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## Review of the Book Homesteading the Plains: Toward a New History

Peter A. Kindle  
*University of South Dakota*

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Book Review

By Peter A. Kindle

**Homesteading the Plains: Toward a New History**

Richard Edwards, Jacob K. Friefeld, & Rebecca S. Wingo

2017

Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press

253 pages

Softback \$19.95

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Beginning with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, continuing with the annexation of Texas and other lands through conflicts with Mexico and British Canada, and after the dispossession of lands from American Indian tribes, 1.5 billion acres of land were added to the United States in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. About a quarter of this land remains in the public domain, and about a third was granted to private owners in lieu of taxes to fund western expansion for railroad construction, creation of land grant agricultural colleges, and war veteran pensions. Some public lands were sold. After federal allotments to new states, around 19% or 270 million acres were given to settlers after passage of the 1862 Homestead Act. Estimates are that 46 to 97 million American adults today are direct descendants of those pioneers.

Although 31 states eventually participated in homesteading to some extent between 1862 and 1961 when the last claim was proven in Alaska, this book focuses on Minnesota and the 16 states west of the Mississippi River and north of Texas where 80 million acres were granted to settlers by 1900. The popular mythology of homesteading understands this period of American history to be an exceptional success story, but since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century academic historians have critiqued homesteading as a well-intended but ineffectual, if not harmful policy. In this book three academic historians set the record straight. Understanding the legacy of homesteading in the rural West and Midwest is essential to understanding the values, sense of community, and underlying distrust of federal government in these rural areas.

The book focuses on the four major critiques of homesteading in the academic literature: (a) that homesteading did not produce farms, (b) that most homestead claims were not proven, (c) that fraud and corruption were rampant in the homesteading process, and (d) that homesteading was a major cause of Indian land dispossession. Readers will be astounded at the ease with which the authors' analyses overturn these long-held errors. Their recalculations indicate that homesteading was responsible for 2/3rds of new farms and almost a third of the total farm acreage in the West. In fact, 80% or more of new farms were homesteads in Idaho, Colorado, South Dakota, North Dakota, Montana, Oregon, Washington, and Wyoming. Between 55% and 63% of claims before 1900 were eventually proven.

The 1862 Act restricted claimants to actual settlers, individuals who intended to occupy and develop the allotment, and Government Land Offices were tasked with compliance. Originally set at 160 acres but expanding by new legislation as settlements extended into the

more arid West, claims were accepted from U.S. citizens, foreign immigrants expressing a desire to become U.S. citizens, and after 1868, even African Americans. Women were eligible to file a claim from the very beginning, a somewhat surprising demonstration of gender equality for the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and around 12% of claims were ultimately filed by women. Although the details change somewhat over time, claimants *proved* their claim and received free title to the land after five years of residence without more than a six-month absence, improving the land by constructing a dwelling, and plowing at least 10 acres.

Homesteading fraud was by speculation in which claims were filed with the intent of conveying ownership to a third party, by assuming a false identity to exercise a military warrant, and by marriage when a wife would file an adjacent claim without residence on it. Government Land Offices did not have the personnel or funding to investigate problems with claims and developed a somewhat elaborate form of community self-compliance that included the testimony of witnesses to substantiate claimant's possession and improvement of a claim, public notice of pending proof of claims in local newspapers, and a contestation process for those denouncing a claim.

Two chapters were devoted to a detailed investigation of the 621 homesteads in Dawes and Custer counties in Nebraska from 1868-1900. The authors identified four potential marriage frauds, no military identity cases, and relatively few land sales within one month of receiving title for a proven claim, yielding a fraud rate of only 3.2%. If every land sale within a year of receiving title were fraudulent, the maximum rate of fraud would have been 8.3%, substantially less than the 22% estimates by earlier historians. Extrapolating findings from this sample to all homesteads suggests that 247 million of 270 million acres were provided to 1.484 million actual settlers who received an average of 166.5 acres apiece.

If homesteaders were the root cause of the dispossession of American Indian lands, this would be a substantial blemish on their records, but the authors present convincing evidence that in most homesteading states, dispossession was due to railroad construction and mining encroachments as preludes to military action. In all but the South Dakota, North Dakota, and Oklahoma, dispossession was completed before homesteading claims were filed. In these three states, homesteading did not take place until after the Dawes Act (1887) and the Land Allotment Act (1904) that allotted land within reservations to individual Indians, creating "surplus" reservation land available for homesteading. These facts perhaps explain the existing White-American Indian tensions in these states.

What might contemporary rural social workers gain from reading this book? Although the authors do not address this issue, it takes only a modest imagination to infer much about rural life in the 17 states included in the analyses. First, readers will note the importance placed on community in these pages. Contrary the mythology of the rugged individual of western lore, homesteaders relied from the very beginning on one another. The lack of resources that most claimants brought with them made cooperation, mutual assistance, and reciprocity mandatory. Claims could not be proven without neighbors willingly serving as witnesses in Government Land Offices that were often quite distant from the homesteads themselves. Most non-immigrant homesteaders did not have the advantages of existing community or ethnic connections, so the frontier became a place where the melting pot was somewhat realized. Survival of these

communities during the Dust Bowl (Egan, 2005) may have been even less likely without this sense of connection. Secondly, readers may infer about rural attitudes toward government from these beginnings. A homesteader's connection to the federal government was primarily through a conflictual relationship with a Government Land Office who, in their zeal to comply with federal regulations, could easily be perceived as viewing each claimant with suspicion. Requiring multiple witnesses to attest to residence, improvements, spousal abandonment or death, and even the frequent lost harvest through drought, fires, pestilence, and hailstorms was unlikely to instill a sense of favor toward Washington, DC. Thirdly, the creation of a form of female emancipation and independence through homesteading should be inferred. It was no accident that women first won the vote in Wyoming, a homesteaders' state. As Morone (2003) so eloquently described as an analogous example, the Sabbatarian campaign against Sunday mail delivery in the 1820s by the most visible hand of the federal government, the Post Office, was the beginning of a felt sense of political influence among women. A century later this east coast movement had led to abolition, suffrage, and Prohibition. Female emancipation through homesteading was a likely western contributor to social change via land ownership, local influence, and the Progressive movement.

I recommend this book to those who wish to obtain a deeper insight into the rural West and Midwestern mindset. For example, I cannot help but speculate that the expansive tolerance for difference and diversity within some rural communities that is explicitly not extended to those not already an integral part of that community may be due to a lingering homesteading effect. Furthermore, the apparent rejection of federal imposition of West and Midwestern agricultural communities, communities that are financially dependent on federal largess, may be explained, in part, by this homestead effect. Other readers are likely to glean even further insights. My only regret is that the authors did not provide more details on the extent of non-citizen immigrant and African American homesteading.

### References

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- Morone, J. A. (2003). *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.