



# Farming in the West

## Objectives

1. Identify what attracted farmers to settle on the Great Plains.
2. Describe how people adapted to life on the Plains.
3. Summarize the result of the Oklahoma Land Rush.
4. Explain how economic issues led farmers to organize to seek reform.

## Prepare to Read

### Reading Skill

#### Use Comparison or Contrast

**Clues** Comparison and contrast can also help you define unfamiliar words. Comparison clues show how an unfamiliar word is similar to a familiar word, phrase, or example. Look for signal words such as *similar to* or *like* to highlight these clues. Contrast clues show how an unfamiliar word is different from a familiar word, phrase, or example. Look for signal words such as *unlike* or *instead* to highlight these clues.

## Vocabulary Builder

### High-Use Words

reside, p. 595

surplus, p. 598

### Key Terms and People

homesteader, p. 595

sod, p. 596

sodbuster, p. 596

sooner, p. 598

grange, p. 598

farm cooperative, p. 598

inflation, p. 599

William Jennings Bryan, p. 599

★ **Background Knowledge** While ranchers and cowhands were building a cattle kingdom, hundreds of thousands of farmers were flooding onto the Great Plains.

## Homesteading

By 1900, half a million farmers had settled on the Great Plains. Many were attracted by an offer of free land.

**Homestead Act** During the Civil War, Congress passed the Homestead Act of 1862. It offered a 160-acre plot to anyone who resided on the land for five years. Congress wanted to give the poor a chance to own farms. Thousands became **homesteaders**—settlers who acquired free land from the government—on the Great Plains.

But few had the money to move west and start a farm. Also, land companies took over large areas illegally. And on the dry Plains, 160 acres was too small to grow enough grain to profit. Only one homesteader in three lasted the required five years.

**Railroads Promote Farming** In fact, railroads promoted more farming than did the Homestead Act. More farms meant more shipping for western railroads. So the railroads gave away some of the 180 million acres they got from the government. They recruited thousands of people from the eastern United States, Ireland, Germany, and Scandinavia to settle on the Great Plains.

✓ **Checkpoint** How did the Homestead Act help people gain land?

## Main Idea

Would-be settlers could get a homestead from the government or land from railroad companies.

## Vocabulary Builder

reside (ree zĭd) v. to live (in or at); to dwell for a while; to exist (in)

## Main Idea

New techniques and inventions helped settlers adapt to the difficult life on the Plains.

## A Hard Life on the Plains

Life on the Great Plains was not easy. Water was scarce, and crops were hard to grow. Farmers struggled to make ends meet.

**Busting Sod** The first farmers on the eastern Plains staked out sites near water and trees. Later arrivals continued on to the treeless prairie. The farther west one went, the drier the climate became.

The soil of the Plains was fertile. It was covered with a thick sod, or a surface layer of earth in which the roots of grasses tangle with soil. With little rain, sod baked into a hardened mass. Early settlers, lacking wood, cut sod into bricks to build walls. Two rows of sod bricks made walls that kept homes cool in summer and warm in winter.

**New Farming Methods** Farmers broke through the tough sod with plows. The sod often cracked plows made of wood or iron. In 1877, John Deere of Illinois invented a sodbusting plow made of steel. Steel plows were stronger and lighter than other plows.

Plains farmers, or **sodbusters** as they were known, used machines called drills to plant crops. The drills buried seeds deep in the ground where there was moisture. Farmers used reapers to harvest crops and threshers to beat off the hard coverings of the grains.

Water often lay hundreds of feet below ground. Farmers used windmills to pump the water out. To keep cattle from trampling crops, farmers put up fences. Lacking wood, they used barbed wire. Joseph Glidden, an Illinois farmer, invented this twisted metal wire in 1874.

