13 Homesteading This Dry Land

1905–1920

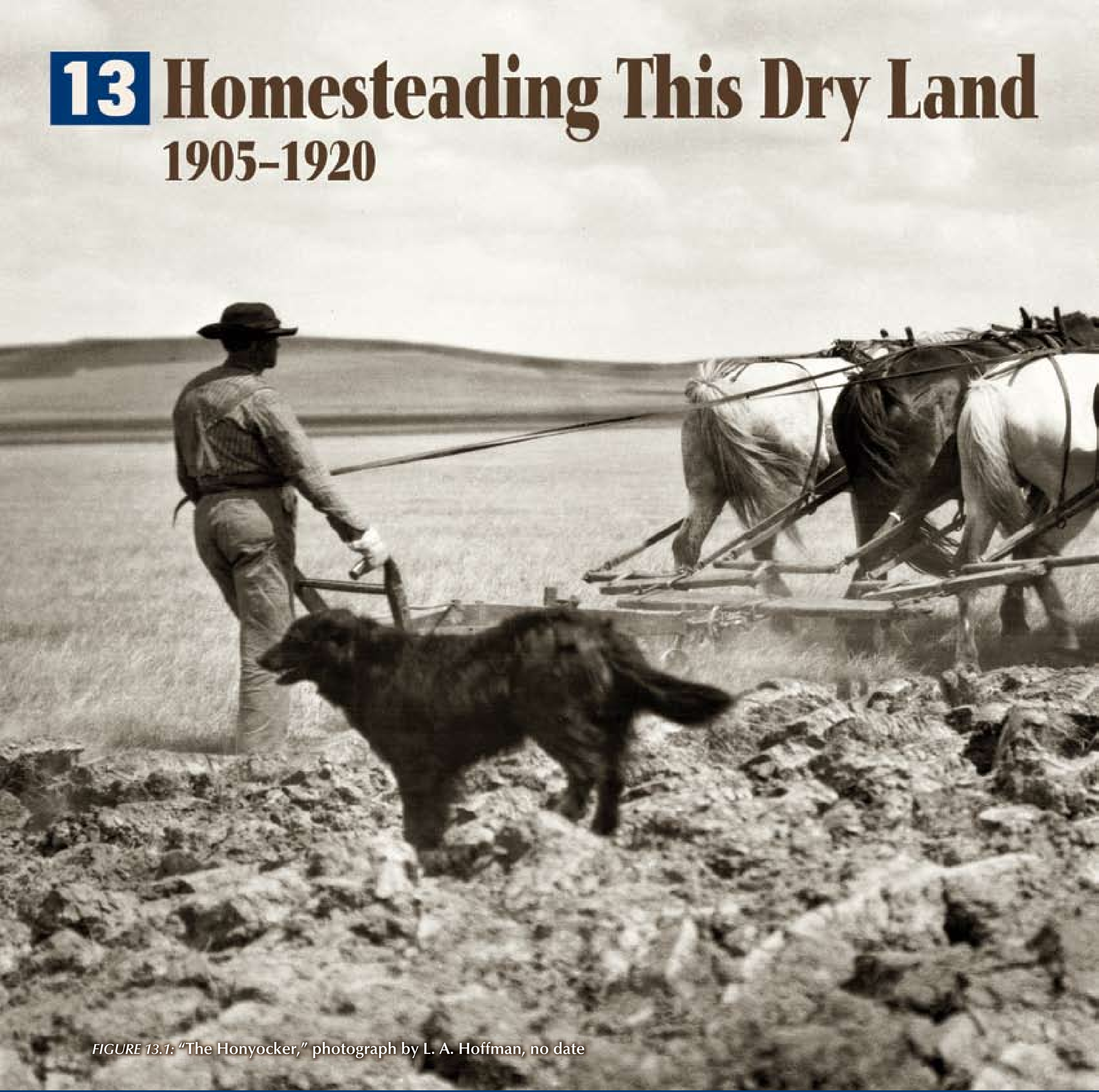
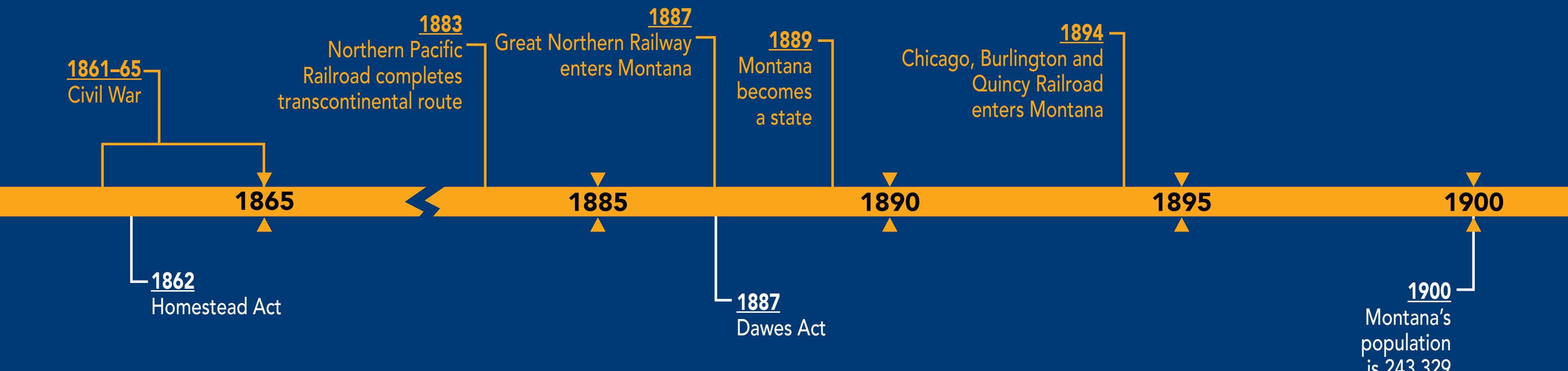


FIGURE 13.1: "The Honyocker," photograph by L. A. Hoffman, no date


1861–65
Civil War
1862
Homestead Act
1865
1883
Northern Pacific Railroad completes transcontinental route
1885
1887
Great Northern Railway enters Montana
1887
Dawes Act
1889
Montana becomes a state
1890
1894
Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad enters Montana
1895
1900
1900
Montana's population is 243,329

READ TO FIND OUT:

- Why thousands of people flocked to Montana after 1902
- Who the homesteaders were
- What life was like on an early homestead
- Why the homesteading boom ended

The Big Picture

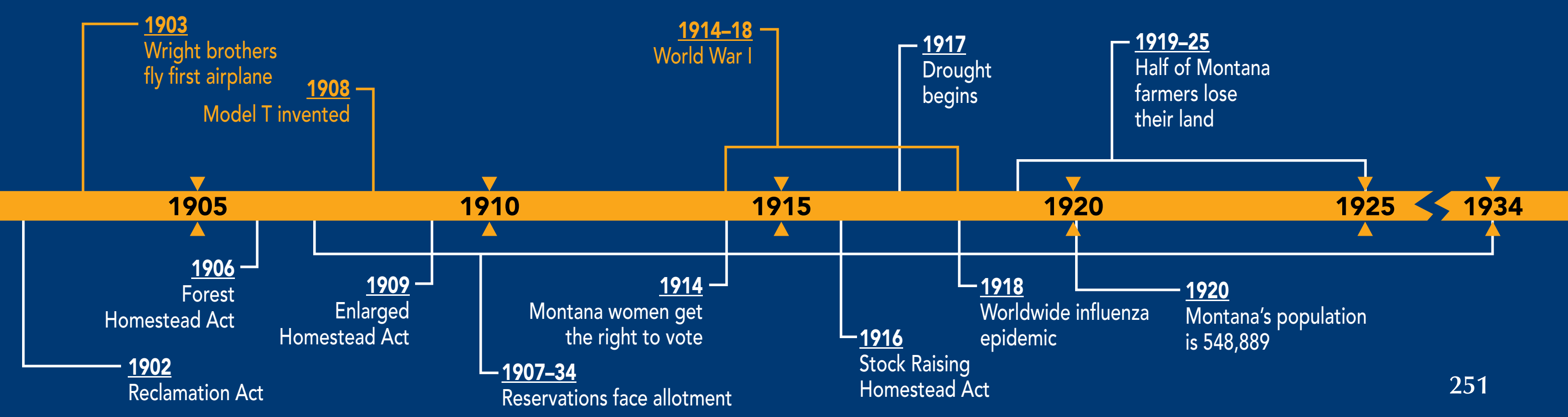
The homesteading era lasted just a few years but changed much of Montana's landscape. Homesteaders endured great hardship, learned to live with the land, and struggled to better understand their new home.

Some of the funniest, saddest, hardest, most optimistic, most tragic, and just plain good stories about Montana happened during the Homestead Era.

The homesteading boom was a time like no other in Montana. Rains turned the whole state into a great green paradise. The railroads advertised Montana farmland to the world. And the federal government gave it away—32 million acres of it—free.

In just a few years, more than 82,000 homesteaders moved to Montana. Some came to build a life; others hoped to make money for a few years, sell the place, and move on.

They were young men, families, single women, and children—lots of children. They poured in on the railroads by the hundreds every day. Miners and cowboys called them "honyockers" (chicken-chasers), "scissorbills," and "sodbusters," insults that reflected resentment against the hordes of newcomers. There seemed to be endless numbers of them.


1903
Wright brothers fly first airplane
1908
Model T invented
1914–18
World War I
1917
Drought begins
1919–25
Half of Montana farmers lose their land
1905
1910
1915
1920
1925
1934
1906
Forest Homestead Act
1902
Reclamation Act
1909
Enlarged Homestead Act
1907–34
Reservations face allotment
1914
Montana women get the right to vote
1916
Stock Raising Homestead Act
1918
Worldwide influenza epidemic
1920
Montana's population is 548,889

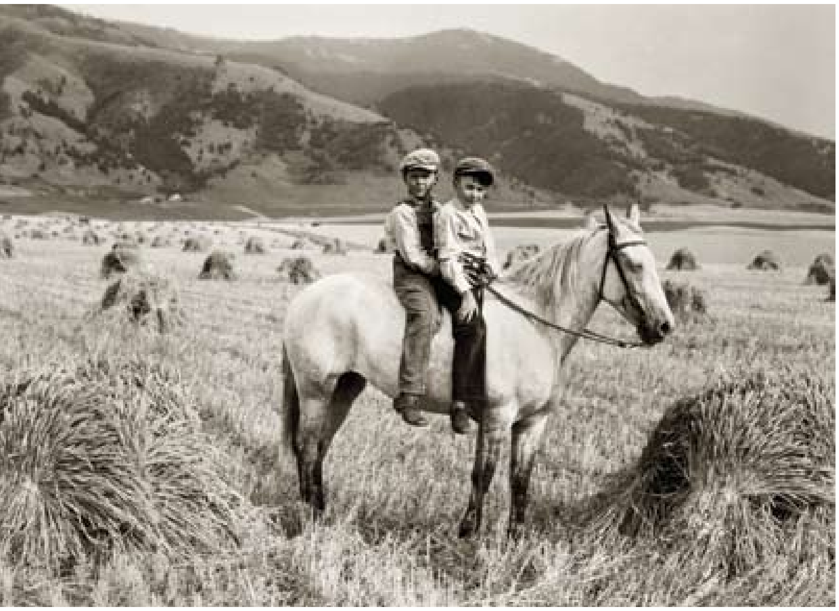


FIGURE 13.2: Homesteading gave tenant farmers, who lived and worked on farms belonging to other people, the chance to own their own land. For many people, a little plot of land to raise a family and some crops was the essence of the American Dream.

