



Leaning Into the Wind: *Homesteading in the White River Badlands*



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.”

Almost Free Land

In 1862 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, put 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. However, 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 was to be 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 as 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, a visitor to Badlands National Park.