


Voyage of Discovery

On the Lewis and Clark Trail – Rapid City, South Dakota, to Cody, Wyoming

10 July 2021



I think I'm going to cry, like when I saw the Eiffel Tower. All I can think of is that my grandmother saw this.

Julie Meacham Jones
July 10, 2021

Homesteading

Before this road trip was mapped out – when it was just Julie saying there were some things she'd always wanted to see like Old Faithful and Mount Rushmore – was when I realized that there was something about the “land” in landmarks that holds a special place in hers and all our imaginations.

Every time she added to her list of I-want-to-sees, it was another landmark. But not one was in the part of the United States we demeaningly call “flyover country” because of its flat sameness, which took months to cross in Lewis and Clark’s time and still fills three hours of a five-hour coast-to-coast flight. She didn’t mention places amid the “amber waves of grain” Katharine Lee Bates wrote about in her poem. Just Bates’ “purple mountain majesties” on the far side.

We could have met in the Black Hills of South Dakota, to begin this trip, but Lewis and Clark aren’t the only reason I said we should start in St. Louis.

It’s because once I started thinking about **land**marks, I also realized the most prominent, most expansive and most thoroughly under-appreciated landmark in our land is the part described by one of my first newspaper editors. To emphasize to the rest of the newsroom just how tough people like him from Middle America were (because toughness, apparently, is the only quality Middle Americans and editors want to be known for), he bragged that there were only two trees on the prairie between his house and the North Pole to block the winter wind.

Next time you’re flying to the moon and glance in the rearview mirror, long after the Rocky Mountains and Grand Canyon have shriveled out of view and the Great Lakes no longer glint in the sun, you’ll still be able to see the Great Plains. They’re that big.

But to appreciate just how big “that big” is, you must cross it by land. Julie is getting a feel for that now, and I’m being reminded. Still, there are numerous Americans who’ve made just this kind of trip and – having come to an understanding of the Great Plains’ vastness – then asked a simple question: Why would anyone move here?

The answer is equally simple. The U.S. government gave much of this land away.

In 1862 during the height of the Civil War, Congress passed the Homestead Act at the urging of President Abraham Lincoln. Under this law, half a billion acres of federal land in 30 states – larger than Alaska and nearly three times the size of Texas – was handed out by the General Land Office.¹

“Homestead, or free claim, costs first on entry 14 dollars and at time of proof of residence costs 4 dollars more, making 18 dollars for 160 acres,” Dakota Territory homesteader J.G. Towle wrote a friend in 1884.² “Is this cheap enough for you? If so, pull up stakes and come to Dakota as soon as you can.”

In the same documentary in which Towle’s letter was quoted, Princeton University history professor James McPherson said the Homestead Act was part of Lincoln and the Republican Party’s philosophy at the time called “the right to rise.”

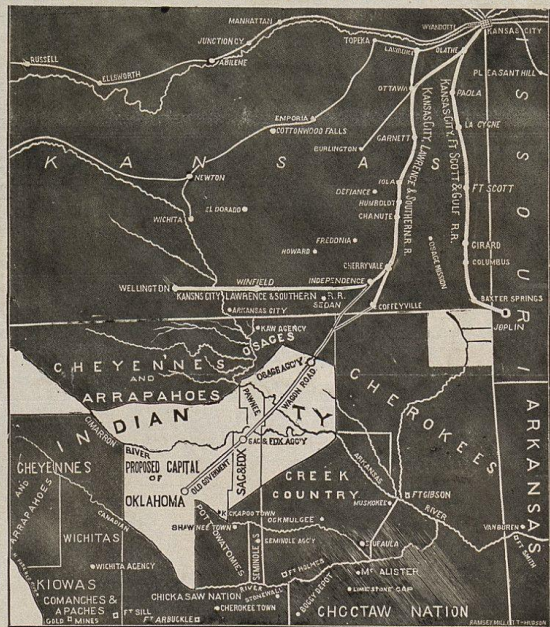
“Give everybody (except agricultural workers and domestic servants, i.e., black people, whom the law banned from applying) an opportunity, and then if they work hard, they’ll get ahead and they’ll develop America,” McPherson said.³

THE PRESIDENT

In his last message to Congress, strongly recommends that the Indian Territory be opened for settlement, and there is no doubt but that Congress at its present session will pass the necessary act declaring the unoccupied lands in

INDIAN TERRITORY

THAT
GARDEN OF THE WORLD,
OPEN FOR
HOMESTEAD AND PRE-EMPTION



MAP OF INDIAN TERRITORY.
Showing the Lands that will be subject to Homestead Entry and How to Reach Them.
White indicates Homestead Lands, of which there will be over 10,000,000 Acres.

