

FIRST DRAFT

Homesteading in West reached peak in early 20th century

On Jan. 3, 1924, readers of The Daily Sentinel viewed this headline: "Western Slope Lands Open to Homesteaders: 13,340 Acres in Moffat and Rio Blanco counties may be filed on."

It was the third decade of the 20th century and the modern world — at least as it was known in 1924 — was rapidly overtaking the remnants of the Old West.

Moreover, it had been 34 years since the U.S. Census Bureau

declared the frontier in the western United States closed, raising questions about whether there was still any need to encourage homesteaders.

Yet homesteading, the government-backed settlement system that had done as much to tame the West as guns or cavalry units, was still going strong. In fact, the country was only halfway through the 124-year period that marked the official homestead era.

Articles similar to the one in the Sentinel appeared in newspapers around Colorado and throughout early 1924, reporting that the federal government had opened new areas to homesteaders in various states. I found no articles about new lands becoming available Mesa County, but there were lands opened to homesteaders in Delta County.

New surveys conducted by the federal government in the preceding few years had determined that more lands could be made available for homesteading in 1924.

Homesteading, as a government-sanctioned activity, officially lasted from 1862, with the passage of the Homestead Act, until 1986, when the last homestead claim was allowed in Alaska.

Homesteading in the lower 48 states ended in 1976, with the adoption of the National Environmental Policy Act. Of course, by then homesteading was rare.

But in the early years of the 20th century, it was still an important undertaking for hundreds of thousands of Americans.

In fact, according to the National Park Service's Homestead National Historic Site in Nebraska, the busiest year for filing of homestead claims

during the entire homestead era was 1913, when Americans claimed 11 million acres of federal lands.

That effort hadn't abated much by the 1920s. According to a Washington D.C. newspaper, more than 12 million acres of homestead claims were filed in 1922. When claims were validated by federal officials, however, the 1922 number dropped below the 11 million acres claimed in 1913.



BOB SILBERNAGEL

The Homestead Act was passed by Congress and signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln in May of 1862. Like its predecessor, the Preemption Act of 1841, part of its aim was to get small farmers to acquire lands in the West, thereby providing a bulwark against the expansion of slavery.

The Preemption Act of 1841 allowed squatters on federal lands to purchase up to 160 acres for \$1.25 an acre. Although claimants were supposed to live on the land and make improvements to it, because claims to the lands were fully transferable, speculators bought land from the squatters and acquired huge tracts of property for relatively little money.

Those sorts of abuses convinced Congress to tighten up the requirements for acquiring federal lands with the 1862 Homestead Act. As historian Paul Gates put it, "The Homestead Act was adopted when land reformers were resolved to halt the unbridled accumulation of land by speculators, land companies, timbermen, and livestock interests. They had been building up great holdings in the pineries of the Great Lakes states, the prairies of Illinois and Iowa, and in the cotton belt of the south."

To file a claim for a 160-acre parcel under the new law, a homesteader had to be the head of a household or at least 21 years of age. He or she had to be a citizen of the United States, or legally declare their intent to become a citizen. Immigrants, single women and freed slaves were allowed to apply. They had to pay a filing fee of \$1.25 per acre.

However, a person was prohibited from filing if he or she had ever taken up arms



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Capt. H.A. Smith, a Union Civil War veteran, built this cabin and homesteaded a small farm along Escalante Creek near Delta in 1911, near the peak of the homesteading era.

or aided the enemies of the United States. This provision prevented anyone who had supported the Confederacy during the Civil War to legally homestead.

During the century and a quarter of homesteading, some 270 million acres of federal land, roughly 10 percent of the area of the United States, was claimed and settled by approximately 4 million homesteaders. The vast majority of those claims were made prior to the 1940s.

It wasn't just one law, however. The Homestead Acts, as they are sometimes called, are a series of laws and amendments to those laws, beginning with the 1862 Act.

The Timber Culture Act of 1873 allowed homesteaders to obtain another 160 acres of land if they planted trees on one-fourth of their land.

The Desert Land Act of 1877 offered up to 640 acres of land to married couples who promised to irrigate and cultivate the land within three years.

The Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909 aimed to encourage dryland farming in semi-arid states such as Colorado, Wyoming and Montana by allowing homesteads of up to 320 acres on lands that were considered non-irrigable. These dryland homesteads had some of the highest failure rates.

The final major change

came in 1916, with the passage of the Stock Raising Homestead Act, which allowed homesteads of 640 acres on lands designated by the U.S. Geological Survey as being "chiefly valuable for grazing and raising forage crops."

Thirty states were open to homesteading during the homestead era, including every state west of the Mississippi River except Texas.

In Colorado, more than 107,000 homesteads were filed during the 124 years, totaling over 22 million acres, or roughly a third of the state's total land area.

In most of Western Colorado, including Mesa County, homesteading was allowed beginning in 1881, under provisions of the 1880 treaty that forced Ute Indians off these lands.

Not every homestead claim was successful. For instance, in Colorado 3.2 million acres were originally claimed under the Desert Land Act, but fewer than 700,000 acres were proved up and turned into functioning farms.

And there were abuses under the Homestead Acts. Ranch owners often had some of their hired cowboys file for homesteads on lands near the ranches. Eventually, the ranchers took over the lands from their employees.

Still, overall homesteading

was an unqualified success in encouraging settlers to take up farms in the West. "Few laws have so shaped American development, so accelerated its growth, so intimately touched the lives of millions of people," Gates wrote in 1976.

The first lands claimed under the Homestead Act were in Nebraska by a man named Daniel Freeman, who arrived in the state from Illinois. The last approved claim was to Ken Deardorff on the Stony River in Alaska.

Between those two claims were homesteads filed upon by millions of people, including African Americans and women, such as this one cited in a 1923 newspaper article: "A woman eighty-eight years old has made application to the Department of the Interior to be permitted to homestead a tract of public land in Colorado."

Sources: Homestead National Historic Park online, www.nps.gov/home/index.htm; "Homesteading in the High Plains," by Paul W. Gates; "How the West Was Settled," by Greg Bradsher, National Archives, www.archives.gov/files/publications/prologue/2012/winter/homestead.pdf; historic newspapers at www.newspapers.com.

Bob Silbernagel's email is bobsilbernagel@gmail.com.



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

The first homestead under the 1862 Homestead Act was filed near Beatrice Nebraska on Jan. 1, 1863 by a man named Daniel Freeman. His claim is now the site Homestead National Historic Park.



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

German immigrant John G. Holzwarth and his family established a homestead along the Colorado River near Rocky Mountain National Park in 1920, and later operated a dude ranch there. It became part of the national park in 1973.

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