Most of these newcomers misunderstood Montana's land and climate. They did not know that years of rain in Montana quickly cycle back into years of drought. Just a few short years after the homestead boom, the rains stopped. Montana's plains returned to their normal dry, windswept conditions. Soils dried up and cracked like calluses. Winds blew the topsoil away. Swarms of grasshoppers devoured crops. The homesteaders' hope and optimism turned to grief and despair. Many left their farms and moved on, searching for better opportunities. Some stayed.

The homestead years transformed Montana. The great land grab brought the end of any sense of "frontier." The homesteaders' plows ruined the native grasslands. Homesteaders hunted game animals like deer, elk, and antelope until they nearly disappeared. Towns, counties, and state government changed shape as different forces pushed communities and pulled them apart. The struggle to survive deeply affected the character of Montana itself.

The Main Character: The Land

The land itself is the main character in most Montana stories. Many different factors combine to make good farmland. **Precipitation** (rain and snow) and the number of streams and water sources affect how dry the soil is. Wind and heat can dry out soil, too. **Topography** (the arrangement of hills, mountains, and slopes), **latitude** (distance north or south from the equator), and altitude all affect exposure to sunlight and length of the growing season. Each of Montana's three geographic regions has a different mixture of all these factors.

Yet compared to the Midwest, all of Montana is dry. If you had looked down on the United States from space in 1900, you would have seen a line

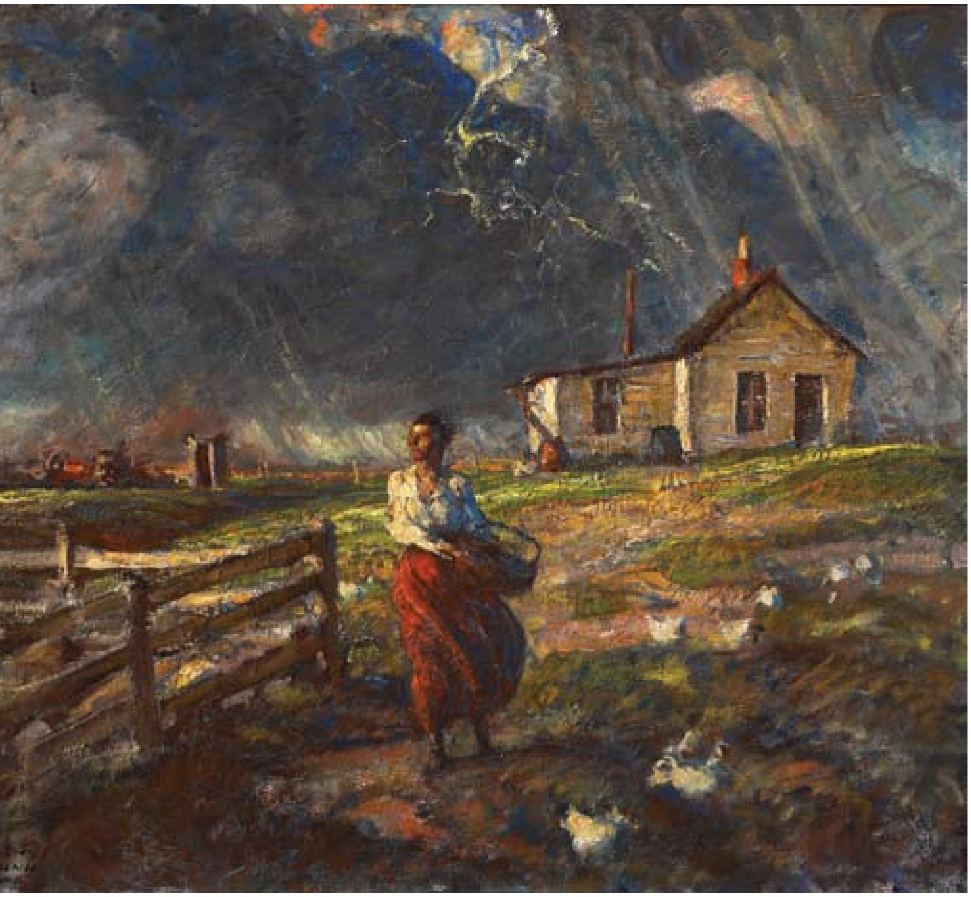


FIGURE 13.3: The land and climate of Montana were the main characters of Montana's homesteading story. Together they taught the homesteaders that Montana can be a land of extremes. South Dakota painter Harvey Dunn (1884–1952) painted this image, called *Just a Few Drops of Rain*.

running north to south right down the middle of North and South Dakota. East of this line you would have seen the green farmlands of the Midwest. West of the line you would have seen dry, open plains.

This line, located at about the 98th **Meridian** (line of longitude), is sometimes called the "rainfall line." It divides the moist Midwest from the semi-**arid** (dry) West. It is so dry in eastern and central Montana, and in the western Dakotas, that the small, 160-acre farms of the Midwest and the East could not grow enough crops to support a family here.

Early Farms Fed Forts and Mining Camps

People have cultivated plants since the dawn of human history. In the place now called Montana, many Indian bands harvested plants for food and medicine as part of their seasonal round of activities.

Fur traders, missionaries, and early settlers also cultivated crops when they arrived. Farms spread into the Deer Lodge, Gallatin, and Madison Valleys. Farmers grew food for the miners and townspeople and hay for their horses. They produced wheat, oats, barley, garden vegetables, and fruit trees. They also raised horses, cattle, hogs, and chickens.

By the 1880s farms peppered the mountain valleys on either side of the Continental Divide. A few farmers had spread into the Prickly Pear Valley (near Helena) and along the Sun River, west of Great Falls. Very few farms lay to the east. In Chouteau County (around Fort Benton), there were only four farms. In eastern Montana, close to Fort Peck, there was only one. It took changes to the nation's homesteading laws—and several other factors—to attract farmers to eastern Montana.

1862: Homesteaders Take Up the Midwest

President Thomas Jefferson, who supervised the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, did not want America to fill up with large, industrial cities. He strongly believed that America should be a nation of small, independent farmers who were educated and virtuous and who owned their own land. It became part of federal policy to open up land for settlers and farmers—often removing Indian tribes in the process.

How Big Is an Acre?

An **acre** is a unit of area for measuring land. One acre equals 43,560 square feet, or 4,840 square yards. Picture an area 66 feet wide by 660 feet long. It is about the size of a football field without the two end zones. Originally, an acre was determined to be the amount of land one man with an ox could till in a day.

In 1862 Congress passed the first Homestead Act. It allowed citizens to claim 160 acres of surveyed government land. To gain full title to the land, they had to **prove up** (fulfill certain obligations for land ownership) by building a house, planting crops, and staying on the land for five years. Once a homesteader proved up on a homestead claim and paid a small filing fee, he or she owned the land.

Between 1862 and 1986 (when homesteading ended in the United States), 2 million homesteaders swept into the Midwest and the West.

> “Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God.”
>
> —*THOMAS JEFFERSON*

Fewer than half of them were able to prove up and claim full **title** (legal ownership) to their land. Still, in the 124 years of homesteading in the United States, 270 million acres—10 percent of the continental United States—transferred into private ownership. But the driest lands—like most of Montana, for example—did not attract homesteaders until after 1900.

Politics, the Economy, and Weather Work Together

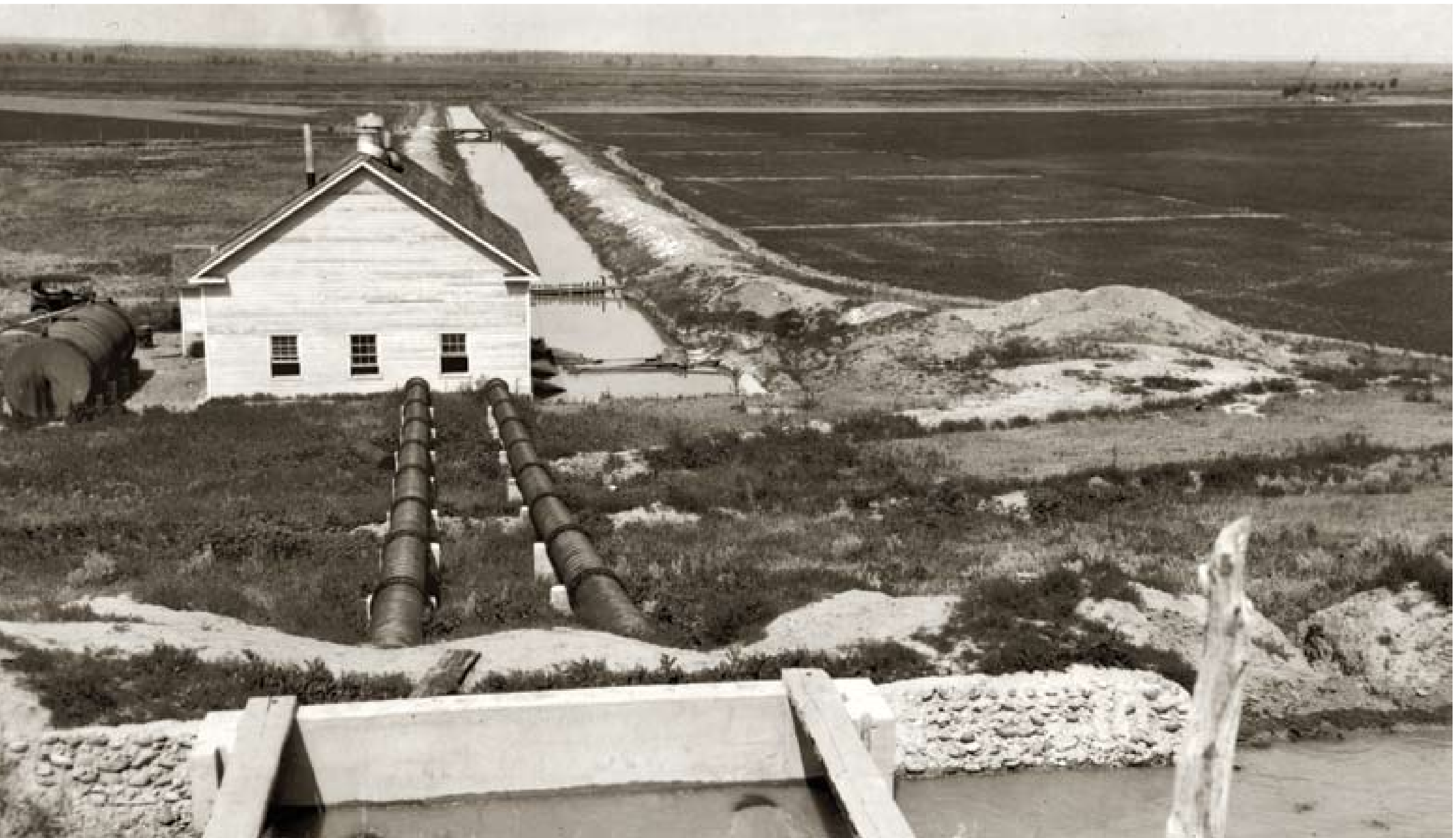
In the early 1900s Congress passed several laws to make homesteading in the dry West more attractive. In 1902 it passed the Reclamation Act, which funded many irrigation projects across the West to supply water to farms. It was called reclamation because people thought that by creating productive farmland through irrigation, they were **reclaiming** (converting to usable land) a wasteland.

