

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

## THE HOMESTEADING ERA

*The population in Montana grew slowly during the end of the 19th century. Between 1900 and 1920, however, a period in Montana history changed the state forever. It is known as the Homestead Era.*

### Vocabulary

aridity	cultivation	lush	cistern
prove up	irrigation	landscape	picket fence
technology	paradise	soddy	pasture
prosperous	precipitation	bushel	mortgage
drought	bankruptcy	kits	thresher
plow	typhoid	grain drill	pneumonia
monotonous	mechanical	disk harrow	cholera

### The Homestead Acts

To promote settlement in the Great Plains, the United States government passed the three homesteading acts. At that time, the West was unpopulated by whites, and it was felt that it would be good for the economy and the nation if it were filled with farms. Land was also given as a reward for Civil War soldiers many of whom had returned home from the war to find their homes destroyed.

In 1862 Congress passed the first **Homestead Act**. For a small filing fee, a person could claim 160 acres of government land. If he or she proved up on it, which meant to live on it and improve it, it would be his or hers after five years.

In 1909 the **Enlarged Homestead Act** was passed. On the dry Great Plains, 160 acres was not enough land to make a successful farm, so the amount of land a person could claim was doubled to 320 acres.

In 1912 the **3-year Homestead Act** was passed. The time it took to prove up a homestead was reduced from five years to three. The homesteader could be absent from the land for up to five months a year, because often he would have to have another job to pay his bills.

The first homestead in Montana was filed on August 1, 1869 by a man named David Carpenter in the Helena Valley.

## Early Farming in Montana

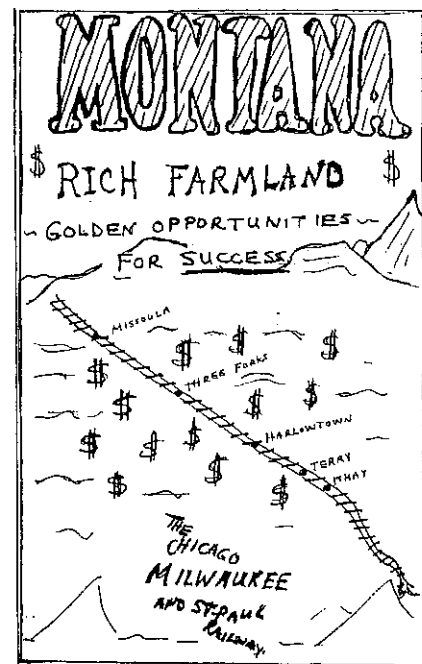
Like cattle ranching, the earliest farming in Montana was in the western valleys. The land was fertile, there was lots of precipitation, and nearby mining communities provided a market for farm produce. Farms were few and far between in eastern Montana before 1900 because of the aridity of the land, the lack of transportation, the Indians' claim to the land, and large cattle ranches.

