

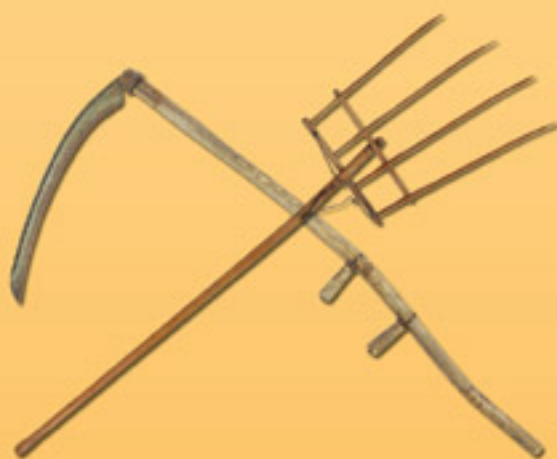
DRAWN TO THE LAND

HOMESTEADING DAKOTA



HOMESTEADING DAKOTA

The newspaper fluttered in the wind-swept street. One word stood out clearly on the crumpled page – LAND! The government in this strange new country would give away land? One hundred and sixty acres of promise. Dakota – who knew what that territory was like? He looked up as a wagon barreled down the street. People leapt out of way, shouting angrily in a dozen dialects. He bent and picked up the newspaper – being a landowner in Dakota surely offered a better future than this crowded city.



From 1860 to 1920, thousands of homesteaders poured into Dakota. Free land offered by the Homestead Act drew people from across the country and overseas. Some learned the ways of the land and stuck it out. They rooted here, making Dakota home for themselves and their descendents. Others came for only a short while before moving on. This exhibit examines the homesteading experience in Dakota.



Who Could Homestead?

To claim 160 acres of land under the Homestead Act of 1862:

- Be a U. S. citizen, or have filed an intention to become one
 - Male or female
 - At least 21 years old
 - Single, or the head of a household
- Never have borne arms against the United States



They had to:

- build a dwelling of at least 12 x 14 feet
- Cultivate at least 10 acres
- Take up residency on the land within 6 months, not be absent from the claim for more than 6 months out of the year, and not establish legal residence anywhere else
- Live on the claim for 5 years.

Upon payment of a small registration fee, the claimant owned the property free and clear. They could also pay \$1.25 per acre and own the land after living on it for only six months.



Tree Claims

The 1873 Timber Culture Act allowed settlers to claim an additional 160 acres by planting trees. Ten acres of trees needed to be planted and 975 trees per acre had to survive ten years to prove up on the tree claim.



Harper's New Monthly Magazine, 1889.



Union soldiers could deduct time they had served from the 5-year requirement.

How big is that?

A 160-acre claim is roughly the size of 148 football fields.



160 Acres Too Small

In western South Dakota and other plains states, 160 acres proved too small for grazing livestock and too dry for traditional farming. The Enlarged Homestead Act doubled claims from 160 to 320 acres. The Stock-Raising Homestead Act of 1916 offered 640 acres.

WEST RIVER / EAST RIVER

West River

- Deep stream valleys and buttes formed by erosion



- Grazing land



- 15 inches average annual rainfall



East River

- Rolling land with prairie pothole lakes formed by glaciers



- Cropland



- Deep, rich soil



- 25 inches average annual rainfall

RESERVATION BREAKUP

Native Americans lived in Dakota long before homesteaders. For the Indians, individual land ownership did not exist. White settlers saw an uncultivated landscape owned by no one. The government supported settlers' claims to specific pieces of property.



Minneconjou Lakota tipi liner, ca. 1890.



Buckskin shirt worn by surveyor U.S. Griggs on the Standing Rock and Cheyenne River Reservations, 1900-1909.

Established by the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, the Great Sioux Reservation originally covered 22 million acres. By 1889, only the much smaller Pine Ridge, Rosebud, Standing Rock, Cheyenne River, and Lower Brule reservations remained. In an effort to force Indians to become farmers and ranchers, the 1887 Dawes Act split reservation land into 160-acre allotments. Indian families often sold or leased their land at very low prices.



Home of White Lance, Pine Ridge.

"Surplus" reservation land was opened to white settlement by lottery. Over 100,000 homesteaders entered the lottery land drawings for the Rosebud reservation in 1908.



