

There's More Online!

- ✓ IMAGE Farming in the West
- ✓ IMAGE Sod House
- ✓ VIDEO Farming the Plains
- ✓ INTERACTIVE SELF-CHECK QUIZ



LESSON 2

Farming the Plains

ESSENTIAL QUESTION • Why would people take on the challenges of life in the West?

Reading HELPDESK



Academic Vocabulary

- prospective • innovation

Content Vocabulary

- homestead
- dry farming
- sodbuster
- bonanza farm

TAKING NOTES:

Key Ideas and Details

Organizing As you read about the settlement of the Great Plains, complete a graphic organizer similar to the one below by listing the ways the government encouraged settlement.



IT MATTERS BECAUSE

The Homestead Act encouraged settlers to move to the Great Plains. Although life was difficult, settlers discovered that they could grow wheat using new technologies. By 1890, the land had been settled and cultivated, and there was no longer a true frontier in the United States.

The Beginnings of Settlement

GUIDING QUESTION What encouraged settlers to move west to the Great Plains?

The Great Plains is a vast region of prairie roughly west of the Mississippi River and east of the Rocky Mountains in the United States and Canada. Although the population of the Great Plains grew steadily after the Civil War, the settlers faced many challenges. Summer temperatures could top 100°F. Prairie fires were a frequent danger. Sometimes swarms of grasshoppers destroyed crops. Winter brought terrible blizzards and extreme cold. A settler who experienced the fierce winters wrote in her diary on March 12, 1884:

PRIMARY SOURCE

“Nobody can describe a blizzard. There is one kind in which the snow sticks all over everything, and another that is colder, in which the snow drives with terrible force, the sun shining above it. This is the Dakota boomer’s exhilarating weather!”

—from *The Checked Years: A Bonanza Farm Diary, 1884–1888*

In this dry grassland, trees grew naturally only along rivers and streams. Without trees to use as timber, many settlers cut chunks of sod, densely packed soil held together by grass roots, to build their homes. To obtain water, they had to drill wells more than 100 feet deep and operate the pump by hand. Land once thought to be worthless was eventually transformed into America’s wheat belt. Major Stephen Long, who explored the region with an army expedition in 1819, called it the “Great American Desert”:

PRIMARY SOURCE

“[I]t is almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and of course uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture for their subsistence. . . . [T]he scarcity of wood and water, almost uniformly prevalent, will prove an insuperable obstacle in the way of settling the country.”

—quoted in *An Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains, Performed in the Years 1819, 1820*

During the late 1800s, the construction and development of the railroads stimulated growth. Railroad companies sold land along the rail lines at low prices and provided credit to **prospective** settlers. Pamphlets and posters spread the news across Europe and America that cheap land could be claimed by anyone willing to move.

In 1862 the government encouraged settlement on the Great Plains by passing the Homestead Act. For a small registration fee, an individual could file for a **homestead**—a tract of public land available for settlement. A homesteader could claim up to 160 acres of land and receive title to it after living there for five years. With their property rights assured and the railroads providing lumber and supplies, more settlers moved to the Plains.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Analyzing What developments of the late 1800s attracted settlers to endure the hardships of the Great Plains?

The Wheat Belt

GUIDING QUESTION *What new methods and technologies revolutionized agriculture and made it practical to cultivate the Plains?*

New farming methods and inventions in the nineteenth century improved agriculture. The Morrill Land-Grant College Act of 1862 provided each state 30,000 acres to sell for monies to fund existing colleges or to create new ones that focused on agriculture and the mechanical arts.

One new farming method, called **dry farming**, was to plant seeds deep in the ground, where there was enough moisture for them to grow. By the 1860s, Plains farmers were using steel plows, threshing machines, seed drills, and reapers. These new machines made dry farming possible. Still, soil on the Plains could blow away during a dry season. Many **sodbusters**, as those who plowed the Plains were called, eventually lost their homesteads through the combined effects of drought, wind erosion, and overuse of the land.

Large landholders could buy mechanical reapers and steam tractors that made it easier to harvest a large crop. Threshing machines knocked kernels loose from the stalks. Mechanical binders tied the stalks into bundles for collection. These **innovations** were well suited for harvesting wheat, a crop that could endure the dry conditions of the Plains.

