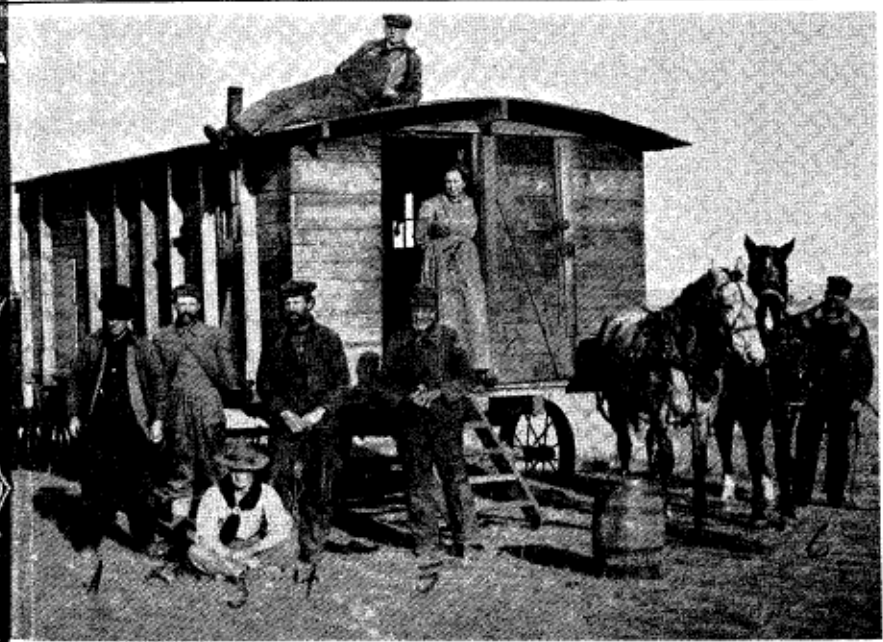


# ALBERTA HISTORICAL REVIEW



AUTUMN  
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HARVEST CREW, 1913

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## A Roumanian Pioneer

by  
ANNE B. WOYWITKA

Mrs. Veronia Kokotailo came with her parents to Canada in 1898 when she was four years old. Her father had decided to leave the village of Boian in Roumania because his native land could no longer offer sustenance to him and his growing family. He owned the house they lived in, plus a scrap of land no larger than a small city lot. Over the preceding generations, the original land holding had been divided and sub-divided among members of his family so that there was hardly enough to grow a garden. How could he hope to raise a family on this meagre bit of land? Much less, how could he hope to give anything to his own children when they were ready to go on their own? For these reasons, he decided to emigrate to Canada. Four other families decided to join him, including his father-in-law with a wife by a second marriage.

The sale of his property in Boian brought him enough to pay their passage but little was left over to re-establish them in the new land. They arrived in Canada in the summer of 1898 to settle in a district north-east of Willingdon which was to form the nucleus of the first Roumanian settlement in Alberta. Though they left behind them the poverty of the Old Country, they also left behind all things dear and familiar to them — their homes, relatives and friends, church and their way of village life. In exchange, they hoped to establish a better life on the 160 acres of land the Canadian Government was giving away for \$10 —

never dreaming how hard the transition from "rags to riches" would be, nor how long it would take to make a decent life for themselves.

They brought with them such tools as spade, shovel, axe, hammer, saw, scythe and sickle. One family brought a quern for grinding wheat into flour, another a spinning wheel and loom. They brought with them their bedding and personal effects. The little extra money they still had, went for hiring teamsters and wagons to take them from Edmonton to the area they had chosen to settle. In truth, to them the place was a

*Mrs. Woywitka is a gifted writer who has previously contributed two articles to the Review. A pioneer Albertan, she is now a resident of Edmonton. The photo above shows a group of eastern European settlers at Kenora on their way west in about 1900.*

dot on the map which they chose because there were other settlements nearby — Willingdon, Shandro and Whitford. They planned to call the new settlement Boian, after their native village.

When their teamster dropped them off, they could see little else than a forest of poplar trees and a glimmer of sky above. So this was to be their home in Canada!

"Well," said Veronia's father, "at least we will never run short of wood here. There is more than enough for our buildings and even more for fuel and fences than we ever dreamt of in the Old Country!"

For economic reasons, they decided that for the first little while, it would be better for the two families to live together.

They immediately set to clearing a space in the woods for their primitive shelter which they called a "burdey". It was a dug-out large enough to accommodate the family with a pole-roof like a tepee over it. The poles were covered with sedge and sod. The burdey afforded them shelter from wind and sun and even kept out most of the rains that fell frequently that summer.