In Montana, the Reclamation Act helped build the Huntley Project east of Billings, the Lower Yellowstone Project near the Montana-Dakota state line, the Milk River Project in northern Montana, and the Sun River Project west of Great Falls.

In 1906 the Forest Homestead Act opened up lands within the national forests for homesteading if they had agricultural value.

In 1909 the Enlarged Homestead Act increased the size of a homestead to 320 acres. The original 160 acres may have been large enough to support a family in the rain-soaked East, but it was far too small in the dry West. (Homesteaders would soon find out that even a 360-acre farm was too small.)

FIGURE 13.4: This pumping station lifts water into the irrigation canals of the Box Elder Irrigation District near Hysham. Irrigation projects were expensive and could help only small areas.



In 1912 Congress reduced the amount of time homesteaders had to live on their farm to prove up—from five years to three years. And in 1916 the Stock Raising Homestead Act increased the maximum homestead claim to 640 acres of grazing land in areas not suitable for irrigation.

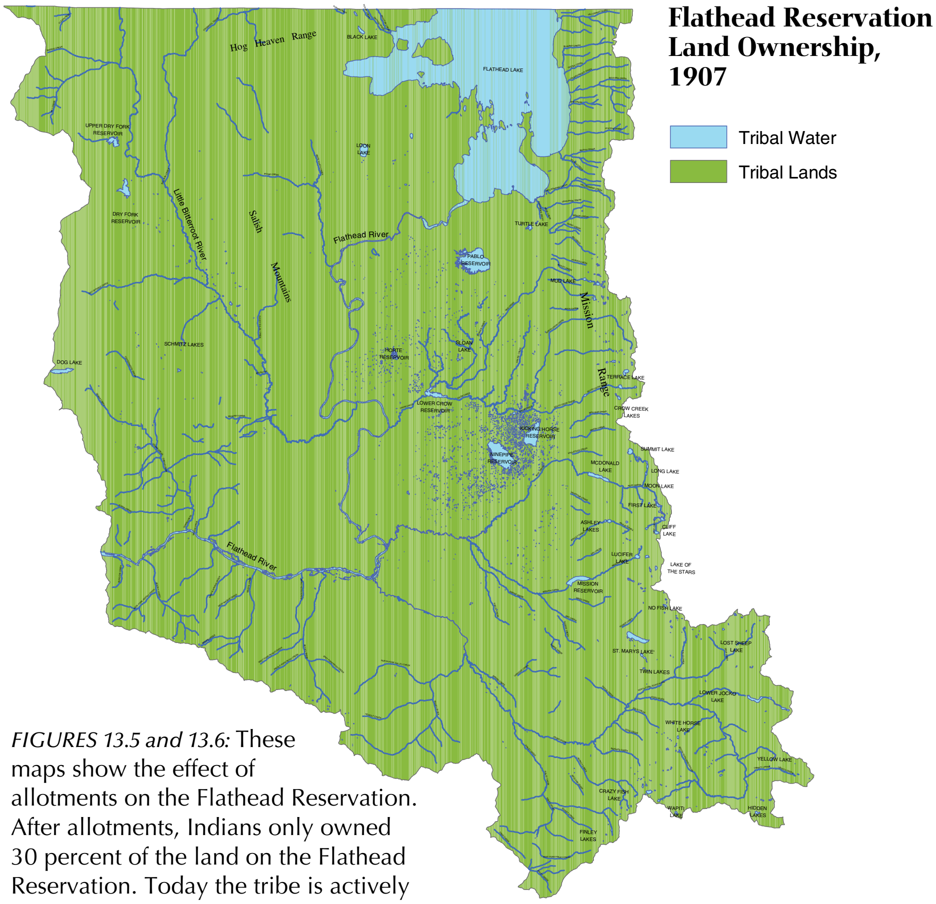
Allotments Bring Homesteaders to the Reservations

Homesteading had a huge effect on Montana's Indian lands, especially the Flathead and Fort Peck Reservations. The Dawes Act of 1887 gave Congress the power to survey **reservation** lands (land that tribes had reserved for their own use through treaties), assign **allotments** or tracts of land to individual tribal members, and open up the remaining lands for homesteading by non-Indians (see Chapter 11).

Most allotments did not happen in Montana until after 1900. Between 1908 and 1926 the Flathead, Fort Peck, and Blackfeet Reservations together lost millions of acres of tribal land. Homesteaders surged onto the reservations to claim these lands.

One goal of allotment was to open up reservation lands to homesteaders. A second goal was to surround American Indians with white farmers who would demonstrate a successful farming lifestyle. The idea was that this would help Indians to **assimilate** (be absorbed into the majority culture). With homesteaders came roads, telephones, and motorized transportation that made some reservations less isolated.

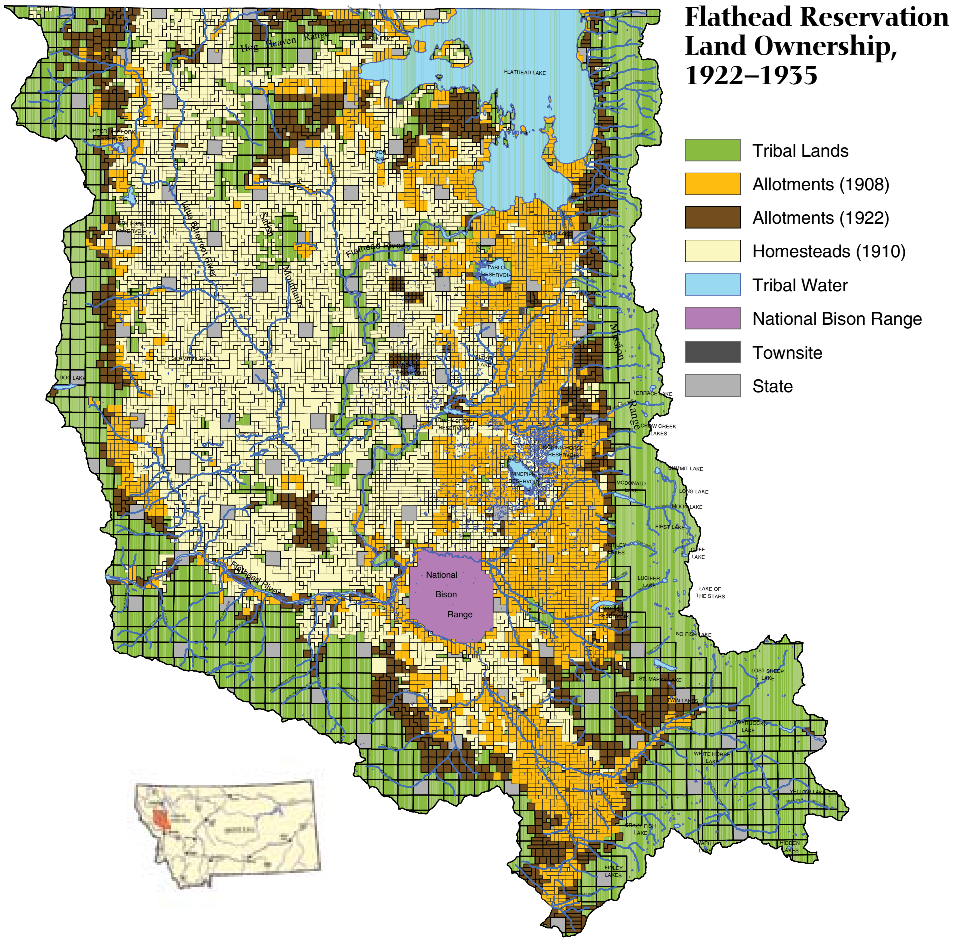
The Northern Cheyenne Reservation had not been **allotted** (divided up), but there was a plan to **abolish** (put an end to) the



Flathead Reservation Land Ownership, 1907

🟦 Tribal Water
🟩 Tribal Lands
Hog Heaven Range
Black Lake
Flathead Lake
Upper Dry Fork Reservoir
Dry Fork Reservoir
Little Bitterroot River
Salish Mountains
Flathead River
Mission Range
Pablo Reservoir
Turtle Lake
Schmitz Lakes
Dog Lake
Lower Crow Reservoir
Crow Creek Lakes
McDonald Lake
Mission Reservoir
St. Marys Lake
Twin Lakes
Lake of the Stars

FIGURES 13.5 and 13.6: These maps show the effect of allotments on the Flathead Reservation. After allotments, Indians only owned 30 percent of the land on the Flathead Reservation. Today the tribe is actively buying back land.



Flathead Reservation Land Ownership, 1922–1935

🟩 Tribal Lands
🟧 Allotments (1908)
🟫 Allotments (1922)
⬜ Homesteads (1910)
🟦 Tribal Water
🟪 National Bison Range
⬛ Townsite
⬜ State
Hog Heaven Range
Flathead Lake
Little Bitterroot River
Salish Mountains
Flathead River
Mission Range
National Bison Range

reservation and move the Northern Cheyenne onto the Crow Reservation. Homesteaders simply settled on Northern Cheyenne lands, expecting to gain ownership.

