

# NEBRASKA TRAILBLAZER



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No. 04

Nebraska's First Farmers

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## Nebraska's First Farmers

At least 1,000 years ago Indian women tended small fields of corn. By the 1700s corn continued to be an important food for the Oto, Pawnee and Omaha Indians. Women of the tribes also raised tobacco, beans and squash.



Soldiers stationed at Fort Atkinson in the 1820s operated a very large farm. They planted Indian corn, wheat and vegetables, raised hogs, and had a herd of 700 cattle.

Some early fur traders were also farmers. An 1832 visitor to the trading post at Bellevue wrote that the fields of corn produced 100 bushels per acre. There were also potatoes and fruit trees and hogs and herds of cattle.

Many farmers began moving to Nebraska after it became a territory in 1854. The Homestead Act, which provided free land, and the coming of the railroads brought many more settlers in the 1860s and 1870s. The number of farms increased to about 125,000 in 1919 and then began to decline as farms got larger.



Corn has always been a major crop in Nebraska. Most farmers planted several different crops so that if one failed another might be profitable. This Custer County farmer in the 1880s seems to have planted nothing but corn.

Wheat is another important Nebraska crop. In the early days most was sold at the nearest mill, where it was ground into flour for local use. More recently, very large farms in the west have raised wheat that is sold world-wide.

