

Homesteading in the Badlands

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Lesson Overview: This lesson is about homesteading on the Great Plains. The area of study is homesteading. The students will learn of the hardships facing the homesteaders. What kind of people were homesteaders? How hard it was for them to survive. Only the strong could survive the elements that nature delivered. Cross curriculum can be used in the area of Science for study of the Badlands and how they were formed. Also, you could study the ecology of the prairie. Communication Arts could be used if you have your students read the attached information.

Objectives: After completing this lesson the student will be able to:

(Grade Level Expectations)

- Describe the historical development of the American economy, including: role of the frontier and agriculture.
- Describe the migrations of people from many regions of the world and the interactions of cultures and religious traditions that have contributed to America's history.
- Describe and evaluate the evolution of United States domestic and foreign policies, including: Manifest Destiny.
- Describe the changing character of American society and culture.
- Apply the following major economic concepts in the context of the historical period studied: scarcity, supply and demand

- List and explain criteria that give regions their identities in different periods of United States history.

(Objectives)

- Describe the role of government in the settlement of the West.
- Apply knowledge of place and location to demonstrate an understanding of human interdependence.
- Relate economic and political conditions to historical change.

Materials:

- Pictures attached.
- Background information included in this lesson.

Class Time: One class period.

Teacher Input:

- Summarize material added to this lesson to your students, read it out loud to them or copy the material and let them read it.
- Have a class discussion about Homesteading and how it changed America.
- The teacher: Make sure your students understand Manifest Destiny.
- *Manifest Destiny was the destiny of the nation to be stretched from sea to sea. Ordained by God and expansionism*
- Ask students to explain the Homestead Act of 1863.
- *A – 160 acre – any American citizen – filed claim – paid \$10 fee*
- The teacher: Explain to your students about the type of people who went West.
- *Young middle class, average age 30, life span was short, seeking inexpensive land, many men jobless in east*

Activity: Divide class into groups. Pass out the “Homesteading on the Plains” pictures. Have each group discuss the picture that their group has and be prepared to discuss what is seen in each picture in detail. Ask the students to describe how these pictures make them feel. Would they be able to live under these circumstances? What would be required in order to live in this sparse area? Locate this area on a map.

Questions for Review:

- Q – How many times was the Homestead Act changed according to this article?
- *Five times*
- In your opinion, why do you think the Homestead Act was changed so many times?
- *A – Students be able to state appropriate answers for this question.*
- What was the White River Badlands of South Dakota referred to as in the article?
- *A – The Great American Desert*
- Why was this area known as the Great American Desert?
- *A – High winds – Little rainfall – poor soil – extreme terrain*
- Describe a sod house.
- *A – A house built from the soil. Settlers shaved the top three inches of root soil, made 12 to 18 inch side blocks, layered the blocks of grass, grass side down, walls about 24 inches thick, warm in winter, cool in summer*

Closure: Life on the Homestead was not easy. They lived in sod houses. Sod houses usually had dirt floors and the walls were covered with a mud mixture. Sometimes if they had newspaper they would put this over their walls. Using a hand held plow with a team of horses they would break the soil. Can you only imagine the hard work that went into this process? Many times their crops would not turn out well. The Homesteaders had very little money. Many had to pick up and leave the area because they just couldn't make a living with the extremes that nature had to offer. Eventually, some of them were able to build wood houses. Life on the Prairie was hard and unforgiving to those who stuck living there out.

Assessment: Participation in class discussion.

Extension: In this lesson I have made the activity friendly to IEP students. Also, if you wanted to learn more about this area in the Badlands dealing with World War II and the gunnery range you can go to this website: <http://www.nps.gov/badl/exp/humans.htm> then click on Gunnery Range.

Another excellent lesson would be the affect Homesteading had on the Native Americans.

References: Leaning Into the Wind: Homesteading in the White River Badlands
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
Badlands National Park
Division of Resource Education
25216 Ben Reifiel Road
Interior, South Dakota 57750
All Quoted information came from this source.

“Homesteading on the Plains” - Pictures
<http://www.pbs.org/historyofus>

Graphics: There are pictures added to this lesson plan of the Badlands and the prairie on how it looks today.

“A People without history are like the wind on the buffalo grass . . .” Lakota

This is the information that you will need to know before doing this lesson.

Leaning Into the Wind: Homesteading in the White River Badlands

Almost Free Land

“When the Civil War ended in 1865, the U.S. directed its attention toward western development. Homesteading attracted depression-ridden Easterners, war-ravaged Southerners, and Europeans. They came west by the hundred of thousands, lured by these advertisements for “free land.”

