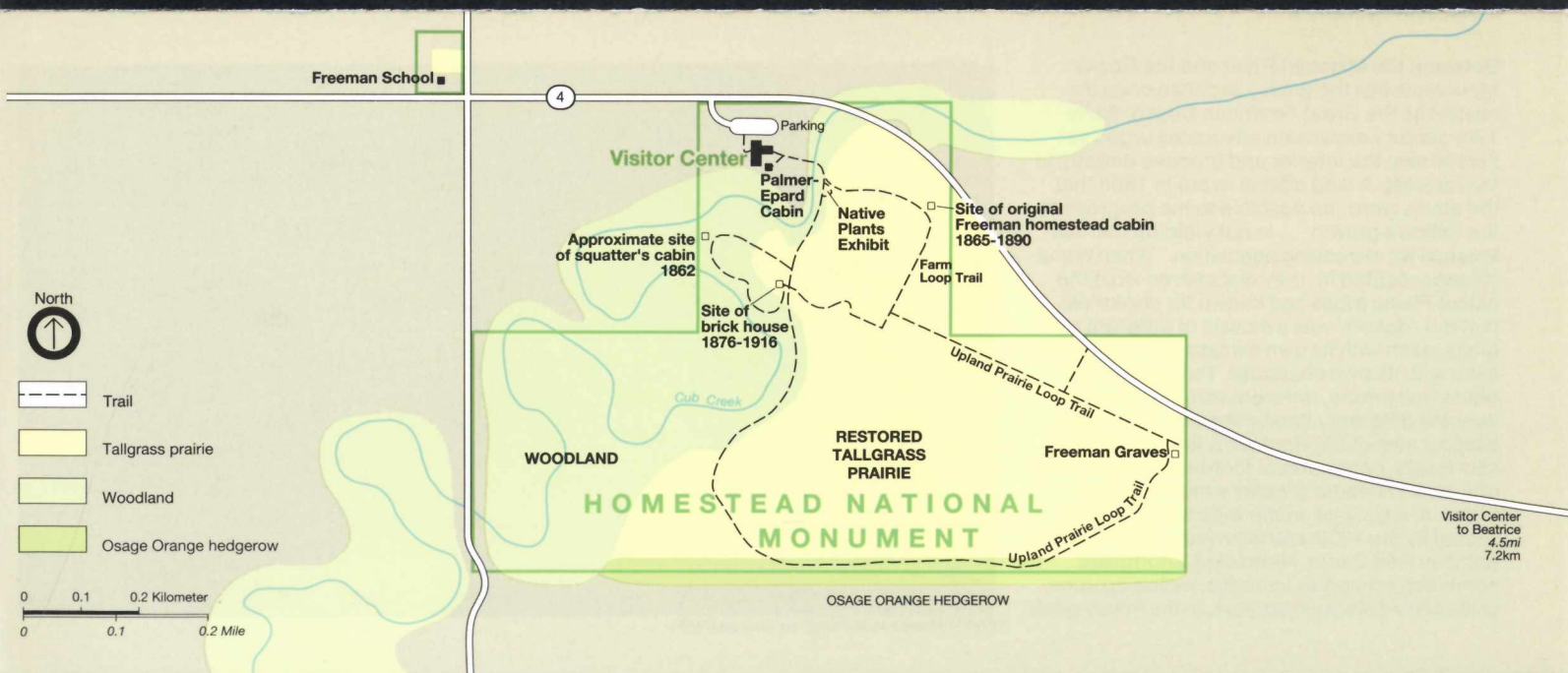




Homestead

The World of the Homesteader

As the frontier pushed westward to the high plains, many new emigrants found themselves getting off a train into a sea of grass and little else. "There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made," recalled Willa Cather in *My Antonia*. "I had the feeling that the world was left behind." Homesteaders used what they had—sod "bricks" for

construction, buffalo chips for fuel, and the ceaseless wind to pump water from deep underground. Eventually homesteaders progressed from living off—and sometimes *in*—the land to changing the land to suit their needs. Their innovations came to symbolize mastery over nature, however tenuous that might be.

"We cannot raise too much corn"

A state agriculturalist made this pronouncement in 1876 about the cash crop that became synonymous with Nebraska. By the 1890s, after several failures of traditional crops—oats, barley, and wheat as well as corn—it became clear that plains farmers needed to re-think their methods. Irrigation, dry farming techniques, strip planting, and summer fallow fields, along with a hardy strain of winter wheat introduced by Russian Mennonite immigrants, revolutionized grain production on the northern plains. In the 1870s a typical Nebraska farmer produced food enough each year for four; a hundred years later he fed nearly 60.

