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FARM FAMILY LIVING IN THE PRAIRIE PROVINCES

By

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MARKETING SERVICE
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FARM FAMILY LIVING IN THE PRAIRIE PROVINCES

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FARM FAMILY LIVING IN THE PRAIRIE PROVINCES

Florence M. Edwards*

INTRODUCTION

Canada's youngest provinces—Alberta and Saskatchewan—together contain one-fifth of the nation's rural people. The story of their rapid settlement, particularly in the first decade of the present century, when the population increased over four hundred per cent, is a story of novelty, excitement, enterprise and endurance. Now it is merging into a more sober tale; one of the struggle for stability, for security on the farm, for a reasonable standard of living.

What have the rural families achieved in their short history of settlement? What kind of living is provided by farms in various kinds of farming regions? Is housing adequate? What of community facilities? How much do these families spend for living and how do they spend it?

In an attempt to answer these questions, farm homes in three contrasting farm regions were visited during 1942 and 1943. Interviewers talked to more than 620 housewives, and, in the course of each discussion, recorded answers to a number of definite questions. Some of the answers are summarized here.

The homes visited were located in central Alberta, central Saskatchewan, and northern Saskatchewan (Figure 1). These three regions differ in age of settlement, in type of farming, in degree of economic security, and in level of living.

CENTRAL ALBERTA

In Alberta the study centred in farming districts from Red Deer to Wetaskiwin which form part of the fertile park belt, where agriculture is a fairly stabilized and well developed industry. The park belt, while subject to regional variation, has certain general characteristics. Most of its land is level to rolling. The natural vegetation consists of an abundance of grasses and considerable light tree growth. The black park soils are rich in organic matter and they retain moisture fairly efficiently. Rainfall is more plentiful and somewhat less variable than it is on the prairie plains to the south.

The picture is that of an area well suited to agriculture. Mixed farming is common. The typical farm is one comprising a half section of land. Because there is a considerable variety in farm products, and because the hazards from climatic variation are fewer than in many parts of the Prairie Provinces, income for the district is comparatively stable.

* Formerly Agricultural Economist, Economics Division, Department of Agriculture.

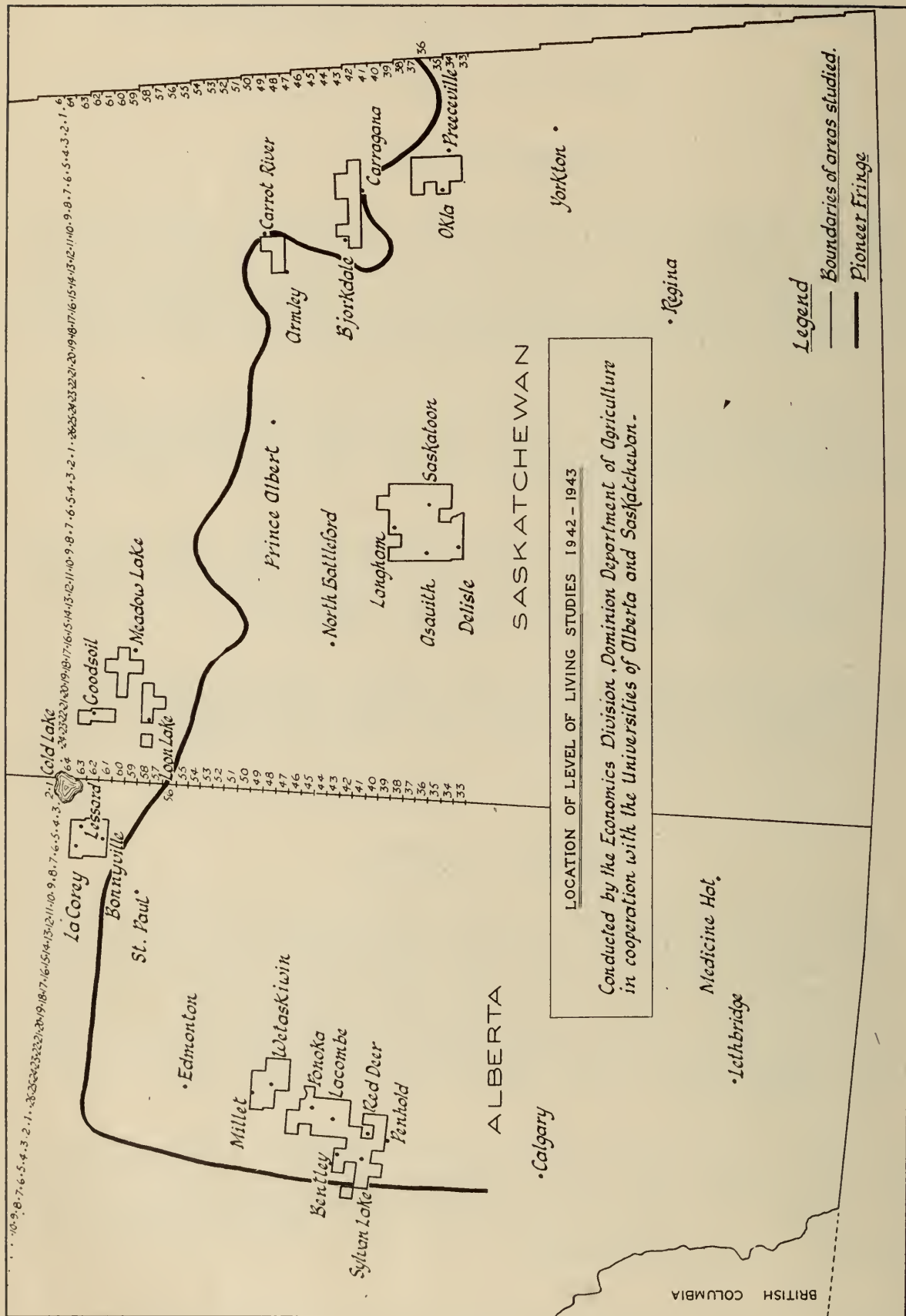


Figure 1.

Progress and expansion since settlement began have been continuous. A branch line to the transcontinental railway was built to serve the territory in 1891. The rapid expansion during the years following this event is illustrated by the growth of Wetaskiwin, where the first settlement of any size took place the year after the line was constructed. In 1897 an elevator was built at this tiny centre. A village was established in 1900 when the population was about three hundred. The next year the Province recognized its incorporation as a town. By 1906 the population was over 1,400, and Wetaskiwin had become a city.

The general district has increased in population almost sixfold since the turn of the century. Now it supports two small cities, Red Deer and Wetaskiwin, the thriving towns of Lacombe and Ponoka, and a number of smaller centres.

Farmers in the Area Were Within Reach of Most of the Services They Required

Farm families no longer experience the kind of isolation that was characteristic of early settlement. Automobiles are widely used. Four-fifths of the families visited owned automobiles; a number of others used farm trucks to meet the needs of the family. However, most of the rural population must depend upon dirt roads for access to town or to an all-weather highway.

Telephone and radio multiply the outside contacts of rural folk today. Half of these homes were equipped with telephones and more than nine-tenths had radios.

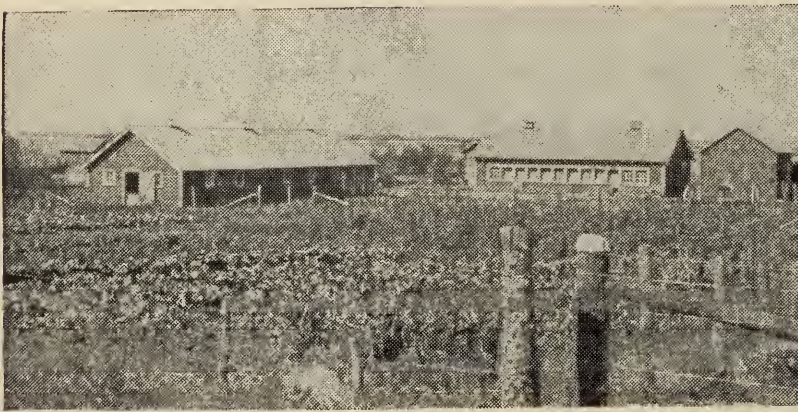
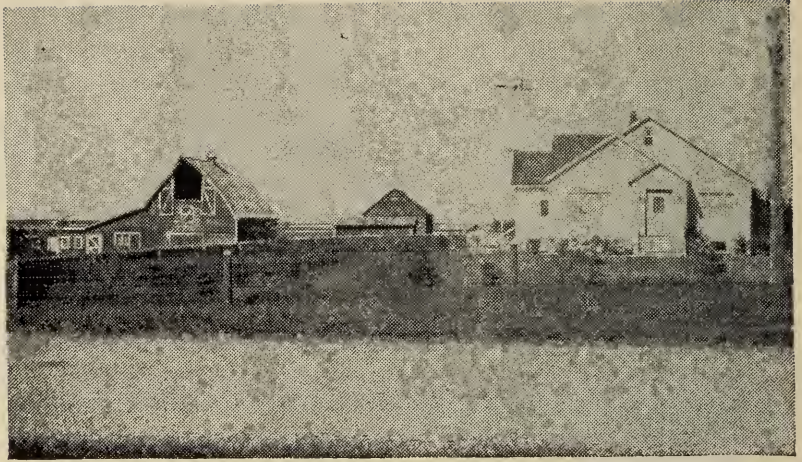
The four principal centres—Red Deer, Lacombe, Ponoka and Wetaskiwin—were located on a main highway. They had frequent bus and train service. Newspapers from Edmonton and Calgary were received in the towns daily and each of the four published its own weekly paper. Most of the many business facilities required in an active agricultural district were available in these centres. Villages in the area provided convenient shipping points, postal service and general stores for many families. Health services were relatively well developed. There were doctors and dentists in each of the four centres and hospitals at Red Deer, Lacombe and Wetaskiwin. In Red Deer, where a Provincial Health Unit was established, important preventive and educational work benefited rural as well as urban families.

