

# Pakan Methodist Mission

By Jars Balan for Kalyna Country

The first Methodist missionary to work among Ukrainians was the Rev. Dr. Charles H. Lawford (1862–1952). Although he originally planned to serve as a medical missionary in China, in 1900 Lawford decided instead to settle at Pakan, seventy-five miles northeast of Edmonton on the north shore of the North Saskatchewan River. There, he provided both medical care and pastoral services to the Ukrainians and the Cree Indians who were living in the vicinity of the former Hudson's Bay Company Post at Fort Victoria. At the time of his arrival, there were no resident Ukrainian priests among the mostly Bukovynian homesteaders who had recently settled in what is today southern Smoky Lake County. Interestingly, Dr. Lawford did not see himself as proselytizing among the Ukrainians, but claimed to be motivated chiefly by a desire help them in their pioneering struggles and “to bring to them a fuller knowledge of the will and love of God.”<sup>1</sup> Certainly, he did not hesitate to assist Pakan area Ukrainian settlers in their church-building efforts, in his patient log noting that on one day alone he helped two nearby congregations file for permits from the government:

Case 10: A trustee of the Greek Church 10 miles east, for me to write regarding logs they wish the government to give them for their church.

...

Case 12: A trustee of another Greek Church, to have me write a list of men and the number of logs they were contributing to their church, and write regarding the grant of land they desire.<sup>2</sup>

According to Rev. Dr. Lawford, Orthodox Ukrainians seemed better-versed in the Bible than typical Roman Catholics, but nevertheless were "very lax" when it came to such important matters as dancing and drinking, which they sometimes even indulged in on the Sabbath.<sup>3</sup> Curing the Ukrainians of these "vices" was to be one of the duties of the missionaries charged with the task of inculcating Protestant values and virtues. It proved to be a daunting task, as cultural differences and language barriers were not easily surmounted.

On 20 June 1904, Lawford and his sister Kate were joined at Pakan by Miss Reta Edmonds and Miss Jessie Munro of the Womens' Missionary Society of the Methodist Church of Canada. After resting a few days, the women made their way with Lawford and a student minister named Frank Bushfield, to Wahstao, on the Victoria Trail east of White Earth Creek. There, they selected a forty-acre site for the first Rural Home School to be founded among Ukrainians in east central Alberta. While the women lived in a tent at Pakan, construction of a

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<sup>1</sup> As cited in “Recollections about Dr. Charles W. Lawford,” [www.smokylake.com](http://www.smokylake.com), and “The Rev. Dr. Charles H. Lawford,” *The Mission*, July 2007, p. 5. Nevertheless, as noted in the latter source, “Charles was also instrumental in building the Pakan Ukrainian Methodist Church in Pakan in 1906.”

<sup>2</sup> *The Mission*, p. 12. The log was for 2 February 1905. On the same day Lawford also provided advice to an “Austrian settler” on how to form a school district, performed two tooth extractions, treated a Métis with middle ear problems, wrote several letters on behalf of local Ukrainian homesteaders, and leant a horse to a resident whose team had gotten away on him. His “practice” area covered some 1200 square miles, from beyond Radway to Saddle Lake and St. Paul crossing north of the river, and south to Soda Lake in the vicinity of present-day Willingdon.

<sup>3</sup> Olender, “Methodist,” pp. 89-90.

wooden residence began at Wahstao on 10 August 1904 following the arrival of Dr. T.C. Buchanan of the Board of Home Missions. Miss Edmonds and Miss Munro subsequently relocated to the new home on 7 October even before the plaster had set, using one room as a Sunday school that in the beginning attracted three boys and one girl, but soon was filled to capacity.

In 1905, a third teacher, Miss Edith Weekes, was dispatched to the Wahstao Home School. A graduate of Victoria College at the University of Toronto, she quickly acquired a basic grasp of Ukrainian and threw herself into the task of compiling a Ukrainian-English grammar for use in the classroom. She also began teaching the children to sing hymns, accompanying them on an organ and encouraging them to share the beautiful folk songs that they knew in their native language.<sup>4</sup> The Wahstao Home School eventually operated until June 1934, when the residence (which had been replaced by a much larger structure during the tenure of W.H. Pike in 1916) was dismantled and later used to construct a home in the railway town of Vilna.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, the Reverend Dr. Lawford continued to travel among the scattered homesteads by horse and buggy providing medical assistance and holding religious services with the aid of interpreters. Once, when the translation seemed particularly unsatisfactory to Dr. Lawford, he gamely decided to use his own, rather rudimentary Ukrainian. The story he wanted to relate was of Christ healing a man who had to be lowered on his bed through the roof of a home that had been surrounded by crowds eager to see Jesus perform miracles (St. Luke, 5:18-26). However, in Lawford's Ukrainian telling, *lizhka* (i.e., "bed") mistakenly became confused with *lozhka*, or "spoon", provoking convulsive laughter among the immigrant farmers in his audience.<sup>6</sup>

Undaunted by these and other challenges that he faced in the conduct of his unique ministry (such as the fact that he had an artificial leg), in 1906 Lawford finally succeeded in building a Methodist Church at Pakan. And there, the following year, he officially opened the George MacDougall Hospital, a much-needed facility in the growing Ukrainian colony.<sup>7</sup> Then in 1908, another Methodist Home and School Mission was opened by the talented Miss Weekes upstream on the White Earth Creek, at a place poetically named "Kolokreeka", north of the present-day town of Smoky Lake.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, a second doctor affiliated with the Methodist church joined Dr. Lawford in providing medical care to the Ukrainians pioneers of Alberta. Dr. Albert Earnest Archer (1878-1949) initially settled in the Star area in 1903, the year after he graduated from the University of Toronto. In 1906, Dr. Archer and his wife moved their home on skids to the newly established rail town of Lamont, where he immediately spearheaded a fundraising campaign to construct a local Methodist Church.

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<sup>4</sup> Pike, W.H. "The Flame". Unpublished memoir of missionary work among Ukrainians, September 1966, pp. 4-5.

<sup>5</sup> Pike, p. 6. Also see the account in Olender, "The Reaction of the Canadian Methodist Church..." Ibid, pp. 104-109.

<sup>6</sup> Pike, p. 14. Although Dr. Lawford worked among Ukrainians, he did not make much of an effort to learn their language.

<sup>7</sup> Olender, "Methodist," p. 90; Pikes, p. 14. The hospital was named in honour of the first Methodist missionary to work in Alberta. It was moved into the town of Smoky Lake in 1922.

<sup>8</sup> Pike, pp. 7-9. Kolokreeka School operated until 1932. In 1938 part of its property was sold as United Church cemetery. "Kolokreeka" is a hybrid combining the Ukrainian word "kolo," meaning "beside" or "by," with the English word "creek".