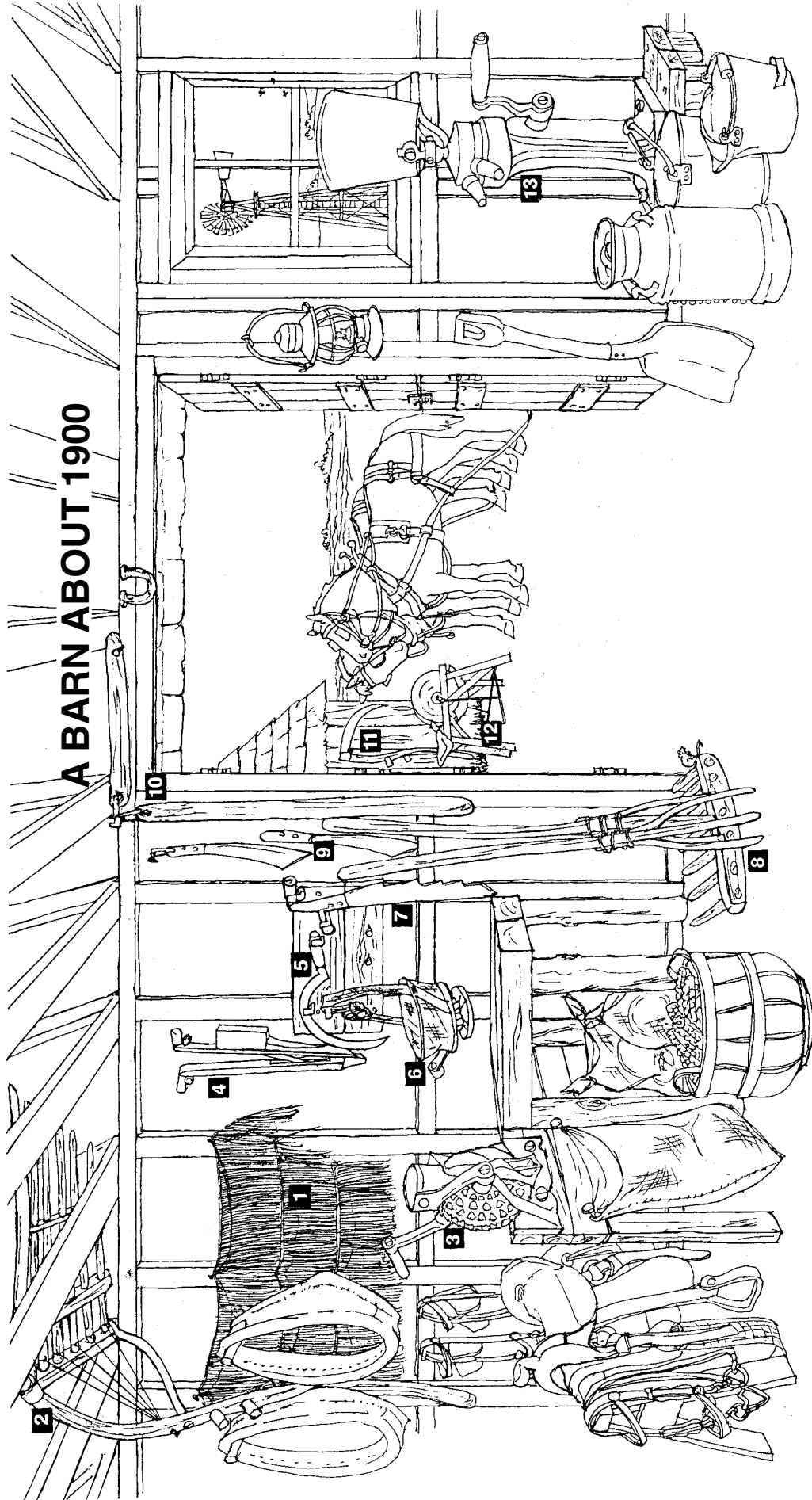


Hogs and cattle were raised on most farms. In addition to providing meat for the farm family, the sale of the animals was a major source of farm income.

Farmers experimented with many kinds of crops. Sugar beets were first tried unsuccessfully in eastern Nebraska in 1890, but later they became an important crop in the far western part of the state. Here a loader piles beets in a truck for shipment to a sugar refinery in Scottsbluff.



# A BARN ABOUT 1900



- 1 **Fly nets** helped protect horses from the bother of flies during the summer.
- 2 The **cradle scythe** or **grain cradle** had a metal cutting blade to cut small grain. The wooden cradle held the cut grain so it could be gathered more easily.
- 3 **Hand corn sheller** removed dry corn from the cob. This model was in use 1880s - 1890s.

- 4 **Stab corn planter** — easier than stooping over but slow to use. Only two-and-a-half acres could be planted in a day.
- 5 **Sickle**, used to cut small stands of grass for hay.
- 6 **Broadcast seeder** planted small grain with a turn of the crank.
- 7 **Hay knife**, used to cut hay from a stack in the winter.
- 8 **Bull rake and wooden hay fork**, used in “making hay.”

- 9 **Corn knife**, used to cut corn stalks.
- 10 **Flail**, used to beat cut grain. The beating separated the kernels of grain from the stalks.
- 11 **Scythe**, used to cut grass in “making hay.”
- 12 **Grindstone**, used to sharpen farm tools.
- 13 **Separator** — cream and milk are separated by this hand-cranked machine.

