

Yes, They Really Did Homestead

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"Oh, I was anxious to go. I don't know, but I just had a feeling I wanted to get away from my former home and go out in this world. All I had was a desire to go, and I did...It was not so easy."

Christine Larson-Tollefson

"Who were they?"

"How many were there?"

"Did they really homestead?"

These are the three questions people ask most often when they hear that women laid claim to homestead land in North Dakota. While pioneer women are thought of more as wives and mothers rather than as landowners, thousands of women from many circumstances decided to meet government requirements and thereby receive title to public lands in their own names.

The purpose of this project was to obtain information that would lead to a better understanding of the contributions this group of women made to agricultural development and to the growth of new communities in this region at the turn of the century. This is only a beginning. Resources limited the study to 306 case studies of women who acquired their land through federal legislation related to preemption, homesteading, and timber culture and does not include women who purchased land or who were in charge of land men owned.

Information was obtained from three sources: (1) women who homesteaded, (2) friends and relatives of women who homesteaded, and (3) land records. Nineteen of the respondents were homesteaders themselves. I personally interviewed 15 of these women and corresponded with the other four. Most of the information, however, came from friends and relatives of women who no longer were living. These respondents completed a questionnaire and sent me other materials such as written accounts, documents, news articles, and pictures.

I was interested not only in anecdotal material but also in determining what proportion of people who filed claims were women. For this information, I used land records.

WHO WERE THESE COURAGEOUS WOMEN?

Their demographic and cultural backgrounds vary widely. Most immigrants came from European countries, some by way of Canada. Other settlers, native born of foreign-born parents, came to North Dakota from Minnesota, Iowa, and South Dakota. Some women's parents had arrived in the United States several generations earlier.

Among those establishing claims were many young, single women; but owning land also appealed to other women. Widows with small children, widows accompanying their grown children, and divorced or deserted women came to lay claim to the land. Horace Greeley, well known for imploring young men to go West, did not limit his invitation to men. "Young men! Poor men! Widows! Resolve to have a home of your own! If you are able to buy and pay for one in the East, very well; if not, make one in the broad and fertile West!"¹

Eva Popp-Henry. She "could pick the head off a rattler at 100 feet." (Photo courtesy of L.A. Joyce)



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Kari Skredsvig. Kari and her 10 year old son used a team of horses to break up the sod on 10 acres of her 160-acre homestead. (Photo courtesy of Margaret Lien)

Shortly after being widowed, Kari Skredsvig (Burke County, 38),* moved to North Dakota from Minnesota with her seven children (the eldest was 10 years old). Anna Hensel (Hettinger County) came to the United States from Bessarabia, South Russia, when she was 67 and a year later applied both for citizenship and a homestead. Ida Popp (Bowman County, 21), and Eva, her sister (Bowman County, 24), came to North Dakota from St. Paul, Minnesota. Eva became well known for her skill with a gun and "could pick the head off a rattler at 100 feet."

Tables 1 and 2 show the age and marital status of the women in my sample who took claims. In general, U.S. public lands legislation discriminated against married women. Unless a married woman was considered the head of the household, she was ineligible. Consequently, few married women could homestead in their own name. There were a few single women who misrepresented their age and took land before they reached the age of 21.

Table 1. Age of women taking claims.^a

Age	Percent	Number
Under 21	6	16
21-25	53	128
26-30	17	40
31-40	13	32
41-50	4	9
51-60	5	11
Over 60	2	5
	100	241

^aInformation was not available for all women.

* County where land was claimed and age when the land transaction was initiated.

Table 2. Marital status at the time of land entry.^a

Marital Status	Percent	Number
Single	83	239
Widowed	15	42
Divorced or separated	1	4
Married; husband died before proof	1	2
	100	287

^aInformation was not available for all women.

WHAT PROMPTED THESE WOMEN TO TAKE SUCH ACTION?

Their motives seemed similar to those of their male counterparts. Dakota territory was portrayed as an exciting place with a bright future. The railroads were particularly zealous in their attempts to increase business and, accordingly, published ads and pamphlets designed to encourage both women and men to initiate settlement. Enthusiastic reports appeared in the press, and perhaps most important of all were the personal contacts among relatives and friends, already settled in North Dakota, who reached out and invited others to join them.

Lucy Goldthorpe (Williams County, 22) described how she got caught up in the excitement:

"Even if you hadn't inherited a bit of restlessness and a pioneering spirit from your ancestors, it would have been difficult to ward off the excitement of the boom which, like the atmosphere, involved every conversation."²

Emma Beske (Stutsman County) expressed her love of adventure, and this surely beckoned many.

But first and foremost, women who undertook this adventure expected some financial return. Land was seen as a

good investment. Some wanted quick profits while others wanted a long-term commitment.

Encouragement from relatives and friends probably had a major impact on many women's decisions to homestead. Men as well as women rarely embarked on this venture alone but joined with relatives and/or friends. Sisters and brothers often homesteaded adjoining quarter sections, and many times whole families homesteaded in the vicinity with parents and children over 21 all taking a piece of land. Mr. and Mrs. Pat Sheridan brought their family from Dexter, Minnesota. He and five of their eight children, including three daughters, Nell (21), Mae (29), and Margaret (28), all filed claims in Renville County November 29, 1901.

HOW COMMON WAS IT TO FIND A WOMAN IN CHARGE OF A CLAIM?

My data indicate thousands of women took land in the area that is now North Dakota.

Table 3 shows the percentage of women claimants in nine North Dakota counties.

Many women combined homesteading with other jobs, juggling their schedules to fit the circumstances. Almost 70 percent of the women in my sample worked in other occupations while homesteading. While the majority were teachers, housekeepers, seamstresses, or milliners, some took up more non-traditional work as mail carriers, journalists, or photographers.