## Sodbusters

Thickly matted grass roots held the fertile Plains soil in a tight grip. Even with a four-horse plow, sodbusting (breaking up the sod) was backbreaking work. Worse, once exposed by plowing, the fertile soil might be blown away by winds. **Critical Thinking:** *Clarify Problems* What problems did settlers face on the Plains? How did they overcome their problems?

### ◀ Railroads Lure Settlers

Railroads, eager for customers, offered free land to lure settlers to the Great Plains. People came from eastern cities and from many countries in Europe.

### Sod ▶

Deep, thick roots allowed grasses to thrive in areas of the Great Plains that received limited amounts of moisture.



2,000,000 FARMS of Fertile Prairie Lands to be had Free of Cost

CENTRAL DAKOTA

30 Millions of Acres

YOU NEED A FARM!

CHICAGO AND NORTH WESTERN

HOW TO GET THERE

**Farm Families** Whole families worked on the farms. Men labored from dawn to dusk. Children tended animals and helped with other chores. Life was also hard for women. Besides keeping house, they helped plant and harvest. They educated children. They nursed the sick. They sewed clothing, preserved food, and made such basics as candles and soap.

**Exodusters** Thousands of African Americans, many of them former slaves, streamed onto the Plains. By the early 1880s, perhaps 70,000 African Americans had settled in Kansas. These settlers were known as Exodusters because they believed they were like the Jews fleeing slavery in Egypt, a biblical story told in the book of Exodus.

Some Exodusters took up farming. Others moved to towns. Men often worked as hired hands and women as laundresses.

**The Spanish Southwest** In the Southwest along the border with Mexico, arriving settlers found Spanish-speaking farmers and shepherders. Many had been there since before the Mexican-American War, when the United States had acquired this territory.

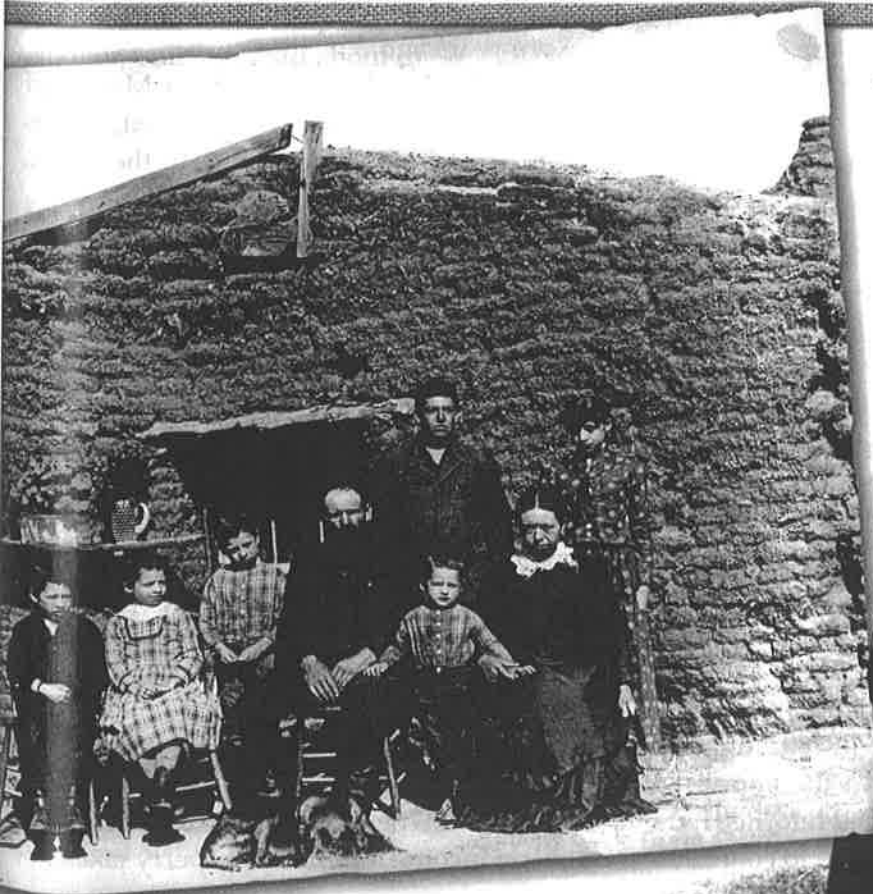
The coming of the railroads brought more immigrants from Mexico. Many helped build the new lines. Some of the older Hispanic residents were large landowners, known as *ricos* (REE kos). They fought to keep their lands, deeded under Spanish or Mexican law.