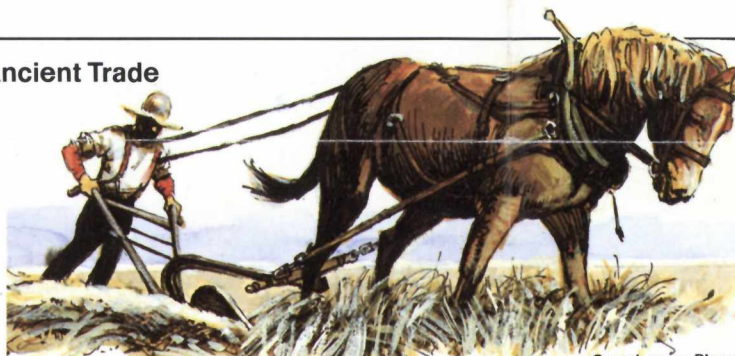
The Comforts of Home

Whether hillside dugouts, grassland soddies, or the log cabins common to eastern Nebraska (shown at right), homestead dwellings were a contrast of makeshift implements and finery salvaged from the old life. Cooks used dried buffalo manure as heating fuel, then served the meal on French china. Potted geraniums in the

What was it like to live in a log cabin on the prairie? The illustration below depicts settlers in eastern Nebraska, where there were enough trees to supply fuel and construction materials. The frame and siding are rough-cut hardwood, chinked with a lime-based mortar. The roof is made of cedar shakes. Like many settlers' early homes, the interior is furnished with a combination of heirlooms, store-bought goods, and items made on the premises from whatever was available.

New Tools for an Ancient Trade

Promoters of settlement conjured up pictures of a land so fertile "you only have to tickle it with a plow and it will laugh a harvest that will gladden your hearts," as one railroad ad claimed. Migrants who succumbed to this vision were soon disappointed. Turning the Great American Desert into the bountiful heartland took considerable ingenuity. For a start, the dense mat of grass defied ordinary cast-iron plows. In the 1860s a new plow called the "grasshopper" appeared. Its steel blade sliced the sod vertically and turned it to one side, opening a furrow for planting. Once crops were sown, sodbusters in the



Grasshopper Plow

drier climates could not count on sufficient rainfall. Pumping well water became the work of the wind. A special pivoting windmill was invented with adjustable compact blades that withstood high winds. By the turn of the century windmills stood sentinel over most plains

farms. In the early days, cattle herds roamed free, the bane of farmers. Enclosing a quarter section with wooden fencing—if there was wood to be had—was costly. Barbed wire was the simple solution

that divided up open range in practice as well as on paper. All these inventions spawned an industry based on specialized equipment for plains farms.

Illustrations by Louis Glanzman

Prairie Palaces of Nebraska Marble

Homesteaders in the eastern prairie could burrow into hillsides before wooden cabins were built. Newcomers to the flat, treeless grasslands farther west found a durable building material beneath their feet. Buffalo grass was short and tough with a dense tangle of roots; it held its shape when cut. Using a special plow, one could shave enough sod from an acre of prairie for a 16-by-20-foot house. The sod strips were cut about a foot wide and 4 inches deep, then sliced crosswise into 3-foot slabs. Slabs were laid grass-side-down in double courses and secured with four corner poles. Frames reserved openings for doors and windows. A sturdy ridgepole was laid across forked upright posts. Branches formed rafters on which more sod was laid—this time grass side up.

Certain advantages kept owners in their homes of "Nebraska Marble" long after lumber was available for housing. Sod houses were inexpensive, quick to build, well insulated, tornado-proof, and did not burn. On the other hand, they needed constant repair, especially after rainstorms when the roofs dropped dirt, water, and sometimes snakes. No wonder pioneer Carrie Lassel Detrick's mother "gave way to the only fit of weeping I ever remember seeing her indulge in," when she first arrived in Kansas and saw the sod house her husband had built. Sod houses remained a marvel to easterners. As Mark Twain noted in *Roughing It*, "It was the first time we had ever seen a man's front yard on top of his house."

The emergence of towns like Comstock, Nebraska, (below, 1904) and social institutions such as the Freeman School (bottom) signaled the end of the frontier and the beginning of a sense of permanency. The one-room brick school, where some of the Freeman children went, served the local community for nearly a century.