Grade schools were accessible to most families. High school facilities were concentrated in the towns and cities.

There was little organized sport for most of the rural people. Schools were to some extent centres for such activity—children might take part there in skating, baseball or other games. Only families living close to towns could enjoy tennis courts, curling or skating rinks.

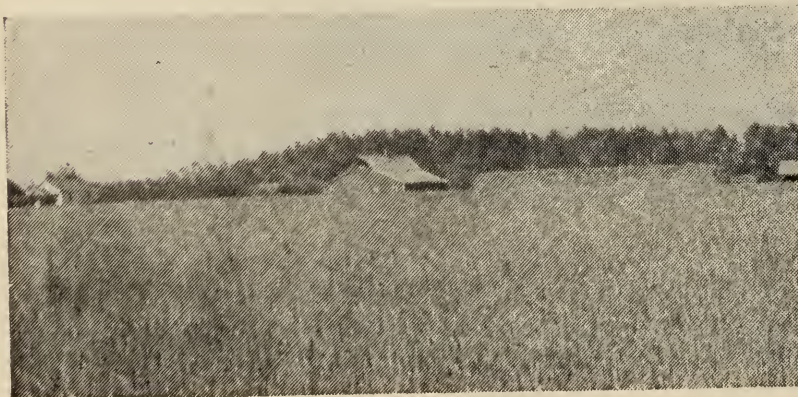
Theatres operated in each of the four centres. Dances were held in towns, country school houses and rural community halls. Apart from the dances, movies, and occasional fairs or concerts, recreation was informal, centering around family activity.

One of the newer and more modern farm homes of Red Deer — Wetaskiwin area.



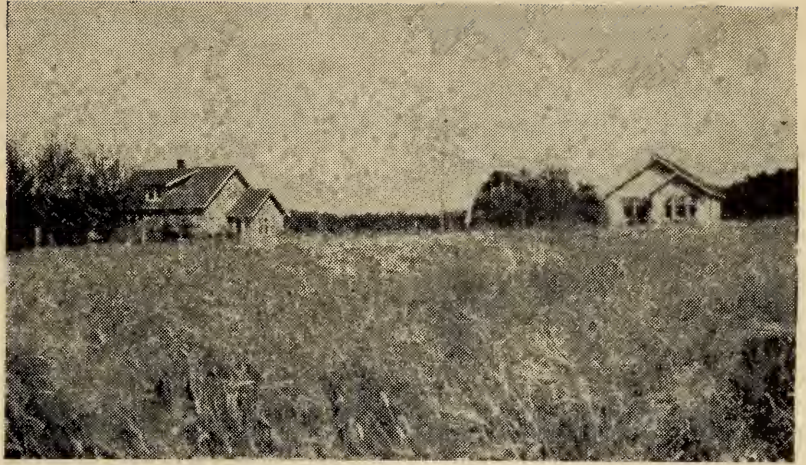
Garden on a mixed grain—livestock farm, Red Deer —Wetaskiwin area.

Cattle on mixed grain—livestock farm, Red Deer Wetaskiwin area.



Grain field on mixed grain livestock farm, Red Deer —Wetaskiwin area.

Farm homes are no longer
isolated in the Red Deer
—Wetaskiwin area.



Rolling land under cultivation east of Red Deer.
Note small lake in distance, and trees in the
depressions.

One of the main streets of
Lacombe.



Hospital, Lacombe.

Farm Families Had Few Conveniences in their Homes

What conveniences would many a city dweller consider essential on a farm: electricity, telephone, bathroom, a power washer? Only 10 of this group of 202 families boasted all of these.

Lighting in most of the homes was by means of gas or coal oil mantle lamps. Some 15 per cent had electricity. Yet one family in five still depended entirely on coal oil wick lamps.

Running water was installed in one-tenth of the homes. About two-fifths had kitchen sinks but many of these lacked efficient arrangements for drainage.

Some conveniences were more common. Radios and sewing machines were found in nine-tenths of the homes. Most families had screen windows and screen doors though a third were entirely without storm windows.

Generally speaking, housing space was not among the more pressing problems for these families; three-quarters of the homes had one or more rooms per member of the family.

A simple chart demonstrates that families in this area, while rather more fortunate than the average Alberta farm family, were very far from sharing the living conveniences enjoyed by urban dwellers. (Chart 1).

Living Expenditures Were Moderate

Housewives were asked to estimate the amount the family spent for various types of goods and services during the year preceding the interview. The cash outlay for family living averaged \$1,031. The average value of goods furnished by the farm—food, fuel and the use of the farm house—was \$616.¹ Thus the average total living expenditure (cash, plus non-cash) was \$1,647.

Although contrasts in family expenditures are less marked in a rural area than in the city, there is considerable variation from the average. Leaving out the very high and the very low groups, 90 per cent of families ranged from \$500 to \$1,800 in cash spent for living.

How did these families spend their money? Over half (55 per cent) of the cash expenditure was for food and clothing. When values of farm-furnished goods were considered, it was found that food, clothing and shelter made up 70 per cent of the total value of family living. "Operation goods"—fuel, light, maids hired, auto-

¹ Farm-furnished food and fuel were valued at the prices which the farmer would have received had he sold them. Rent was calculated as 10 per cent of the value of the farm house.

CHART NO. 1

HOUSEHOLD CONVENIENCES IN URBAN AND RURAL AREAS, ALBERTA.

PERCENTAGE OF
HOMES POSSESSING
CONVENIENCES.