Kaja Kurz (Benson County) alternated her teaching sessions with homesteading. Hilda Paulson (McKenzie County, 22) mentioned working in Alexander and cooking in a cook car during harvest: "I had to get short jobs because I had to

Table 3. Percentage of women claimants in selected counties.

County	Predominate ethnic groups ^a	Approximate settlement time	Percent women
Burke	Norwegian Swede Dane	After 1900	14
Foster	German Norwegian Anglo-American	1880s-1890s	11
Grand Forks	Norwegian Anglo-American	1880s	8
Kidder	German Norwegian Anglo-American	1880s-1890s	10
McIntosh	German-Russian	1880s-1890s	8
McKenzie (28 of 89 townships)	Norwegian Anglo-American	After 1900	20
Pembina	Anglo American (Canada)	1870s-1880s	6
Sheridan	German-Russian	After 1900	11
Williams	Norwegian	After 1900	18

^aMany other ethnic groups were represented in these counties in smaller numbers.

live on the claim." Tillie Mostad (Ward County, 22) lived in her shack on weekends, driving her horse and buggy the 15 miles to Minot where she worked as a dressmaker during the week. Julia Pettingill (56) and her daughter, Sadie, (Mount-trail County, 28) provided a variety of services to the Amanda community. Sadie's shack was the post office and her home. She also taught school. Julia operated the Amanda store from her nearby two-room shack and drove a team of horses 62 miles into Minot to buy supplies.

Occupational interests seemed to take precedence over marriage, at least for awhile. The median age at first marriage for my sample was 27, compared to a much younger median age of 22 for the general U.S. population in 1890, 1990, and 1919.³ A majority of the homesteading women (57 percent) did not marry until after they had gained title to their land. Of 226 women who never had been married when they filed on the land, 42 (19 percent) remained single throughout their lives. This tendency either to postpone marriage to forego it freed these women to expand their horizons beyond the domestic hearth.

DID THEY REALLY HOMESTEAD?

The tendency to view the lives of pioneer women in terms of tragedy and fear, in some respects, is related to this question. Many perceive women as secondary figures in the process of settlement. Considering the information gathered for this study, such as image no longer can be considered the norm. Homesteading women simply did not fit the image of the fearful clinging vine. These women took charge of their own lives. They were initiators and builders, and 94 percent managed the affairs of their own homesteads.

This does not mean that there was no division of labor or social restrictions. A woman who was teaching school often rented her land to a relative or neighbor or hired the field-



Anna Hensel. Anna took a homestead in 1903 at the age of 68 and remained on the land for nearly 12 years. (Photo courtesy of Loraine Stindt)

work done. She did not give up managing her land but, instead, made a prudent decision. Social boundaries, however, did restrict the women's activities as reflected in the comment of Kaja Kurz, "Oh if I were a man, I surely could do so many things!"

Although men and women generally worked within their separate spheres, the boundaries were fuzzy and often overlapped. Some women did work in the fields, and some men on occasion took charge of domestic responsibilities.

Although there was a general division of labor, women still were not secondary players in the process of settlement nor were they necessarily more fearful than men. Tragedy and fear were a part of pioneer life but were not overpowering forces for either men or women.

In almost all cases, women who took homesteads managed their land. They made the decisions necessary to meet the government requirements, and the government issued the women title to their land. Further, women were as likely as men to successfully prove up (gain title) their claims. The percentages of those canceling or failing to prove up claims were similar in two North Dakota counties. The percent of men who canceled their rights compared to the percent of the women were 28 and 24 percent, respectively, in Sheridan County and 29 and 32 percent, respectively, in McIntosh County.

In light of these factors, the answer to the question, "Did they really homestead?" has to be "Yes!"

The legacy of these women is clear. They are remembered as capable, independent, strong, and courageous. A sense of adventure guided their decisions and commitments.

The qualities that defined homesteading women are illustrated in the following descriptions.

Philip Boise, son of Ella Curry-Boise (Steele County, 21): "Mother was a manager. We were all lucky to inherit her ability...She helped form the Nonpartisan League...supported the Women's Boarding Home in Fargo, was active in Women's Suffrage...was a Langer supporter...She was the 'kingpin' of what went on in the family."

Myrtle Ronnevik Lindstrom, daughter of Lillie Tysver-Ronnevik (Mercer County, 24): "She hungered for knowledge and would read by lantern at the bedpost after the others went to bed."

Bill Scott, son of Janie Brew-Scott (Dunn County, 22): "She was an avid reader, a poet, and had a strong will to make things go in spite of the odds."



*Amelia Brennon-Jacobsen. Amelia and her sister Lena survived North Dakota winters alternating residence between their two sod shacks.
(Photo courtesy of Margaret Albrecht)*

Olive Kateley Sprague, daughter of Rosa Kateley-Olstad (McHenry County, 24): "She taught school, sometimes 3-4 month terms a year, for \$30 a month...She loved all aspects of education and learning...Everyone consulted her for advice and information, and she wrote letters for many neighbors. She was a good public speaker and attended every possible convention for school, P.T.A., farm organizations and politics...She was very active in church, Sunday school, and helped organize the Nonpartisan League for farmers... Mother was an avid reader, but I can never remember seeing her just sitting and reading. She felt she couldn't waste time just reading, so she would churn butter or knit socks or mittens while she read."

NOTES

1. *New York Daily Tribune*, June 6, 1862. Cited in Roy M. Robbins, *Our Landed Heritage: The Public Domain 1776-1936* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1942), p. 206.
2. Roberta M. Starry, "Petticoat Pioneer," *The West* 7, no. 5 (October 1967):8.
3. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970*, pt. 1 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), p. 19.