A Burst of New Immigrants

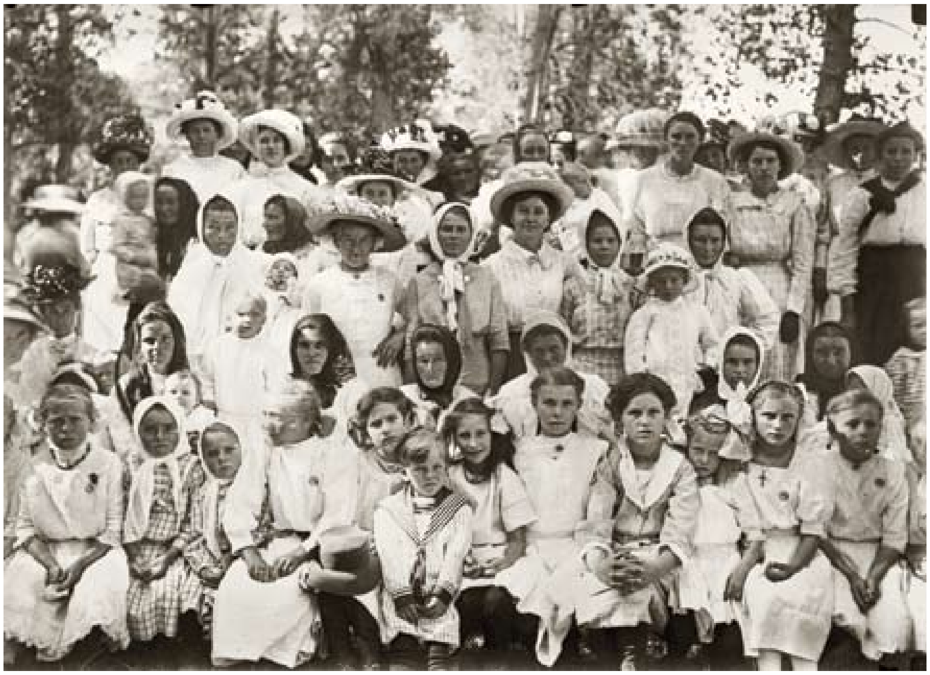


FIGURE 13.7: Whole families, clans, and communities immigrated to the Americas in the early 1900s. This group of German-Russians held a picnic in July 1913 near Terry. They listened to sermons, sang hymns, and enjoyed children's recitations, then all posed for this picture.

Upheaval in Europe drove many northern Europeans to immigrate to America between 1880 and 1914. Germans, Swedes, Norwegians, Scandinavians, and other Europeans left the economic and political uncertainty of their homelands and came to America. Many took jobs in factories, contributing to the explosive growth of cities at this time. People in these growing cities needed to eat. They created a huge demand for agricultural products.

Many of the new European immigrants bypassed the cities and crowded farmlands farther east and looked to the newly opened West. They found much of the northern United States similar to the landscape back home. By 1910 more than half of all Montanans were either immigrants or first-generation Americans. Many of these new Montanans were homesteaders.

Meanwhile, America was enjoying a period of national prosperity. Lowered interest rates made it easier for people to get loans to set up farms. The beginning of World War I in Europe (1914) created a sudden boom in the world's market for agricultural products. Armies need to eat. Prices rose sky high. There was also a sudden demand for metals, so Montana's mining towns expanded. The region's agricultural products gained a vast new market.

Railroads Promote Free Tickets to Paradise

By 1908 the Milwaukee Road and the Great Northern Railway had both completed their **transcontinental** (all the way across the continent) lines across Montana (see Chapter 9). Unlike the Northern Pacific, neither of these railroads had received **land grants** (free land that the federal government gives to a company, an organization, or a state). So they needed to make their money from passengers and freight. They needed people to settle in Montana who would pay to travel, import goods and supplies, and raise grain to ship to eastern markets.

The Milwaukee Road began aggressively marketing the land along its railroad line—especially the Musselshell Valley and the Judith Basin—

as a golden opportunity for farmers. It published posters, brochures, and ads portraying Montana as green, fertile farmland.

But no one promoted Montana homesteading more than James J. Hill did. By this time Hill owned the Great Northern and much of the Northern Pacific, too. Hill sponsored **dryland** (without irrigation) farming conferences and exhibitions. He offered prizes for crops and livestock. He sent special trains displaying Montana's agricultural products around the country to advertise farmland along the Hi-line.

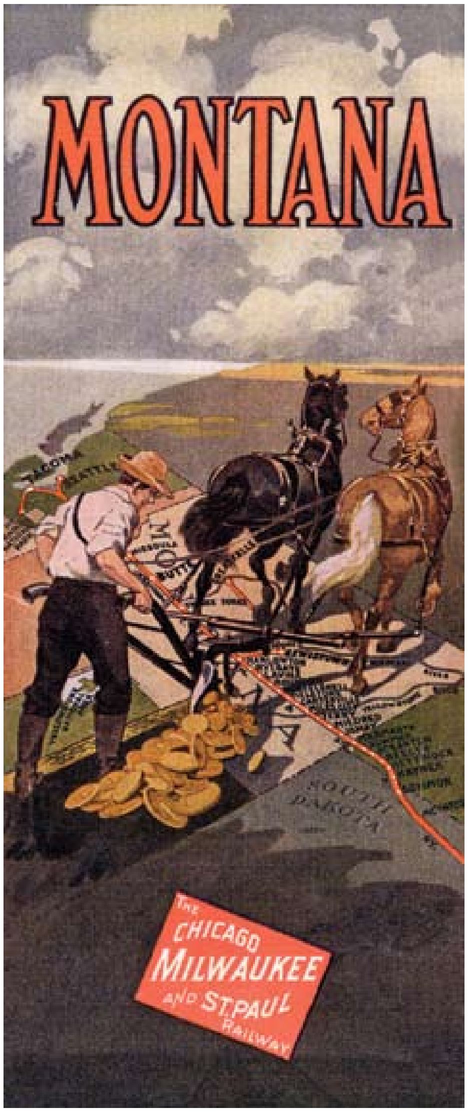
> **"Population without the prairie is a mob, and the prairie without population is a desert."**
>
> —*JAMES J. HILL, OWNER OF THE GREAT NORTHERN RAILWAY*

> **"I was raised in Chicago without so much as a backyard to play in. When I heard you could get 320 acres just by living on it, I felt that I had been offered a kingdom."**
>
> —*A MONTANA HOMESTEADER*

Hill distributed brochures and flyers across the country and in Europe encouraging emigration and always emphasizing "Montana's FREE homesteads!" Most importantly, he offered special fares across the Atlantic and cheap train fare to transport homesteaders and their families, stock, and belongings to their new homes in Montana.

The federal and state governments, local chambers of commerce, and other groups also published ads and flyers promoting free land in Montana. They sponsored contests for the biggest and best crops and livestock—then advertised those prizewinners as "average Montana products." These promotions were just as effective as ads for cars and electronics are today. They made people long for the good life on a fertile Montana farm.

FIGURE 13.8: This image said it all: a strong, healthy man plowing up gold coins as he cultivates the land along the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railway.


MONTANA
SOUTH DAKOTA
THE CHICAGO MILWAUKEE AND ST. PAUL RAILWAY

New Ways to Cultivate the Dry Land

Some people thought that, if irrigation could not turn Montana into a moist paradise, perhaps new farming techniques could. Farmers in other dry regions developed dryland farming methods. One of them was Hardy Webster Campbell from North Dakota. He noticed that thick, green grass grew in the ruts of roads where wagon wheels compacted the soil. He also noticed that plants grew wherever the last snowdrifts of spring trickled moisture into the soil. From these observations, he developed his own farming methods.

Campbell promoted **subsurface compacting** (compressing the soil beneath the surface). This was a method of plowing that firmly packed the loose soil at the bottom of a furrow so that it would hold water at the level where roots develop. Then Campbell recommended tilling up the top two to three inches of soil into a loose, dry layer of mulch to prevent moisture from evaporating.

Campbell believed that climate conditions had little effect on crops. In fact, he thought rain drained the soil of its fertility. He thought that manipulating the soil was the key to farming in the West.

Agricultural researchers at Montana Agricultural College (now Montana State University) cautioned against Campbell's system.

They feared it would damage the topsoil. But the **boosters** (people who vigorously promote something) dismissed their pessimism. The homesteaders listened to the boosters. It was hard not to.

> **“Bob you wouldent know the town or the country either it’s all grass side down now. Wher once you rode circle and I night wrangled, a gopher couldn’t graze now. The boosters say it’s a better country than it ever was but it looks like hell to me I liked it better when it belonged to God it sure was his country when we knew it.”**
>
> *—MONTANA PAINTER CHARLES M. RUSSELL EXPRESSES HIS NEGATIVE VIEW OF HOMESTEADING IN A BADLY SPELLED POSTCARD TO A FRIEND*

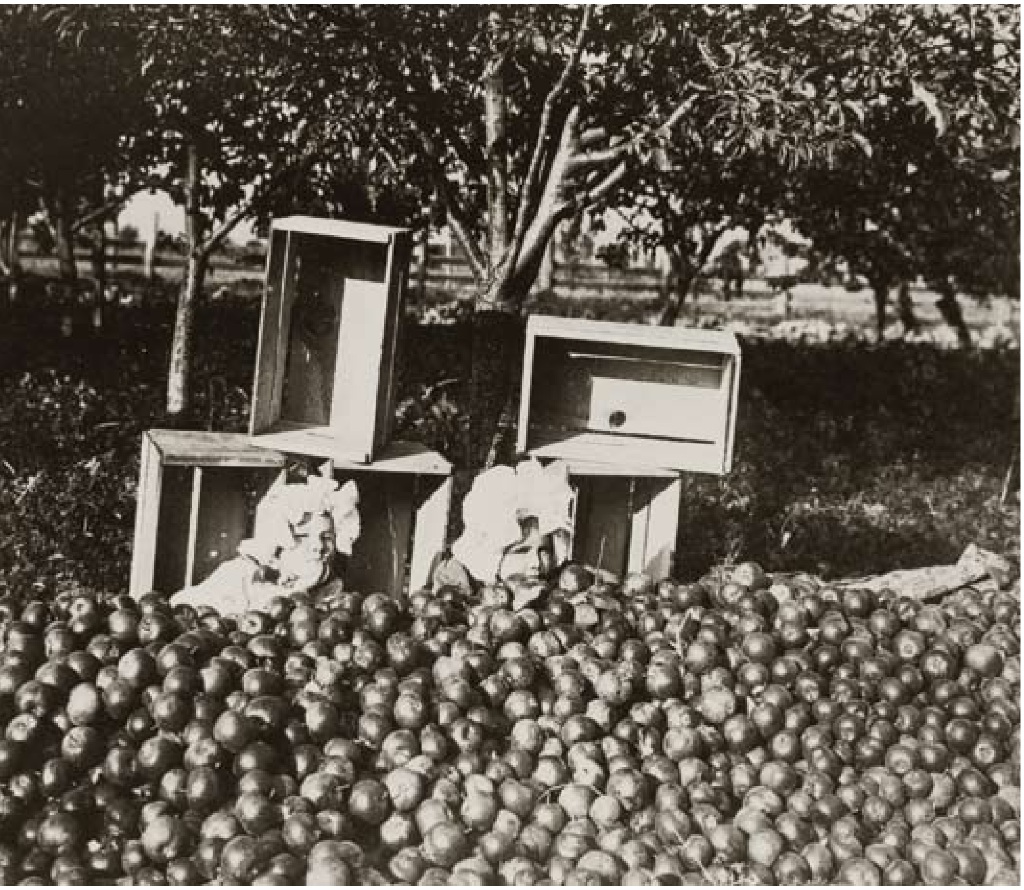
The Weather Cooperated

The homestead boom never would have happened without rain. Just as the government’s promotional campaign began, the Northern Plains entered a wet, rainy period. Places that averaged 7 to 9 inches of rain per year began to get 15 inches—even 18 inches. Rains fell heaviest in May and June, just in time to saturate the soil and nourish new crops.