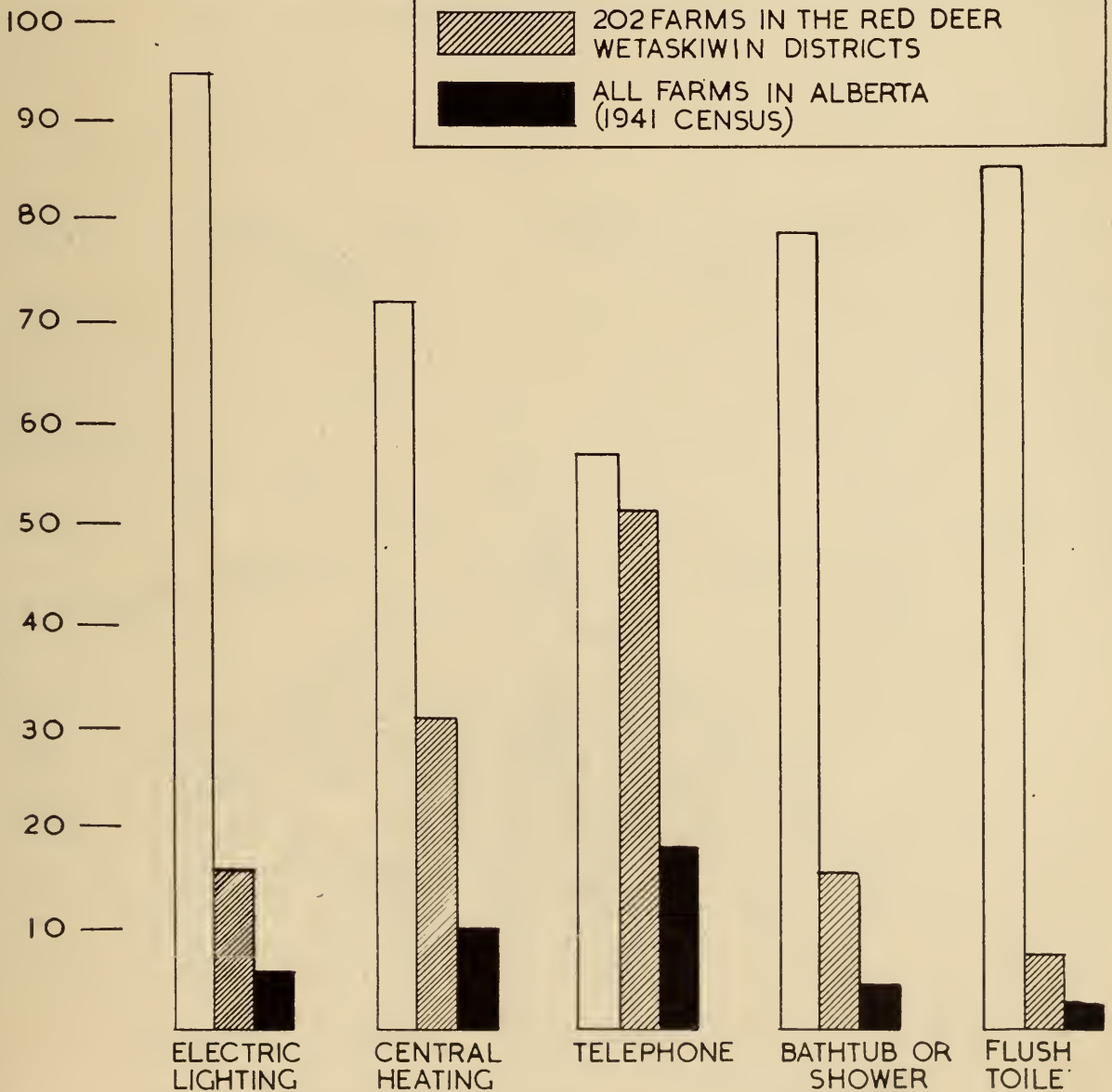
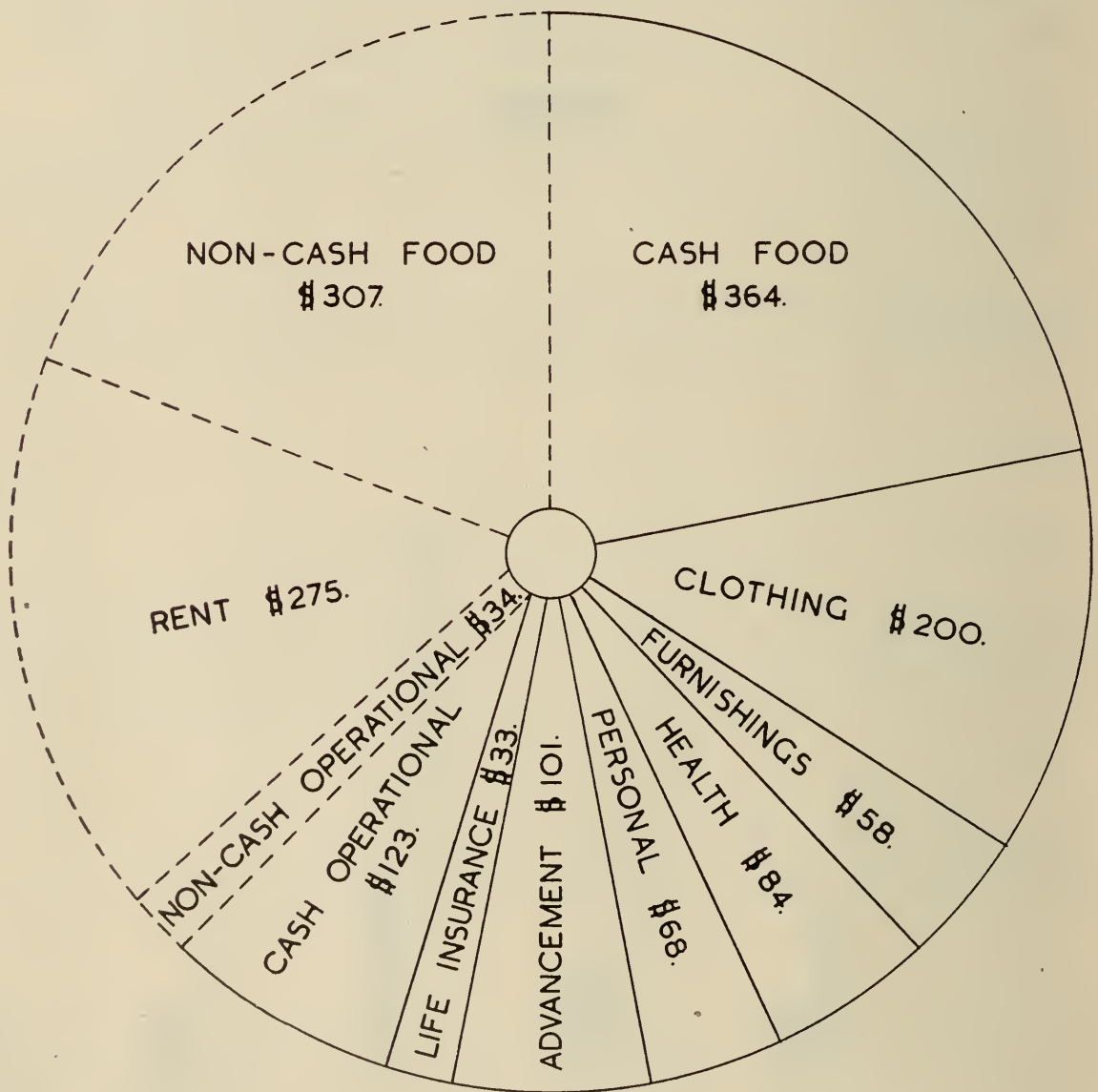


CHART No. 2

ALLOCATION OF FAMILY LIVING COSTS

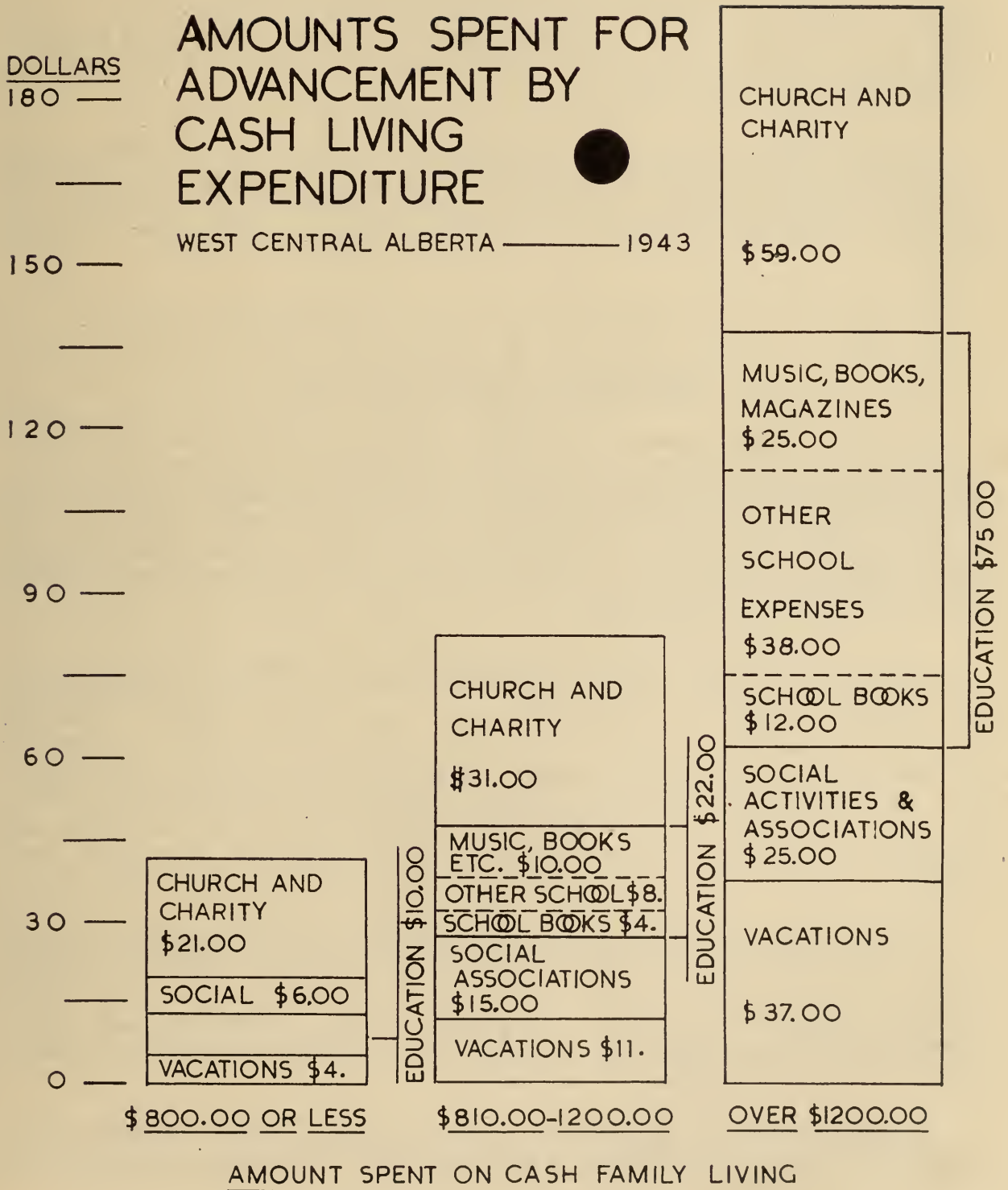
WEST CENTRAL ALBERTA ————— 1942-43

NOTE: COMPLETE CIRCLE REPRESENTS \$1647.