Tripp County lottery, October 12, 1902.



Land filers in Yankton on July 18, 1904 during the Rosebud land rush.

STAKING YOUR CLAIM

A Good Claim

Eager homesteaders snapped up prime claims. Those with good water, near roads or rail lines, and with good farming ground went quickly. Marginal claims also had plenty of takers.



Jackson County.



The Illustrated London News, April 23, 1881.

Preemption

The Preemption Act of 1841 allowed settlers who had moved onto land before it was surveyed to homestead the property. The "squatter" could purchase up to 160 acres if they had lived on the land for at least six months.



A "Burt's" solar compass used for surveying, ca. 1880.



Land office of A.J. Burnau, Cottonwood SD, ca. 1910.



Law and land office in Florence Township, Hand County, ca. 1885.

Cheating

Speculators moved in with the homesteaders. They acquired large amounts of land by paying individuals to "settle" on a claim for 6 months and then buying up the property with the speculator's money. Others skirted the rules by building the required 12x14 dwelling in inches rather than feet.

"Staking" a claim

Actually driving stakes into the land was one method of marking the property. Other methods included building rock cairns or piles, or building "straddlebugs" – small tripods with the claimant's name written on one board.



Surveyor's chain, ca. 1885.

GETTING THERE

Settlers walked, rode horseback, and rode wagons overland to Dakota. A few came upriver on steamboats. The vast majority of homesteaders arrived by train.



Following the Rails

Railroads built Dakota, pushing into the territory ahead of settlement. Unlike earlier pioneers using wagon trains, the majority of Dakota settlers came by rail. The railroads platted towns every 6 to 10 miles along the track, giving farmers easy access within a day's drive with team and wagon. Individuals and groups set up towns, too, gambling on where the rails might run. If they guessed wrong, they moved the town.



Rails at Hetland, ca. 1920.



Rosebud area, ca. 1910.

Immigrant Cars

Immigrants packed all they owned into rail cars. Some family members might ride in the immigrant car while others traveled in passenger cars. One immigrant car carried lumber and nails, china dishes, tools, a wagon, a walking plow, a team of horses, a flock of ducks, 7 cows, 25 chickens, and 2 cats. The teenage son riding in the packed car for the 10-day trip considered it "crowded and stuffy."



Fort Pierre train, 1905.



Harper's Weekly, June 11, 1881.



Trunk brought from Luxembourg to Pierre in the 1880s.

In April 1882 we embarked for Aberdeen. Father rode in one end of the freight car that carried our household goods so he could feed and care for his team of matched gray horses and our faithful shepherd dog. Mother, little sister and I were in a coach of a passenger train.

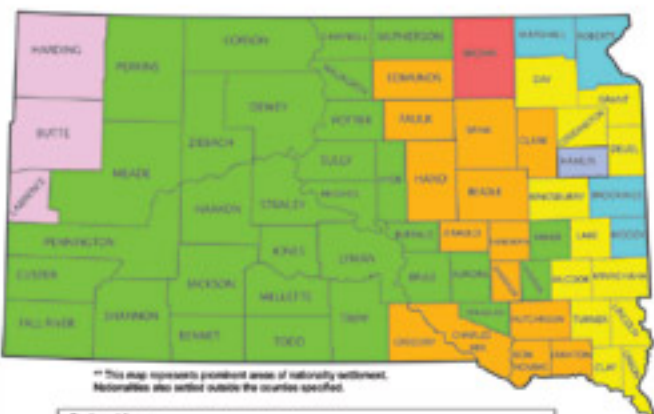
- Louise Wylie Aldrich

WHO CAME?

Settling In

As part of the great westward wave of United States settlement, ethnic groups from every corner of the world moved to Dakota. Some came alone; others brought families or settled near kinfolk in colonies. By 1900, Germans from Russia formed the largest ethnic group in the state. Norwegians, Swedes, Poles, and others also made Dakota their home.

Immigrant Settlement In South Dakota



** This map represents predominant areas of nationality settlement. Nationalities also settled outside the counties specified.

Color Key

- Germany, England, Norway, Ireland
- Sweden, Denmark, Germany, England, Norway, Ireland
- Finland, Germany, England, Norway, Ireland
- Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Germany, England, Norway, Ireland
- Russia, Germany, England, Norway, Ireland
- Sweden, Denmark, Russia, Germany, England, Norway, Ireland
- Finland, Russia, Germany, England, Norway, Ireland



Norwegian settlers near Philip ca. 1910.

