DRAWN TO THE LAND
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.
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.

**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
- Deep stream valleys and buttes formed by erosion
- Grazing land
- Gumbo clay soil
- 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

Drawn to the Land: Homesteading Dakota
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.

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.

"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 files in Tan Dek on July 18, 1904 during the Rosebud land rush.

Drawn to the Land: Homesteading Dakota
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 "squattee" 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.

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.

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

"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.

Drawn to the Land: Homesteading Dakota
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 plotted 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.

**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.”

**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 Adrich

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**Drawn to the Land: Homesteading Dakota**
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.
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 hillside 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.

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 Evora Kohl

Drawn to the Land: Homesteading Dakota
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.

BuildContext:

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

Context:

Drawn to the Land: Homesteading Dakota
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.

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.

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.

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

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

Community members relied on each other during severe weather. Blizzards often caught settlers unawares. The January 12, 1888, blizzard—the "Children’s 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

1. Find an unclaimed piece of land, file an intent to homestead and pay a $10 filing fee at the land office.

2. Move to the claim, build a dwelling, and begin making improvements.

3. After meeting the homesteading requirements for time lived on the claim, file an intent to take legal possession with the land office and put a notice in the local newspaper.

4. If the claim is uncontested, file an affidavit at the land office witnessed by two people who can confirm the required improvements have been made to the land.

5. The land office issues the homesteader a certificate and sends a copy to the U.S. General Land Office.

6. The General Land Office issues the final land patent and the county register of deeds records the deed.

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.

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.

Drawn to the Land: Homesteading Dakota
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.

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.
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.

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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