

The Making of the Great Plains

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Nations need myths. Myths draw us together, define us as a people, give shape to our culture. Some myths elevate us; others produce harmful, even catastrophic results.

The myths I refer to are not fictions but rather the constructed and shared versions of our past. They may be fashioned out of historical accuracies or contain large portions of error or even fabrication. Some myths, like the story of our nation's founding fathers or of President Lincoln's personal growth toward becoming the Great Emancipator, give us a way to celebrate our past and unify us as a people. Others, like the notion that President Obama is a Muslim, are intended to divide us.

In the Great Plains we have our myths, too, and many of them trace back 150 years to 1862. That year the nation's attention was focused on little-known places like Shiloh, Antietam and Fredericksburg. But 1862 also emerged as a momentous year for laws and events that shaped the development and culture of the Great Plains.

When 11 southern states seceded from the Union, their congressmen and senators also withdrew. The northerners and westerners left in Congress soon began passing legislation they had long advocated but which had been bottled up, especially in the Senate, by the coalition of slave-state southerners and conservative northern Democrats. In early 1862 Congress passed four historic bills: an act establishing the Department of Agriculture, signed by President Lincoln into law on May 15; the Homestead Act, signed by Lincoln on May 20; the Pacific (transcontinental) Railroad act, signed on July 1; and the Morrill (or land-grant college) Act, signed on July 2. 1862 was also the year of the bloody and fateful Dakota Conflict (more on that below).

This burst of law making occurred amidst crushing news from the battlefield, yet Lincoln and Congress fashioned legislation that would bear fruit only far into the future. Their faith in that future made possible approving laws that embodied their vision for the development of the Great Plains. Thus, while the rest of the country is memorializing the war—in Charleston, S.C., in 2010 the Sons of Confederate Veterans staged a celebratory “Secession Ball,” and every battlefield park north and south is being dressed up for its big anniversary—we in the Great Plains have other sesquicentennial business.

The University of Nebraska's Center for Great Plains Studies in collaboration with Homestead National Monument of America will host a Symposium on March 28–30 called



“1862–2012: The Making of the Great Plains.” We will examine this federal vision: how did it drive regional development in some directions while foreclosing others? How did these laws shape the culture, economy, environment, demography, history and politics of the Great Plains? How do they continue to have relevance today?

In our founding myths of the Great Plains, none is more powerful than that of homesteading. The Homestead Act of 1862—formally “An Act to secure Homesteads to actual Settlers on the Public Domain”—and its various amending successors are today remembered schizophrenically. On the one hand, homesteading is celebrated in popular culture as one of the crowning achievements in the American narrative—a glorious opening of valuable but idle public lands to “actual settlers” instead of land speculators, railroads, political insiders and profiteers. Author Mari Sandoz rhapsodized in 1963 that “The Homestead Act was the hope of the poor man,” and columnist George Will enthused in 2005 “Rarely has a social program worked so well.” President George W. Bush in his second Inaugural Address linked the Homestead Act to “a broader definition of liberty,” and the left-leaning Center for American Progress has just named the Homestead Act (and the Morrill Act) as among its “Top 10 Middle-Class Acts of Congress.” Political leaders regularly hitch a ride on homesteading's popularity by proposing “new” homestead acts designed to lure settlers to burned-out ghettos or repopulate dying prairie towns or, in more imaginative uses of the myth by politicians as diverse as Bob Kerrey and Rick Santorum, to provide a “KidSave” savings account for all newborn babies; in Gingrich's phrase, these would be “the information-age equivalent to the Homestead Act.”

On the other hand, among scholars and others there also exists an undertone that the whole homesteading enterprise was somehow illicit, for two reasons: one, that the claims process was shot through with corruption and fraud, and the other, more fundamental, that homesteading was based on an illegal and historically unjust dispossession of Native Americans from their lands. On the first, award-winning his-



torian Louis Warren even made the claim that “After 1862, the federal government deeded 285 million acres to homesteaders. Half their claims were fraudulent, backed by false identities, fake improvements, or worse.” Although this claim is unsupportable and almost certainly false, its circulation shows the power of the disbelieving view of homesteading. In contrast, Russell Lang’s detailed analysis of Nebraska land transfers suggests that fraud may have played a much smaller role than scholars have assumed.

The second matter is more complicated. In the unalloyed homesteading myth, the public land being claimed was empty of people; that was not true. In the last generation, historians have focused on how white settlement of the West intersected with Native American cultures, women, the environment and other topics of interest. This more comprehensive story includes the disreputable progression of unequal treaties forced upon Indians by the federal government under compulsion of hunger or military might, followed by the appointment of corrupt, misguided and sometimes megalomaniacal Indian agents, followed by U.S. failure to live up to even the minimal obligations of unjust treaties, which were followed by the replacement of the earlier treaties by ever more unequal treaties or executive orders.

