

# Busting the Prairie

## Planning a Homestead Community

### Objective

Students will read about the Homestead Act and discuss pioneer life. Students will read from an imagery-rich personal account of homesteading and identify the different kinds of imagery. Students will design their own homestead communities and a handbill to advertise it.

### Background

The public domain is land owned by the US government that is not reserved for some specific use. At one time 75 percent of the continental United States, about 2 billion acres, was public domain. This included land ceded by the 13 original states, the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, the Spanish cession of Florida in 1819, land acquired through the Oregon Compromise in 1846, the Mexican Cession in 1848, the Texas Purchase of 1850 and the Gadsden Purchase, 1807. Alaska was purchased from Russia in 1867.

For three centuries, most Americans lived within easy reach of cheap land. They often made no attempt to buy it but simply built a log cabin or sod house anywhere on the public domain they chose to squat. They cleared a spot large enough for crops and a garden, pulled out the stumps, built roads, laid out towns, and established churches and schools.

Squatting on government land was illegal, but enforcing the law was difficult. In 1841, the US congress passed the Preemption Act which allowed squatters to purchase the land they already occupied for \$1.25 an acre. For the poor man even this arrangement was too risky. It meant that if he couldn't raise the money at the proper time, he would lose all the work his family had put into developing the land.

In 1862, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Homestead Act, which granted 160 acres of public land in the West free to "any person who is the head of a family, or who has arrived at the age of twenty-one years, and is a citizen of the United States, or who shall have filed his declaration of intention to become such." The homesteader had to pay a \$14 filing fee, live on the land for five years, and make certain improvements. By 1900 about 600,000 farmers had received clear title under the Act to lands covering about 80 million acres. The Act was repealed in 1977.

Many of the homesteaders were immigrants from Europe. They learned of the free government land through letters from family members who had already settled in America. Government immigration bureaus and the railroads put out handbills advertising the free land as well. The success of the railroads depended on people coming out west to settle. They needed the business provided by farmers shipping out produce to sell and shipping in the materials they needed to maintain their farms.

Land on the Great Plains was the last to be settled. The climate was

### Oklahoma Academic Standards

#### GRADE 6

Reading—1.1b; 2.1;

3.1ab,2c,4d;

4.3ad; 5.1ab,2a

Writing—2.7

Visual Literacy—3

#### GRADE 7

Reading—1.1,2,3bcd; 2.1;

3.1a; 4.3a; 5.1ab 5.2a

Writing—2.8

Visual Literacy—3.1

#### GRADE 8

Social Studies PALS—

1.A.1,2,B.4,D.10; 2.B.6

Social Studies Content—6.4

Reading—1.1,3bcd; 3.1a,4d;

4.2a,3ac; 5.1a,2a

Writing—2.8

Visual Literacy—3.1

## Vocabulary

**binder**—a machine that fastens something together

**cession**—a ceding or giving up of lands or rights to another person, group, government or country

**cultivate**—to loosen or break up the soil

**draft horses**—horses used for pulling or hauling

**furrow**—a trench in the earth made by or as if by a plow

**handbill**—advertisements for products, equipment, services, and land

**harrow**—a cultivating tool that has spikes, teeth, or disks and is used for breaking up and smoothing the soil

**heel fly**—the adult stage of the common cattle grub

**hoe**—a farm or garden tool with a thin flat blade at nearly a right angle to a long handle that is used especially for weeding and loosening the earth

