



This goose, designed by J.N. "Ding" Darling, is the symbol of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Lee Metcalf

National Wildlife Refuge

The Homestead Act of 1862

A Time to Remember

As you travel the rural back roads of the west, you are likely to encounter reminders of a bygone era – homesteads. You might find a complete farmhouse that has been preserved through the years, but it's more likely that you will come across a sagging remnant of log walls or just an imprint in the ground where a simple structure once stood. Each of these discoveries should bring to mind the struggle of pioneering settlers who came to the west in search of freedom and new beginnings on land that demanded backbreaking toil for limited yield.

2012 is the 150th Anniversary of the Homestead Act.

The Homestead Act, passed on May 20, 1862, was intended to hasten the settlement of lasting, legal communities in the western territory by granting 160 acres of surveyed public land to any adult U.S. citizen or intended citizen. Anyone, including women and minorities, was qualified to receive land under this Act. Under the Act, a claimant was required to improve the acreage received by building a dwelling and cultivating the land. Improvements to the land had to be documented for 5 continuous years, after which the original claimant owned the property free and clear except for a small registration fee.

Easier Said Than Done

The lure of free land was enticing, but there were hidden costs to be paid. In the east, homesteaders found easily cultivated soils for agriculture and trees for building houses. In the west, homesteaders encountered poorer soils, a shorter growing season, and a dryer climate. There were fewer trees in the west, so often homes were constructed of sod bricks and heated with dried cow dung. The start-up costs for western homesteads were expensive, because everything in this unsettled area had to be made with labor and materials onsite. Because of these difficulties, only 40 percent of the claims filed under the Homestead Act were actually granted.



Homestead cabin in Montana

USFWS

What the Homestead Act Achieved

Although it often did not make economic sense to move west of the Mississippi, it appealed to a sense of something American – freedom. This was the freedom for an individual or head of household to determine their own financial or religious destiny separate from government intervention in these pursuits. The values and energy that pushed the homesteaders forward into unknown hardships were the same values their children brought to the 20th Century when this country became the most powerful and influential country in the world.

Environmental Impacts of the Homestead Act

The removal of sod from prairie grasslands by homesteaders and a dry, windy period in the 1930s caused what would become known as the Dust Bowl in the central United States. Many homesteads were abandoned during this time. Waterfowl numbers plummeted as damage to grasslands and wetlands caused by Dust Bowl conditions left populations struggling to sustain themselves.

Good News for Refuges

The Dust Bowl marked the beginning of the withdrawal of unsettled public domain lands by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in preparation for a nationwide conservation effort that would be focused on the prairies of the West. In an effort to restore those lands that were degraded by Dust Bowl conditions, Roosevelt established 134 national wildlife refuges to add to a growing system of refuges. The Civilian Conservation Corps and Works Progress Administration supplied the labor and financial support required to build the infrastructure for these refuges. In 1940, Roosevelt combined the Bureau of Biological Survey and the Bureau of Fisheries to create the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the agency that today administers the National Wildlife Refuge System.

The End of an Era

Under the Homestead Act of 1862, about 10% of the lands in the United States were transferred into private hands. The Act would remain in place until 1976 when it was repealed by Congress except for the State of Alaska. Then in 1986, homesteading was closed in Alaska.

Whaley Homestead

The Homestead Act Expands

The Homestead Act of 1862 initially lured people only as far west as Nebraska, the farthest point west where it was considered possible to still farm without irrigation. But lands east of Nebraska began filling up and settlers started drifting further west to places like Montana, Wyoming, and Utah. As homesteaders experienced the dry conditions of these western states, it soon became clear that the 160 acres offered through the Homestead Act couldn't produce enough to make a living on. Several pieces of legislation were passed to remedy this problem, including the Desert Land Act of 1877. This Act gave up to 640 acres of Federal land at \$1.25 per acre to an adult married couple who promised to irrigate the land within 3 years.

Homesteading in Montana

Peter Whaley, a retired Indian Agent, and his wife, Hannah, moved into the Bitterroot Valley of western Montana in 1877, claiming 160 acres under the Desert Land Act. The Bitterroot Valley, lying west of the Continental Divide, offered rich soil and a moderate climate for agriculture. By adding homestead filings to the original claim, two of Whaley's children enlarged the farm to 400 acres. Additional improvements included fenced fields, barns, and outbuildings. The Whaley's augmented their farming income by raising livestock, operating a meat market in Stevensville, and investing in the Stevensville hotel and in a sawmill in Florence.

The Whaley's first cultivated their land and in 1879, built a small log cabin nearby. By 1885, they had completed a two-story house made of square-hewn logs (approximately 12 inches wide) that were covered with pine

weatherboard siding. This house still stands today as a lasting example of craftsmanship of the late 19th century.

Changes Through the Years

In 1905, the Whaley's sold their land. For the next 65 years, the Whaley homestead would change hands three times and be used for a variety of mostly agricultural pursuits. From 1905 to 1909, Forest Plummer and Mary Carroll raised horses on the property. During their ownership, several new structures were built, including a horse barn. The Bitterroot Valley Irrigation Company (BVIC) owned the homestead from 1909 to 1921, during which time the upper fields were planted with MacIntosh apple trees and gooseberry bushes for nursery stock, along with seed crops of radishes and sweet peas. After the BVIC was forced out of business in 1921, the Whaley Homestead was sold to Fred and Anna Hagen. The Hagens returned the property to a self-sufficient farm. Over the next 50 years, they raised corn, potatoes, hogs, and dairy cows. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, they sold all of the parcels of the homestead to the Ravalli National Wildlife Refuge, now the Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge, with a stipulation that their son, Harold Hagen, retained life use of the house where he lived until 1988. These lands formed the core land holding that became the Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge.

Stewardship Ensured

In 1992, the Whaley Homestead was listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Refuge staff, recognizing the significant cultural and interpretive values of the Whaley Homestead, is dedicated to preserving this unique historic property.

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Interior log construction of the Whaley House



Whaley House

Rob Moeller

Brant Loflin / USFWS

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