LEGEND: - - - - - NON-CASH ——— CASH

CHART NO. 3



mobile, telephone¹—accounted for nearly one-tenth of the total. New furnishings or household equipment, sundry personal expenditures, and health costs, each made up 4 to 5 per cent of the total (Chart 2). The other main group, “advancement”, included all money spent for education, music, reading material, vacations, social activities and contributions to church and charity. All these together averaged \$101 per family, or 6 per cent of the total expenditure.

This was the average distribution of expenditure. The pattern varied from family to family. In general, those who spent more for living reported larger expenditures for each group of goods and services. However, they spent a smaller *proportion* of their money for food, while both amount and proportion spent for “advancement” increased sharply.

Provided that the basic needs for food, clothing, shelter and the maintenance of health are satisfied, increased expenditure for education, recreation, and social activities indicates a higher level of living. Chart 3 shows clearly the comparative advantage enjoyed in this respect by those who were able to spend more for family living.

NORTHERN SASKATCHEWAN

In the woodland regions of northern Saskatchewan are vast areas where farming is still in the pioneer stages. Farms are being developed out of bushland. Log buildings and pole fences are common. Agriculture, generally, is of the mixed crop—livestock type. It resembles that of the area in central Alberta, already described, except for its more primitive stage of development. A typical farm here would comprise a quarter section with about 100 acres under cultivation. Horses are the chief source of farm power.

There are a number of reasons why settlement here was later than in the park belt and on the prairies. A heavy growth of scrub and of trees made the land more difficult to clear for cultivation. Frost was a greater hazard to farming. Northern communities, remote from the main railway lines, were not serviced by rail until settlement was well advanced. In territories to the south, the railways often pushed ahead of settlement, for the building of the transcontinental railway was a great national project. Both the existence of the vital rail service and organized promotion by railway companies and government encouraged rapid settlement.

By 1920, most of the good land in the prairie and parkland regions was settled. The railways began to sponsor some settlement in the north. The development of earlier maturing varieties of grain reduced the danger of losses from frost. Most important, drouth was experienced by prairie farmers. Depression and drouth together led not only farmers, but a number of unemployed city dwellers to seek a new start in the woodlands of Saskatchewan.

Development in the region has been slow and often painful. The difficulty of building up an economic farm unit was suggested in a recent study of such pioneer

¹ Only half of the current expense for automobile and telephone was included in living expenses; the remainder was considered a farm business expense.

farms.¹ It was stated that farmers on the poorer grey wooded soils needed 88 acres under cultivation to maintain the farm and furnish the average amount of cash spent by these families for living. (This level of expenditure is discussed in a later section). At the current rates of clearing and breaking, 10 to 20 years were required to clear 88 acres, depending on the density of the scrub or bush cover. Farmers here, most of whom started with little capital, have experienced severe hardships.

Many Families Were Remote from Essential Services

While some of the northern towns were equipped to meet most needs of the surrounding farm families, others were unable to supply important community services. Railways were accessible in the northeastern areas; the majority of settlers were within four miles of a shipping point. However, in the northwest, transport was a serious problem. In one community farmers averaged sixty miles from a shipping point. This was the little settlement at Goodsoil, most northerly agricultural community in Saskatchewan. The town had neither rail service, telephone connections nor medical facilities.

Generally speaking, post offices, general stores, community halls and churches were convenient to most farms; but the more expensive services were often out of reach. Farmers of some communities must travel fifty miles to a doctor. For all the families visited, the average distance to a doctor was 28 miles and distances to hospital averaged 22 miles. Nor were high schools always accessible. Half of these families were 10 miles or more from a high school.

During the last ten years, well graded roads have been built south from Goodsoil and Meadow Lake to the older towns of St. Walburg and North Battleford. There is a fairly well graded road connecting the settlements in northeastern Saskatchewan with longer-settled areas. Generally, in the parts of the northern areas which have been about 50 per cent cleared and brought under cultivation, fairly satisfactory dry-weather roads have been built. They are by no means as easily travelled as the roads in the other areas visited during the study.

Something over a third of the families owned automobiles. Only 8 of the 200 had telephones.

Housing and Home Conveniences Reflected the Difficulties of the Pioneer Communities

Over half of the people in these areas lived in log houses. Such dwellings, often hurriedly constructed to meet an urgent need, are likely to remain without major improvements until the farm capital has been greatly increased. Many provided insufficient space for the family; fewer than half had one or more rooms per person.

More expensive home conveniences such as electric lights, central heating, running water, were almost non-existent in these homes. Only 14 per cent had a power washing machine; about the same number had kitchen sinks.

Few pioneer families had been able to furnish their homes well and comfortably. In their living rooms, only 45 per cent had some type of chesterfield or lounge, only a third had an easy chair. Still fewer—one-fifth—boasted a bookcase

¹ Stutt, R. A. and H. Van Vliet: "An Economic Study of Land Settlement in Representative Pioneer Areas of Northern Saskatchewan", Economics Division, Dominion Department of Agriculture, Ottawa, 1945.



Town of Meadow Lake Main Street.



Hamlet of Loon Lake Main Street.



Hamlet of Goodsoil Only Street.

TYPICAL HOMES OF SOME OF THESE DISTRICTS



Preeceville.



Meadow Lake.



Bjorkdale—Carragana



Loon Lake.

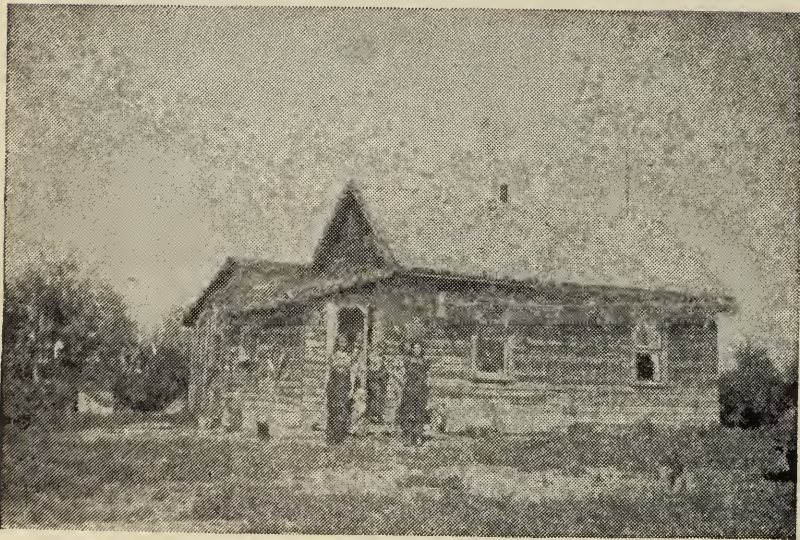
POORER HOMES FOUND IN SOME OF THESE DISTRICTS



Preeceville
Mud plastered log with thatched roof.



Bjorkdale—Carragana.



Aylsham—Armley.

Goodsoil
Mud-plastered
log with slab
roof.



BETTER HOMES FOUND IN SOME OF THESE DISTRICTS



Preeceville.

**Aylsham—
Armley.**



Bjorkdale—Carragana

Meadow Lake.



SOME UNIQUE FEATURES OF PIONEER LIFE



Most northerly grain elevator in Saskatchewan—60 miles from a railway.



Oxen hauling a load of poles.



An outdoor bread oven.

or desk. Hardly this number had more than ten books in their homes. Less than half the homes had floor coverings such as linoleum in the kitchens.

As in other farm districts, however, the radio and the sewing machine were almost standard equipment. Four-fifths had radios, and 82 per cent had sewing machines.

Expenditures for Living Were Low

Half of the 200 families of the pioneer areas spent less than \$460 in cash for living during the year. The average for the group was \$516 cash expenditure. In other words, the average family of 4.8 persons spent \$43 per month. This was supplemented by farm-furnished goods averaging in value \$376 per family for the year.

The food produced on the farm is particularly important in a pioneer area. During each month the average family spent \$18 in cash for food and used in addition home produce to the value of \$23.

When the family can spend little for living, a very large proportion of what it spends must be for necessities. Food and clothing accounted for 64 per cent of the cash expenditure of these families (Chart 4). Since there were few automobiles, almost no telephones and little purchased fuel, the "operation goods" totalled only \$29 per family for the year. New furnishings and household equipment averaged \$28; expenditures for health, \$44. As would be expected very few families spent money for life insurance.

The low standard of living is revealed strikingly in the expenditures for "advancement goods" which averaged \$48 per family. How was this apportioned? Thirteen dollars was spent for social events, membership in associations. Eight dollars was the average for vacations. Nine dollars was spent for church and charity. The remaining \$18 per family constituted the expenditure for education, including reading matter for the home. It should be remembered that many families spent substantially less than these average amounts.

