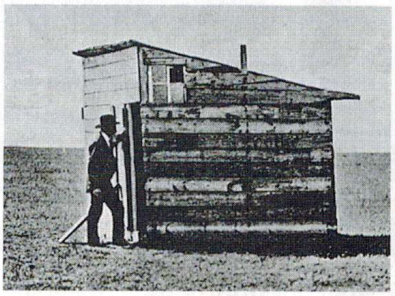
15 Fencing the Homestead



With a portable shack, a homesteader could establish one claim and move on to another.

Imagine: you are settled on a farm in Kansas. You've worked hard, your crops are thriving, you're pleased with yourself. Then a cowpuncher decides to drive his herd to market and, though you're not right on the Chisholm Trail, you're near enough. The herd stampedes and longhorns trample your land. Wham, bang, squash! You have no crops. Nothing left of a year's work. And maybe no farm, because without a crop to sell, you don't have money to buy more seed and supplies.

That kind of thing happened. It was just one of the things that discouraged farming in the Plains states. The early pioneers and the forty-niners (who went west during the gold rush) leapfrogged over the plains and mountains and settled in the Far West. They called the plains the "Great American Desert" and believed it was no good for farming. They were wrong. The region would become one of the best agricultural areas the world has ever known. But they were right about one thing. It wasn't an easy place to be a farmer. There were hardly any trees and not enough water. The soil was wonderfully rich—the pioneers found native grasses tall enough to hide a man on horseback—but the weather was either blisteringly hot

"Any woman who can stand her own company... and is willing to put in as much time at careful labor as she does over the washtub, will certainly succeed," wrote one homesteader.

The Plains states stretch from Texas to Canada and from Kansas and Iowa to the Rocky Mountains. The Plains states are Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming.

The advertisements for land in Kansas and Nebraska never said what a cornfield looked like after a grasshopper plague had finished with it.

or frigidly cold, with tornadoes thrown in just to keep people on their toes. Besides that, there were invasions of grasshoppers that ate crops, droughts that dried them up, and a loneliness on the open plains that drove some people mad.

None of that seemed to matter. The dream of many Americans was to have a farm. Land in the East was spoken for. Even with problems, those vast plains looked inviting to people who wanted land of their own. Winds blew much of the time, which meant that windmills could be used to pump water from deep wells. That water made irrigation possible.

In 1862 (which was during the Civil War), Congress passed a bill called the Homestead Act. It said that for $10 any citizen, or anyone who had filed papers to become a citizen, could have 160 acres of public land. That included women. As soon as the Civil War was over, a lot of people headed west to get land and become farmers. Some say a quarter of a million widows and single women were among those who became homesteaders.

Many homesteaders were immigrants—right off the boat. Some western settlements became all German, or all Danish, or all Swedish, or all Norwegian. Many immigrants tried to hang on to their original culture. Food was one way to do it. Greek, Polish, German, or Italian food was found in surprising places.

The Plains States are the heart of our nation, and that heart beats slow and sure year after year.... Nowhere can we find a closer correlation of landscape and character than in the Plains States. The people there are, for the most part, as plain and level and unadorned as the scenery.

—WILLIAM INGE, PLAYWRIGHT

Successful or not, a pioneer had to get used to being a long way from anywhere.

Hear the wind
Blow through the buffalo-grass,
Blow over wild-grape and brier.
This was frontier, and this,
And this, your house, was frontier.
There were footprints upon the hill
And men lie buried under,
Tamers of earth and rivers.
They died at the end of labor,
Forgotten is the name.

—STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT,
WESTERN STAR

The newcomers didn't have to worry about buffalo herds anymore—the buffalo were practically gone—but they did have that problem of cattle wandering about. They couldn't fence their land because there were no trees to make fenceposts; besides, wooden fences rotted, or got knocked over, or burned. Joseph Glidden solved their problem. He invented barbed wire. He experimented in his backyard with an old coffee mill and a big grindstone that turned. He used them to twist two wires together, and then he coiled sharp barbs around the wires. With barbed wire, farmers could fence in their property.
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Recess for the children of Pine Creek School, Livingston, Montana, and their teacher, Miss Sherman, in 1888.

Pronghorns Abounding

Brewster Higley, a Pennsylvania doctor, packed his bags and headed west to become a homesteader in Kansas. He was so happy in his new home that he wrote a poem about it called "The Western Home." A neighbor set the poem to music and gave it a new name, "Home on the Range." Before long everyone was singing it. When Higley used the words *buffalo* and *antelope* everyone knew what he meant, but the proper names for those animals are *bison* and *pronghorns.*

Oh, give me a home,
Where the buffalo roam,
Where the deer and the
antelope play,
Where seldom is heard
A discouraging word,
And the skies are not
cloudy all day.