The plains sprouted into lush growth. The land seemed to be living up to the advertising slogans. People even began to believe that farming itself was helping transform the climate of the Northern Plains, converting it to a green paradise.

Montana’s Plains region has always experienced alternating wet and dry periods lasting 3 to 30 years. This wet cycle lasted from 1909 to 1917—just long enough to lure thousands of homesteaders onto the Plains.

FIGURE 13.9: During the years of abundant rain, people rushed into western Montana to buy up fruit farms.



A Tidal Wave of Arrivals

In 1909 homesteaders swept like a tidal wave across Montana. Hopeful men, women, and families poured into the state. Most came by train, and some by car or truck.

Homesteaders came from Scandinavia, Germany, and Scotland. They came from Missouri, Pennsylvania, and Minnesota. Some were **tenant** (renter) farmers tired of working other people’s farms. They brought generations of agricultural knowledge with them. Others were bank clerks, factory workers, craftsmen, accountants, or actors who had never touched a plow. Many—in some areas up to 18 percent—were single or widowed women. Like the men, they came looking for opportunity.

At least a few took out large loans to get a good start. Others arrived penniless. Almost all of them were young, in their twenties or thirties. Whole families moved west together, each member filing a homestead claim. Brothers and sisters filed on adjacent lands, then built their houses close together so they could share chores. At least a few husbands and wives divorced so they could file individually and remarried when they had proven up, joining their two homesteads to make a large farm.

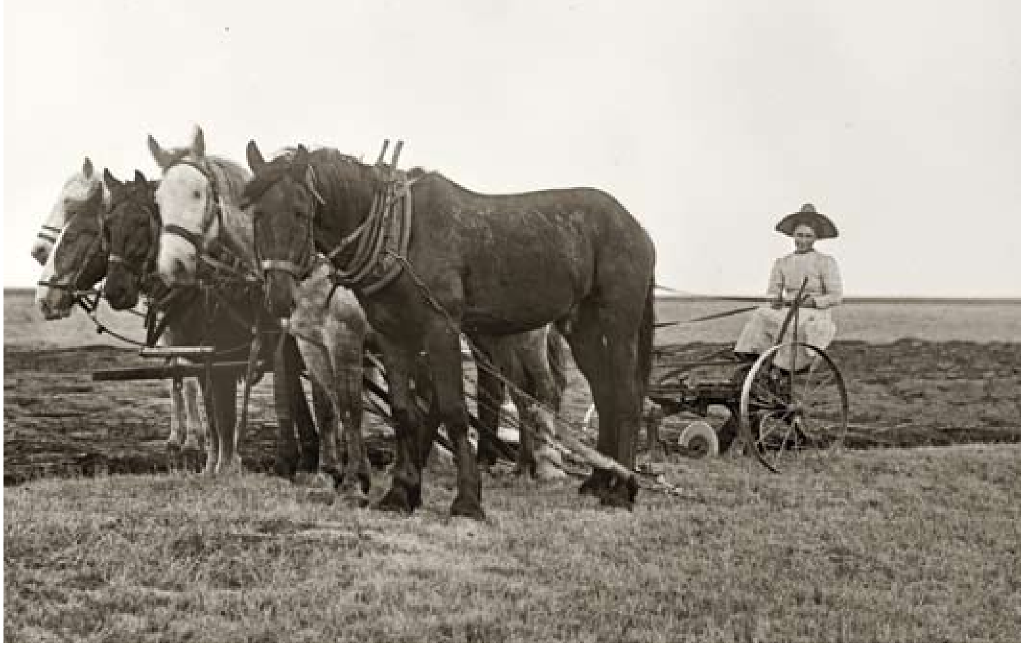


FIGURE 13.10: One of the first jobs facing a homesteader was turning over the hard-packed soil, which was thickly interlaced with dense native grasses. Montana photographer Evelyn Cameron (1868–1928) took this photo of a German-Russian farmer's daughter on a horse-drawn plow in 1912.

New boomtowns like Rudyard, Ryegate, Scobey, Baker, and Hardin sprang up almost overnight. On one springtime evening in Havre, the Great Northern Railway unloaded 250 homesteading families from a single train.

Between 1909 and 1919 more than 82,000 homesteaders filed claims on 25 million acres of land in Montana. This is more land than Maryland, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Delaware, and Rhode Island combined. In 1910 the Great Falls land office, which served north-central Montana, processed between 1,000 and 1,500 homestead filings every month. The homestead boom happened all across the West, but more people claimed more land in Montana than anywhere else.

Starting Out

Once here the hopeful newcomers selected land, filed their claims, and set about the business of building a new life. First they had to find water, build homes and livestock sheds, stockpile firewood, plant gardens for their own food, and line out fences. Then they started their most important task: getting in a first-year crop—usually flax, which grew well on newly turned sod.

They built houses of rough planks insulated along the bottom with rocks or sod. They stuffed newspaper or straw between the boards to keep the wind out. Sometimes their shacks blew over in a winter gale. Families huddled around little stoves that burned twisted straw, cow chips, or coal carried from the railroad yard or mined from nearby coal veins. A few homesteaders' houses had second stories, wood floors, and glass windows, but not many.

Lucky homesteaders found good ground on creeks with timber nearby. But thousands of others arrived to a land dry and rocky,

> **“We were going to build: a community, schools, good roads, good homes, and we knew we had a great country where there was room and opportunity for all. It was new, raw and hard.”**
>
> —*PEARL DANNIEL, WHO HOMESTEADED ON BIG DRY CREEK NEAR BONIN IN MCCONE COUNTY*

totally unlike the golden wheatfields pictured in the promotional brochures. They faced a constant struggle for water and firewood.

Children learned to work almost as soon as they could walk. They fed the chickens and pigs, milked cows, collected eggs, chopped firewood, hauled water, and helped deliver produce to town by horseback or wagon. As they grew, they took on more responsibilities, helping repair fences, harvest crops, build barns, and operate farm equipment.

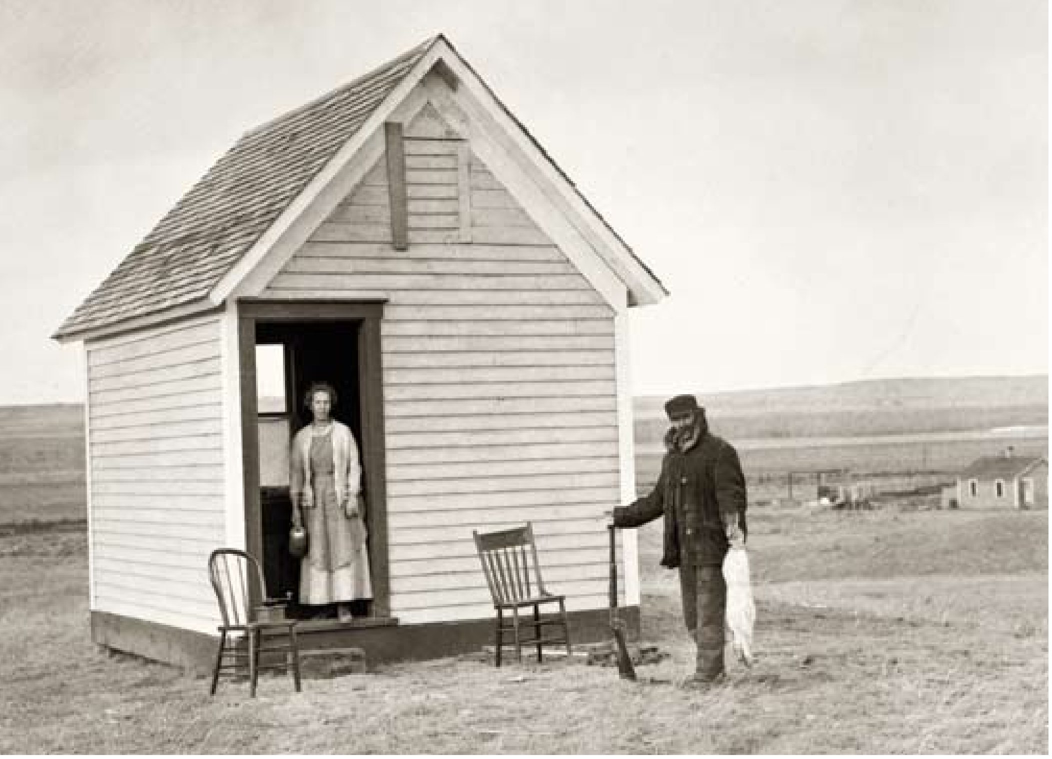
Women held the homestead together. A woman on the homestead cleaned, cooked, washed, tended the family garden, fed and managed the livestock, helped in the fields, trained horses, and worked alongside—and often without—men. At harvest time she cooked three huge meals a day for **threshing** (separating wheat from straw) crews of 20 people. She doctored neighbors who were sick or giving birth. And to her own family, she was primary teacher, minister, doctor, and source of ingenuity and optimism.

Men also worked endlessly. They dug wells, built houses, strung fences, tilled the soil, threshed wheat, cut firewood, repaired equipment, and helped neighbors. Some even played fiddle at the Saturday night dance.

For some people, homesteading brought endless adventure; for others, it was a life of lonely toil. Many fathers had to leave their families in wintertime to find work on the railroad or in town. Mothers spent the winter on the farm with the kids and the livestock. Sometimes it was the women who left and spent the winter teaching school in town. Laws allowed homesteaders to be gone up to five months a year so they could earn extra income.

Where farms were spread far apart, people figured out ways to stay in touch. Some farmers strung telephone wire along barbed-wire fences so they could keep in touch with neighbors. A visit from the postman always brought news and gossip. Mail carriers sometimes carried eggs and milk to town for the farm wives and brought back payment on their next visit.

FIGURE 13.11: How would you like to share this house with your stepfather? Olga Wold and her stepfather, Norman Wold, posed here at their home near Marsh in 1911. Tiny houses like this, most built with tarpaper or lumber shipped from western forests by train, were typical of eastern Montana homesteads.



The homesteaders' optimism became one of their most powerful tools. They tackled hardship because they thought it was only temporary. They believed that a few years of hard work would bring prosperity and security. They did not listen to the old cattlemen or the state's agricultural experts who warned against expanding too fast. Pessimism had no place on the homestead.

1917–18: Peak of Homesteading in Montana

Homesteading peaked in Montana in 1917 and 1918. In each of those years, more than 14,000 people filed for a total of 3.1 million acres of homestead land.

In 1917 the United States entered World War I. The government pushed farmers to increase production to meet the market demands of the war. With slogans like "Food will win the war," the government urged homesteaders to buy more land and equipment to expand their farms.