Süd Dakota Nachrichten.



German-Russian children at Eureka, *Harper's Weekly*, ca. 1890.



Swedish Bible, ca. 1885.



A band of Russian immigrants passing through Puckwana, 1894.



Norwegian folk dress, ca. 1910.

SOD HOUSES & CLAIM SHANTIES

Sod houses, dugouts, and claim shanties dotted the prairie. Two-foot-thick walls kept soddies warm in the winter and cool in the summer. Claim shanties were little more than crude wooden frames covered with tarpaper, sheet metal, or sod. Dugouts built into hillsides and fronted with wooden planks or sod offered protection – and bugs, snakes and dirt. Meant as temporary housing, settlers replaced soddies and claim shanties with permanent wood-frame structures as soon as they could.



Dugout, ca. 1910.



Sod house interior, ca. 1910.



Dog Ear Township, Tripp County, ca. 1910.

It was a typical homestead shack, about 10 x 12 feet, containing only one room, and built of rough, foot-wide board. . . put together with small concern for the fine points of carpentry and none whatever for appearance. It looked as though the first wind would pick it up and send it flying through the air.

– Edith Eudora Kohl



Sod brick from Hutchinson County, ca. 1880.



Wood burning stove, 1892.



Brule County soddy, ca. 1890.



Harper's Weekly, date unknown.

DAY-TO-DAY WORK

Pitching In

Everyone worked on the homestead. Daily chores often included hauling water and gathering buffalo chips or twisting hay for fuel. Digging a well was a priority. Children helped in the garden and cared for farm animals. Most homesteaders kept a few cows, hogs, chickens, or turkeys to put food on the table.



Corn planting, ca. 1885.



Domestic sewing machine, ca. 1890.



Corn planter, ca. 1875.



Sod house, 1878.



Laundry day, ca. 1910.

Fire!

Sweeping across the grasslands, prairie fire could destroy a home, crops, and people in minutes.



Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, Sept. 19, 1891.



Washstand, ca. 1900.

CROPS AND CATTLE

The tough prairie made for hard farming. Breaking plows rolled the sod over, exposing the rich soil beneath. Oxen and horses did the heavy work until steam engines replaced them. Wheat, flax, barley, oats, and alfalfa grew well.



Alfalfa near Belle Fourche, ca. 1915.



Harvesting wheat on Oleson Farm near Brookings, 1888.



Harvest time on the Henry Giesler Farm near Elk Point, 1900.



Yoke, ca. 1865.

Grasshoppers destroyed crops across Dakota. In flight, the insects resembled a dark cloud. When they landed, the pests ate everything including clothes, fence posts, and the paint off buildings.



Breaking plow, ca. 1890.

Our first year on the plains brought us an abundant crop. Oats were so heavy on the low lands that they had to be cut with a scythe. Wheat stacks fairly groaned with wealth. Corn was in abundance and the potatoes planted on sod were large and heavy. Rutabagas, onions and other root crops, to say nothing of squash, pumpkins, and melons overflowed the bins in our cellar.

- Clarence W. Taber

In western Dakota, working cattle kept ranchers in the saddle for hours. Moving cows from pasture to pasture, fixing fence and putting up hay kept everyone busy. Branding time brought extra work.



Posthole digger, 1908.



Dipping sheep near Ft. Pierre, 1900.



Roundup, 1887.

Years of above-average rainfall in the 1880s made Dakota a farmer's paradise. The good times did not last when the rain stopped falling. Drought drove more prospective homesteaders off the land than any other factor.

BUILDING COMMUNITY



Dedication day at Highland Lutheran Church west of Brandt, 1892.

Communities formed on the Dakota prairie. Schools educated the young and provided a gathering place. Dances, spelling bees, baseball games, and church services brought people together in spite of distance and harsh weather. A wedding could draw well-wishers from miles around. Security came from knowing your neighbors.

The neighbors used to have surprise parties, all would go to someone's home and take sandwiches and cake. . . . Several of the men could fiddle well enough for dancing. The hostess would pile furniture up or set things outside; the beds were full of sleeping babies. Sometimes they had to take numbers – all take turns so each could get a share of the dancing in the 12 x 16 foot shacks.

