economic opportunities. But those who left the settlements to further their education or pursue economic interests usually intermarried and lost touch with Estonian activities. Many of Eckville's young Estonian-Canadians left their parents' farms and moved to other parts of central Alberta where they opened small businesses, such as general stores, construction companies, or repair shops. Others became electricians, machinists, welders or tradesmen.<sup>20</sup>

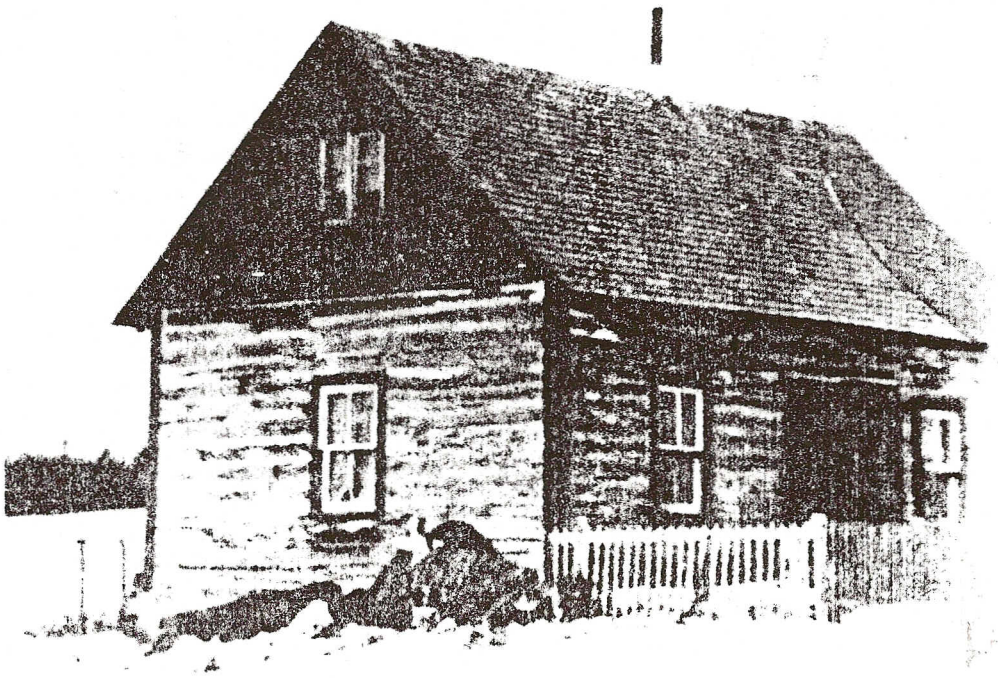
Radical political activity among Estonians in the Eckville area began to decline by the late 1920s for a variety of reasons. These included the improving economic conditions of late 1920s (many of the pioneers could now afford to hire

farm labourers); the growing impact of the new immigrants (most of them were "white" or anti-Communist); and the passing of some of the early community leaders (Henry Kinsep died in 1929). Radicalism also declined in the wake of disillusionment over the failure of the communal experiment of seven families who had returned to Russia from Eckville in the early 1920s. Fired by the utopian ideals of Russian communism and disillusioned by economic and political conditions in Canada, the group had returned to Russia in 1923 to establish a commune, taking farm equipment with them. But within two years, all but two of the families were back in Eckville, impoverished and somewhat disillusioned. With the decline of radicalism, the Estonian society gradually lost its political orientation and became primarily a cultural organization.<sup>21</sup>

By the time of the Second World War, the organized Estonian community in Alberta was in decline. Many of the pioneer generation had passed away during the 1930s and 1940s. The Estonians' small numbers and scattered settlements, their emphasis on education and minimal prejudice against them led to their soon becoming a part of the mainstream of Alberta society. This process was given added impetus during World War Two when many young men from the Estonian settlements joined the armed forces. However, the arrival after the war of a new wave of Estonian immigrants injected new vigour into the Estonian activities in southern and central Alberta and led to the first significant concentrations of Estonians in Edmonton and Calgary.