During the 1880s, many farmers from the states of the old Northwest Territory moved to the Great Plains to take advantage of the inexpensive land and new technology. The Wheat Belt began at the eastern edge of the Great Plains and covered much of the Dakotas and parts of Nebraska and Kansas. The new machines allowed a family to bring in a substantial harvest on a wheat farm of several hundred acres. Some wheat farms covered up to 65,000 acres. These were called **bonanza farms** because they yielded big profits. Like mine owners, bonanza farmers formed companies, invested in property and equipment, and hired laborers as needed.

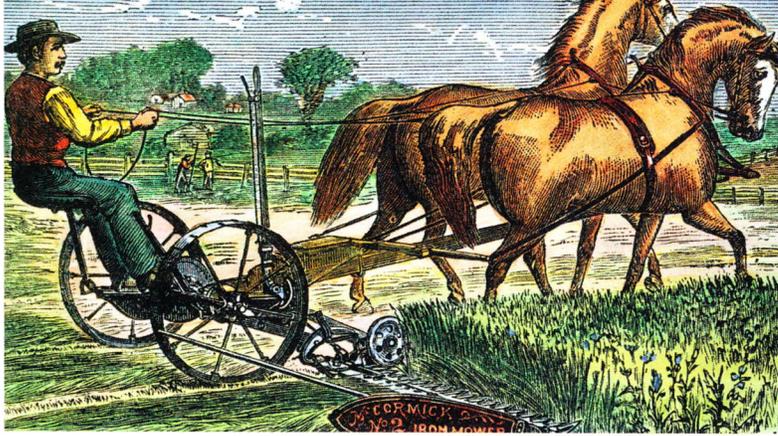
prospective to be likely to, or have intentions to, perform an act

homestead a piece of U.S. public land acquired by living on it and cultivating it

dry farming a way of farming dry land in which seeds are planted deep in the ground where there is some moisture

sodbuster a name given to Great Plains farmers

innovation a new idea or method



Technology helped make it possible to farm the vast open grasslands of America. Here, horse-drawn farm equipment is used to gather hay in the 1880s.

► CRITICAL THINKING

Determining Cause and Effect

How did technology help facilitate the settlement of the Great Plains?

bonanza farm a large, highly profitable wheat farm

Farmers Fall on Hard Times

The bountiful harvests in the Wheat Belt helped the United States become the world's leading exporter of wheat by the 1880s. Then things began to go wrong. A severe drought struck the Plains in the late 1880s, destroying crops and turning the soil to dust. In addition, competition from other wheat-producing nations increased. By the 1890s, a glut of wheat on the world market caused prices to drop.

Some farmers tried to make it through these difficult times by mortgaging their land—that is, they borrowed money from a bank based on the value of their land. If they failed to meet their mortgage payments, they forfeited the land to the bank. Some who lost their land continued to work it as tenant farmers, renting the land from its new owners. By 1900, tenants cultivated about one-third of the farms on the Plains.

Closing the Frontier

On April 22, 1889, the government opened one of the last large territories for settlement. Within hours, thousands of people raced to stake claims in an event known as the Oklahoma Land Rush. The next year, the Census Bureau reported that there was no longer a true frontier left in America. In reality, there was still a lot of unoccupied land, and new settlement continued into the 1900s, but the “closing of the frontier” marked the end of an era. It worried many people, including historian Frederick Jackson Turner. Turner believed that the frontier had provided a “safety-valve of social discontent.” It was a place where Americans could always make a fresh start.

Most settlers did indeed make a fresh start, adapting to the difficult environment of the Plains. Water from their deep wells enabled them to plant trees and gardens. Railroads brought lumber and brick to replace sod as a building material, coal for fuel, and manufactured goods from the East, such as clothes and household goods. Small-scale farmers rarely became wealthy, but they could be self-sufficient. Typical homesteaders raised cattle, chickens, and a few crops. The real story of the West was about ordinary people who settled down and built homes and communities through great effort.

✓ READING PROGRESS CHECK

Identifying How did new technologies help improve settlers' ability to cultivate larger, more profitable farms?

LESSON 2 REVIEW



Reviewing Vocabulary

1. Explaining Why were some settlers on the Great Plains called homesteaders?

Using Your Notes

2. Drawing Conclusions Use your notes to explain why you think the government and the railroads used special policies to attract settlement in the Great Plains.

Answering the Guiding Questions

3. Identifying Cause and Effect What encouraged settlers to move west to the Great Plains?

4. Summarizing What new methods and technologies revolutionized agriculture and made it practical to cultivate the Plains?

Writing About History

5. ARGUMENT Write an essay expressing your opinion about whether the “closing of the frontier” described by historian Frederick Jackson Turner was good or bad for the country.