**Checkpoint** Who were the sodbusters and the Exodusters?



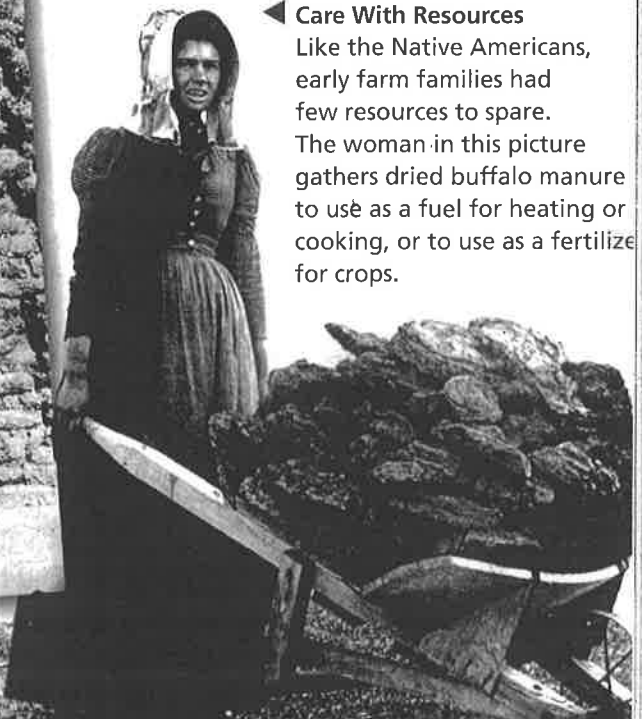
**Use Comparison or Contrast Clues**

What comparison clue is included in this paragraph to help you define the term *Exodusters*? What are Exodusters?



◀ **A Sod House**

Settlers cut sod into bricks that they used to construct sturdy sod houses like the one at left.



◀ **Care With Resources**

Like the Native Americans, early farm families had few resources to spare. The woman in this picture gathers dried buffalo manure to use as a fuel for heating or cooking, or to use as a fertilizer for crops.

### Main Idea

A rush for land in Oklahoma in 1889 signaled the closing of the western frontier.

## A Last Rush for Land

By the 1880s, few areas on the Plains remained free to settlers. The federal government agreed to open Oklahoma to homesteaders.

**Boomers and Sooners** In April 1889, nearly 100,000 people gathered at a line near present-day Oklahoma City. These were the “boomers.” They had come to claim some of the 2 million acres of free homesteads in what was once Indian Territory.

At noon, a volley of gunfire signaled the start of the Oklahoma Land Rush. A few people, known as **sooners**, had already sneaked onto the land. They jumped from hiding and grabbed the best land. Other rushes followed until all 2 million acres had been claimed.

**The Frontier Closes** In 1890, the national census reported that the United States no longer had land available for homesteading. In the West, “there can hardly be said to be a frontier line,” the report stated.

**Checkpoint** Where was the last land rush in the West?

### Main Idea

Facing an economic crisis, farmers formed groups like the National Grange and the Populist Party.

### Vocabulary Builder

**surplus** (SER pluhs) *n.* excess; quantity that is left over

## Farmers Organize

Wheat and grain from Plains farms fed the growing cities of America and Europe. A few big farmers prospered. But small farmers faced an economic crisis and quickly organized to end it.