CENTRAL SASKATCHEWAN

The agriculture carried on west of the city of Saskatoon is of a type common in the western provinces. Geographically and climatically the area occupies a central position in the agricultural settlement of the west. The typical farm varies in size from a half to three-quarter section with about 80 per cent improved. Nearly one-half of the improved acreage is normally in wheat. Tractors are used on more than three-fifths of these farms. Some livestock is usually kept. The farm organization here contrasts with that in the central Alberta region in that fewer livestock are kept per one hundred acres of cropland and that there is a greater wheat acreage in proportion to the coarse grains and hay.

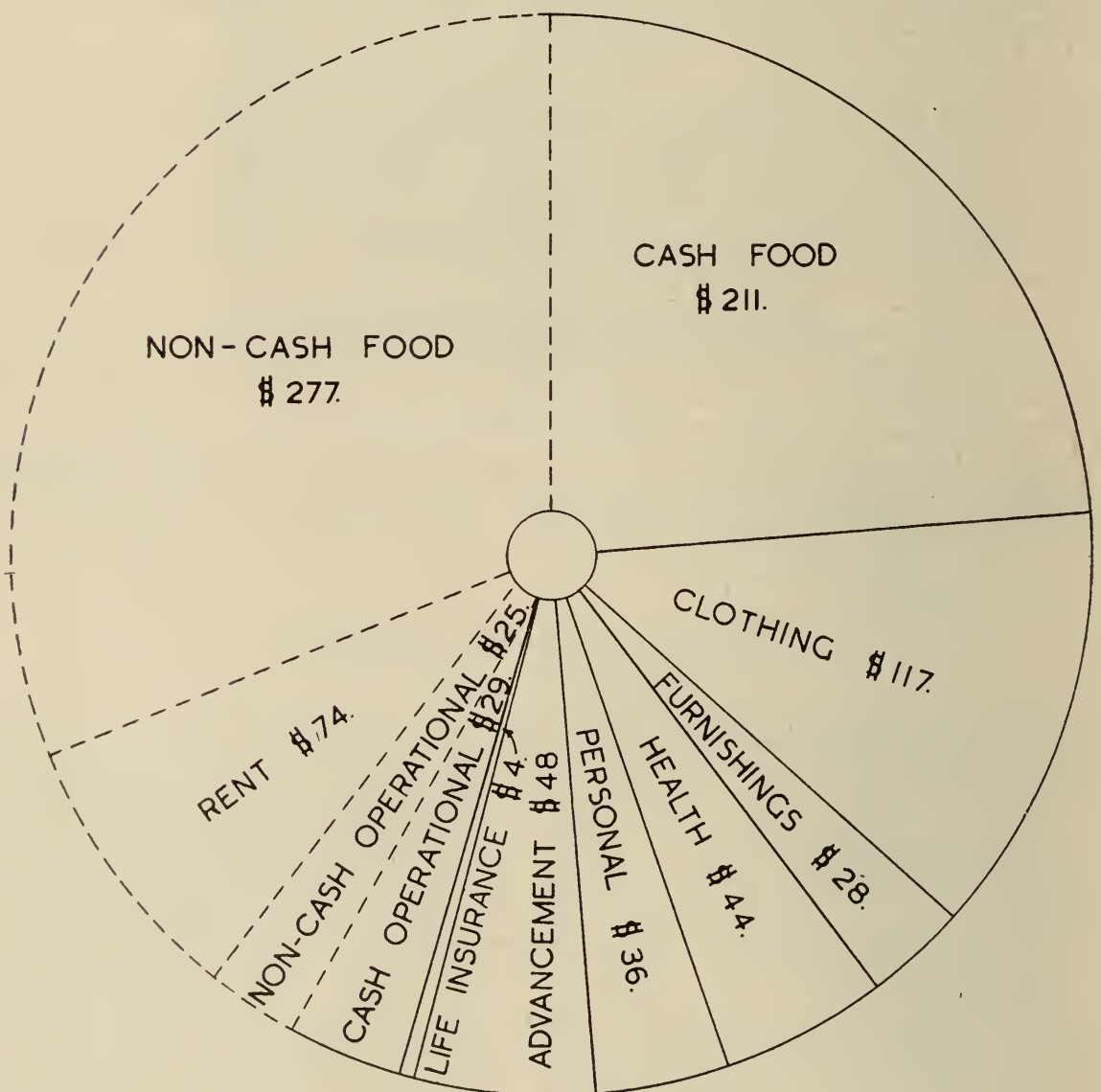
It is over forty years since the earliest settlers began to break out the land. By the end of the first Great War most of the cultivated land of today was broken. Indeed, some over-expansion took place and a considerable area of sandy loam soil has since been abandoned for cultivation. During these relatively prosperous war years most of the present farm buildings were erected. But farmers of the area have since known a succession of years when crops failed, needed repairs to buildings were not made, and land became weedy on account of lack of capital to farm it properly. From these drouth and depression years there has been some recovery. The agriculture has reached a stage of maturity and a definitely settled type. In general, very modest incomes can be expected from farms in this area.

CHART NO. 4

ALLOCATION OF FAMILY LIVING COSTS

NORTHERN SASKATCHEWAN ————— 1941-42

NOTE: COMPLETE CIRCLE REPRESENTS \$ 892.

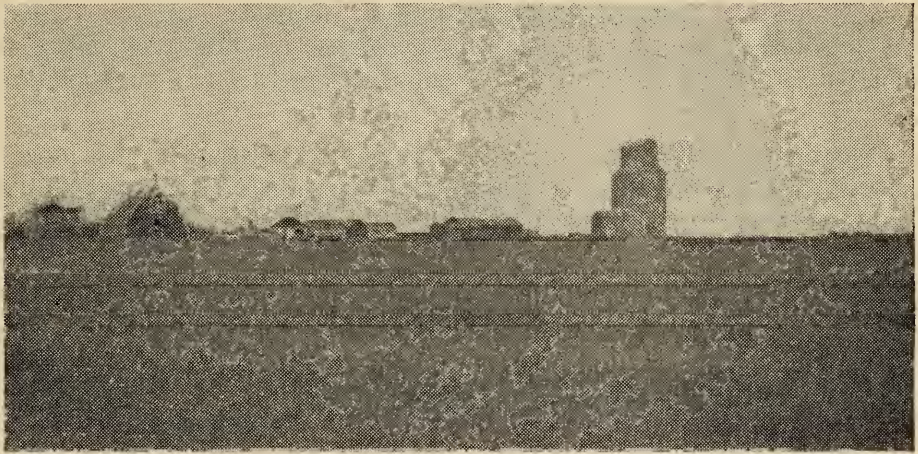


LEGEND: - - - - NON - CASH ——— CASH



Farmyard on mixed grain — livestock farm in central Saskatchewan.

Farmstead of one of the larger wheat farms in central Saskatchewan.



Typical of the landscape on the prairie west of Saskatoon. Such bands of sheep, however, are not common in this area.

Farmstead more typical of central Saskatchewan than that above.



The City and Small Villages Served the Area

Railway lines and gravelled roads radiating from Saskatoon, together with fairly good municipal roads, provided for transportation. Almost two-thirds of the families owned automobiles. Communication by telephone was common in this area—71 per cent of homes had telephones. A large part of the area was served by rural mail deliveries.

Local centres which served the area with their small general stores, garages, repair shops, elevators, churches and schools, met the more frequent and immediate needs of the surrounding farm communities. Among these centres were the towns of Asquith, Delisle, and Langham, and the villages of Vanscoy and Dalmeny. These were small centres—each had a population under 400.¹

The city of Saskatoon was about 40 miles distant from the farthest part of the area studied. Its more specialized stores, its theatres, libraries and educational institutions, supplemented the services offered by the smaller community centres.

Grade schools were well distributed throughout the area; high schools were located in the towns. At Saskatoon were several business colleges, a technical school, normal school, and the University of Saskatchewan.

Adequate medical services were lacking throughout much of the area. There were no local hospitals, dentists or opticians, and only one local doctor, who was located at Warman. A number of families had to travel 30 to 40 miles to reach the excellent facilities available at Saskatoon.

Houses Needed Repairs and Modernization

At the time of the study, almost 60 per cent of the houses in this district were over twenty years old, while only 20 per cent were ten years old or less. (Thirty per cent were over 30 years old). Most of these homes were of frame construction, fully half being unpainted frame houses. Nine-tenths of the farmers stated that their homes needed repairs and almost one-quarter said the house should be rebuilt, rather than repaired. Ratings by field workers showed 10 per cent to be in good condition, 45 per cent in fair condition and 45 per cent in poor condition.

The picture of farm home conveniences was typical of much of the province. Two-thirds of the homes were heated by coal or wood heaters and about one-quarter had central heating systems. Sixteen of the 220 homes were heated by kitchen stove only. Lighting was almost exclusively by gas and coal oil; 8 per cent had electricity. Only 4 per cent of families had water piped into the house. Three per cent had a septic tank.

Half of the homemakers used power washing machines, another third having hand-turned washers.