Home, home on the range,
Where the deer and the
antelope play,
Where seldom is heard
A discouraging word,
And the skies are not
cloudy all day.

Home on the Grange

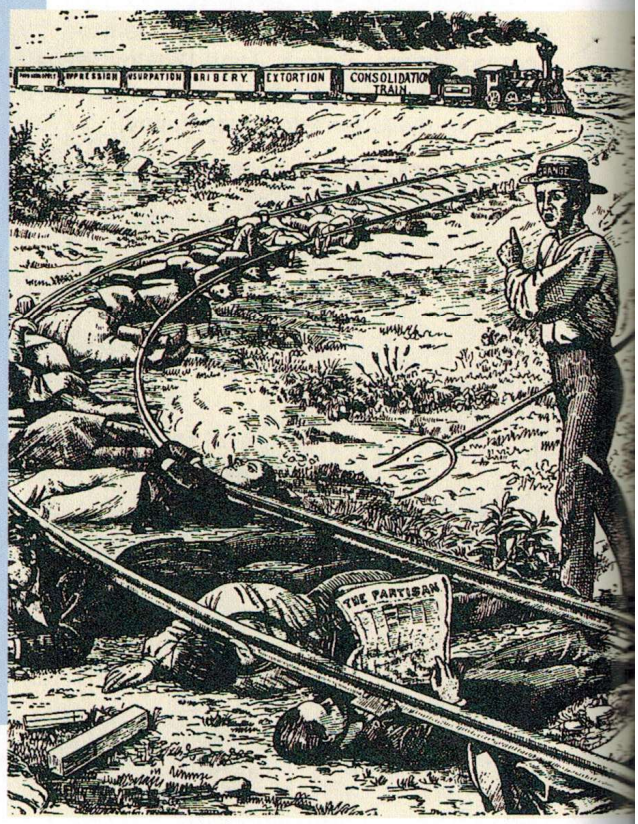
In 1867, Oliver Hudson Kelley founded a social and political organization for farmers called the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry. It grew rapidly, especially in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Iowa. The Grange was a way for farmers to band together and protect their interests. Working people were joining unions; farmers joined the Grange.

The grangers (that's what members were called) influenced lawmakers and established cooperative stores and mills. They made politicians pay attention to the farmers' concerns. Do you know what that word *husbandry* means? In medieval times a *husband* was the peasant who farmed his own land, the man of the family who provided for his household. He had to look after his crops and animals and use them economically, and from that we get one meaning of *husband,* which is "to be thrifty with one's resources." A meaning for *husbandry* that developed from this was simply "farming." From that came the meaning that the word usually has today: the application of scientific principles to farming, especially animal breeding.

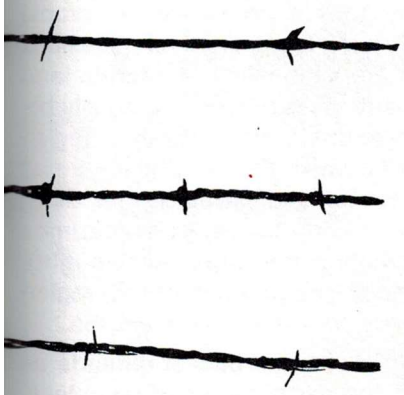
And the word *grange*? It comes from England, where a grange was a farm or a farm building for storing grain, like a barn.

Early types of barbed wire. In 1874 Joseph

Now the cowboys had a problem. Those fences got in the way of their herds. Well, cowboys and farmers did some fighting, but before long the farmers and ranchers won. The cattle drives were over and most



The Grange wakes sleeping farmers up to railroads' unfair practices—they made farmers pay more to ship their goods than the middlemen in cities did.



Glidden put out 10,000 pounds of barbed wire.

cowboys turned into ranch hands. By 1890, railroads seemed to be about everywhere, so the cattle drives weren't necessary anyway. Railroads meant farmers and ranchers could send their cattle and grains to faraway markets.

A new kind of agriculture developed on the Plains. The early American farms had been self-sufficient. The farmer took care of most of his own needs. Farm families raised cows, hogs, and chickens, grew wheat and vegetables, killed game, caught fish, built their own homes, and made their own furniture and clothes. They didn't have much use for money; they bartered for the few things they needed.

Self-sufficient farming wasn't suited to the Plains area or to the times. In the 19th century, agriculture became a big business. Many farmers became specialists who grew only one or two crops. It happened quickly. For thousands and thousands of years men and women had used the same methods of sowing and harvesting. Then a few inventions came along and changed everything.