In 1944, with the Soviet Army approaching, nearly 72,000 refugees (or nine percent of the total population) left Estonia, many escaping to Sweden in small boats, but the majority crossing Latvia and Lithuania to Germany under very arduous conditions. The refugees then began their long wait in Sweden or in the refugee camps of Germany, hoping to obtain immigration visas to other countries. The Canadian government did not take an active interest in their plight until the fall of 1948. In the meantime, as early as 1945, the Soviet government began pressing the western powers to extradite Estonian army officers, some of whom had been drafted into the German army as Soviet citizens during the war-time occupation of Estonia by Germany. Well aware of the fate which awaited them at the hands of the Soviets, they desperately tried to emigrate elsewhere.

When it appeared that the Swedish govern-



This pioneer log house was built by Estonian pioneer Mike Warnau, in the Linda Hall district.

ment, under pressure from the Soviet Union, might extradite Estonians and other Baltic refugees and with Canadian officials incapable of helping since they were enmeshed in their own red tape, some of the Estonians had little choice but to set out for North America in small 30 to 40 foot vessels. Thirty-five boats made this voyage between 1945 and 1951; nine of the boats and 987 Estonian refugees arrived in Canada. The Canadian government response to the arrival of Canada's first "boat people" was basically generous. All normal immigration procedures were waived and all but 12 were allowed to remain in Canada. Eventually the Canadian government unravelled the red tape and a total of 5,000 Estonians came to Canada from Sweden.<sup>23</sup>

However, it was not easy for Estonians to come to Canada immediately after the war. During this period, the Canadian government preferred single, uneducated immigrants who would be suitable for the unskilled manual labour and farm jobs which were difficult to fill with Canadian workers. Under these circumstances, one of the few ways for Estonians to emigrate as families was to come under the sponsorship of Canadian

citizens. In response to this need, members of Alberta's existing Estonian community sponsored a number of families; consequently, many of the Estonians who came to Alberta at this time worked first on farms at Eckville, Barons or Stettler. Others found sponsors on sugar beet farms in the Lethbridge area or were sponsored by the CPR. Because of their hasty flight from Estonia, some arrived with little more than the clothes they were wearing.

Thus, fleeing the political upheaval precipitated by World War Two, 13,521 Estonians immigrated to Canada between 1946 and 1955. Although the majority settled in Ontario, approximately 400 came to Alberta, helping to push the number of people of Estonian origin in the province from 819 in 1951 to 1,115 in 1961.<sup>24</sup>

The social and professional composition of the Estonian refugees was diversified but most were from middle-class backgrounds and many were professionals. Among those who came to Alberta were engineers, architects, veterinarians, medical doctors, dentists, clerks, tradesmen, army officers, lawyers and teachers, some of whom had been prominent personalities in Estonia.



Although most were originally placed as farm hands, few had any direct farming experience. As with other post-war refugees, most abandoned Alberta farms after their one year contracts and looked for more suitable employment in the cities. For example, only two of the 13 Estonian families who came to the Eckville area after the war remained in the area. In Calgary and Edmonton, they found jobs relatively easily but mostly as blue-collar workers. Later, some tried to re-establish themselves in their professions.

Although most of the Estonian immigrants were bilingual in either German or Russian, most were not fluent in English and this was the main obstacle to their pursuing previous occupations. Nor did cities in Alberta, unlike those on the West coast or in the East, provide conditions conducive to the immigrants establishing independent businesses. Consequently, most who were ultimately able to realize their desires for upward mobility did so through the most readily available job markets — the bureaucracies of the civil service in Edmonton and the oil industry in Calgary.<sup>25</sup>

The Estonians who settled in Alberta after the war felt the need to organize social and cultural activities. Although their primary reasons for establishing these organizations were social, political motives also were strong. Estonia's turbulent history bred an intense nationalism. These sentiments were heightened for many of the post-war immigrants, who had been deeply committed to their country's independence and then had been forced to flee by wartime events. Consequently, some maintained a "refugee mentality," marked by a persistent desire to hope and fight for an independent, non-Communist Estonia to which they can someday return.