Banks encouraged farmers to borrow money to buy land, tractors, plows, threshers, and harrowers so they could work more land. Montana farmers expressed their patriotism by going further into debt.

Homesteading Changed Montana

The tidal wave of homesteaders broke up Montana's foothills and plains into farms and brought an end to the sense of a "wide-open frontier." The landscape of the plains transformed. The free-range native grasslands became a settled and plowed landscape of cropland and grazing land strung with fences, roads, and railroad tracks.

Homesteaders Built Communities

Homesteaders deeply influenced social life in Montana. Neighbors arriving in an area at the same time helped one another, housed and fed one another, and took turns building one another's houses. They worked together to build schools and community halls, to improve and maintain county roads, and to set up volunteer fire departments and telephone **cooperatives** (businesses or companies owned by the people who use them).

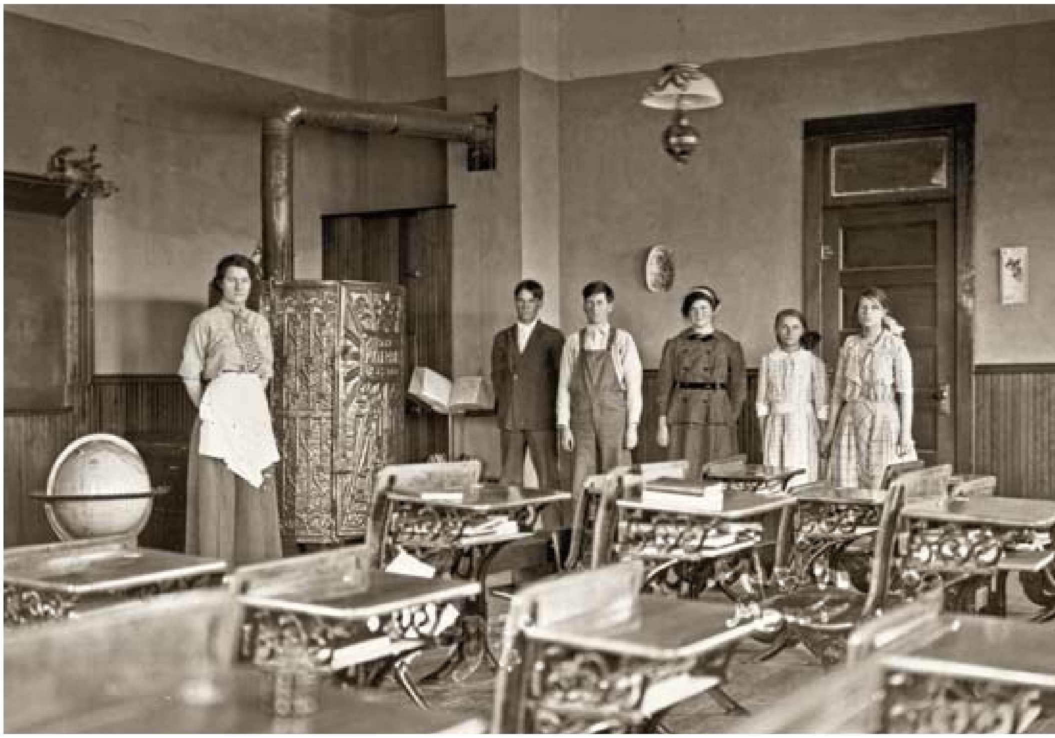


FIGURE 13.12: Homesteaders built schools as soon as there were enough kids in the area to justify one. Many families sent their children to live in town for the winter so they could attend schools like this one in Marsh.

Homesteaders often gathered at one another's houses or in town for dances, fairs, and ice-cream socials. They organized multi-family picnics. A school pageant was the highlight of the season. Even those spread out across the plains conquered their isolation with a spirit of cooperation and mutual concern.

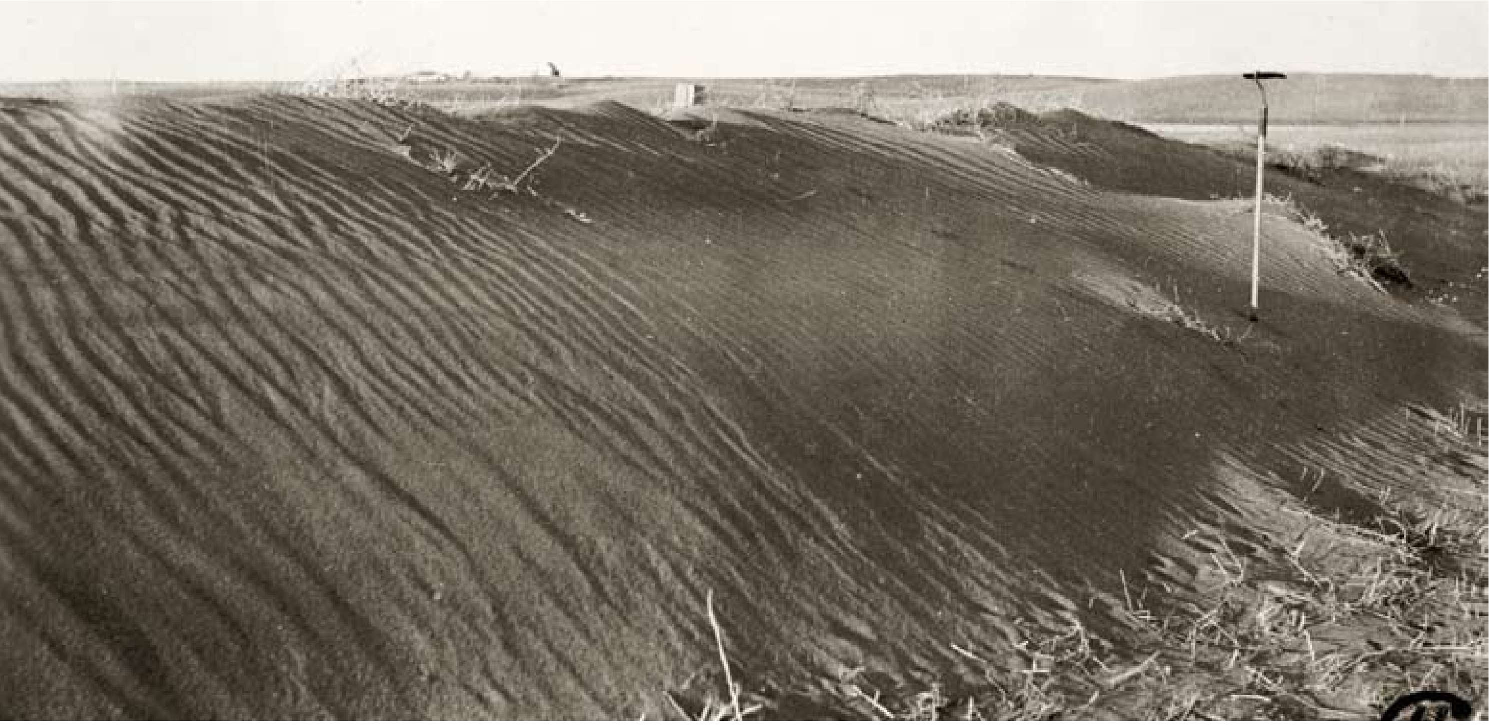
They Changed Montana Politics

Many homesteaders held the traditional belief that women provided moral guidance to their society. They thought women could improve Montana by getting involved in political and civic affairs. So most homesteaders supported women's **suffrage** (the right to vote). In 1914 Montana tied with Nevada to become the ninth state in the Union to give women the vote.

Women voters helped elect the first woman to the U.S. Congress—Jeannette Rankin from Missoula. Many women also disapproved of gambling houses, saloons, and dance halls, which were common in mining and cowboy towns. They campaigned for **Prohibition** (outlawing drinking or selling alcohol; see Chapter 15).

Homesteaders also worked together to reduce the control that mining and railroad companies had over state politics (see Chapter 10). To bring local governments closer to the people, the homesteaders split up many of the large, spread-out counties into smaller ones. County seats created jobs and brought local government services like courts and filing offices closer to the people. Also, since each county elected a state senator, more rural, agricultural counties gave farmers a stronger voice in the state **legislature** (the branch of government that passes laws).

FIGURE 13.13: During the drought, hot winds blew the loosened, dried-up topsoil right off the fields. Here, drifting soil completely covers a fence on a homestead near Dagmar.



The Bust Begins

> **“In 1913 people had just come to Montana. They were well dressed; had plenty of money; they were hopeful, spirited, and energetic. In 1923 every face looked careworn. The sociability was gone. In its place was a look of reserve and suspicion.”**
>
> —*WILLIAM ALEXANDER, WRITING IN HIS DIARY IN 1923, AFTER THE FOURTH OF JULY PICNIC IN CULBERTSON*

In 1917 the drought years returned. Northern counties dried up. Crops produced half their previous yield. Farmers tightened their belts, borrowed more money, and hoped for rain the next year.

The next year was worse. Dry, hot winds withered crops and dried up water holes. Wind shredded tarpaper shacks and blew dust into water tanks and clothing. Windstorms tore seed out of the ground and piled topsoil around the fence lines. In some places temperatures stayed above 100°F all summer.

Drought marched south and westward. By the fall of 1918, it gripped all of eastern and central Montana. Farmers who had believed that 15 to 18 inches of rain per year was normal now suffered under 10 inches. By 1919 severe drought gripped all of Montana's farmlands, even as far west as the Flathead and Bitterroot Valleys. Farmers had been getting approximately 25 bushels of grain per acre; in 1919 Montana farms averaged only 2.4 bushels per acre.

Prairie fires burned houses, barns, granaries, and fields. Swarms of locusts ate up everything green in sight. Horses and cattle starved. More died of **blackleg** and **distemper** (livestock diseases). When their livestock died, farmers lost major investments, dairy and meat products, and the horsepower to work their fields.

On the reservations, the drought drove relatively successful farmers back into poverty. “The people sold vegetables, wheat, and anything to get a little money to buy food or clothing for their families,” said Leo Wing Sr., an Assiniboine on the Fort Belknap Reservation. “Some of the people lived off sage hens or rabbits and deer . . . That was about all we could get.”

Homesteaders plowing the prairie had loosened and dried out the topsoil. Now the topsoil just blew away in giant dust storms. The so-called dryland farming techniques that had been successful during the wet years had created a disaster.

1918: A Year of Disasters

In 1918 an influenza **epidemic** (rapid spread of disease) swept around the world. Within nine months the epidemic killed 675,000 Americans, and up to 100 million people worldwide. Unlike most viruses, it killed the young and the strong—mostly people between ages 20 and 40. Sometimes whole families died. In some cities hundreds of orphans wandered the streets to find food. It was later called the worst epidemic the United States has ever known.