**homesteader**—a person who accepted a 160 acre tract of US public land to farm

**husk**—to strip the outer leaves and silk from corn

**immigrant**—a person who comes into a new country to settle

**nonviolent**—peaceful

**origins**—ancestry

**plow**—a farm machine used to cut, lift, and turn over soil

**prairie**—a large area of level

**process**—the method of preserving foods for later use

**public domain**—land owned by the US government that is not reserved for some specific use.

**remedy**—a medicine or treatment that cures or relieves

**rhythmic**—a movement or activity in which some action repeats regularly

**shock**—a bunch of sheaves of grain or stalks of corn set on end (as in a field)

**sod**—the grass-covered and herbcovered surface of the ground

**spade**—a digging tool like a shovel made so that it can be pushed into the ground with the foot

**sprouts**—edible young shoots especially from recently germinated seeds

**squatter**—someone who settles on public land in order to get title to it.

**thrust**—to cause to enter or pierce something by pushing

**type**—a particular kind, class, or group

**vegetarian**—a person who refrains from eating meat and lives on a diet made up of vegetables, fruits, grains, nuts, and sometimes eggs or dairy products

**weed**—to remove

harsh, and the Indians were still hostile at that time.

The prairie farmer needed a cast iron or steel plow to cut and turn the sod and stout draft animals, either oxen or heavy horses, to pull the plows. The work of the family was the homesteader's most valuable resource. Few had the money to hire extra help.

Corn was the most important crop. It was fed to work animals and to swine raised for meat and lard. Besides corn, the prairie farmer grew wheat, oats, clover and grass for feeding the animals. Each farm also had a potato patch, orchard, berry patch and vegetable garden. Food was processed on the farm and stored in a smokehouse, cellar or pantry. A barn was necessary for storage and stables.

Water sometimes had to be hauled 10 miles or more until the homesteader could dig a well. In the spring, homesteaders stayed home because the roads were too muddy for travel. If the weather was clear, they went to town on Saturday to transact business. The town provided services, goods and entertainment.

The area we know as Oklahoma was not included in the first lands offered for homesteading. In 1862, this area was held by several Indian tribes. These lands were not open for homesteading until Congress passed the Indian Allotment Act of 1887, which divided the Indian lands among individual members of the tribes. The land that was left over was opened for non-Indian settlement at that time.

## English Language Arts/Social Studies

1. Share background information either by reading it aloud or having students take turns reading sections to the class.
  - Discuss the vocabulary as it pertains to the background.
  - Lead a discussion of the Homestead Act, using the following questions as starters:
    - What groups of people might have wanted to take advantage of the opportunity to homestead?
    - Would you (students) be willing to leave family and belongings behind to homestead in a new land?
    - What would be some pros and cons to this adventure?
2. Provide copies of “The Homestead in Perspective,” an essay by Mari Sandoz included

with this lesson. This is a difficult reading because of the obscure imagery but it is a good first-hand account of pioneer life.

— Explain to students that Mari Sandoz had first-hand experience of life as a pioneer homesteader. She was born in Nebraska to Swiss immigrants who were pioneers. Her childhood was spent in hard labor on the home farm, and she developed snow blindness in one eye after a day spent digging the family's cattle out of a snowdrift.

— Read the selection together as a class.

— Review definitions of unfamiliar words.

— Discuss the use of imagery.

— Students will identify some of the mental pictures the writer paints.

— Discuss simile, metaphor and personification.

— Students will identify the underlined examples of figurative language in the reading as simile, metaphor or personification.

— Discuss the author's purpose in her use of imagery. (To give us a vivid picture of the homesteaders' lives.)

— Each student will select one example of imagery in the selection and draw a picture to illustrate it.

— The student will include the words his/her drawings are meant to illustrate somewhere in the drawing.

3. One of the ways the government advertised the free land available for homesteading was through handbills put out by the government or the railroad.

— Hand out copies of the handbill included with this lesson. Discuss handbills as a means of advertising. How does that method of advertising compare with advertising today. Are handbills still in use today?

— Read through the handbill with students, and explain that it was used to persuade people to move to Minnesota and take advantage of land offered for homesteading.

— Students will brainstorm about occupations that would be needed to start a community (farmers, merchants, teachers, mechanics, etc.).

— Divide students into groups of 3-5.

— Hand out the "Community Planning" worksheet.

— Each group will use the worksheet to plan an imaginary community.

— Students will develop computer or other presentations to present their communities to the class.