The two men had no sooner completed the burdey and dug a well, when they left the women and children in search of work. They had to earn a few dollars for winter food supplies.

As the women enlarged the clearing for a garden, the pile of logs grew. Then Veronia's mother saw the possibility of a log house. She resented living like an animal in a lair and had cried bitterly over it. She longed for the clean white-washed home she'd left behind. From then on she worked with the vision of a log house uppermost in her mind. Before the men returned in the fall, the house had been built.

Veronia recalls how hard her mother worked as she cut, limbed and sawed the logs into equal lengths. With the mother-in-law's help, they dragged the logs into place and set them upright into the soil, side by side, to make a wall. Her mother was young and her body was yet to be hardened by hard work. Before she was finished building the house, both her

shoulders were a mass of raw bleeding flesh. But she refused to give up and in time all four walls were standing. The only thing that baffled her was the roof for which she was forced to call for help from a neighbour.

She left a space for the door and arranged for a window on the south wall. In place of glass she used a linen pillow case. As a final touch to the house, she made a porch over the door. Its walls and roof were made by weaving willows over a frame. She then plastered everything, inside and out, using a mixture of clay and chopped sedge.

Later, when she discovered a deposit of white clay, she carted it home by hand and used it to smooth and brighten the dark walls. The dirt floor bothered her but there was no way to improve on that other than to surface it with clay and tramp it down. She kept the loose dirt down by sprinkling it with water and sweeping it off with a broom made of birch switches.

Now there remained the problems of a door, a chimney and an oven. Again, the willow came in handy. For the door she made a cross frame over which she wove thick batts of sedge. She wove a willow frame for the chimney and plastered it thickly, inside and out. She made a clay bake-oven, the top of which served as a warm bed for the children on cold winter nights. She laid rocks for a cook stove but had to wait until she could get a galvanized iron sheet for the stove-top. Thus, without spending a penny and improvising as she went, Veronia's mother built them a home in which they lived for many years.

One day while the women worked and the children played nearby, a herd of wild range cattle wandered into the clearing. The children screamed in terror as they ran for their mother. Alarmed by the screams, the cows wheeled around to form a protective circle around the calves. This aroused the bulls so they roared and pawed the ground, throwing clouds of dust over their humped backs. Terrified at their first sight of wild cattle, the women grabbed the children and ran to the house, certain that their end had

come. However, after a while, the animals wandered off and did not come back again.

That summer and fall they lived mostly off the woods and meadows around them, picking berries, mushrooms and edible roots. They had some flour and a bag of potatoes which they had used sparingly. Their supplies had to last indefinitely.

The men returned in the fall with enough money to replenish food supplies and to buy the barest necessities. Because it was necessary to live on one's homestead part of the year in order to "prove" it, they built a shelter on the father-in-law's quarter and he moved into it with his wife. About this time, Veronia's mother gave birth to another child.

That fall and winter, Veronia's parents chopped down trees, enlarging the clearing around the house. Come spring they would hire someone to break it. They did not spare themselves as they worked. When the snows grew deep, they sawed stacks of firewood for fuel and trimmed trees for posts and fence rails. Young as she was, Veronia took care of the baby and her brother and kept the fire going.

Before the spring thaw came, the father went working again. The food supply was running short and they needed money to pay for the breaking and the seed. Soon after he was gone it became necessary to ration their food. When the last handful of flour had been used and the last potato had gone into the soup pot, death by starvation became a very real possibility. The baby cried and the older children begged for something to eat. There was no one to whom the mother could turn for help, knowing other settlers were all in the same predicament.

Without too much hope, she went into the woods looking for mushrooms, though it was still early in the season. However, she did find little yellow button-sized mushrooms growing. These she picked not knowing whether they were edible or not. What difference if they died of mushroom poisoning or by starvation? Beggars could not be choosers. She added chopped green grass to the mushrooms in the pot and boiled it.

They ate that day and did not die. Then for two weeks without a break, they ate the same unpalatable food. The mother cried each night and prayed that they not wake when morning came. But every morning they awoke, alive as ever and hungrier than the day before. The mother would go into the woods again and hunt for more mushrooms and pick more grass, and pray for the father to return.

At the end of the second week the father arrived home, carrying on his back 50 pounds of flour and a pig's head. He had walked a hundred miles over rough trails bringing food for his family. Later, the mother earned her husband's displeasure when she cut off the ears from the pig's head and gave them to her parents for a pot of soup.