“In 1863 Abraham Lincoln signed the Homestead Act, legislation which granted 160 acres to any American citizen who filed a claim, paid a \$10 fee, and agreed to work the property for five years. Rich farm land west of the Mississippi was rapidly claimed and towns soon developed. However, the White River Badlands of South Dakota were less attractive – high winds, little rainfall, poor soil, and extreme terrain did not draw farmers. The area was nicknamed “the Great American Desert.” Military strategists proposed that cavalry horses be replaced with imported camels when exploring the Great Plains.”

“In 1900, the Homestead Act was amended, making areas like the Badlands more likely to experience settlement. Now, settlers simply had to pay a \$14 filing fee, 10 acres under cultivation (later modified to 5 acres) and live on the land for five years. This process was nicknamed “proving up.” In 1912, the “prove up” period of time was reduced from five to three years. Just three years later, another amendment was applied to land west of the Missouri River, enabling settlers to acquire 320 acres instead of 160. In 1915, acreage was doubled again to 640 acres per homestead and reduced the period of time to “prove up” the land to only eighteen months.”

The Arrival of the Iron Horse

“Another vital component to the Euro-American settlement of the White River Badlands was the construction of the railroads. In 1907 the Chicago and North Western Railway Company built its line from Pierre through Philip and Wall to Rapid City. During the same year, the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad Company completed its line from Chamberlain to Rapid City along the White River through Kadoka and

Interior. This made the Badlands easily accessible to the homesteaders from the east. By 1920, nearly every allotment in the White River Badlands was settled, giving hundreds the opportunity they sought – a chance to own property.”

Shelter

“Early Badlands homesteaders lived in very simple structures scraped out of sod tables or scooped out of the soil. Called dugouts, this type of shelter was the most readily available due to the lack of trees for construction. However, the arrival of the railroads made access to lumber simpler, if expensive. The most common type of residence in the Badlands was the sod house. Buffalo grass and blue grama grass was abundant, providing an almost limitless supply of building materials. Roots in prairie grasses give the top three inches of soil a tight consistency that provides protection from the elements but does not break down in rain. To construct with sod, settlers “shaved” a belt of roots and grass 12 to 18 inches wide and three inches deep, creating blocks. These soil bricks were layered, grass side down, staggering the layers. Two rows were usually arranged parallel making the finished walls about 24 inches thick. These houses were warm in the winter and cool in the summer.”

“South Dakota was one of the last states to become electrified. Several areas still lacked electricity in the 1940s. Instead, caves were constructed to keep materials cool in summer while insulating food and milk in winter to avoid freezing. Some settlers stored produce in bed with them at night to keep them from freezing. Plumbing was also a problem, particularly since surface water was undrinkable and there was no rural water system for running water. Hand digging wells proved useless since the water table was over 100 feet deep. To make small amounts of surface water usable some homesteaders threw cactus pads into the whitish water, filtering it enough to water livestock. Eventually the Milwaukee Railroad dug a cistern at the depot in the town of Interior, keeping it full of water hauled from Rapid City. This supplied drinkable water for fifty cents a barrel.”

Farms to Ranches

“Initially, homesteaders assumed they could exist on crops with a few cattle for meat. However, due to the poor soil and harsh climate, over time agricultural endeavors changed from crops to grazing. Cattle were profitable, dead or alive. A fertilizer company back east paid two dollars a

ton for bones of cattle. Homesteaders in the Badlands brought in bleached cattle bones, remnants of the blizzard of 1905, by the wagon load. Milk from live cows was the homesteaders' most reliable source of cash, but 160 acres of Badlands would not support more than the requisite team of horses and a couple of cows. The typical homesteader sold only five gallons of cream a week, which brought in three dollars – barely enough money to support an individual, much less a family. After America entered World War I in 1917, beef production was declared “an essential industry,” making grazing the dominant activity.”

“Then as now, hay was a necessity. Ranchers learned the tops of the Badlands tables were perfect hay ground after they filled in gullies and cut away protrusions, carving paths to the top. When the hay was cut and piled, it as slid down by means of a “hay slide” – a wedge shaped device five feet wide at the base and 600 feet long. Badlands hay slides were located at Hay Butte, Cuny Table, and Sheep Mountain Table.”



Tenacious As The Prairie

“The Dust bowl conditions of the 1930s drove off nearly 85% of the homesteaders. 24,000 families were relocated by the federal government. Those who remained are still here today – as tenacious as the prairie grass on which they depend. Their roots have dug in deep to hold them in place through the 50 mile per hour winds, blizzards, and torrents of spring rains. Today’s Badlanders are of mixed European or Euro-American Indian heritage. Names such a Her Not Help Him, Whirlwind Horse co-exist with Kudnra, Carlbom, and Crew. They share an intense pride in their home and their history and work with the National Park Service to share their heritage with you. . .”