— Students will work individually to design handbills on large paper to advertise the communities their groups have planned.

— Handbills should include the community's name, a reply address, a description of the community and other important information.

— Students should be prepared to present and explain their handbills.

— Post the handbills around the school, and have other students vote on the best handbill.

## Materials

computer and library access

large-sized paper, markers and other materials for use in creating a handbill

## Ag Careers: Agricultural Surveyor

**JOB DESCRIPTION:** Mostly involved in land valuations, advice on development, management and use of rural land.

Agricultural surveyors work in a close relationship with the local government and environmentalists as well as the developers in the area. They value rural property, equipment, cattle and harvests for the purpose of selling a piece of farm land or for insurance claims. They are also involved in auctioneering of farms. The work sometimes entails mapping of areas for creation of resorts and wildlife sanctuaries.

### SKILLS:

Analytical thinking abilities

- Computer literacy
- Mapping skills
- Working knowledge of farming equipment
- Extensive ground use knowledge
- Background in farming practices
- In-depth knowledge of crops and animals
- Ability to do complex calculations and work out statistics
- Good interpersonal and written communication skills
- A thorough understanding of the land uses regulations and laws.
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**PREPARATION:** Some experience of farming, mapping and conservation is required apart from a higher diploma or a related degree in agricultural surveying. Other degrees or diplomas that are related such as estate management or valuation together with practical learning experience can be used as an alternative

## Extra Reading

Larsen, Kirby, *Hattie Big Sky*, Delacorte, 2006

Mierau, Christina, *Accept No Substitutes!: The History of American*

*Advertising*, Lerner, 2001.

Wilder, Laura Ingalls, *First Four Years*, Harper Collins, 1971.

Wilder, Laura Ingalls, *Little Town on the Prairie*, Harper Collins, 1981.

# Handbill

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## EMIGRATION



## UP THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER

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The attention of Emigrants and the Public generally, is called to the now rapidly improving

### TERRITORY OF MINNESOTA

Containing a population of 150,000, and goes into the Union as a State during the present year. According to an act of Congress passed last February, the State is munificently endowed with Lands for Public Schools and State Universities, also granting five percent, on all sales of U. S. Lands for Internal Improvements. On the 3d March, 1857, grants of Land from Congress was made to the leading Trunk Railroads in Minnesota, so that in a short time the trip from New Orleans to any part of the State will be made in from two and a half to three days. The

### CITY OF NININGER,

Situated on the Mississippi River, 35 miles below St. Paul, is now a prominent point for a large Commercial Town, being backed by an extensive Agricultural, Grazing and Farming Country; has fine streams in the interior, well adapted for Milling in all its branches; and Manufacturing **WATER POWER** to any extent.

Mr. **JOHN NININGER**, (a Gentleman of large means, ideas and liberality, speaking the various languages,) is the principal Proprietor of **Nininger**. He laid it out on such principles as to encourage all **MECHANICS**, Merchants, or Professions of all kinds, on the same equality and footing: the consequence is, the place has gone ahead with such rapidity that it is now an established City, and will annually double in population for years to come.

Persons arriving by Ship or otherwise, can be transferred without expense to Steamers going to Saint Louis; or stop at Cairo, and take Railroad to Dunleith (on the Mississippi). Steamboats leave Saint Louis and Dunleith daily for **NININGER**, and make the trip from Dunleith in 36 to 48 hours.

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### NOTICES.

1. All Railroads and Steamboats giving this card a conspicuous place, or *gratuitious insertion* in their cards, **AIDS THE EMMIGRANT** and forwards their own interest.
2. For authentic documents, reliable information and all particulars in regard to Occupations, Wages, Preempting Lands (in neighborhood), Lumber, Price of Lots, Expenses &c., apply to  
**THOMAS B. WINSTON, 27 Camp street, New Orleans.**  
**ROBERT CAMPBELL, St. Louis.**  
**JOSEPH B. FORBES, Dunleith.**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

# Community Planning

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Use the form below to plan your community. Include as many details as possible about the people and your community. Refer to the handbill as an example.