They broke a plot of land that spring and planted it to potatoes, a bit of garden, and the rest in wheat.

In the meantime, Veronia's mother and a neighbour woman, hearing that a Mr. Johnson at Whitford had raised a log barn and was looking for someone to plaster it, offered their services in hopes of earning a bit of money. They walked twice a day to work through five miles of bush. It was a back-breaking job and for lunch they were given raw carrots out of the garden.

One evening on their way back home, they lost all sense of direction. Wandering aimlessly, they began to despair of ever getting back home, when they came upon a path with human excrement alongside it. They fell on their knees thanking God for letting them know that there were people around. They had been afraid they had wandered off into deep wilderness and would never see home or people again. They finally stumbled back to their homesteads late that night. Next morning they took an axe with them and blazed their own trail. At the end of two weeks of hard labour, they each received a pail of potatoes in lieu of payment.

Because her father was away from home so much of the time and her mother worked outside the house, Veronia at the age of five had already learned responsibility. She took



This home, photographed in 1906 in the Vegreville area, is typical of those built by Eastern European settlers at the turn of the century. Note the crude shack at right, which probably served as a temporary shelter when the family first arrived.

care of the younger children and ran errands for her mother.

In 1899, her mother harvested their first crop of wheat by sickle, tying it into sheaves and putting it in stooks to dry. The day she threshed, she took a panful of the precious grain, put it in a bag over Veronia's shoulder and sent her up the path to a neighbour's home where they had a quern. Veronia came back with the flour and by night-time they were eating buns and potato soup made from the produce of their own little bit of land.

It was a great day for rejoicing when Veronia's father bought a cow. Her grandfather had also bought one and when they purchased a plough, the two men teamed their animals. Now, not only did they have milk, but were able to break more land without hiring anybody.

The mother was heart-broken the day their cow died. They had come to depend on the milk, the bit of cream and cheese the cow had supplied them. It was hard to reconcile themselves to the loss. However,

being a practical woman, she skinned the cow and tanned the hide. At least she had leather for making moccasins for her family.

Then, in time, her father bought another cow, also an ox. This time he kept the cow for milking purposes only and used the ox for heavy work.

During those first years they were always only a step away from hunger and starvation. Mostly, they lived off the land. Meat was almost an unknown commodity. Though wild game was plentiful, her people were not hunters. Without a gun, they had no way to get the ducks and upland game-birds to their table.

One day when Veronia was on an errand to a neighbour's home, she sniffed the heavenly aroma of meat cooking on the stove. As she waited hopefully to be invited to eat, her attention was drawn by a cat yowling at the door.

The old woman turned to the door.

"Oh, there's my Machko back home. Be a good girl and let him in. He's been out

all morning," she said to Veronia.

Veronia opened the door and drew back with a gasp. She had never seen such a large cat before. He was twice the size of an average tom. His face and ears were nicked with battle scars, the end of his tail bitten off. On the doorstep lay a fat prairie chicken he had brought home. Padding softly into the house, he went straight to his mistress, rubbing himself affectionately against her legs and purring like a distant thunderstorm.

While the woman bent over to fondle the cat, speaking endearingly and praising him, the wheels in Veronia's head began to turn madly. She did not think the woman had seen the prairie chicken. Though she had never stolen anything before, hunger did not leave her much choice. Through the half-open door she could see the dead bird. It lay there, tempting her with visions of broth and succulent meat. Maybe if she snatched it and ran . . . ? Surely the woman could not miss something she had not seen? Besides, Veronia told herself convincingly, there was meat bubbling in her pot already. She did not know what it was to be hungry.

Putting her thoughts in action, the little girl slid out of the door, grabbed the prairie chicken under her arm and ran. But she had not gone far before she heard the woman shouting:

"What are you doing? Where are you going with that chicken? It's mine. Wait till I tell you're mother what you did. Just wait."

Caught in the act red-handed, Veronia dropped the bird and dived into a tall growth of green, too scared to look where she landed. Immediately, she felt the sharp sting of nettle on her legs and arms, but mostly on her bare buttocks. She scrambled out of the nettles even faster and ran home crying, shedding tears of shame and humiliation combined with the painful itch of nettle stings. She shrivelled inside when she thought of her mother's wrath. Now even hunger seemed preferable.

The neighbour came to their door later in the day carrying the plucked bird in her hand. The little girl looked for a place to

hide but saw none. Hanging her head in shame and resignation, she waited for the sky to fall on her. But as it turned out, the neighbour had a heart after all. While Veronia watched fearfully, the woman handed the bird to her mother.