Estonians in Calgary and Edmonton began organizations in 1949 and both groups were affiliated with national organizations. Membership in the new organizations included virtually all Estonians in each centre, as well as those in Barons and Eckville. The focus of organizational activity in the urban centres was the celebration of Estonian Independence Day, but the groups also initiated displays of ethnic arts and crafts, and held concerts featuring the performance of national dances and songs. Each summer during the 1950s, Estonians from across the province gathered in Eckville for a traditional mid-summer festival which included bonfires, dancing and singing. In Edmonton the society organized recreational and sports trips, which the refugees

welcomed as opportunities to escape from their crowded apartments. Several times a year, the organizations also invited travelling Lutheran ministers from eastern centres to provide religious services. Monetary support for the Toronto-based Estonian National Committee and the Estonian Relief Committee was strong in both cities. The community activities provided a place where Estonians could meet and discuss their common problems, including information on ways of obtaining better jobs or housing.

The post-war displaced persons and the second-generation Estonian Canadians from the rural communities had little in common and the latter generally did not participate in the activities of the newly-founded urban Estonian societies. However, the Medicine Valley Estonian Society provided a point of contact for the different waves of immigrants. The gulf between the left-wing refugees from the 1905 revolution and the strongly anti-Communist post-World War Two refugees was a potential source of strain. But by the late 1940s and early 1950s, most of the pioneer generation had passed away and the political views of the second generation were usually different from their parents. Nevertheless, differences in perspective between the Canadian-born and the newcomers created misunderstandings. The new arrivals suspected the existing Estonian community of having Communist sympathies, while the Canadian-born, who were committed to complete integration into Canadian society and did not want to be treated as "different," could not understand and at times resented the intense nationalism of the newly-arrived political refugees.<sup>26</sup>

For a variety of reasons, Alberta's Estonians have now largely disappeared as a distinct part of the provincial mosaic. The second and third generation offspring of both the pioneer generation and the post-war refugees are now almost completely integrated into Alberta society. Estonian clubs in Edmonton and Calgary each have less than one hundred members and activities have declined to only a few meetings during the year. Also, after years of declining activity, the Medicine Valley Estonian Society disbanded in 1979.

While the Estonian presence and identity in Alberta is not readily apparent, it has not completely disappeared. Numbers and organizational activity may be limited, but there are still some Estonian immigrants and people of Estonian origin whose frames of reference and world



Rev. John Sillak was an Estonian Lutheran minister who visited most of the settlements in Alberta.

views include an awareness of developments in Estonia and of the presence and concerns of Estonians around the world. Even among the Canadian-born who are completely removed from organized Estonian-Canadian life, there is

often an awareness of and interest in their cultural roots which finds visible expressions in their homes in artifacts, handicrafts and cuisine. This interest is often both symbolized and strengthened by visits to Estonia, which inevitably heighten awareness of Estonian history and culture.

Like other groups from small countries of which Canadians have been only barely aware, Estonians have faced an uphill and largely unnoticed struggle for recognition. As with many other immigrant groups who helped to settle rural Alberta, their contribution is not highly visible; besides the Estonian family names the only tangible signs of their presence are roadside and community plaques and rural cemeteries near the sites of early settlements. In one such roadside cemetery near Linda Hall, beneath rows of wrought-iron crosses lie 69 Estonian settlers who were members of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran congregation, providing mute testimony to the early Estonian presence in the area. But the struggles and contributions of the pioneer Estonians are alive in the memories of their children and grandchildren and should become part of the awareness of all Albertans seeking to understand the many strands which have come together to make today's Alberta.