## The Land Rush to Montana

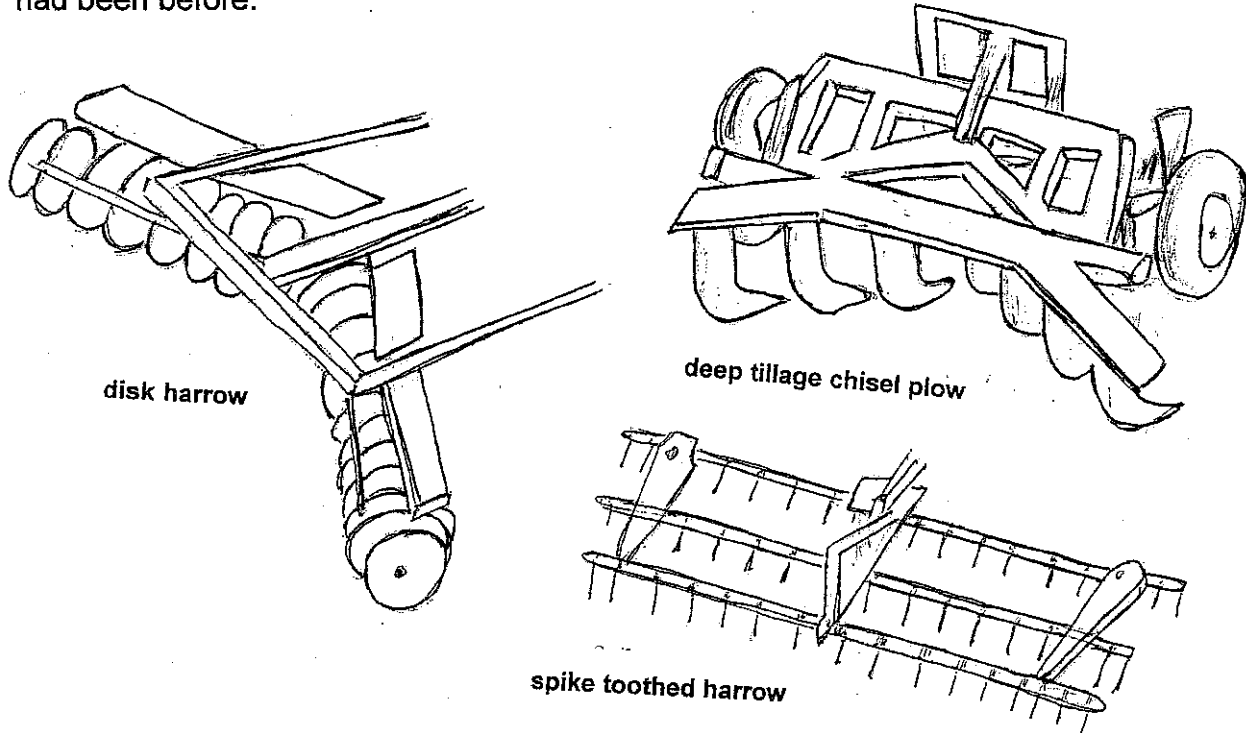
There were few homesteading claims in Montana until 1900, when a great land rush began for four reasons:

1. Land in other parts of the country was taken up, and the greatest amount of available attractive land was in Montana.
2. The railroad, which now ran through Montana, promoted settlement in Montana. The railroads wanted to sell the land they owned to settlers who would then use the railroad to come west. To encourage homesteaders, they published brochures which were distributed in the East, the Midwest, and in Europe. These brochures claimed that the land was a paradise where crops almost grew themselves. The colored pictures showed enormous fruits and vegetables and lush green farmland. This was quite different from the actual landscape in eastern Montana. The railroads also offered reduced fares and special railroad cars to transport the belongings of homestead families. For \$22.50, a family with all of its equipment and livestock could rent a boxcar from St. Paul, Minnesota, to Montana.

Railroad poster



3. Agricultural technology had improved. Farmers could now buy such equipment as steam or gasoline powered tractors, steel plows, disk harrows, grain drills, and mechanical threshers which made farming on large tracts of land more possible than it had been before.



4. New agricultural techniques were being promoted for dryland farming, which is farming without irrigation. The Montana Agricultural Experiment Station in Bozeman sent out information encouraging farmers to use techniques such as proper soil cultivation to preserve moisture in the ground.

### **Arriving in Montana**

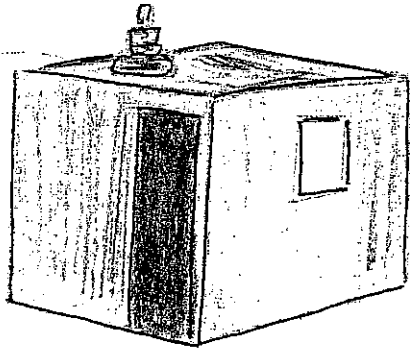
When the homesteaders got off the train, a railroad agent or private “locator” would meet them. For a fee of \$25 to \$50, the locator would offer to find them a choice homestead lot or a piece of railroad land and help them get settled. Some of these locators were honest and helped the homesteader to find good land. Some, however, were not honest, and the homesteader ended up filing a claim on worthless land.

The homesteader would then pay his filing fee and get his claim to a piece of Montana. He would then build his home and start to farm his homestead.

## Life on the Homestead

A homesteader's life was isolated and monotonous. The work was very hard. Family and neighbors were important for help and companionship. Many children died of diseases such as typhoid, cholera, scarlet fever, pneumonia, and smallpox.