– Hattie Geary Slack Churchill



Country school, ca. 1890.



Violin played at country dances in the Herrick area by Frank Ducharme around 1900.



Visiting, 1908.



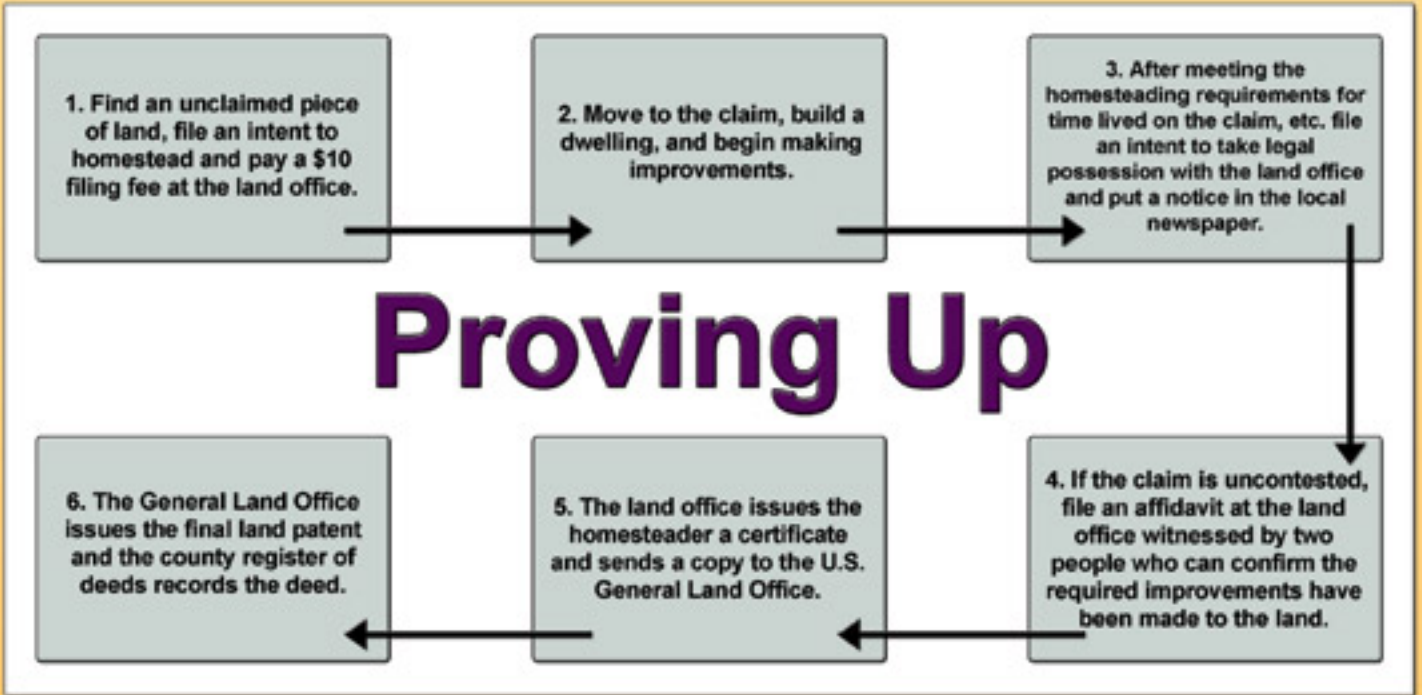
Stamford general store, ca. 1910.

Community members relied on each other during severe weather. Blizzards often caught settlers unawares. The January 12, 1888, blizzard – the “Childrens Blizzard” – killed over 500 people and thousands of cattle. What had started as an unusually warm day turned deadly as the temperature dropped and the wind howled at over 60 miles per hour.

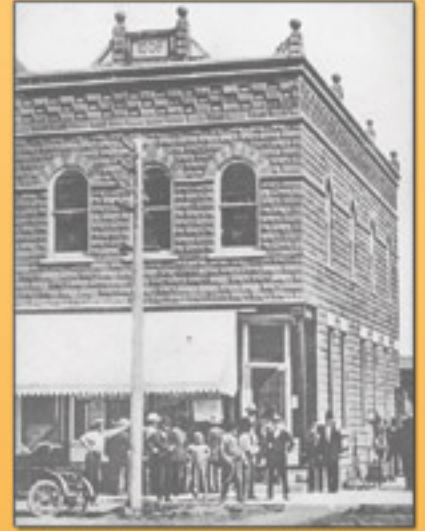


A blizzard buried a train east of Groton, 1897.