In view of the early opening of the Territory, it is necessary for those who would improve the opportunity to secure Free Land and Homes in this magnificent country, to be prepared to start as soon as the lands are declared by Congress to be subject to Homestead Entry. The rush will be great, and early comers will have every advantage.

Every Person 21 Years of Age or Over will be
ENTITLED TO 160 ACRES.

COFFEYVILLE & INDEPENDENCE

The two large towns on the Border, and the nearest points to the Public Lands will be the

GREAT OUTFITTING POINTS

FOR
Immigrants to the Indian Territory.

The Old Government Wagon Road starts from both these points. Plenty of Wood and Water on the route, and all large streams and bad crossings are avoided.

THE GOVERNMENT LAND OFFICE IS AT INDEPENDENCE.

THE KANSAS CITY, LAWRENCE & SOUTHERN R. R.

Being the Short, Direct and only Good Route to the Public Lands in the Territory, are making every preparation necessary to accommodate the rush, and will make

Special Low Rates for EMIGRANTS and their HOUSEHOLD GOODS

J. E. LOCKWOOD, General Ticket Agent, Kansas City, Mo.

Ramsey, Millett & Hudson, Printers.

National Archives, Public Domain

A railroad poster alerting people to the imminent opening of Indian Territory (Oklahoma) for homesteading.

That made no sense for Native Americans, from whom the land had been taken. After being removed to reservations, 90 million acres (65%) of reservation land would be lost due to the Dawes Act of 1887.⁴ It subdivided reservation land into 160-acre plots that Natives could also farm. But those who did not take the offer were denied U.S. citizenship. Much reservation land was unsuitable for farming, but after the farming land was claimed, the rest was declared “surplus” and given to non-Indians. The Dawes Act was repealed by New Deal legislation passed in 1934.⁵

Most of the land given away under the Homestead Act did not go to homesteaders, who had to agree to build a dwelling and farm it for five years to “prove up” their claim. About 420 million acres went to speculators, cattlemen, miners, lumbermen and railroads.⁶

Railroads – beginning with the first transcontinental railroad built between Council Bluffs, Iowa, where Julie and I stayed earlier, and Sacramento, California – were given land not just for their tracks but to sell to finance construction. For example, 16% of Nebraska’s land area was given to railroads by either the state or federal governments.⁷

In turn, the railroads helped bring settlers to unoccupied land, and the new farms produced two-way freight business – shipping farm products to market and bringing manufactured goods back to the farms.

There was a precedent for homesteading.

German farmers had been enticed to land in Ukraine in the 18th century by Tsar Alexander I of Russia, who promised free land, freedom to keep their language and religion, plus no compulsory military service.⁸ In the 19th century, agents of U.S. railroads rebranded what had been called the “Great American Desert” into the “Great Plains” and went to Ukraine, Germany and Scandinavia, to recruit farmers to the region.

As a result, in the five years between 1868 and ’73, 100,000 Swedes moved to the United States.⁹ In the 1880s, one-ninth of the population of Norway came here, the greatest percentage loss of a country’s population to the U.S. of anywhere but Ireland.¹⁰

"If you weren't the oldest son, you had to get out. That's the way it was over there," North Dakotan Margit Wallstad, whose parents were Norwegian, told the television documentary about homesteading in the Dakota Territory.

Today, "German Russians" from the Black Sea area (among them parents of the late TV host Lawrence Welk) are the largest ethnic immigrant group in North Dakota,¹¹ Garrison Keillor is a radio show millionaire and the heaviest concentration of Lutheran churches in the United States is in the Upper Midwest.¹²

Nevertheless, there was a reason the Great Plains were called a desert before the marketing push to fill that land was begun. It's a difficult place to farm, drought-prone with a short growing season. Free land attracted more farmers than were needed, and over-production caused prices to fall, plunging many farmers into debt.

In the 1930s, with the world already in the throes of the Great Depression, drought compounded by failure of farmers to use "dry land farming methods" created the Dust Bowl – a real desert concentrated on the contiguous areas of Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, Texas and Oklahoma but stretched across a wide area of the plains. It drove 3.5 million people out of the region over 10 years.¹³

The only larger migration of people within the United States was the Great Migration of 6 million black people out of the South, but that occurred in two waves over a six times longer period between 1910 and 1970.¹⁴

By the end of the Homestead Act in 1976, 60% of the farms on land claims had failed,¹⁵ and the plains remain sparsely populated today.



