

<<Back to Winter 2011 Steward

BLM Commemorates Homestead Act*story by**Mary Apple, Montana State Office,
with information compiled by the National Park Service, BLM, and Wikipedia*

How many of you live where you do because of the 1862 Homestead Act and its successor laws? Perhaps some of you live on land homesteaded by a family member or have a homesteader in your family tree. Many of you rural dwellers may live on a piece of land that was originally patented by a homesteader and was subsequently sold or divided. If you live by a river or creek, it's more than likely your property was once part of a homestead. Don't feel like you're part of a select group though; 93,000,000 people alive today (or rather in 2007 when the stats were compiled) are descendants of homesteaders.

The year 2012 is the 150th anniversary of the Homestead Act, an occasion we're celebrating in the BLM. Why? The BLM's precursor, the General Land Office (which has its 200th anniversary in 2012), was the administrator of homesteads, and many of those records now reside with the BLM. Some of the BLM-managed public lands were once homesteads that were abandoned or returned to the government. So we as an agency have a homesteading legacy too.

Homestead.
BLM photo

Ignatz Mrizek, in the 1930s near Camp Crook, South Dakota.

Three Homestead Acts

The Homestead Act of 1862 has been called one of the most important pieces of legislation in the history of the United States. Signed into law in 1862 by Abraham Lincoln after the secession of southern states, this act turned over vast amounts of the public domain to private citizens. Under the act, homesteaders claimed and settled over 270 million acres, or 10 percent of the area of the United States.

Because much of the prime low-lying alluvial land along rivers had already been homesteaded by the turn of the twentieth century, a major update called the Enlarged Homestead Act was passed in 1909. It targeted land suitable for dryland farming, increasing the number of acres to 320. In 1916, the Stock-Raising Homestead Act targeted settlers seeking 640 acres of public land for ranching purposes. The Taylor Grazing Act of 1934 substantially decreased the amount of land available to homesteaders in the West. Because much of the prime land had been homesteaded decades earlier, successful homestead claims dropped sharply after this time.

The Homestead Act remained in effect until it was repealed in 1976 by the Federal Land Management Policy Act, the BLM's "organic act." However, FLPMA included provisions for homesteading in Alaska until 1986. Alaska was one of the last places in the country where homesteading remained a viable option into the latter part of the 1900s.

The Homestead Act of 1862 had an immediate and enduring effect on America and the world that is still felt today. Agriculture, industrialization, immigration, American Indian tribes, and prairie ecosystems—all were somehow impacted and forever changed by the implementation of this revolutionary land law.

Research Your History

Over the course of the Act's 123-year history, more than two million individual homestead claims were made. Each and every one of these claims generated a written record known as a case file that was kept by the U.S. General Land Office. Today, these case files exist only as paper originals and nearly all are stored in the National Archives in Washington, D.C. The complete collection of case files created under the Homestead Act contains more than 30 million individual pieces of paper. Homestead case files are treasure troves of historical and genealogical information. Within them can often be found information about a homesteader's date and place of birth, the names of children that lived on the homestead, naturalization information about immigrant homesteaders, notations regarding military service, the types of crops planted on the homestead, the value and kinds of homes and other buildings on the site, and more.

For more information on obtaining homestead records, visit <http://www.nps.gov/home/historyculture/requesting-homestead-records.htm> or www.archives.com.

The BLM's General Land Office (GLO) Records Automation website (<http://www.glorecords.blm.gov/>) provides live access to federal land conveyance records for the public land states, including image access to more than five million federal land title records issued between 1820 and the present. It also has images related to survey plats and field notes dating back to 1810. Due to the organization of documents in the GLO collection, the site does not currently contain every federal title record issued for the public land states.

Share Your History

To demonstrate the impact of homesteading in Montana and the Dakotas, we're asking you to send in a brief vignette of your homesteading history in these three states (hopefully we don't get one from all 93 million descendants). We'll publish as many of these as we can throughout the year in the Quarterly Steward and/or post them on our webpage. Please email them to aboucher@blm.gov or mail them to Ann Boucher, Bureau of Land Management, 5001 Southgate Drive, Billings, MT 59101. Electronic copies are much preferred over paper ones. Please note in your submission whether we can publish your name.

Here's my Montana/South Dakota homesteading history to get the ball rolling.