The homesteaders' first homes were very simple. Many were shacks made out of kits of wood and tarpaper they bought for about \$100.00. If there was no wood available, they had to use what materials the prairie provided. Some built a soddy, which was a small house built out of blocks of prairie grassland. Others dug caves in the side of a hill, or built a simple lean-to.



**tarpaper homestead shack**

The stove in the center of the home provided heat. Wood was difficult to find, so coal was often used. The shacks were cold in the winter and hot in the summer. Water was very precious, and it was usually too difficult and expensive to dig a well. Some trapped rain water in a cistern, and some had to haul the water by wagon.

## From Farm to Finished Product

The main crop of the homestead was wheat, which is a type of grain. Crops went through six steps from the farm to the finished product. First, the homesteader would plow his land. Second, he would plant the seeds. Third, the farmer tended the crop during the summer. The weather was the main influence on the crop, over which the farmer had little control. If there was not enough rain, the crops would die or be destroyed by insects. Too much rain and not enough sun could also ruin a crop. Hail was another problem farmers faced, for a severe hailstorm would flatten all the wheat

so that it could not be harvested. Fourth, the grain would be harvested in the fall with big threshing machines. Fifth, the farmer sold his harvest to companies which had large grain elevators on the railroad. Sixth, the grain was shipped to mills in the east and ground into flour.

## **The Homestead Boom - 1900 to 1916**

The years from 1900 to 1916 are known as the Homestead Boom or the Homestead Era in Montana. Three main factors caused homesteaders during this time to become extremely prosperous and the population of Montana to increase tremendously.

First, Eastern Montana received a lot of precipitation from 1900 to 1916. The rain averaged 16 inches a year, and it came at the right times of the year, in the late spring and early summer.

Second, as a result of the good rainfall, crops were excellent. Homesteaders got 25 bushels of grain to the acre which was an excellent yield. In 1915 and 1916, the harvest averaged 35 to 50 bushels to the acre!

Third, the price of grain was very high. World War I was going on in Europe, causing grain from farms in the United States to be in high demand. In 1917 the United States entered the war, and the demand for grain increased even more. The price of wheat was set at a high price by the government to encourage farmers to produce as much wheat as possible to feed the soldiers.

## **The growth of towns and population**

In 1900, the population of Montana was about 240,000. By 1920, it was almost 550,000 and 32 million acres of Montana land had been claimed. The Northern Pacific Railroad sold 11 million acres of its land grant to settlers between 1900 and 1917.

Towns sprang up along the railroads during the Homestead Era. They were not at all like earlier mining or cattle towns, with many saloons. They were more like the towns in the East that the homesteaders had left behind. They had main streets with grain elevators and white frame houses with picket fences on the side streets. Life was

more civilized. The towns of Wolf Point, Glasgow, Malta, Havre, Plentywood and Scobey began during the Homestead Era and are still towns today.

## **End of the Homestead Era**

After 1920, disaster struck. The homestead movement failed and the economy of Montana was devastated. There were several reasons for this.

First, the farmers had gone further and further into debt. The high price for wheat had encouraged them to produce as much wheat as they could. Many plowed up their pasture to plant more grain. They mortgaged their land to purchase new land and machinery but did not worry because they were so prosperous.

Second, a drought cycle began in 1917. Drought is a natural part of the climate of the Great Plains, and the plentiful rainfall of the early 1900's was abnormal. The amount of rainfall dropped from 20.5 inches in 1916 to 5.6 inches in 1918. Crops died because of a lack of moisture or because they were eaten by grasshoppers. The grain harvest went from 25 bushels to the acre to 2.4 bushels per acre in 1919.

Third, the war ended by 1920, and food prices went down. The price of wheat fell from \$2.40 a bushel in August of 1920 to \$1.25 a bushel in October.

The results were devastating. People began to leave their homesteads. Over 60,000 people left Montana, and 11,000 homesteads were abandoned. Half of the farmers in Montana lost their farms to foreclosure because they were unable to pay their mortgages. Many banks failed because they had to take over farms that were not worth very much money and could not be sold. Montana had the highest bankruptcy rate in the United States.

The Homestead Era ended in a mood of depression and discouragement. Many of the people who had been encouraged by the railroads to settle in Montana were very bitter. It has taken a long time for Montana to recover from this disaster.