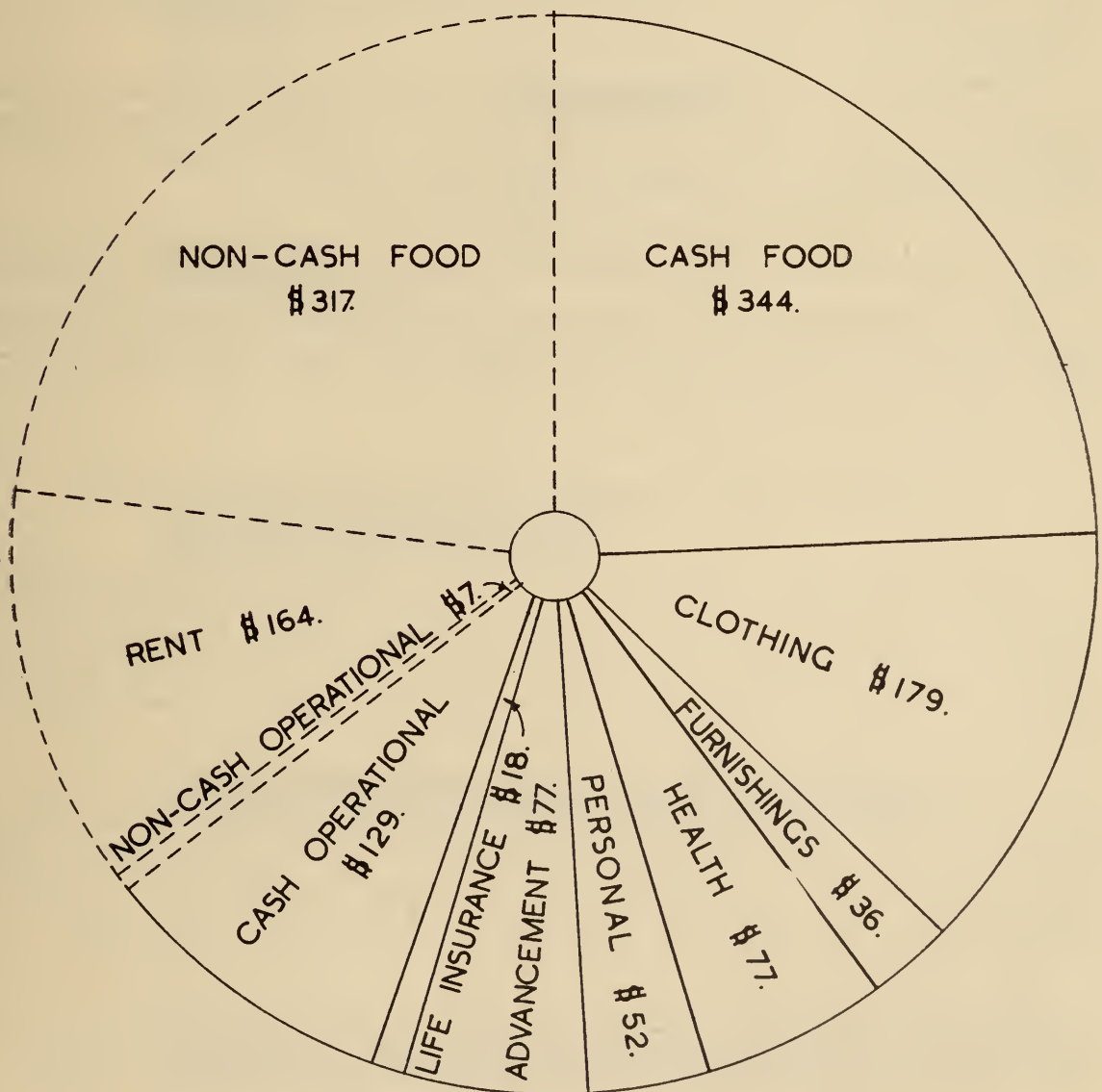
Furniture had in a great many cases been purchased second hand and had seen long years of service. About half the families had a chesterfield or lounge, fewer than half had one or more easy chairs. Pianos were found in one-quarter of the homes; about one-third had some other musical instrument.

¹ Census of Canada, 1941.

CHART No. 5

ALLOCATION OF FAMILY LIVING COSTS

WEST CENTRAL SASKATCHEWAN ————— 1942-43

NOTE: COMPLETE CIRCLE REPRESENTS \$1400.LEGEND: - - - - - NON-CASH ——— CASH

Living Expenditures Varied Markedly

During the study year, yields and prices were favourable in the central Saskatchewan area, with the result that living expenditures were somewhat higher than usual. The average total living expenditure for the 220 families studied was \$1,400. Of this amount \$911 (65 per cent) was cash expenditure, while \$489 was supplied from the farm in the form of food, use of the farm house and fuel.

Variation in cash living expenditure was considerable. Excluding extreme cases, 90 per cent of families spent between \$360 and \$1,640. Half of them spent \$825 or less; half more than \$825.

Chart 5 shows how the money was distributed among various groups of goods and services. Provision of food accounted for nearly half of the total living expenditure. One-eighth was allotted to clothing; about the same proportion to rent, while one-tenth was spent for "operation goods."¹ After spending five per cent for health, and about the same amount for sundry personal goods, these families had about five per cent of the total for advancement goods, and one per cent for life insurance.

Expenditures for such items as maids hired and life insurance were concentrated among a few families. About one-third of the families paid most of the life insurance reported. These averaged \$50 each. The 23 per cent of families who employed domestic help paid \$82 per year to maids hired.

Families in this district averaged \$32 per year for church and charity, \$32 per year for education and reading material, and \$14 for vacations and social activities.

As in central Alberta, families having more money for living spent a smaller proportion of the total for food, and a considerably larger proportion for advancement—particularly for education.

CONCLUSION:—Family Living in Three Rural Areas

Farm homes were visited in regions which represent three general types of agricultural settlement. One is a stable mixed-farming area among the older settlements of Alberta. Another, on the northern fringe of Saskatchewan's agriculture, is still in a pioneer phase of development. The third, located on the great brown soil zone, is typical of many longer-settled parts of Saskatchewan and Alberta.

In each of these districts there were families who sustained hardships. In each, some families maintained a comfortable living on the farm. Generally speaking, however, those in the mixed-farming area of central Alberta enjoyed better housing, more home conveniences, and larger expenditures for living. Farm people in the pioneer areas were much less fortunate in these things. The district visited in central Saskatchewan supported levels of living between the two.

The following pages present, in graphic summary, important facts about family living in these areas. The charts present a series of comparisons, but their primary purpose is to tell something of the living conditions of rural people.

¹ See p. 6.

Chart No 6

DISTANCES TO COMMUNITY FACILITIES IN THREE FARMING REGIONS OF WESTERN CANADA.