Plains Writing

Willa Cather

July came on with that breathless, brilliant heat which makes the plains of Kansas and Nebraska the best corn country in the world. It seemed as if we could hear the corn growing in the night; under the stars one caught a faint crackling in the dewy, heavy-odoured cornfields where the feathered stalks stood so juicy and green. If all the great plain from the Missouri to the Rocky Mountains had been under glass, and the heat regulated by a thermometer, it could not have been better for the yellow tassels that were ripening and fertilizing the silk day by day. The cornfields were far apart in those times, with miles of wild grazing land between. It took a clear, meditative eye like my grandfather's to foresee that they would enlarge and multiply until they would be, not the Shimerdas' cornfields, or Mr. Bushy's, but the world's cornfields; that their yield would be one of the great economic facts, like the wheat crop of Russia, which underlie all the activities of men, in peace or war.

When spring came, after that hard winter, one could not get enough of the nimble air. Every morning I wakened with a fresh consciousness that winter was over. There were none of the signs of spring for which I used to watch in Virginia, no budding woods or blooming gardens. There was only spring itself, the throb of it, the light restlessness, the vital essence of it everywhere; in the sky, in the swift clouds, in the pale sunshine, and in the warm, high wind rising suddenly, sinking suddenly, impulsive and playful like a big puppy that pawed you and then lay down to be petted. If I had been tossed down blindfold on that red prairie, I should have known that it was spring.

Everywhere now there was the smell of burning grass. Our neighbors burned off their pasture before the new grass made a start, so that the fresh growth would not be mixed with the dead stand of last year. Those light, swift fires, running about the country, seemed a part of the same kindling that was in the air.

—WILLA CATHER, *MY ANTONIA*, 1918

On the Lone Prairie

The first Europeans in the New World were surprised by America's forests—by their vastness and vigor—but they weren't surprised by forests. Europe was full of trees. It was when the people pushed west, into the continent's heartland, that they found something that was indeed a new world. America's savannas—its grasslands—seemed endless. They were like nothing any of them had seen before. The grass sometimes reached 12 feet, so that the tallest animals and men were hidden in the growth. But if you stood on a rise and looked over the grass, there was nothing to block your view—no mountains, no trees—nothing. Just an enormity of sky that stretched out in every direction and rubbed its belly on the grass.

The unshorn fields, boundless
and beautiful,
For which the speech of
England has no name—

That was poet William Cullen Bryant's explanation for that French word: *prairie*. It means "big meadow." (There were savannas in Africa—with lions and giraffes and rhinoceros—but the African grasslands were much smaller than the American prairie.)

Our prairie divided itself into three regions. The *tallgrass prairie* began below Lake Michigan, in Illinois, and pushed west. (All of Iowa was filled with tall grass.) The tall grasses thrived where there was plenty of rain; sometimes those grasses—especially big bluestem—grew half an inch a day.

Far to the west, in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains, there were short grasses—just a few inches high. This was the Great Plains region. It was high, flat, dusty-dry grassland—a *steppe*—cold in winter and hot in summer. The grasses that grew best on the Great Plains—buffalo grass and blue grama—were drought-tolerant.

