

Restoration of the Tall Grass Prairie at Homestead National Monument, Beatrice, Nebraska

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Homestead National Monument, a T-shaped quarter section of prairie and woodland is located five miles west of Beatrice, Nebraska, in the southeast corner of the state. It is built on the land claim of Daniel Freeman, one of the first applicants to file under the Homestead Act of 1862. This monument commemorates the influence of the Homestead Movement on American History. It "is a memorial to the pioneers who braved the rigors of the prairie frontier to build their homes and fortunes in a new land." (Brochure on the Homestead National Monument, National Park Service, 1987).

Daniel Freeman is credited with building the first Homestead in the United States. At the Homestead site, he found good soil, adequate timber which he needed for lumber and fuel, and plenty of water in the creek for use in his home and to water the livestock. The tall grass prairie provided feed for the livestock. The pioneers also used the prairie grass for building their first homes, the sod house.

Many attempts were made to make Daniel Freeman's homestead into a national park. In 1908, six weeks after Freeman's death, interested Beatrice citizens started a movement to preserve the homestead as a national park.

Senator George W. Norris of Nebraska introduced the legislation in the U.S. Senate on January 22, 1935. Unlike previous homestead bills, Norris's proposal did not die in a congressional committee. It was signed into law on March 19, 1936 by President Franklin Roosevelt and the new legislation became Public Law 480, 74th Congress, creating "The Homestead National Monument of America in Gage County, Nebraska".

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(Mattison, Ray H., Nebraska History, volume 43, number 1, March, 1962).

After the Civil War, thousands of Veterans took advantage of the Homestead Act. Population rapidly grew in Nebraska, the Dakotas, and Montana with the free distribution of public lands. By 1935, the supply of suitable areas was exhausted. Today many descendants of the original Homesteaders still successfully farm the land. (Pamphlet on Homestead National Monument)



Ralph Shaver, superintendent of Homestead National Monument, standing in the tall big bluestem. Photo by D.E. Hutchinson, Oct. 18, 1957.

In 1938, the National Park Service asked the Soil Conservation Service for help in re-establishing a tall grass prairie at the Homestead National Monument. Based on my experience and success in establishing tall grass prairies in Pawnee County, Nebraska,

I was asked to help the Park Service at the National Monument. At the time, I was working as the District Soil Conservationist.

Nineteen thirty-eight was a good year for the growth and harvest of native grass seed in southeast Nebraska. Seed in a virgin native grass prairie, primarily of big bluestem, indian grass, and switchgrass, was found on the Joe Scheve farm located near the Homestead National Monument. The seed was harvested by cutting the grass with a grain binder and then separating the seed with a threshing machine.

Big bluestem is the chief component of the tall grass prairie. It is the "king" of native grasses. It is often called the "ice cream" of native grasses cattle eat it so well. It is one of the most robust and colorful of the grasses. After frost it turns a light reddish color. Homesteaders found corn grew best where bluestem had grown.

Indian grass was named for the American Indian. It is the state native grass of Oklahoma. It grows tall and is one of the most beautiful of the grasses with golden seedheads appearing in September.

Switchgrass is very deep rooted. It is a vigorous sod forming grass that is good for planting on road cuts, fills, and earth dams. It grows in colonies or patches in uplands and lowlands.

Once the big bluestem, indian grass and switchgrass seed was harvested, the next step was planting. The land at Homestead National Monument, where the grass would be planted, had previously grown corn. The area was disced lightly in the Spring of 1939 to prepare the land for seeding the tall grass prairie seed.



Homestead National Monument Supt. Ralph Shaver standing in head high switchgrass. Photo by D.E. Hutchinson.

The Soil Conservation Service in Pawnee County, Nebraska, owned a Minneapolis doublerun feed grain drill capable of planting "trashy" (seed plus stems, leaves) tall grass prairie mixtures. It was necessary to have a man standing on the back of the drill to keep the seed agitated with a stick.



Supt. Ralph Shaver standing in indian grass. Photo by Darrel A. Davis.

The drill was loaned to Homestead in the Spring of 1939 for seeding the restored prairie.

Since being re-established, the farmers who live near Homestead have managed the tall grass prairie by cutting it for hay and by an occasional burning.

The restored tall native grass prairie at Homestead National Monument is a replica of the original vegetation. The restoration shows present day visitors what the prairie looked like in the early days before it was disturbed. They get a feel for the land as it was when Daniel Freeman made his Homestead claim.

Today, seed for the tall grass species, grown on seed farms, is planted in rows like corn and then cultivated, irrigated, and harvested with a grain combine. Improved drills are available for planting tall grass prairie seed. The trash goes down as mulch. Several hundred acres are planted annually for seed in the Midwest. Many miles are also planted along highways. Interstate I-80, across Nebraska, is a good example.

At one time, tall grass prairie covered millions of acres in North America. Today, only a few isolated patches remain. We take encouragement from the fact that more people are becoming interested in preserving and re-establishing prairies.

References

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- Mattison, Ray H.** Homestead National Monument: Its Establishment and Administration. Reprinted from Nebraska History, volume 43, number 1, March, 1962.
- Pamphlet. (1987).** Homestead National Monument Nebraska. National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.