Because homesteaders were mostly young, the flu hit Montana particularly hard. Many became ill, and approximately 5,000 died. Loretta Jarussi of Bearcreek, in Carbon County, recalled young, healthy people

Twenty miles from water
Forty miles from wood,
We're leaving dry Montana
And we're leaving her for good!

—SIGN ON A VEHICLE SEEN LEAVING MONTANA DURING THE DROUGHT

stopping by to visit, only to be reported dead two days later. "My mother was very friendly," Jarussi said. "So when anybody passed by, she always [visited] with them. And, you know, maybe a week later, they'd say so-and-so died, and they had been past our place. So many people had that flu—and young people—and they died."

Then, in November 1918, World War I ended. The military no longer needed Montana wheat for the war effort. Prices collapsed as the nation's markets flooded with wheat, grain, and produce. Farmers who had gone into debt to support the war effort now could not make their bank payments.

"This is a hard, hard land . . . It is almost always too hot or too cold, too wet or too dry, and life is like that here also, gray, lonely, chilling . . . It is now four years this summer since we raised any crops. Only a few people live here."

—PEARL DANNIEL, IN AN ARTICLE SHE SENT BACK TO THE ST. LOUIS DISPATCH, NOVEMBER 10, 1931

Homesteaders who had prided themselves on their **grit** (determination) and adaptability felt helpless against the onslaught. What hope could they hold against the wind, sun, locusts, and disease? As one deeply disappointed homesteader named William Alexander wrote in his diary, "People are just walking around to save funeral expenses."

Hardship Spreads across Montana

Between 1921 and 1925 half the farmers in Montana lost their farms. Of the 82,000 immigrants who came to Montana to homestead, 70,000 left before 1925. Families lined the railroad tracks with their few possessions or moved to other towns in wagons and Model T Fords.

Schools closed. Shops went bankrupt. Farm towns folded up. Banks **foreclosed** (took possession of property for failure to repay loans) on farmers who could not make payments. They auctioned the land, animals, equipment, and household items to the highest bidder.

Unable to collect on so many loans, 214 Montana banks closed their doors. At that time there was no government insurance for depositors. When the banks closed, people lost their life savings.

The new counties created during the homesteading boom depended on taxes for their budgets. When taxpayers could not pay, counties took their lands. In some places the county soon owned more land than anyone else.

Governor Samuel Stewart did not know what to do. The state was set up to promote and develop new industries, not to provide relief. When asked for help, he simply held his head in his hands. Church groups distributed some food and clothing to farm families. The Salvation Army and the Red Cross did their best, but too many families needed help.

The desperate farmers looked for someone to blame for their problems. First they blamed the federal government for luring them into debt and abandoning them when disaster struck. They blamed the railroads for their false promises about life in the West. They blamed the so-called scientific experts for their dryland techniques that had ruined the soil. Most of all, they blamed James J. Hill, the Great Northern Railway **tycoon** (a wealthy businessman), who was an easy target because he had been so vocal, and also because by this time he was dead.

Digging In and Adapting

Thousands of homesteaders moved away. Some sold what they had and went on to find better opportunities. Others simply opened their fences, abandoned their livestock, and drove away. Montana was the only state in the union to lose population between 1920 and 1930. It decreased by more than 11,000 people, from 548,889 in 1920 to 537,606 in 1930.

Yet many stayed, too. Some went to work in towns, mines, or lumber camps. Others stayed on the farm and held on. They sold what crops they grew, shared equipment, and lived on deer, elk, grouse, and snake meat—when they could find it. Overhunting so depleted wildlife (and farms destroyed so much habitat) that by 1920 almost no elk were left in eastern Montana. And the 2 million pronghorn that grazed on Montana's grasslands in the late 1800s had dwindled to just around 5,000.

Some people bought their neighbors' farms at foreclosure sales and expanded their holdings. They changed their farming techniques to better suit the dry climate. And in the few good rainfall years—like 1922 or 1928—they once again produced good crops.

The general drought lasted from 1917 until 1940. Even though the rest of the nation enjoyed a prosperous time in the 1920s, Montanans suffered through almost continual drought.

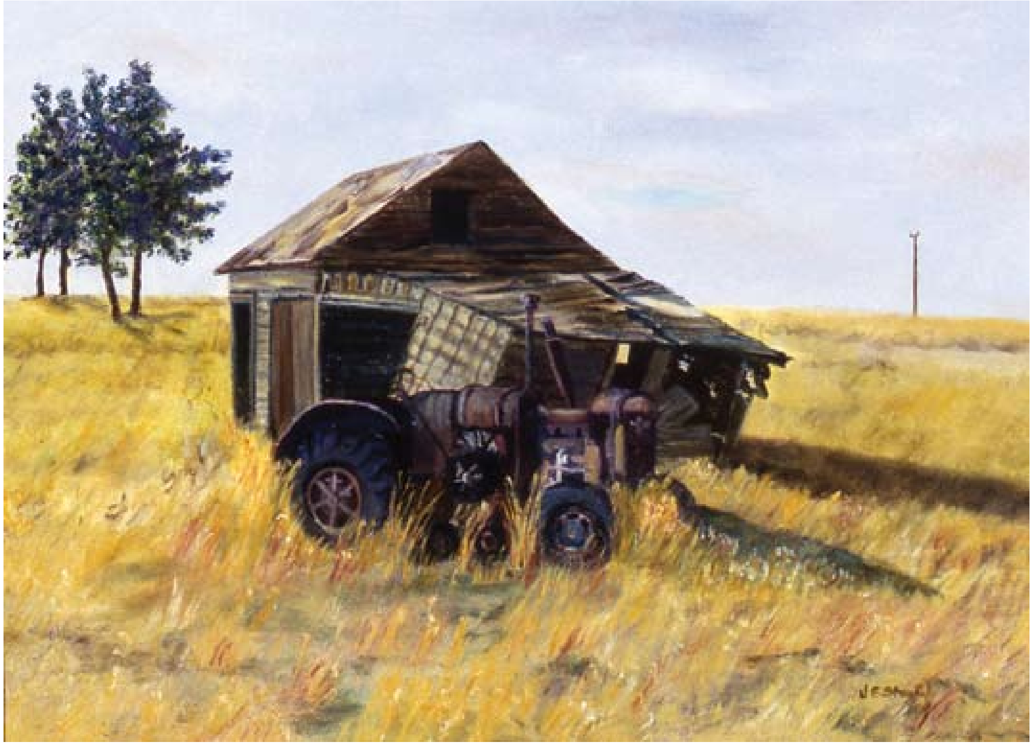


FIGURE 13.14: The Homestead Era changed the Montana landscape. Today you can still see the remains of homesteaders' cabins, sheds, barns, and other buildings, now slowly collapsing into the soil. Contemporary Montana artist Jane Stanfel painted this picture, *Beckman's Barn,* in 2007.

Wisdom from Experience

The homestead period was perhaps the most dramatic example of the **boom-and-bust** cycle (sudden economic activity followed by decline) of Montana's economy. Thousands of people came to farm, and almost as many left. Land values skyrocketed and then dropped like a rock. Hundreds of new banks opened and then failed. Many new counties emerged and then lost the tax base to support themselves. Dozens of farm towns appeared and then died.

The farmers who stayed in Montana learned to **diversify** (make more varied) their crops instead of relying on just one product. This way they had access to more markets, in case prices for one crop dropped or yields were poor. More farmers became farmer-ranchers, combining crops with beef cattle.

Farmers began summer **fallowing** (plowing fields without seeding them). Summer fallowing kills weeds while allowing soils to build up fertility and conserve moisture. Many started to **strip-farm** (planting crops and fallowing in alternating strips). Strip-farming reduced damage to topsoil and kept it from blowing away in hot windstorms.

Montana's farmers also learned that 320 acres could not support a family. They expanded their holdings, and as soon as they could afford them, they bought gasoline tractors and other new equipment: multiple-bottom plows, harrows, seed drills, tillers, weeders, mowers, combines, and gas-powered farm trucks. With gas-powered equipment, one person could cultivate larger plots of land at a low cost per acre.

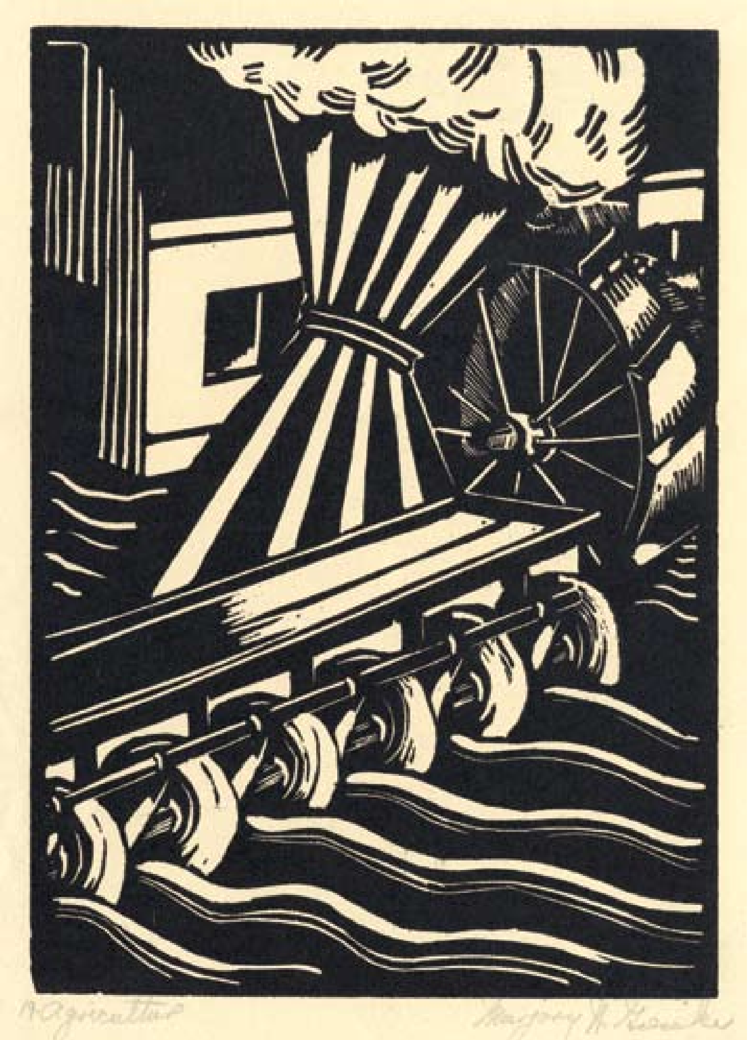


FIGURE 13.15: The homesteading boom ended, but agriculture remains an important part of Montana's character and economy. It is celebrated here in this woodcut created by Marjorie Gieseker Goering in 1935.

The disaster years on Montana's homesteads may have brought non-Indian people as close as they ever came to experiencing what American Indians experienced after the coming of white settlers. They suffered poverty and disease on farms that were too small or otherwise unsuitable for making a living. They felt trapped by powers beyond their control. And they survived through inner **fortitude** (strength) and help from their communities.