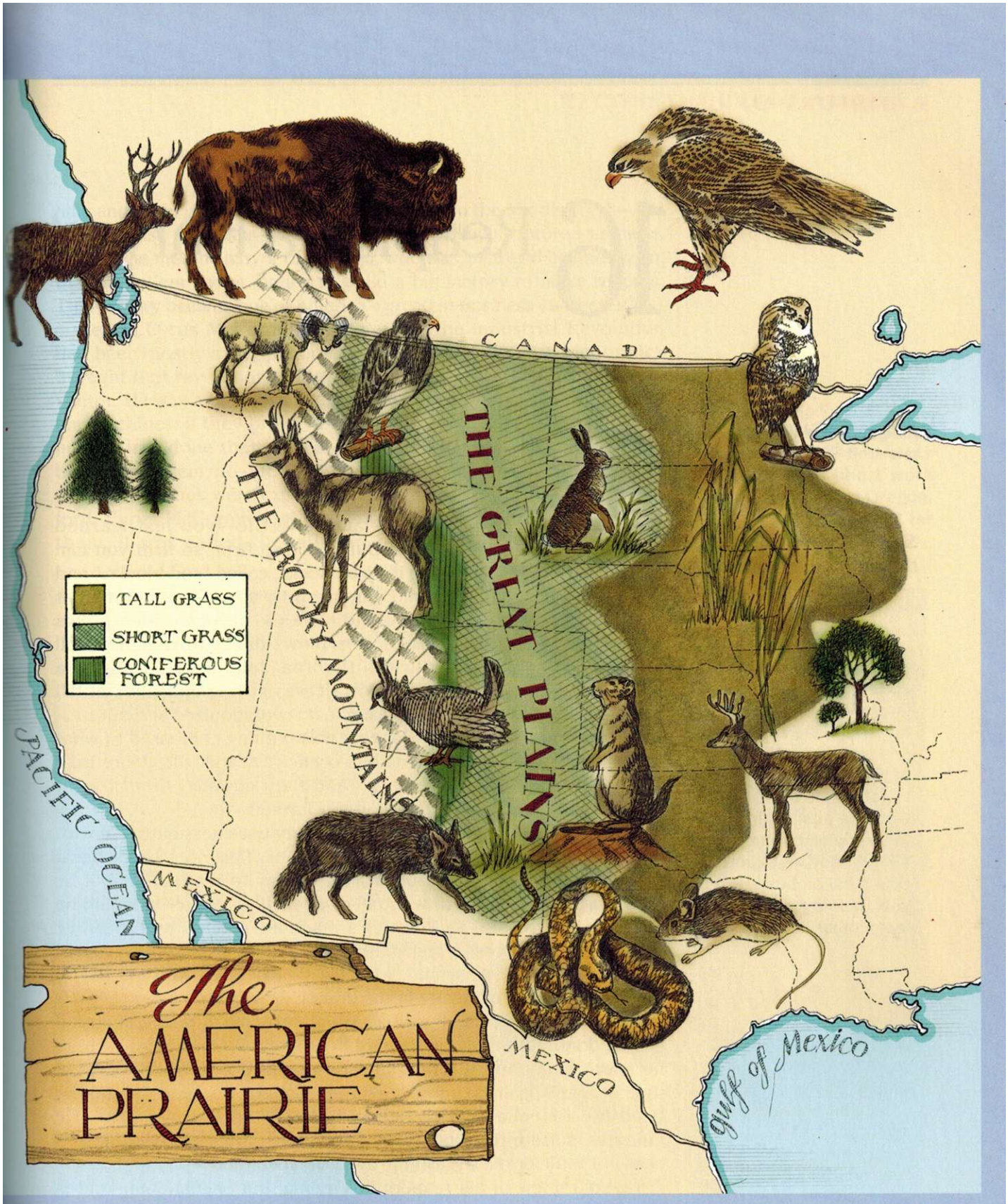
In between the tall and short were—as you might guess—mixed and medium grasses. Altogether it was the greatest grassland on earth, and home to wildflowers, birds, insects, and animals in astonishing balance and abundance. Before the railroads, the homesteaders, and the cattle ranchers pushed west, there were perhaps 60 million bison and 50 million pronghorn, along with millions of wolves, deer, elk, and coyote—as well as grizzlies, bighorn sheep, cottontails, rattlesnakes, and perhaps 5 billion (yes, billion) prairie dogs. (Prairie dogs aren't dogs at all, they are burrowing members of the squirrel family.) But there were more earthworms and butterflies than prairie dogs. And as for birds and ducks, in migration season they sometimes filled the sky like a dark moving cloud that blocked the sun from the earth and stretched as far as anyone could see.

Prairie grass has thick roots that twist and tangle and intertwine with the earth. That root-hard soil made the sod that the settlers cut for their homes. At first it broke the homesteaders' plows—but steel plows mastered the sod. Prairie fires kept the grasslands treeless. The fires started naturally, from sparks of lightning, and they spread—like wildfire. The fires were useful; they cleared out the dead grasses and encouraged new shoots. But animals—or people—were sometimes faced with terrifying walls of flame higher than their heads.

Domestic animals (cattle and sheep) and farmers (who pulled up the grasses and planted food crops) changed the prairie from grassland to market basket. The fertile land where grass grew so vigorously became the richest agricultural region in the world. The vast prairies turned into corn and wheatfields, or cities, or grazing lands, or sometimes forests (when fires were fought). Today, the produce of this region feeds our nation and others, too.

That market basket reminds us the earth is a changing place. The cornfields are just the latest inhabitants of a region rich in environmental history. In the great sweep of time, the grasslands were newcomers. One hundred million years ago, mid-America was a tropical jungle, with lush forests and roaming dinosaurs. Then the climate changed, the dinosaurs disappeared (to return on TV screens), and grass took over.

And what of that grassland? Where can you see prairie today—real prairie, like Lewis and Clark saw? Hardly anywhere. Illinois, which once had 37 million acres of tallgrass prairie (and is known as the Prairie State) now has about 3,500 acres of it. There is some tallgrass prairie at Konza Preserve, near Manhattan, Kansas, and the Nature Conservancy has a tallgrass preserve in Oklahoma, 17 miles north of Pawhuska. For midgrass, visit the Willa Cather Prairie near Red Cloud, Nebraska. You can see shortgrass prairie at Coronado National Grassland in Kansas. You'll also find prairie at Blue Mounds State Park in Minnesota and prairie-dog towns in Shirley Basin, Wyoming. To see prairie, along with an awesome cave, visit Wind Cave National Park in South Dakota.


CANADA
THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS
THE GREAT PLAINS
TALL GRASS
SHORT GRASS
CONIFEROUS FOREST
PACIFIC OCEAN
MEXICO
MEXICO
Gulf of Mexico
The AMERICAN PRAIRIE