About all I knew about my great-grandfather and mother Ignatz and Marie Mrizek, immigrants from Bohemia, was that they had homesteaded in Harding County, S.D., very near Capitol, Mont. After working for the BLM for several years and learning that some of my family history might reside in the Montana State Office (which has jurisdiction over North and South Dakota), I started my research. Through the information access center (commonly known as the public room), I obtained a copy of my great-grandfather's land patents. From this information I could pinpoint on a map the heretofore unknown to me location of the homestead. I then wrote to the National Archives and Records Administration for a copy of the case files. After wading through many pages of affidavits, applications, reports, and petitions, I came across a big surprise—my grandfather Earl Newell's signature. He vouched for my great-grandfather Ignatz on one of the applications. Earl was also married to Ignatz and Marie's daughter Ann. Earl and Ann eventually moved to Sheridan, Wyo., and lo and behold, I was born (my parents entered the picture at some point). Thank you homesteaders!

From the National Archives case file, I also learned the following: the Mrizek homestead consisted of 320 acres patented under the Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909 and another 320 acres patented under the Stock-Raising Homestead Law of 1916. Ignatz entered the homestead in 1911, moving into the house in 1912. Between 1912 and 1918, when he received the first patent, he planted from 10 to 56

acres a year in corn, oats, barley, and wheat. In 1917, most of the crops failed because of "drouth." He built a four-room house, two barns, a chicken house, a work shop, a hog pen, granary, hay corrals, outside cellar, two miles of two-wire fencing, and three shallow wells. The improvements totaled \$1,300. He described the land in his homestead entry as "high and rough, cut up with draws, rocky, uneven, very rough."

Ignatz received the second patent in 1927. The GLO inspector reported that on the original homestead, "He and his wife care for 42 head cattle, 12 horses, 39 hogs and some chickens. . . . Entryman is a naturalized citizen and a successful farmer and stock raiser." The land was described as "rolling to rough, the soil is a hardpan gumbo." Ignatz wrote, "I have broken up 65 acres on my original entry, a few acres each year, and have planted crops each year, and have always cut the grain and corn for hay and fodder, and have never made a grain crop that could be considered a successful crop." His three wells were too shallow to provide any irrigation water, and the land contained no flowing water. Furthermore, "That because of high altitude, short season, lack of rainfall, hot winds, and hard, compact soil, this land is not suitable for grain farming, and is chiefly valuable for grazing and raising forage crops."

At some point he sold the homestead and moved to Sheridan, but he is buried near Capitol in a very small cemetery.

Compiled by Homestead National Monument of America Historian Todd Arrington, April 24, 2007

10: Percentage of U.S. land given away under the Homestead Act.

24: Presidential administrations during which the Homestead Act was in effect (Lincoln to Reagan).

30: Number of states in which homestead lands were located.

40: Percentage of homesteaders that "proved up" on their claims and earned the deed from the federal government.

45: Percentage of Nebraska's acres distributed under the Homestead Act [Largest percentage of any state].

123: Years the Homestead Act was in effect (1863-1986).

160: Number of acres in a typical homestead claim.

4,000,000: Approximate number of claims made under the Homestead Act.

11,000,000: Acres claimed in 1913, the peak year of homestead claims.

93,000,000: Estimated number of homesteader descendants alive today.

270,000,000: Total number of acres distributed by the Homestead Act.

Montana (151,600 homesteads) — most of any state; 30,000 more than runner-up North Dakota

Total acreage: 93,155,840

Total homestead acreage: 32,050,480—most of any state by 10 million acres

Total percentage: 34%

North Dakota (118,472 homesteads)

Total acreage: 44,156,160

Total homestead acreage: 17,417,466

Total percentage: 39%—second of all states

South Dakota (97,197 homesteads)

Total acreage: 48,573,440

Total homestead acreage: 15,660,000

Total percentage: 32%

For some great stories, both fiction and non-fiction, about the homesteading experience, check out one of these books.

O Pioneers! Willa Cather

Bad Land Jonathon Raban

Letters of a Woman Homesteader Elinore Pruitt Stewart

Little House books by Laura Ingalls Wilder

Giants in the Earth Ole Rolvaag

The Children's Blizzard David Laskin

When the Meadowlark Sings: The Story of a Montana Family Nedra Sterry

In Open Spaces Russell Rowland

On Sarpy Creek Ira S. Nelson

Land in Her Own Name: Women As Homesteaders in North Dakota H. Elaine Lindgren

900 Miles from Nowhere: Voices from the Homestead Frontier Steven R. Kinsella

The Long Death: The Last Days of the Plains Indians Ralph K. Andrist

Winter Wheat Mildred Walker

Last updated: 06-28-2012

USA.GOV | No Fear Act | DOI | Disclaimer | About BLM | Notices | Social Media Policy
Privacy Policy | FOIA | Kids Policy | Contact Us | Accessibility | Site Map | Home