The farmers who stayed learned that, in Montana, extremes are normal. They began to look at the environment more realistically and to learn about its cycles. They survived by doing what human beings have done for thousands of years on the Northern Plains: adapting to the land.

> **"We have no regrets; life is fuller and sweeter through lessons learned in privation [hardship], and around our homestead days some of life's fondest memories still cling . . . I feel that creating a home and rearing a family in Montana has been a grand success, and my cup seems filled to overflowing with the sweetness and joy of living."**
>
> —*PEARL PRICE ROBERTSON, WHO HOMESTEADED IN THE JUDITH BASIN, WEST OF BIG SANDY*

Expressions of the People

The Poetry of Gwendolen Haste

Gwendolen Haste moved from Nebraska to Billings with her family in 1915, when she was 25. She discovered a land unlike anything she had ever seen. Her father was editor of a farming magazine, and Gwendolen—Gwenna to her friends—worked as his editorial assistant.

Gwenna lived in a nice house in town and enjoyed the social life of Billings's upper middle class. But she was fascinated by the homesteading life and by the people she met on farms and homesteads. While her father interviewed the men on a farm, Gwenna visited with the women, heard their stories, and learned intimate details about their joys and heartaches. She began writing and publishing poetry about homesteading in Montana.

Even though she never lived on a homestead herself, she often portrayed the experience accurately, according to her homesteading friends. One woman told her, "I don't know how you can write those poems when you didn't go through hell with the rest of us." Gwenna responded that she had spent many sleepless nights worrying about "the appalling disaster that was striking down those around me."

Two of her poems show contrasting views of life on a homestead. "Dried Out" expresses the sorrow and frustration of leaving a ruined homestead—and the dreams that built it, represented by the "roses by the door." The second poem, "Horizons," gives a glimpse of the joy and richness of life on a Montana farm.

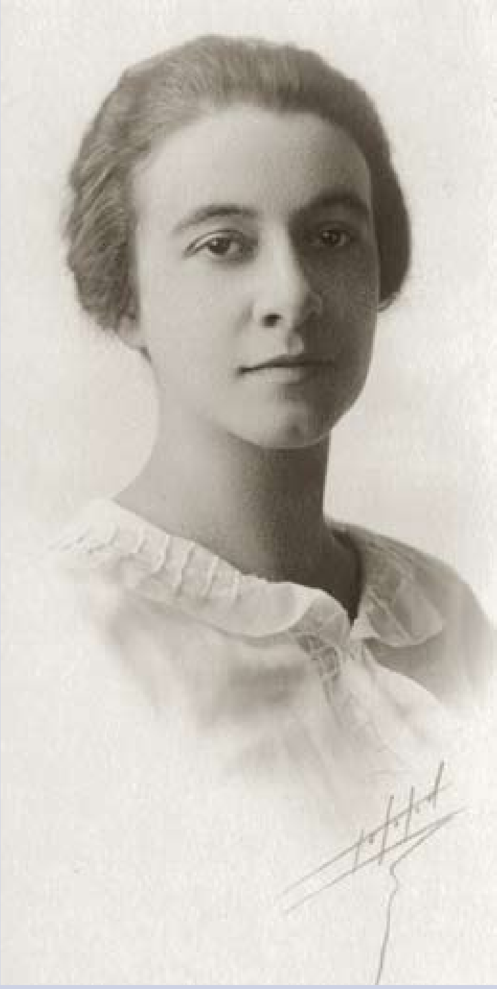


FIGURE 13.16: Gwendolen Haste enjoyed the "two worlds" she occupied: the socially active life of downtown Billings and the hard-working, nature-driven life of the homesteaders she wrote about.

Dried Out

This place was the first home we ever had,
And I was sick of farming for other folks
First in Wisconsin and then in Dakota.
It looked so pretty when he broke sod that day.
There wa'n't only three sides to the house,
But what did I care!
There was sunlight and wet rain and a coulee
full of springtime where the children could play.
Seven full years, says the Book, and seven lean—
And we come in at the end of the full ones, I guess.
There ain't no crops where they's no rain.
And the stock died in the big blizzard.
So now we're goin'
Back to Dakota to farm for other folks.
Oh God, the nice white ranch house with a floor
We was to have! The roses by the door!

Horizons

I had to laugh.
For when she said it we were sitting by the door,
And straight down was the Fork,
Twisting and turning and gleaming in the sun.
And then your eyes carried across to the
purple bench beyond the river
With the Beartooth Mountains fairly screaming
with light and blue and snow,
And fold and turn of rimrock and prairie as far as
your eye could go.
And she says: "Dear Laura, sometimes I feel
so sorry for you,
Shut away from everything—
eating out your heart with loneliness.
When I think of my own full life, I wish that you
could share it.
Just pray for happier days to come and bear it."
She goes back to Billings to her white stucco house,
And looks through net curtains at another
white stucco house,
And a brick house,
And a yellow frame house,
And six trimmed poplar trees,
And little squares of shaved grass.
Oh dear, she stared at me like I was daft!
I couldn't help it. I just laughed and laughed.

CHAPTER 13 REVIEW

CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. Identify: (a) Reclamation Act; (b) Dawes Act; (c) Prohibition
2. Define: (a) precipitation; (b) topography; (c) prove up; (d) title; (e) assimilate; (f) land grants; (g) dryland; (h) cooperative; (i) suffrage; (j) epidemic; (k) foreclose; (l) fallowing; (m) strip-farming
3. What mistaken belief about Montana brought many people here in the early 1900s?
4. What are the homestead acts of the early 1900s?
5. Why did the railroad companies advertise for people to come west to homestead?
6. Describe Campbell's method of farming known as "subsurface compacting."
7. Describe the roles of the men, women, and children on the early farms and ranches.
8. Why did some families live apart during the winter months?
9. Why did early homesteaders want smaller counties?
10. Why didn't the techniques for dryland farming work?
11. What events in 1918 made life difficult for many homesteaders?
12. Why did so many banks have to close during the 1920s?

CRITICAL THINKING

1. President Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) strongly advocated building a country of small, independent farmers. How do you think he would have viewed the rush to cultivate Montana?
2. Compare and contrast the homesteaders to the people who came to Montana in earlier eras (during the fur trade or the gold rush, for example). Think particularly about their demographics (statistics characterizing human populations) and goals.
3. List the reasons so many homesteads failed in the 1920s. How did these same circumstances affect the Indian farmers who received land under the Dawes Act?
4. The term human environmental interaction refers to the way people adapt to, depend on, and modify the land. Analyze the human environmental interaction of the early homesteaders.
5. The land that is now Montana has always experienced periods of drought. Compare and contrast how this cycle might have affected the people living here in the 1600s with the way it affected the early homesteaders.
6. In the chapter text, you read a diary excerpt: "People are just walking around to save funeral expenses." What does it tell you about the state of mind and spirit of the people?
7. Review some of the farming practices used by the early homesteaders. Compare how the homesteaders learned to implement different techniques to how people today might make changes to their ways of doing things.

PAST TO PRESENT

1. Describe the life of a person your age growing up on a homestead in the early 1900s. Think about what they might have done for entertainment, education, and chores. How does this person's life differ from yours? How are your lives the same?
2. Think about the attitudes of miners and cowboys toward the arriving homesteaders. Compare them to the attitudes many Montanans hold toward newcomers today.
3. Homesteaders divided larger counties into smaller ones. How does the "county-busting" craze of the Homestead Era affect Montana today?

MAKE IT LOCAL

1. Research the history of a homestead or a homesteading family from your area.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Investigate the changing percentage of people in the United States who are involved in agriculture. Make a graph illustrating your findings.
2. Design your own homestead.
3. Imagine you are a European immigrant coming to Montana to homestead. Create a poster or PowerPoint presentation, or write a paper, about the things you would pack (in the limited space you had in your trunk) to bring to Montana. Include both practical items and items of sentimental or personal value to remember your home.

Credits

The following abbreviations are used in the credits:

BBHC Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming
GNPA Glacier National Park Archives
LOC Library of Congress
MAC Montana Arts Council, Helena
MDEQ Montana Department of Environmental Quality, Helena
MDT Montana Department of Transportation, Helena
MFWP Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Helena
MHS Montana Historical Society, Helena
MHSA Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena
MHSL Montana Historical Society Library, Helena
MHS Mus. Montana Historical Society Museum, Helena
MHS PA Montana Historical Society Photograph Archives, Helena
MSU COT Montana State University College of Technology, Billings
NMAI National Museum American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
MSU Billings Special Collections, Montana State University Billings Library
NARA National Archives and Records Administration
NPS National Park Service
NRIS Natural Resource Information System, Montana State Library, Helena
SHPO State Historic Preservation Office, Montana Historical Society, Helena
TM Travel Montana, Helena
UM Missoula Archives & Special Collections, The University of Montana–Missoula
USDA United States Department of Agriculture
USFS United States Forest Service
WMM World Museum of Mining, Butte

Chapter 13

FIG. 13.1 The Honyocker, photo by L. A. Huffman, MHS PA 981-176

FIG. 13.2 Gallatin Valley wheat field, photo by Albert Schlechten, Bozeman, MT, MHS PA

FIG. 13.3 *Just a Few Drops of Rain,* Harvey Dunn, South Dakota Art Museum, Brookings

FIG. 13.4 Box Elder Irrigation District, 1922, photo by Walter Dean, Jr., MHS PA PAc 76-26.462 1/2

FIG. 13.5 Flathead Reservation Land Ownership, 1907, map created by the CS&K Tribes Natural Resources Department, used with permission of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribal Council

FIG. 13.6 Flathead Reservation Land Ownership, 1922–1935, map created by the CS&K Tribes Natural Resources Department, used with permission of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribal Council

FIG. 13.7 Children at Cabin Creek picnic, 1913, photo by Evelyn Cameron, MHS PA PAc 90-87 21-1

FIG. 13.8 Cover, *Montana* (The Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railway, ca. 1917), MHSL Pam 3882

FIG. 13.9 Two girls in apples, Ravalli County Orchards, MHS PA

FIG. 13.10 Rosie Roesler on sulky plow, 1912, photo by Evelyn Cameron, MHS PA PAc 90-87-65.6

FIG. 13.11 Olga Wold (Norderud) and her stepfather, Norman Wold, by homestead near Marsh, MT, 1911, photo by Evelyn Cameron, PAc 90-87.42-7

FIG. 13.12 School Room in Marsh, MT, 1914, photo by Evelyn Cameron, MHS PA PAc 90-87.63-3

FIG. 13.13 Results of soil drifting, Two Triangles Farm, photo by Henry B. Syverud, MHS PA PAc 77-94, Vol I p46 #2

FIG. 13.14 *Beckman's Barn,* Jane Stanfel, 2007, Roundup, MT

FIG. 13.15 *Agriculture,* Marjorie Gieseker Goering, 1935, MHS Mus.

FIG. 13.16 Portrait of Gwendolen Haste, Gwendolen Haste Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations