The planting of shelterbelts and field shelters was a common practice in the Prairie Provinces for many decades. Trees protect farm fields, gardens and orchards, allowing families to produce a variety of food and saleable crops. This was not always the case; in fact, in the late 1800s the general consensus was that nothing could be grown in the arid prairies. How did the prairies go from a treeless expanse to a varied landscape supporting a variety of tree species? Most would agree that it happened when the Tree Planting Car (TPC) rolled into town.

The TPC program was run by the Canadian Forestry Association (CFA) and member associations from 1920-1973, in co-operation with the Canadian Pacific (CP) and Canadian National (CN) Railways, and several government agencies. This was a “travelling theatre and classroom,” touring by rail to capture the attention of children and adults alike, as it delivered the message of tree planting across the Prairie Provinces. Throughout its 53 consecutive years of service, the TPC traveled 424,000 kilometers of rail, and delivered its program to over 1.5 million people from four generations.

The idea for the TPC was introduced by the CFA manager, Robson Black, at a meeting of the CFA directors on 18 May 1920. Black had begun to raise funds in Manitoba to support the project, and obtained free haulage privileges from CP and CN Railways—he was sure the program would prosper, and he was right. After its three-month trial in 1920, the TPC continued its service for 52 more years, through the ‘Dirty Thirties’ and the Second World War.

The TPC program did not distribute trees; rather it created a demand for them. Those involved in the program could see that its success hinged upon a reliable and sustained supply of trees, since without the trees to plant, their message carried little weight. This was a concern, because in 1920 the capacity of the tree planting division of the Dominion Forestry Branch was equal to the demand in the Prairie Provinces alone. The Dominion government would need to expand its nursery facilities to support the efforts of the TPC. Two nurseries were instrumental in securing this supply: the Indian Head Experimental Farm and Nursery, and the Sutherland Nursery.

David Boulard regrets that Ontario hasn’t emerged as a “champion” for this clean, renewable energy product.

“There has to be political leadership to be able to recognize the advantages of our solution,” Bouard notes. “We are hopeful that a ‘champion’ emerges to recognize the benefits of this renewable fuel product and it is just as sustainable, and more dependable, than wind and solar. Our province is blessed with a huge renewable wood supply, and Ontario can be a world leader in this area.”

Jeff Muzzi, Ensyn
trains and dropped off at towns along the rail line, following a pre-determined itinerary.

There were three primary lecturers aboard the TPC over the years, but many others lectured on the Car as well. Archibald Mitchell was the first lecturer on the Car. After his family immigrated to Fort McLeod, Alberta, Mitchell worked for both the Indian Head nursery and Mitchell Nursery Company, which was owned by his family. In 1918, he began to work part-time for the CFA, and went on to lecture aboard the TPC from 1920 to 1925. Alexander Charnetski was the last lecturer on the TPC, serving from 1966 to 1973. He was an early district agriculturalist in Alberta, and worked for the Department of Agriculture in a number of areas. Alan Beaven was the longest-serving lecturer, beginning in 1926 following Archibald Mitchell’s death. He remained on the car for 20 years, until 1946 when he was appointed manager of the CFA Prairie Provinces Division.

All lecturers on the car were required to keep daily reports, which provide a vivid picture of life aboard the TPC. Alan Beaven’s reports often note the dedication and determination of the TPC audiences who endured snow, sleet, rain, heat, bugs, and mud to attend. The programs were designed to provide entertainment and education to school children during the day, and adults in the evening. They would begin with a travelogue of films that showed all parts of Canada, then move on to a showing of *Tree Planting on the Prairies*. The lecturer would give a presentation tailored to the age of the audience, often accompanied by slides, to promote tree planting and its many benefits. The question-and-answer period that followed proved most useful to the adult audiences as it served as a forum for the exchange of information and advice.

Though the program had certainly picked up speed, the future of the TPC was in jeopardy due to a lack of funds through the 1930s, often referred to as the Dirty Thirties or Dust Bowl Years—a period of severe drought and relentless dust storms. While the financial support for the program waned, the information was never received more enthusiastically. Those who had planted trees prior to the drought were able to grow gardens to support their families, and some were able to grow modest crops. People were beginning to realize that shelterbelts provided the protection needed to grow successful crops. Alan Beaven responded to this fervor by advocating for a program in which farmers would receive financial assistance to plant shelterbelts, referred to as *bonused shelterbelts*.

The 1930s brought an expansion to the TPC program. For a short time each year, with a change of signage, the TPC became the Conservation Car, heading north away from the Prairies to tour parkland and forested areas. The program was broadened to include content on the importance of all renewable resources, and put an emphasis on preventing human-caused forest fires. This program was enhanced in 1956 when Smokey Bear was introduced to Canada to spread his message, “Only you can prevent forest fires.”

