

## BENDER HAMLET

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Manitoba's first Jewish farm colony began here in 1903. Called Bender Hamlet after its founder, Jacob Bender, the colony consisted of 19 families living close together in a row of log houses. These settlers from the Nickolaiev region of the Ukraine, built a synagogue and carried on their lives according to Orthodox Judaism. They had little farming experience, no equipment, and little outside help. Falling grain and cattle prices in the 1920s and poor soil forced the settlers to leave for larger urban centers. By 1927, the colony was abandoned and the land sold for taxes as one by one the families had left for the larger urban centers.

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- Historical Significance:
- first (and perhaps only) Jewish farm colony in Manitoba
  - founded 1903; abandoned 1927
  - earlier and longer-lasting colonies were supported in Saskatchewan by the Jewish Colonization Association; the Manitoba colony received little aid from either the Association or the Federal and Provincial Governments.

Designated an historical site in 1970 by the Historic Sites Advisory Board.

- Site Location:
- Two miles east of Narcisse in the Interlake region; off Highway 17.

A regular row of weed-covered mounds and land that is still cleared in narrow strips are the only remains of the first Jewish farm colony in Manitoba.

It was founded in 1903 and called Bender Hamlet. Its site was two miles east of Narcisse in the Interlake region north west of Teulon. By 1927, the last family had abandoned the colony. Descendants of the 30 families who once lived there are scattered in small towns and cities throughout Manitoba.

Jacob Bender, the man who originally owned the site of the colony, was a Jewish immigrant from Nikolaiev of the Ukraine. In 1903, he persuaded some friends to take homesteads and create a farm colony. They petitioned the federal government to let them build their homes on Bender's lot. The government consented and the settlers divided the north-east corner of Section 36 Range 19 West into 19 strips. Each strip was about 150 feet wide and a half mile long. Nineteen homes were built, all in a row facing north and the mounds that now mark the site are the remnants of these log houses. The colonists lived close together in village fashion and walked to their farm fields. Other Jewish families lived outside the village area on individual homesteads, and at its height, Bender Hamlet was comprised of some 30 families.

The European-style village facilitated the religious and social life of these Jewish settlers. They built a synagogue on strip three, then a school. They were Orthodox Jews, mostly from the southern Ukraine, and Yiddish was the main language of the colony. There was a Cantor; his aid; a Schochet (slaughterer); and Mohel (circumcisor) to ensure the daily practises and observance of the Jewish faith. With help from the head Rabbi in Winnipeg, the settlers were able to give their children religious training and schooling.

Unlike the Mennonite settlers in Manitoba who had a similar colony pattern, the Jewish colonists had little if any farming know-how. They arrived without agricultural tools, or money, to try farming by trial and error. They spent their first winter in a tent loaned from the Dominion Government. The Mennonites settled the rich prairie lands of southern Manitoba; they had a long tradition of farming and ready cash when they arrived. The Jews had a massive gravel bed beneath the topsoil of their land – a legacy of the glacial era and Lake Agassiz which had covered the area.

Subsistence farming, with some dairy products on the side, was all the colony could muster. In the early optimistic days of the settlement, Jacob Bender persuaded the federal Government to set up a creamery at the colony. It thrived until the manager left. Apparently his successor destroyed the equipment. Bender also pressured the Canadian Northern Railway to construct a line north of Teulon to Bender. The Fisher Branch line now serving the Interlake region is the outcome of this activity.

Bender left the colony about 1908. He operated a clothing store in Winnipeg and later, a haberdashery in Nipewin, Saskatchewan. He eventually migrated to California. He was only one of the many who were lured from the hard colony life to the brighter prospects of the city.

In the beginning, these Jewish settlers were driven by the pastoral dream of owning their own land; but they were plagued with realities too demanding to overcome.

The Jewish Colonization Association, which was already supporting similar colonies in Saskatchewan, came to their aid in 1907 with a \$500 loan. The farmers were then able to replace their slow, stubborn oxen with horses. Later, they brought in a steam tractor. In gratitude, the settlers renamed the community Narcisse, after Narcisse Levin, a one-time president of the Association.

The meager existence caused by the poor soil, falling prices for milk, cattle and grain in the 1920s finally drove all the settlers from the colony. They moved to nearby small towns and into Winnipeg where many took up the trades they had abandoned for farming. The better educational and job opportunities elsewhere had already taken most of the younger generation from the colony.

By 1927, the last family was gone. Some household goods were auctioned off; the rest left behind and dismantled for lumber by other residents in the area. Much of the land was taken over by the Provincial Government for back taxes.

Today, besides the telltale mounds, all that remains of the colony is a little walled cemetery a half-mile from the road on strip three. Descendants of the early settlers erected the cement wall 20 years ago. Much of the land has been bought again by Joe Lavitt and Jack Walker, descendants of the first settlers. They lease the hay rights to a local farmer.

The area is still somewhat isolated and off the beaten track. Its location and condition are poignant reminders of the hard times of the immigrant Manitoba settlers.

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## **Bibliography**

The History and Archives Committee of Canadian Jewish Congress, *Centennial History Exhibition 90 Years of Jewish Life in Western Canada* (Winnipeg: Canadian Jewish Congress, 1967).