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COAL TOWN IN WHEAT COUNTRY: LETHBRIDGE, ALBERTA, 1885-1905

One settlement in western Canada which will probably receive only passing attention from urban historians is Lethbridge, Alberta, a city which in 1971 had a population of only 41,217 people. My own work on Lethbridge, too, was only part of a dissertation on the entrepreneurial activities of the Galts in western Canada.¹ Yet, Lethbridge is worthy of study because as a coal-mining centre, containing an unusually large proportion of skilled workers, it was in a sense western Canada's first 'industrial' community. While in many ways its development was similar to other prairie communities, it also experienced some unique problems.

From 1882-1890 the various enterprises incorporated by Sir Alexander Galt established several collieries near Lethbridge and constructed two railways, one to the CPR mainline near Medicine Hat, the other to the Great Northern railway at Great Falls, Montana. During peak production periods the Galt companies employed over a thousand workers, thereby creating a transient, male-dominant population as well as a local economy entirely dependent upon the company. The two railways were subsidized by the federal government with nearly a million acres of land located south of Lethbridge. When these lands proved to be too dry for agricultural settlement, Galt's eldest son, Elliot, constructed elaborate irrigation works, a project completed by 1900. Once irrigated, the lands attracted a large number of settlers and thereby transformed Lethbridge from a mere dormitory for the mines to a service centre for its agricultural hinterland.

Since Galt permitted local businessmen to establish themselves in Lethbridge and to freely develop the town's economic potential, its society displayed many characteristics common to western Canadian communities. Its population was youthful: the leading merchants were in their late twenties or early thirties, the first mayor only thirty-one. Very soon after the town's founding, a clique emerged which first established and

later controlled civic government. This group's active involvement in municipal politics was not primarily a search for personal power but rather an ardent drive to establish Lethbridge, with its seemingly inexhaustible coal supply, as a great industrial metropolis. Inspired by this vision of public, as well as personal wealth, the local entrepreneurs vigorously promoted economic growth, supported all sorts of social organizations, churches, schools and above all their Board of Trade. They created a miniature metropolitan centre which supplied essential services to outlying districts while collecting cattle, grain and coal for shipment east and southward. In its energetic boosterism the Lethbridge business establishment differed little from its counterpart in many other prairie towns.

Lethbridge's men of business, aided by company officials as well as professionals, also sought to reconstruct on the prairies an idealized conception of the central Canadian urban life they had so recently left behind. The fluctuating production of the collieries, however, produced instead a transient male-predominant society which became one of the most unruly permanent settlements in western Canada. Excessive drinking, frequent brawls and open prostitution characterized community life. By and large the workers looked upon Lethbridge as a temporary residence and thus, with no abiding interest in the town, they abdicated the responsibility for social organization and municipal government to the merchants, professionals and company officials. The transient nature of the work force did not prevent the formation of rudimentary labour organizations, however, and Lethbridge became a leader in union activities, the first strike erupting as early as 1887. In these early years the conflicts were peaceful, largely because of the paternalistic interference of the NWMP who usually sided with the workers. In 1906 a fierce struggle did break out, climaxed by a dynamiting, forcing the federal government to extend the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act to include coal mines.

Apart from the heavy concentration of workers, Lethbridge also differed from other prairie towns because for many years its economy depended entirely upon the Galt companies. To be sure, other settlements, like Calgary for example, relied heavily upon the CPR, but nowhere was the tie

as complete and personal as in Lethbridge. Sir Alexander Galt occasionally visited the town, built a hospital and donated a number of town lots for a park, the churches and several social organizations. One of the firm's top executives, C.A. Magrath, was elected the community's first mayor and later its territorial representative. Elliot Galt, the general manager, lived in town and became a member of its social elite. He seldom interfered in local affairs but was effective where he did. For example, not until the Board of Trade pledged to exempt from local taxation all company property, did Elliot permit the town's incorporation. The ethnic composition of Lethbridge was also a direct result of company policy: Galt at first hired Nova Scotians but replaced many of them with Hungarians who were willing to work for less. Consequently, Lethbridge developed an immigrant ghetto and witnessed harsh racial animosities.

Although limited in number, the sources for the history of Lethbridge do furnish some unique insights into urban development. The Galt papers at the Public Archives of Canada and the North West Coal and Navigation Company records at the Glenbow-Alberta Institute provide a very interesting financial background to the establishment and growth of Lethbridge. The RCMP records at the Public Archives contain a very detailed, running commentary on the social conditions, labour relations, crime, prostitution, population trends, mine production, and economic circumstances in the mining settlement. More traditional sources are the files and minutes of the town council still kept at the city clerk's office, while the Galt Museum at Lethbridge has a set of tax assessment rolls which give a good picture of land ownership in the town. The two newspapers, the Lethbridge News and the Herald are another major source on social and political activities. Finally, interesting impressions are recorded by Burton R. Deane, Mounted Police Life in Canada: A Record of Thirty-One Years' Service (London, 1916), John D. Higinbotham, When the West Was Young: Historical Reminiscences of the Early Canadian West (Toronto, 1933), and C.A. Magrath, The Galts, Father and Son: Pioneers in the Development of Southern Alberta (Lethbridge, 1936).

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1. A.A. den Otter, "Sir Alexander T. Galt and the Northwest: A Case Study of Entrepreneurialism on the Frontier", unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Alberta, 1975.