A hand-colored photo of homesteaders Ole and Martha Myrvik, children of Norwegian immigrants, and their daughter Olava, in front of their sod house in Milton, North Dakota, in 1896. The photo is from the Fred Hultstrand History in Pictures Collection, North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies – North Dakota State University, Fargo, and is published with permission. Photograph by John McCarthy.

Notes

¹ **Homestead Act (1862)**, General Records of the U.S. Government, National Archives <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=31>

² **Homesteading**, a one-hour documentary produced by Prairie Public, the public broadcasting network for North Dakota and parts of South Dakota, Minnesota, Montana and the Canadian province of Manitoba and published on YouTube in 2011 <https://youtu.be/RIjYd-SKNRc?t=242>

³ **Ibid**, <https://youtu.be/RIjYd-SKNRc?t=205>

⁴ **American Indians and the Homestead Act**, a page on the Homestead National Historical Park in Nebraska website, part of the National Park Service <https://www.nps.gov/home/learn/historyculture/american-indians-and-the-homestead-act.htm>

⁵ **Dawes Act**, Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dawes_Act

⁶ **Ibid**, Homestead Act (1862).

⁷ **Land Grants and the Decline of Railroads**, copyright 2021 by Nebraska Public Media Foundation <https://nebraskastudies.org/en/1850-1874/railroads-settlement/land-grants-decline-railroads/>

⁸ **It's All Earth & Sky**, documentary film on the immigration of "German Russians" to the Great Plains produced by public broadcaster Prairie Public, published on YouTube in 2011 <https://youtu.be/56tSQNhOa2Q>

⁹ **Immigration and Relocation in U.S. History**, The Swedes, Library of Congress <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/scandinavian/the-swedes/>

¹⁰ **Ibid**, The Norwegians <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/scandinavian/the-norwegians/>

¹¹ **Germans from Russia**, North Dakota Heritage Center & State Museum <https://statemuseum.nd.gov/sites/default/files/german-russian-web.pdf>

¹² **A Very Brief History of American Lutheranism**, by Lyman Stone, March 7, 2018 <https://medium.com/migration-issues/a-very-brief-history-of-american-lutheranism-be8b7a26fd59>

¹³ **Dust Bowl: the southern Plains in the 1930s**, by Donald Worster, published by Oxford University Press in 1979 <https://archive.org/details/dustbowl00dona/page/49/mode/2up>

¹⁴ **The Great Migration, 1910-1970**, U.S. Census Bureau, published in 2012 <https://www.census.gov/dataviz/visualizations/020/>

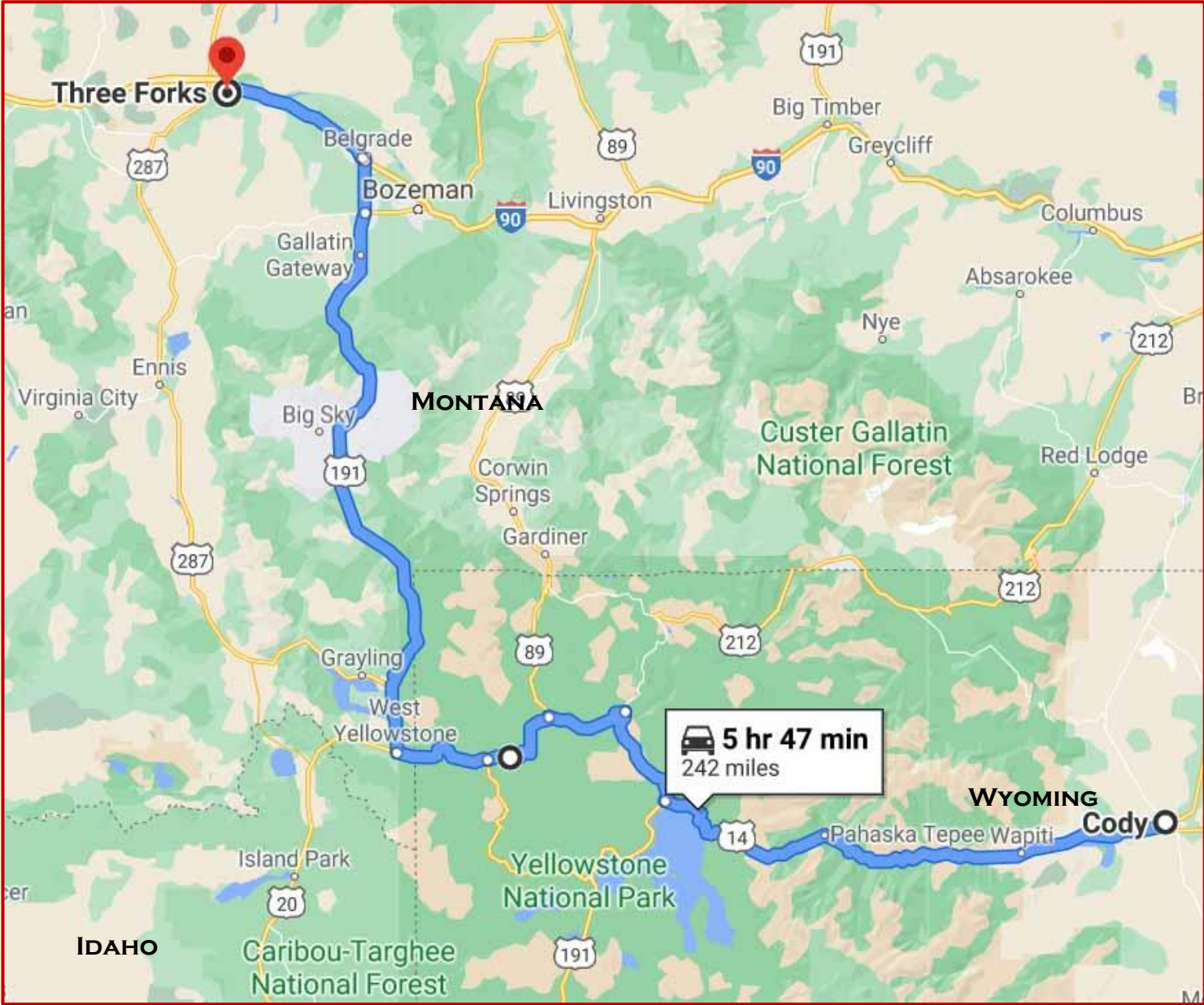
¹⁵ **The Impact of the Homestead Act of 1862**, a film produced by the National Park Service and published on YouTube in 2015 <https://youtu.be/pQSCW1Sf-yA>