"Perhaps you would like to make some soup. My cat is a hunter and brings me more than I can use."

No word or mention of what had really happened.

Veronia's mother seized the old woman's hand and kissed it. Her eyes were bright with unshed tears. "God will repay you for this! My husband is not home and my children are hungry. Thank you! Thank you so much!"

The neighbour nodded sadly. "Forgive me! I should have known. But like the saying goes, the well fed do not know the hungry."

The lean years continued. What little income rolled in from the father's work was ploughed back into the homestead. The clearing in the woods grew ever larger. The family increased and so did the mother's responsibilities. Soon Veronia was to shoulder much of the work her mother had done before. She helped clear land, picked roots, and learned to work with the machinery her father had acquired. They grew a large garden and laid in a store of potatoes, dried peas, beans and broadbeans. They krauted cabbage, picked saskatoons and dried them for the winter. The whole family contributed to the welfare of the home for there was no room for a drone in their midst.

As more settlers came in, they brought with them various things like an oil press, mortar, and a grist mill. Her mother availed herself of their use, making oil from poppy seed, sunflower seeds and mostly from the oil rich seed of the cannabis, all of which she grew in her garden. She used the oil in all her baking and her cooking. She used the mortar to take the coarse hulls off the barley, wheat and millet and used the hulled grains to cook as cereal or as filling for cabbage rolls. They caught fish in the



river using box-traps. These fish they pickled for later use or salted and dried them for winter eating. They picked mushrooms and dried them.

From the cannabis or hemp plant, they processed a coarse fibre which they wove into horse blankets. From these same fibres, they made strong rope. The mother made her own soap using waste fat and lye made from ashes. She scrubbed clothes on a wooden scrub board. She sewed and mended, first by candlelight, later by the light of a kerosene lamp.

In times of sickness, Veronia's mother reverted to the use of herbs and roots to make her own medicinal teas and salves. As a carryover from the Old Country she like the rest of the settlers, believed in the power of witchcraft and the "evil eye". Usually in every district of Central European settlers, there was an old woman versed in the art of "pouring wax" or "throwing coals" which was supposed to be able to relieve many aches and pains as well as take away illnesses of an emotional nature. These may have been primitive practices but the power

of believing in them was strong and seemed to help in many instances.

By 1910 Veronia's father had horses for working on the land, a breaker for turning the sod, a plough, a disc, drill, harrows and a binder for harvesting.

The Boian Marea school was opened in 1909 and though fifteen-year-old Veronia wanted to go, her father felt that she was too old for that. Besides, he needed her help on the homestead. Three of the oldest children missed school because they were needed at home. The father felt that though he was illiterate, he had done well. Why waste time on school when there was still more land to be cleared, more work to be done? Perhaps that was why, when Veronia married and had children of her own, she made certain that no sacrifice on her part was to great in order to give them the education she had missed.

Veronia grew into a hard-working, spirited girl who enjoyed life in spite of the hardships. In her own words, she was "black as a crow", wind-burned and sun-



By 1927, when this photograph was taken, the lands in the Willingdon-Vegreville area had become productive through the hard work of the pioneers.

tanned by her life outdoors. At sixteen, she did not know how to boil a pot of potatoes, when she fell in love with the man she was later to marry. In order to impress him, she was determined to have a new blouse to wear for the Easter celebrations in church. She wheedled some linen from her mother and took it to her godmother's to embroider and sew into a blouse.

Because Easter holidays came late that year, people were already working on their land. It was Saturday, the day before Easter. Veronia's father had gone to the blacksmith's in Willingdon and left her harrowing the field in preparation for seeding. It seemed an opportune time to go and pick up the blouse. She tied all the horses but one to a fence, gave them hay and rode that one bareback to her godmother's. But she was not back soon enough for her father had returned.

Upon inquiring of her mother, he discovered she had gone to her godmother's on the horse. He shook with anger. Instead of stopping to feed the horse and letting it rest, she had further played him out. He was waiting for her when she got back.

"Where have you been?" he shouted at her.

There was no way out but to tell the truth. "I had to get my blouse!"

"Your blouse! Do you realize the horse will be too tired to work this afternoon?"

"But I had to get it! What am I to wear to church tomorrow? A quilt on my back?"

That did it! Not only had she misused the horse but she had dared to talk back. That day she received a beating she was to remember for the rest of her life.