## NOTES

1. Eckville and District Historical Society, Eckville, 1979, *Homesteads and Happiness*, 558; Interview Nick Kingsep (son of Henry Kingsep), Calgary, March, 1980; for general background on causes of emigration see V. Rand, *Estonia: A Reference Book*, New York, 1953, p. 20-23.
2. A. Kurlents, *Eestlased Kanadas*, Toronto, 1975, 21-26; *Homesteads and Happiness*, 558; diary, August Posti, March 23, 1902, in possession of Medicine Valley Estonian Society.
3. Kurlents, *Eestlased Kanadas*; *ibid*: *Homesteads and Happiness*, 558.
4. Kurlents, *ibid*, 26-37; *Homesteads and Happiness*, 587.
5. Kurlents, *ibid*: *Homesteads and Happiness*, 574.
6. *Homesteads and Happiness*, 13, 21-26, 548-49; Interview, Nick Kingsep. *ibid*.
7. *Homesteads and Happiness*, 542-43, and quote from 575.
8. *ibid*, 559, 903.
9. Minute book, Medicine Valley Estonian Society, April 24, 1910.
10. *Homesteads and Happiness*, 360, 560; A. Kurlents, *ibid*.
11. Selma Pallo, "Free Land Attracted Henry Kingsep to Sylvan Lake," *Red Deer Advocate*, June 28, 1967; Interview, Nick Kingsep. *ibid*: Minute Book, Medicine Valley Estonian Society, Nov. 6, 1910; May 11, 1912; Jan. 25, 1913; Sept. 1915.
12. *Homesteads and Happiness*, 40, 559-60, 588-903; interview Nick Kingsep.
13. *Homesteads and Happiness*, *passim*; interview, Nick Kingsep.
14. *New World Jubilee Album, 1909-1934*, New York: New York World Printing, 1934, 61-63.
15. Kurlents, *Eestlased Kanadas*; Edith Clark, *Trails of Tail Creek Country* (n.p., n.d.) 130-31; Joseph Tipman "Estonians Came to Stettler," *The Stettler Independent* May 18, 1977.
16. Kurlents, *ibid*; Clark, *ibid*, *Stettler Independent* May 18, June 1, June 29, 1977; interviews, Phelix Leew, Calgary, March 14, 1980; Joe Tipman, Stettler, Aug. 5, 1980.
17. Kurlents, *Eestlased Kanadas*; quote from Barons History Book Club, *Heart of the West*, Calgary, 1972, 236.
18. Foremost Historical Society, *Shortgrass Country*, Foremost, 1975, 419, 371, 329, 331, 324-325. Schuler History Committee, *Saga of Schuler Stalwarts*, n.p., 1973, 36, 135.
19. Kurlents, *ibid*: *Homesteads and Happiness*, 556.
20. *Homesteads and Happiness*, *passim*.



21. Kurlents, *Eestlased Kanadas*; interview with Kinna in *Red Deer Advocate*, Dec. 19, 1924; *New World Jubilee Album*, 61-62.
22. Quote from Villibald Raud, *Estonia: A Reference Book*, New York, 1953, 31; Tone Parming and Elmar Jarvesoo eds., *A Case Study of a Soviet Republic; The Estonian SSR*, Boulder, Colorado, 1978, 25.
23. *Ibid*: Gerald Dirks, *Canada's Refugee Policy: Indifference or Opportunism?* Montreal, 1977, 164-66.
24. Dirks, *Canada's Refugee Policy*, chapter 7; Kurlents, *Eestlased Kanadas*, Department of Citizenship and Immigration, "Ethnic Origin of Immigrants by province of Destination," mimeographed report, Ottawa, 1956; Census of Canada, 1951, 1961.
25. On the social origins of the post-war immigrants see Parming, *A Case Study*, 25; information on Alberta from interviews Lydia Pals, Edmonton, January, 1980; Andres Pilt, Edmonton, December, January, 1980; Mr. and Mrs. Rouk, Calgary, January 5, 1980; Mrs. Eva Weir, Edmonton, December, 1979; Mrs. Ludmilla Kowalski, Edmonton, December, 1979; *Homesteads and Happiness*, p. 303-04; interview, Rita Matissen, Eckville, October 8, 1980.
26. Interviews.