1. Name of your community:
2. Description: (Include geographic features, population, available farmland, water, etc.)
3. Transportation available: (railroad, stagecoach, steamboat, roads, etc.)
4. Occupations and types of people needed.
5. Other categories or details about your community.

Oklahoma Ag in the Classroom is a program of the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry and the Oklahoma State Department of Education.

# The Homestead in Perspective

Homesteaders were not a type, not as alike as biscuits cut out with a baking-powder can. They varied as much as their origins and their reasons for coming west. . . . A nervous-fingered murderer who fled west under a new name might join fences with a nonviolent river Baptist or a vegetarian who wouldn't kill a rabbit eating up his first sprouts of lettuce, no matter how hungry the settler might be.

With two fairly good draft horses, preferably three or four against the tough rooting, and a sod plow, the settler could break the prairie himself. or he could hire it done, usually by exchange of work with some of his neighbors. . . .

. . . Sometimes corn, beans or potatoes were dropped in the furrow behind the sod plow and covered by the next round but more often the corn was planted later by a man, a woman or an energetic boy or girl. With an apron or a bag tied on for the seed and a spade in the hand, the planter started. At every full man's step or two steps for the shorter-legged, the spade was thrust down into the sod, worked sideways to widen the slit, two kernels of corn dropped in, the spade swung out and the foot brought down on the cut to seal it. All day, up and down the sod ribbons, the rhythmic swing of step and thrust was maintained. To be sure, the spade arm was mighty work-sore the next morning, but every homesteader's child learned that the remedy for that was more work.

Millions of acres were planted this way, sometimes with beans and pumpkin seeds mixed with

the corn for a stretch. Good breaking grew few weeds except a scattering of big sunflowers so the sod field was little care. . .

. . . All of us knew children who put in twelve-, fourteen-hour days from March to November. We knew seven-, eight-year-old boys who drove four-horse teams to the harrow, who shocked grain behind the binder all day in heat and dust and rattlesnakes, who cultivated, hoed and weeded corn, and finally husked it out before they could go to school in November. And even then there were the chores morning and evening, the stock to feed, the cows to milk by lantern light. . . .

The eldest daughter of a sizable family was often a serious little mother by the time she was six, perhaps baking up a 49-pound sack of flour every week by the time she was ten. . . .

Almost from their first steps, the homesteader's children had to meet new situations, make decisions, develop a self-discipline if they were to survive. . .

They learned to rescue themselves in adulthood as they had once scabbled under the fence when the heel flies drove the milk cows crazy. What they didn't have they tried to make for themselves, earned money to buy, or did without.

Excerpts from "The Homestead in Perspective," an essay by Mari Sandoz.

1. Identify the five underlined examples of figurative language as metaphor, personification or simile.
2. What is the author's purpose in using the images? How does the use of imagery help convey the author's meaning?

TERM	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
Metaphor	Comparing two things by using one kind of object or using in place of another to suggest the likeness between them.	Her hair was silk.
Personification	Giving something human qualities	The stuffed toy bear smiled as the little boy hugged him close.
Simile	A figure of speech comparing two unlike things that is often introduced by "like" or "as."	The sun is like a yellow ball of fire in the sky.

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# The Homestead in Perspective (answers)

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Homesteaders were not a type, not as alike as biscuits cut out with a baking-powder can. (**simile**) They varied as much as their origins and their reasons for coming west. . . . A nervous-fingered (**personification**) murderer who fled west under a new name might join fences (**metaphor**) with a nonviolent river Baptist or a vegetarian who wouldn't kill a rabbit eating up his first sprouts of lettuce, no matter how hungry the settler might be.

With two fairly good draft horses, preferably three or four against the tough rooting, and a sod plow, the settler could break the prairie (**metaphor**) himself. or he could hire it done, usually by exchange of work with some of his neighbors. . . .

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