A few months later when the young man decided to ask for her hand, he sent a "starosta" (matchmaker) to her father's home. It was her mother who tried to talk her out of it for several reasons. But Veronia stuck by her decision and made a good marriage of it that lasted for more than half a century. She and Thomas Kokotailo were married in 1913. Her father made her a wedding, inviting all their neighbours and

as was the custom among her people, they presented the newlyweds with 25 hens, 20 bags of grain, including wheat, oats and barley, three ducks and two geese. Her father gave her a cow and calf, her mother pillows and a featherbed. They moved into a small house on their homestead at Eagle Tail Hill and Veronia began to learn to keep house.

She worked along with her husband as she had with her father. The grain presented to them on their wedding day yielded well on the new land and that fall they bought a new binder. Never having worked with a binder before, Tom found he did not know how to put the binder-canvas on. When Veronia tried to show him how it was done, it became a battle of the sexes.

"You must think I'm stupid," said young Tom. "What do you know about it? You're only a woman!"

While he struggled and sweated with the canvases, Veronia watched impatiently but dared not say anything. It was a dry harvest day and a shame to have it wasted but her husband refused to let her show him how it was done. In the end he succeeded, proving once and for all his male superiority!

Their life on the homestead was full of hardships. They cleared land, bought machinery and raised a large family. Veronia still had to do all the things her mother had done before her. She grew a large garden, took care of the house and babies, hulled grains for cereals, baked bread, made her own oil and learned to cut corners like all pioneer women. Her work began at day-break and ended late at night. She scrubbed clothes by hand. She sewed and mended by night.

Few women had any money to call their own, not because their husbands were tight-wads but because the land came first. If the land was to ever support them, then it must first and foremost, be developed. This took money.

The farm woman's financial emancipation came with the arrival of the country peddler with his democrat loaded with empty crates and cases. He bought eggs



and old hens and, for the first time, a bit of money found its way into Veronia's pockets. It was never frittered away and it helped to bring back her self-respect. With it she bought embroidery thread and poured out her re-awakening love of color and beauty into embroidered aprons and pillow cases. With a few cents worth of crepe paper, she made dozens of roses and decked her drab walls with the flowers. For the first time in a couple of decades, she was able to buy a few extras for herself and her children without being beholden to her husband.

It took a lot of work and money to raise her eight children. At one time, Veronia had all eight going to school. Many a time, she wracked her brains to figure out what to give them for their lunches. She baked twenty loaves of bread or more at a time. Sometimes there was nothing but a sprinkling of sugar to go with the bread, and a bottle of cold tea.

"Mrs. Kokotailo", an elderly woman teacher who used to come to her house

said, "how do you manage? How do you manage?"

When George, the oldest son started university, Mrs. Kokotailo spent most of her nights lavishly embroidering shirts with cross-stitch work for which she had ready buyers. It took a month and more to embroider one and the \$25 it brought helped her son through a few weeks. Altogether she made 35 shirts. When George was finished, he helped the younger brothers to get their education. Today, George is a research scientist in New Jersey. Three other boys finished university and are scattered throughout Canada. The rest received a high school education.

The early settlers survived and made good because of the industry and character of their women. The men would have never lived through the rigours of those frontier days without their support. They were the ones who bore the brunt of work and worry. The man worked hard, but his woman worked even harder.

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### THE WILY SPONGER

A story is going the rounds of how a barkeeper at one of the leading Calgary hotels was recently made the victim of a most ingenious scheme. Quite a crowd was gathered at the bar, when a gentleman of a very delapidated and down-at-the-heel appearance shambled in, and with an apologetic manner handed the bartender a black bottle and requested that it might be filled with the best Seagram. The man behind the high counter looked rather doubtfully at the shabby figure before him, but did as desired, placed the bottle on the counter and demanded the price. He of the shabby genteel appearance, however, intimated with a most ingenious air that he had no money at present but would return with sufficient of the needful if he were allowed to take the liquor with him.

"Not by a jugful!" thundered he of the white apron. "What the Sam Hill do you take me for? Get out of here and don't let me see your face again." Timidly, and with an air of most abject self abasement, the suitor for credit stole towards the door, but as if struck by an alert afterthought he said: "Please give me back the bottle, that at least is mine."

"All right, take it and get out quick," returned the bartender, emptying the bottle and handing it to the man, who disappeared with great celerity. At the door of the bar room he was joined by another gentleman of the same type and together they retired to the secluded precincts of the city and broke the bottle, disclosing a sponge from which they extracted a few good drinks of the best Seagram.

— Lethbridge News, March 28, 1901.