PROVING UP LEGALLY



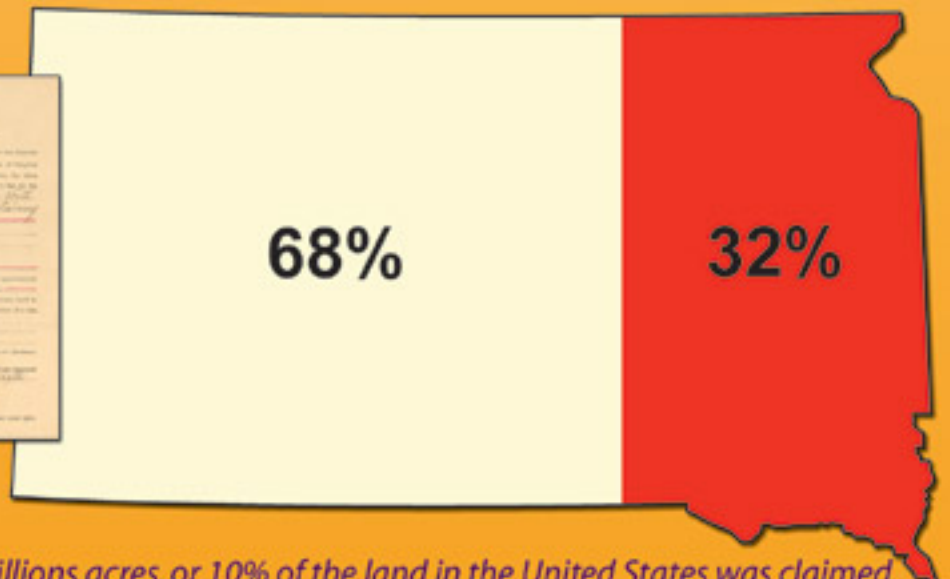
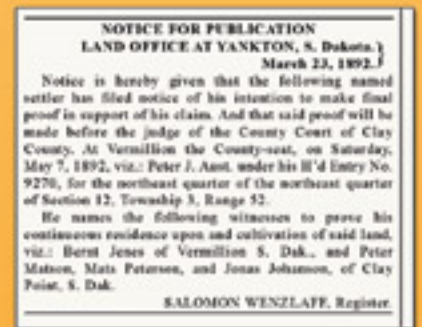
About 40% of homesteaders proved up on their claims. Most stayed the six months required to buy the land and then sold the property. For them, the land brought cash for other ventures. Taking a claim was one step towards a better life, but not necessarily a life on the land.



Gregory County land office, ca. 1920.



Proved up claim, ca. 1900.



Under the Homestead Act, 270 millions acres, or 10% of the land in the United States was claimed. South Dakota had 97,197 homesteads covering 15,660,000 acres, or 32% of the state's total land.

WHAT THEY LEFT BEHIND

Homesteading shaped South Dakota in important ways. The concept that land ownership offered a better future took root. The population exploded as free land was claimed. With the people came statehood. Some communities grew while others faded into ghost towns. Ethnic communities still share traditions brought over from the old country.



Bovee, Charles Mix County.



Phillip, Haakon County.



Stanley County.

Remnants of the homesteading era are still part of the South Dakota landscape. Small clumps of trees dot the prairie, physical reminders of long-ago claims. Sometimes an old house or shanty weather nearby. Fences and gravel roads run along section lines.



Hand County.

LEGACY

For many South Dakotans, homesteading is not history, but an intimate family memory. Stories of the “home place” are passed from generation to generation. The land may belong to others, but the stories rooted in the land and family pride in their homesteading ancestors lives on.



West River.



Walworth County.

The newcomers quickly learned their way about and soon felt at home. The Homestead Act of 1862 provided them, as well as many other pioneers, with an opportunity to acquire land and establish family farms. To the land-hungry immigrants, the tough prairie sod seemed a golden opportunity and they conquered it by hard work.

– Harry S Truman, 1948



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