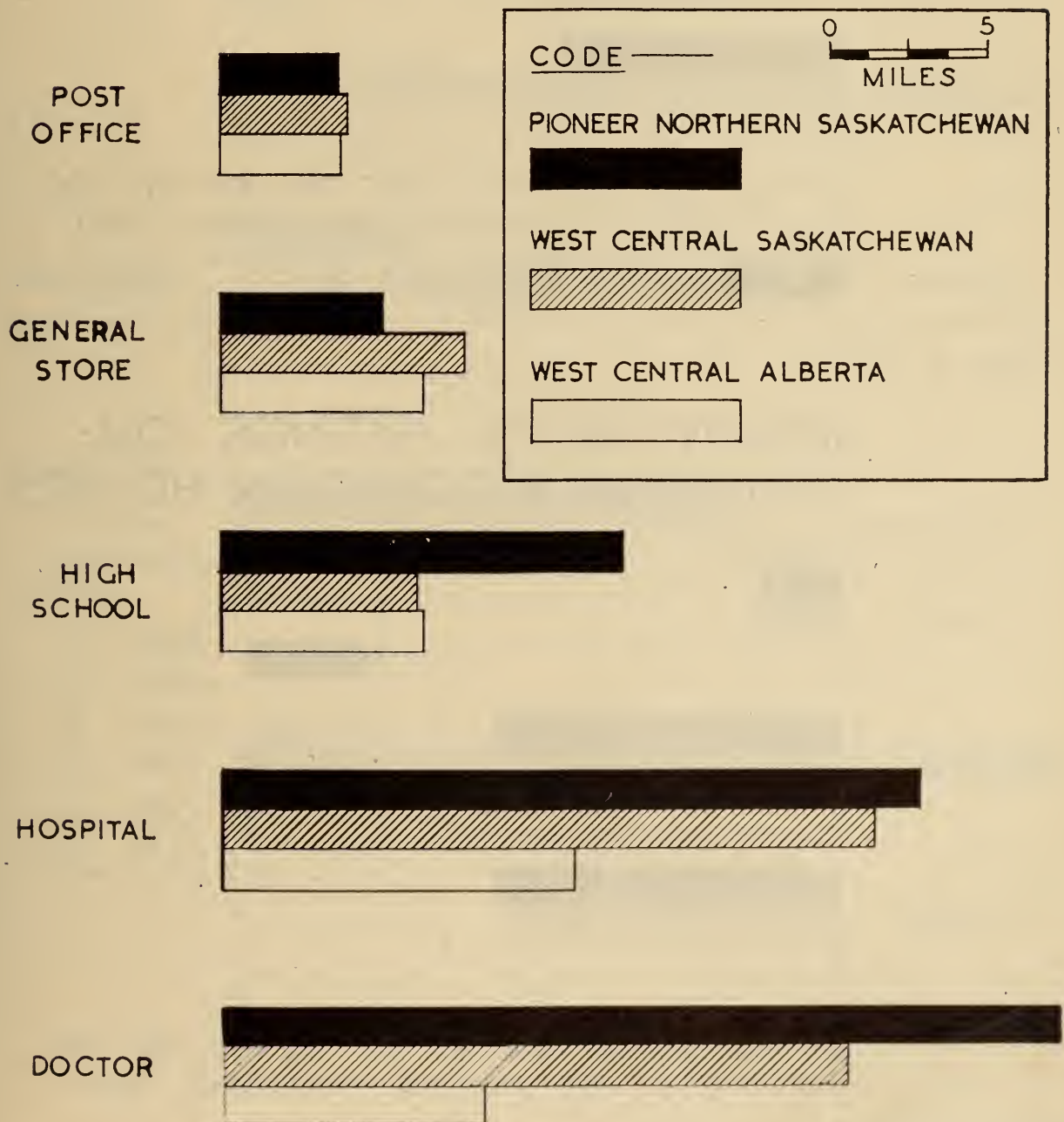


CHART No. 7

USE OF AUTOMOBILES & TELEPHONES

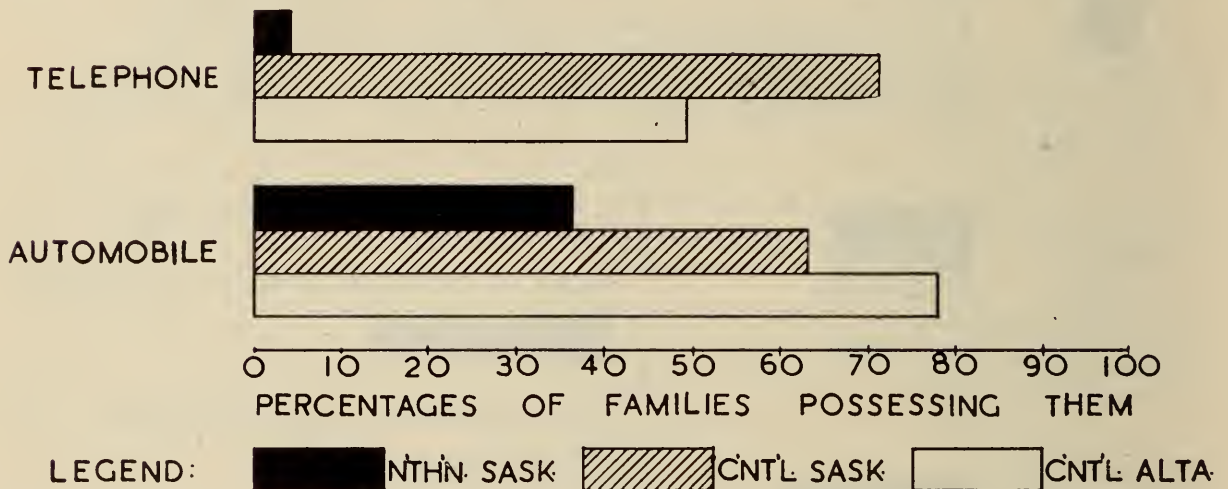


CHART No. 8

INTERVIEWER'S RATINGS ON STRUCTURE & CONDITION · HOUSES

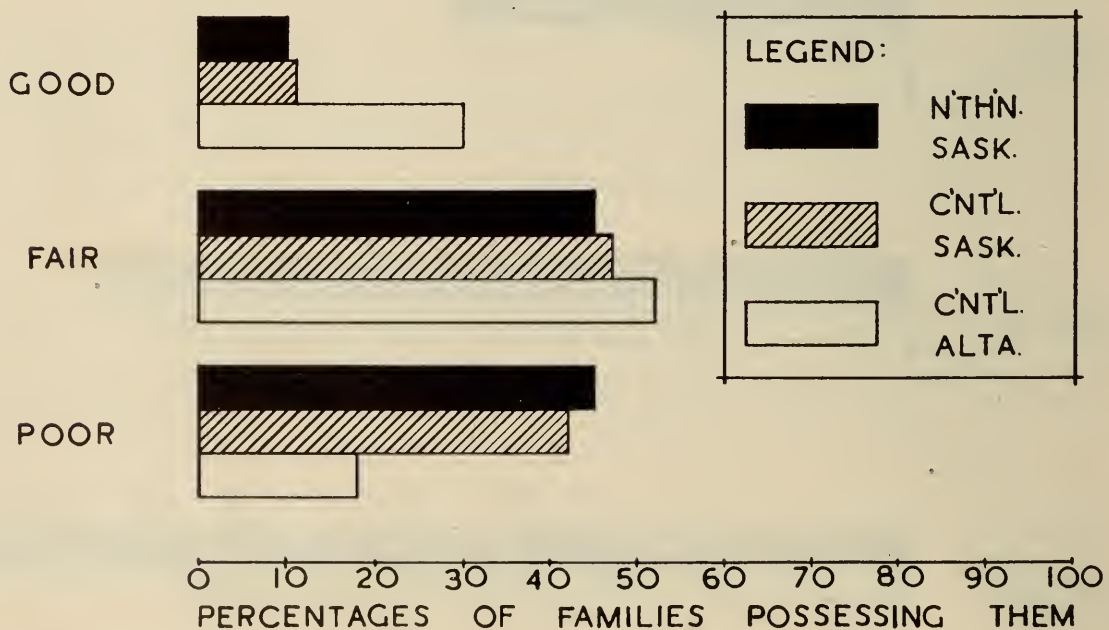


CHART NO. 9