By 1939, prairie life was beginning to stabilize after the uncertainty of the Dirty Thirties, and the future of the TPC was secure. Then the Second World War began, and farmers began to realize the importance of their farm production to the War Effort. During the war, staff aboard the TPC asked their audiences whether the programs being delivered still had value. The answer was always yes, and it was clear that the farming community greatly appreciated the benefits of tree planting.
In 1959, the CFA was reorganized into a federation of provincial forestry associations, and its name changed to the Prairie Provinces Forestry Association (PPFA), with Alan Beaven as its manager. In 1971, the forestry associations in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba became completely autonomous. Aside from the Alberta Forestry Association, all of these associations are still operating under the traditions established by the CFA years ago.

By 1973, the CPR made the decision to retire the TPC and donate it to the Manitoba Forestry Association. The Car was moved to Hadashville, Manitoba on the Greater Winnipeg Water District Railway, and transferred to the Sandilands Forest Discovery Centre by flatbed truck. The Car now sits on a piece of track, serving as an icon of prairie culture. The TPC is still used as a theatre so people of all ages have the opportunity to learn about the importance of trees and forests.

Throughout its years of service, the TPC made a marked impact on the landscape of the prairies, and the way prairie people looked at trees and the forest. TPC lecturers would return to the same communities year after year, and would see the proof that their programs were making a difference. They began to record these success stories of farmers and children who had attended the program years before and had put the information into action. Schools were landscaped, farmers were able to grow crops as well as vegetable and flower gardens, and fruit trees flourished, while the treeless land around them produced little or nothing. One only needs to take a drive through the prairies to observe the impact of the TPC program, and the legacy it left behind.

The information found in this article was adapted from A Prairie Odyssey: Alan Beaven and the Tree Planting Car, written by Dianne Beaver. For a more in-depth account of these events, I encourage you to read her book, which can be purchased at thinktrees.org.

Letters-to-the-Editor

[Ed's note – for the past several years we received fewer and fewer letters-to-the-editor and so this section in the Chronicle was dropped. However, much to our surprise and delight, a letter, in the form of a parable, has been mysteriously received from "Nemoresis" who, readers may recall, especially older readers, had been a wise and knowledgeable observer of the forestry scene in Canada. It is a pleasure to find that he (or she) is alive and well and still ready to offer subtle comments on forestry today!]

Dear Editor – you might find the following parable of interest.

A Forestry Parable


to tell about the past

THOMAS KING (2012)

History teaches us the mistakes we are going to make

JEAN BOON (18TH C. FRANCE)

Once upon a time, in a country where a King and his lords owned all the lands and forests, the poor peasants were allowed to grow food for themselves but had in addition to provide enough for their lords and masters. They were forbidden to hunt any of the game in the forests, which was reserved for the hunting pleasure of the lords and their guests. The huts they lived in were constructed of waste wood held together with mud, limbs and branches— which had either fallen from trees or were left after trees were felled and topped and the logs used in the castles and manor houses of the owners.

In order to cook their food, the peasants had to gather and make use of, not only the fallen limbs and branches not used in building their huts but also, the annual litter of twigs with dry leaves that they could gather from the forest's floor. After many decades of such activities, one of the lords, who had a steward in charge of keeping his lordship's records, noticed over the generations they had been recording the timber produced from the forests that more trees were needed to produce the same volume because the size of the trees was declining. The steward's master was an unusual person with an enquiring mind and had amongst his followers an alchemist who was interested in the native elements, which were contained in the plants and animals used in the castle. The Lord put to his steward the question of why the trees were becoming smaller. The steward's family name was Chisquare, and he had observed that, in a part of the forest that was too far removed from the peasants' village for them to gather fuel and small branches, the trees were still large. He decided to collect all litter that fell in each forest in a year and determine not only the amount but how much of the native elements were contained. He found that although the amount of litter was somewhat less where it was removed by the peasants each year, the elements contained in it were obviously removed whereas in the other forest they were left each year; he concluded that this was the reason the tree growth was less where annual litter fall was removed.

As often happens with rulers, kings and lords, they become envious of each other's lands and engage in battles and warfare. The poor peasants have to bear the brunt of these feuds, suffering from food scarcity and depredations by the warring knights and their soldiers. However, after several seagoing adventurers had found a new continent to the west, opportunities to leave and inhabit this new land occurred so that over the years many of the peasants and some of the adventurous lesser lords sailed to a land where they could clear the forest, build their own houses out of timber and grow their own food and other crops. For many years all went well until, especially on the most easily cultivated lands, they noticed that their food crops were progressively less and less until they could no longer sustain their families and had to abandon the lands. In this new land, there were some per-