**Crisis on the Farm** The more grain that farmers hauled to market, the lower grain prices fell. Farmers were producing a **surplus** of crops. One Kansas farmer complained that “we are poorer by many dollars than we were years ago.”

Small farmers were hit the hardest by low grain prices. Many had borrowed money for land and machinery. As prices fell, Plains farmers could not repay their loans and lost their land. In the South, tenants and sharecroppers fell deeper into debt as cotton prices fell.

**Cooperatives and Political Parties** Many farmers lived in poverty and isolation. Some communities began to form **granges**, groups of farmers who met for lectures, sewing bees, and other events. In 1867, local granges joined to form the National Grange.

What began as a social and educational movement evolved into an economic protest. In the 1870s and 1880s, Grangers demanded the same low rates from railroads and warehouses that were given to big farmers. They elected state officials who passed laws limiting rates.

A group called the Farmers’ Alliance organized in the late 1870s to help farmers. It set up **farm cooperatives**—groups of farmers who pool their money to make large purchases of tools, seed, and other supplies at a discount. In the South, both whites and blacks joined the Alliance.

In 1892, unhappy farmers joined with members of labor unions to form the Populist Party. This was a political party that pushed for social reforms. It demanded public ownership of railroads and warehouses to control rates, a tax on income to replace property taxes, an eight-hour workday, and other reforms.

Populists wanted to use silver in addition to gold as a basis for the money supply. With more money circulating, Populists hoped to see **inflation**, or a general rise in prices. They believed rising grain prices would help farmers pay off their debts. In that way, the farmers could avoid foreclosure—the taking of property to settle a debt. Summing up Populist demands, Kansas activist Mary Elizabeth Lease said:

“We want money, land, and transportation. We . . . want the power to make loans direct from the government. We want the accursed foreclosure system wiped out. . . .”

—Mary Elizabeth Lease, 1890 speech

**The Election of 1896** In the presidential election of 1896, Populists supported Democrat **William Jennings Bryan**, known as the “Great Commoner.” Bryan won the votes of farmers from the South and West for supporting the use of silver to raise prices.

Bankers and business owners claimed rising prices would ruin the economy. They backed Republican William McKinley and his gold-alone standard. McKinley won. Republicans took both the White House and Congress for the first time in decades. The Populists faded. Although the major parties absorbed many of their ideas, most Americans saw no link between farm problems and their own.

✓ **Checkpoint** What did the Populists demand?

★ **Looking Back and Ahead** Farmers found it hard to make a living, so they organized to demand reforms. In the next chapter, you will read about the rise of big business and labor.



These presidential campaign buttons show the two major candidates in 1896. William McKinley (right) won for the Republicans. William Jennings Bryan (left) had the backing of Democrats and Populists but lost.

## Section 4 | Check Your Progress

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### Comprehension and Critical Thinking

- (a) **Recall** What was a homesteader?

(b) **Explain Problems** What were three problems associated with the Homestead Act?
- (a) **Recall** What is a surplus?

(b) **Clarify Problems** How did a surplus of grain contribute to low grain prices? How did the National Grange, the Farmers' Alliance, and the Populist Party try to address the economic crisis caused by low prices?

### Reading Skill

- Use Comparison or Contrast Clues** Define the term **inflation** in the following sentence: Like the wind under a child's runaway balloon, inflation pushed prices higher and higher.

### Vocabulary Builder

Answer the following questions in complete sentences that show your understanding of the key terms.

- How did tough **sod** make living on the Great Plains difficult?
- Why were Great Plains farmers called **sodbusters**?
- Who were the **sooners**?

- How did forming a farm cooperative help farmers?
- How did Populists think **inflation** would help them economically?

### Writing

- Imagine that you will be writing an editorial meant to influence readers of your school newspaper about coed sports teams. Write a few sentences creating an audience profile describing these readers. Think about who they are: How old are they? What types of interests do they have? What sports interest them the most?