HOUSE STRUCTURE & FINISH

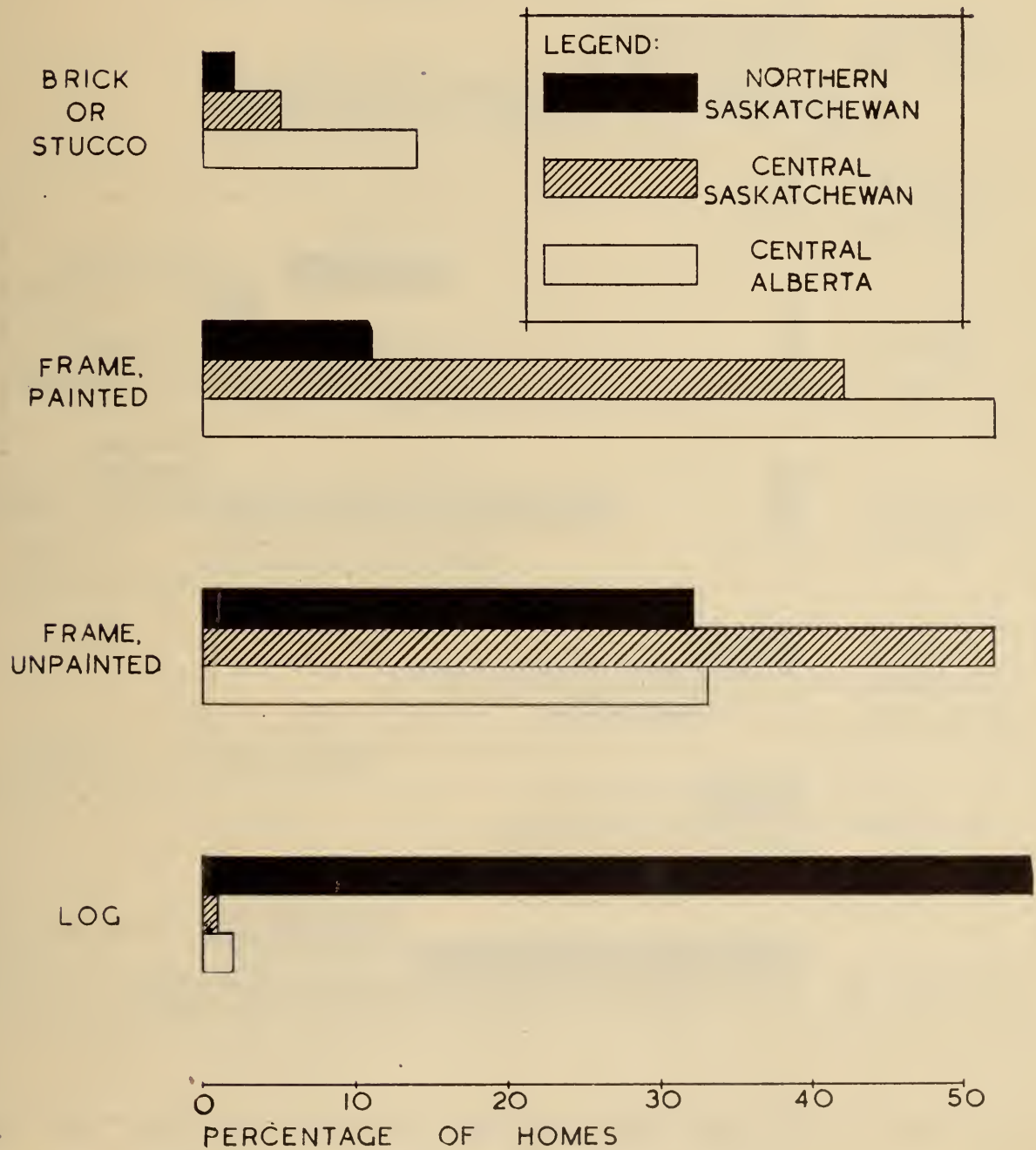


CHART NO. 10

HOME CONVENIENCES

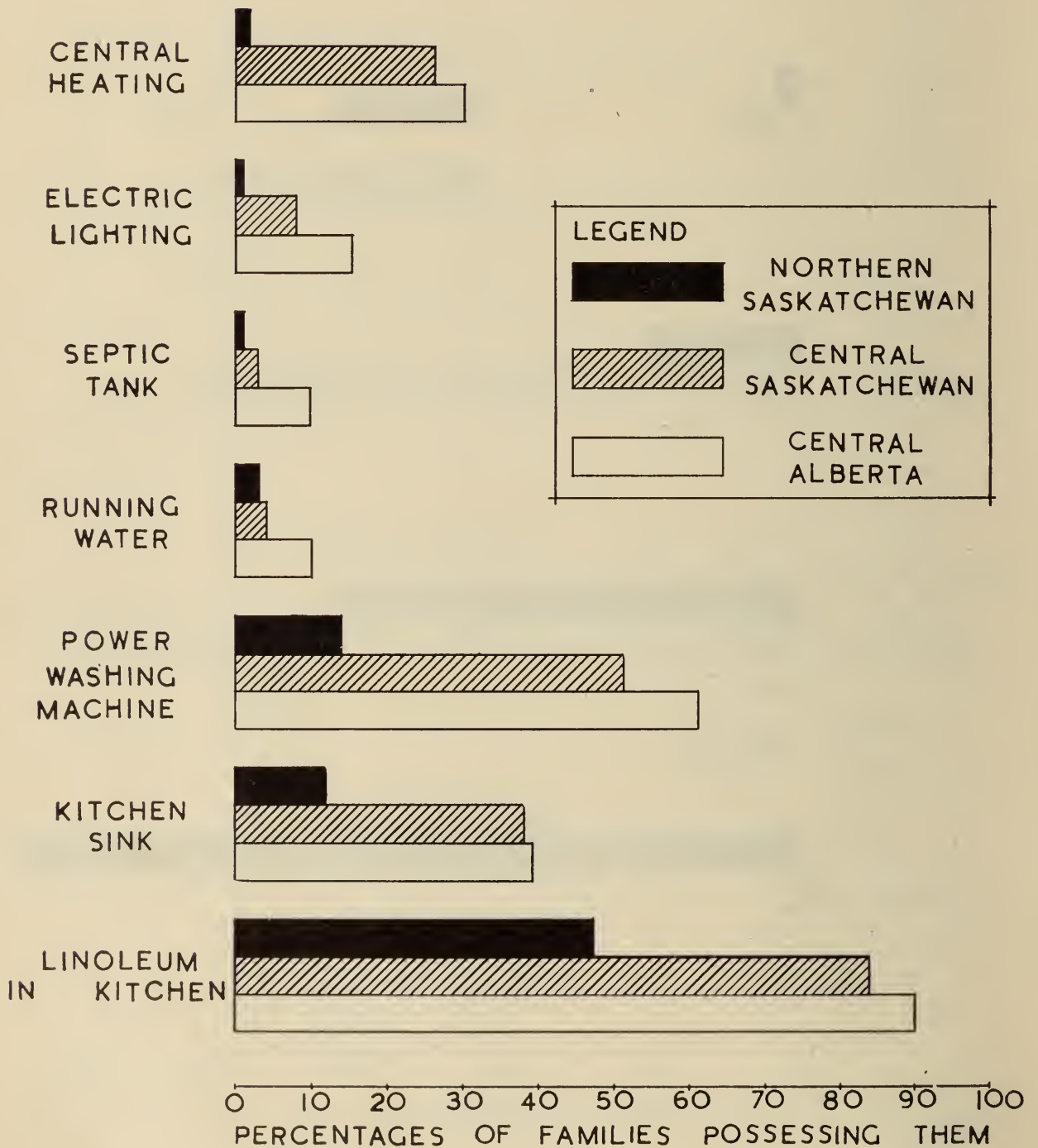


CHART NO. II

SOME CULTURAL ASPECTS OF FARM HOMES

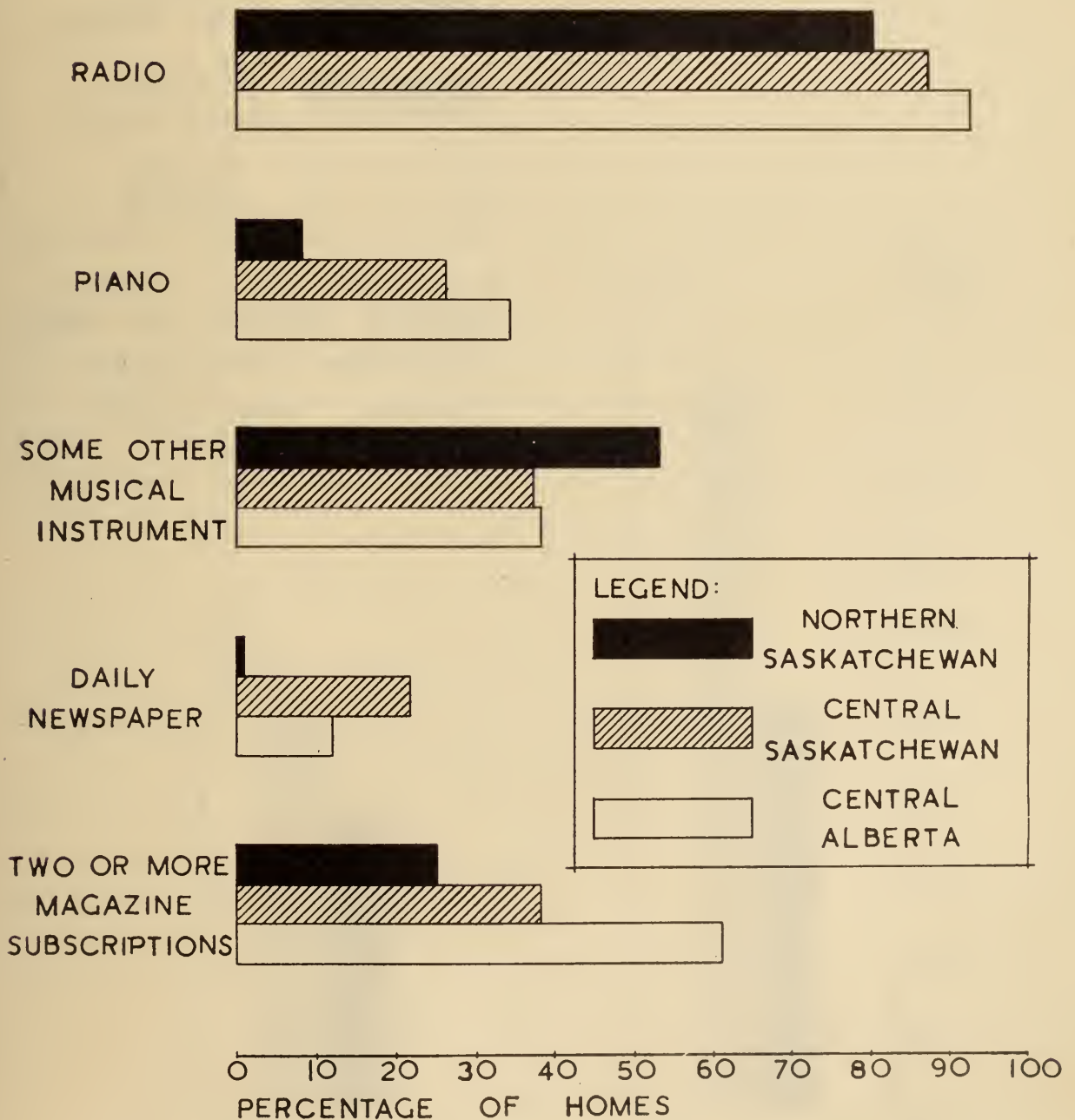


CHART No. 12

FAMILY LIVING EXPENDITURE