Solomon D. Butcher Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society



Woman gathering buffalo chips for fuel.

window competed for attention with wildflowers in bloom atop a sodhouse roof. Homemakers tacked up muslin sheets to catch falling debris from sod roofs and covered floors with cow skins. Packing crates served as tables and trunks as cradles. Cisterns collected rainwater and children collected fuel. Meals included anything from a wild prairie chicken to storebought coffee, along with corn and more corn. Agnes Freeman concocted a remedy for ague from prickly ash bark, Peruvian pine bark, Cayenne pepper, and brandy.

Crude as they were, settlers' dwellings became beloved homes. Lydia Lyon, for one, had fond memories of her family's Kansas cabin: "The wind whistled through the walls in winter and the dust blew in summer, but we papered the walls with newspapers and made rag carpets for the floor, and thought we were living well."



Solomon D. Butcher Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society



The Closing of the Frontier

"The red grass was disappearing," wrote Willa Cather in 1918. "There were wooden houses where the old sod dwellings used to be, and little orchards and big red barns." As mechanization sped the transition of grassland into farmland, some 1.6 million homestead applications were fulfilled. In 1934 the Taylor Grazing Act withdrew 75 million acres of public land from potential homesteading. The homestead law was repealed in 1976 (excluding Alaska), formally ending the pioneer era that had died long before.

Remnants of a Sea of Grass

Between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains lies the grassy expanse once dismissed as the Great American Desert. Early 19th century expansion advocates urged settlers to skip the interior and proceed directly to the far west. A land official wrote in 1868 that the plains were "an obstacle to the progress of the nation's growth . . . in not yielding that sustenance for increasing population." When homesteaders settled in, they discovered what the native Plains tribes had known for centuries: that the "desert" was a mosaic of different regions, each with its own climate and vegetation, each with its own character. Throughout the plains and prairie, different varieties of grass indicate different climatic regions. In the rain shadow east of the Rockies is the high plains shortgrass, consisting of foot-high buffalo, blue grama, and needle grasses which need little water. A ways east, in the wide belt of land bisected by the 100th meridian (near Willa Cather's home in Red Cloud, Nebraska), shortgrass combines with other varieties, including June grass and western wheatgrass, in the mixed-grass

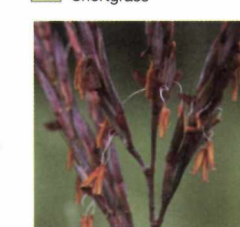
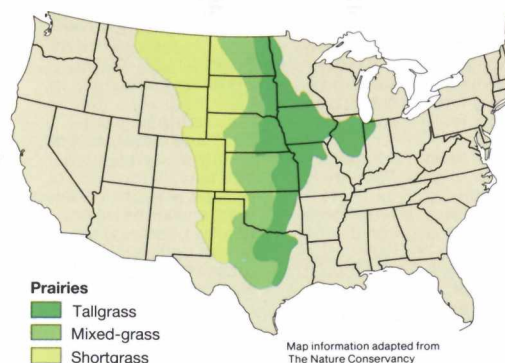


"Prairie Meadows Burning" by George Catlin.

terrain. This is the land of the cattle empire of the mid-19th century and later the homestead soddies. Still farther east toward the lower Missouri valley, thriving on increased moisture, reigns the tallgrass that the Freeman family encountered when they emigrated from Iowa to southeastern Nebraska in the 1860s.

Tallgrass prairie is a complex ecosystem, including flowers, trees, birds, mammals, insects, and microorganisms. But grass dominates. Like other grasses, tallgrasses do not form woody tissue nor increase in girth. Their stems are hollow except where the leaves join, leaves are narrow with parallel veins, and flowers are small and inconspicuous. Tallgrass prairie is so-named because the component grasses—big bluestem, little bluestem, indiangrass, and switchgrass—can reach 8 or 9 feet!

The eye sees only half the prairie; the other half is underground. Roots several feet deep tap moisture in times of drought. Another advantage of deep roots is that they store energy



Big bluestem



Little bluestem

which can produce new growth. Since grass grows from below, like human hair, rather than from its ends, the plant will survive weather extremes, mowing, grazing, and fire.

Once this prairie covered millions of acres; now only isolated remnants exist. The homesteaders saw it as a nuisance to be replaced as soon as possible with crops that paid their way. Today prairie is being brought back in places using a land management technique borrowed from the Plains tribes: controlled burning. Spring fires clear out non-native grasses before the later "sun-seeking" native grasses begin to grow. Fire also burns up dead plant debris on the ground, allowing the sun and rain to penetrate the soil, and releases nutrients, promoting growth and increasing seed yields. This and other prairie restoration methods help ensure that, at least in some places, we can look out over a sea of grass and feel the wonder of the first homesteaders.

GPO:2000-450 976/00246 Reprint 2000
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