Crossing the plains of northeastern Wyoming at 80 miles per hour / 130 kilometers per hour on Interstate 90 – but there are mountains in the distance.

This chart will track the 78 counties in nine states that we're traveling through from St. Louis to the Pacific coast. The counties are listed in the order we enter them. Counties that the Corps of Discovery traveled through or had some other connection have red explanation cells.

| TOMORROW - County-by-county in Montana | | | |
|--|------------|-------------|---|
| Start Day 5 at Cody, Wyoming | | | |
| Via U.S. 14, 191 and I-90 | | | |
| County | Population | County seat | Source of name / significance to Lewis and Clark |
| 44. Gallatin | 114,434 | Bozeman | Lewis and Clark arrived at what is now Three Forks, Montana, in July 1805, where three rivers – which they named President Thomas Jefferson, future President James Madison, author of the U.S. Constitution and then secretary of state, and Treasury Sec. Albert Gallatin – join to form the Missouri River, North America's longest river. Numerous businesses in Three Forks take their names from the expedition including the Sacajawea Hotel, which includes the Pompey's Grill restaurant from the nickname expedition members gave her son Jean-Batiste, the Lewis & Clark Motel and the offices of the Lewis & Clark Journal. |
| End of Day 5 at Three Forks, Montana | | | |
| Day: 242 miles / 389 kilometers | | | |
| Trip: 1,646 miles / 2,649 kilometers | | | |



about five oclock this evening one of the wives of Charbono was delivered of a fine boy. [Jean Baptiste Charbonneau] it is worthy of remark that this was the first child which this woman had boarn and as is common in such cases her labour was tedious and the pain violent; Mr. Jessome informed me that he had freequently adminstered a small portion of the rattle of the rattle-snake, which he assured me had never failed to produce the desired effect, that of hastening the birth of the child; having the rattle of a snake by me I gave it to him and he administered two rings of it to the woman broken in small pieces with the fingers and added to a small quantity of water. Whether this medicine was truly the cause or not I shall not undertake to determine, but I was informed that she had not taken it more than ten minutes before she brought forth perhaps this remedy may be worthy of future experiments, but I must confess that I want faith as to it's efficacy.—

Captain Meriwether Lewis

11th February Monday 1805.



Jean Baptiste Charbonneau sleeps on his mother Sacagawea's back, part of the Lewis and Clark Expedition statue in Case Park, Kansas City, Missouri.



I know what you're thinking, and I'm having none of it. This is so the real Devils Tower even though there's no spaceship hovering over it. The guy who told me gave me his autographed statement from Richard Dreyfuss that says so. Devils Tower National Monument, Devils Tower, Wyoming.