That dishonorable pattern triggered what has often been seen as the first of the Plains Indian wars, the Dakota Conflict. Cheated by traders and denied protection and food by Indian agents, angry Dakotas revolted, killing hundreds of white settlers. Despite their need elsewhere, President Lincoln dispatched federal troops, mainly Minnesota Volunteers, who defeated the Dakotas at the Battle of Wood Lake. Hundreds of Dakota warriors surrendered, and 303 were convicted of murder and rape and sentenced to be hanged. Lincoln commuted the sentences of 264, leaving 39 under capital sentence; 38 were hanged in Mankato, Minn., in the largest mass execution in U.S. history. The remaining Dakotas were forcibly removed to Iowa and Nebraska, a diaspora that persists to the present.

Less known is how the conflict ruptured Lakota/Yanktonai (Sioux)-white relations throughout the Upper Missouri region. U.S. Army campaigns staged from this area in 1863–65 by General Alfred Sully succeeded in punishing some of Little Crow’s Dakota combatants but were equally significant for inadvertently provoking hostilities with Lakotas and Yanktonais, already feeling pressed by the intrusion of whites

headed for Black Hills gold. These conflicts destroyed trust and destabilized cooperative relations, with poisonous consequences that persisted for decades.

This contested historical memory is exquisitely but painfully illustrated in the beautiful and historically sensitive film, “Land of Dreams: Homesteading America,” which introduces visitors to Homestead National Monument of America in Beatrice. The Monument is the National Park Service’s homage to homesteaders, built on the location of the putative “first” homesteader, Daniel Freeman. “Land of Dreams” includes vignettes of fourth- or fifth-generation descendants of white and black homesteaders who proudly describe the courage and persistence of ancestors who staked their claims and made successful new lives for themselves despite the hostile and isolating prairie environment. These positive images are interspersed with interviews of Native Americans who describe, with palpable pain and sadness, how the land previously belonged to them but was stolen away, leaving them dispossessed. The viewer is left with both admiration for homesteaders and discomfort or guilt over the injustice of dispossession.

The other 1862 laws also had powerful consequences for the Great Plains. The Pacific Railroad Act stimulated the successful spanning of the continent. When the Union Pacific connected its tracks to those of the Central Pacific, travel time from New York to California was reduced from 35 days (via Panama) or 90 or more days (around Cape Horn) to about 10. An equally important consequence was the creation of a dense network of feeder lines within the Great Plains. From the characteristic design of the region’s towns (with their “T” street layout where “Railroad Street” is the crossing of the “T”) to the nature of agriculture and commerce, the federally subsidized railroads and the vast lands they controlled and sold played an influential role in developing the Plains. Indeed, David Wishart has asserted that “No other North American region was so fundamentally shaped by the railroads.” But like the homesteading myth, our railroad narrative too has contested complexities of meaning; railroads brought costs as well as benefits, as historian Richard White (a Symposium speaker) has forcefully documented in his new book, “Railroaded.”

The Morrill Act helped create a new kind of university—the land-grant college focused on teaching “such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts

... in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life." Before then, universities had concentrated on teaching the classics and preparing the priestly orders, people who wore robes: ministers, lawyers and judges and (much less important) professors. This was a legacy handed down from the great universities of Europe like Bologna and Cambridge and Heidelberg. Such places had little thought of contributing to the "practical" arts, and while American universities were never as standoffish as their European counterparts, introducing such suspect fields of study as botany or modern languages was often decried as a "loss of standards." The idea that universities would (or could) contribute to "agriculture and the mechanical arts" was quite novel. But the Morrill Act set us on that path.

American higher education is today recognized around the world for its exceptional quality, and while some point to Harvard and Stanford and Princeton as exemplars, others name Purdue and UC-Davis and Wisconsin, land-grant colleges all, as the true American innovation. The land-grant idea, especially when combined with other innovations such as the Cooperative Extension Service and USDA's research programs, have helped propel Great Plains agriculture to the high-productivity commodity production now practiced so successfully in the Great Plains. This model of agriculture has changed not only the environment of the Plains but also the way Americans and the rest of the world shops and eats. But this legacy too is contested: does the modern land-grant university now cater too much to giant agribusinesses instead of serving family farmers and the wider society? Has it promoted an extension of agricultural production to the point where it now threatens to outstrip the natural limits of our soil and water? Does the land-grant university have a future?

Many of our ideas and understandings of Great Plains history and culture—our region's myths—flow from these 1862 laws and events. Periodically we need to question, refresh and reshape those myths in light of new understandings of ourselves and our past. A sesquicentennial is a good time to do so.

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