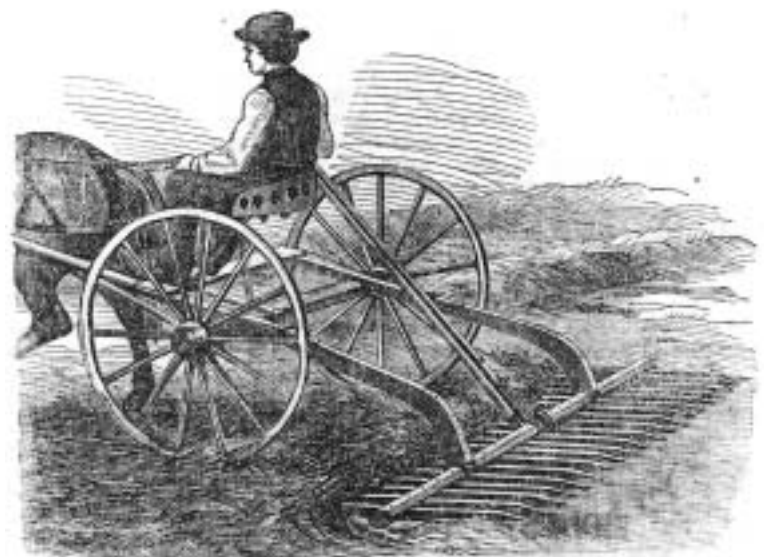


Mechanical corn planters were not developed until the 1860s. Before this, hand planters like the one shown here were sometimes used. More often, a horse-drawn machine cut shallow trenches across a field and farm children dropped seed corn in the trench and covered it with loose soil.

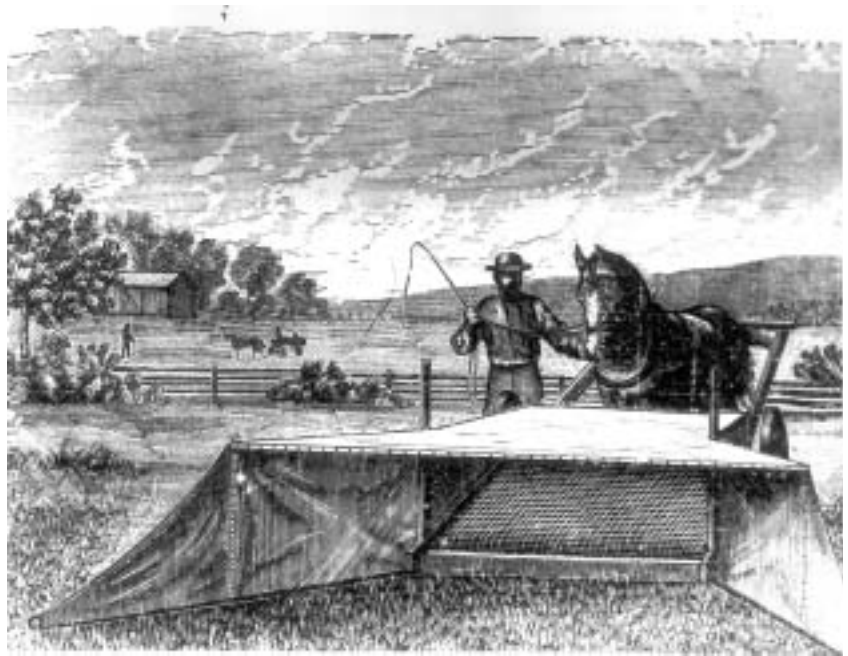


After about 1875 wheat, oats, rye and barley were planted by a mechanical seeder called a drill. This one cut eight shallow trenches into which the seed was dropped automatically. In earlier times the farmer scattered seed by hand and covered it with a rake.

As long as farmers used horses, wild or prairie hay was an important crop. Hay was cut with a scythe or with a mechanical mowing machine which was common by the mid-1870s. The hay was raked into long piles to dry. An early rake with wooden teeth is shown here.



Farmers have faced many problems growing crops on the plains. One of them was the great swarms of grasshoppers that devoured so many crops in the 1870s. Many farmers were nearly bankrupted by the grasshoppers. In an attempt to destroy these insects some farmers used grasshopper sweeps like this one, but they were not successful.



Another serious problem was the lack of water on many farms. Windmills, which helped solve the problem by providing the power to pump water, were in common use in Nebraska by the 1870s. Factory-made mills were expensive, and some farmers made their own, like this one near Grand Island which cost only \$14.00.



Dry hay was gathered by a horse-powered hay sweep shown on the left. The sweep carried the hay to the stacker on the right which lifted it by horse power to the top of the hay stack.

The pioneers cut grain by hand. In the 1880s the binder was developed which cut grain and tied it into bundles. After the bundles were dry they could be threshed. In later times combines were used which cut and threshed the grain in one operation. Combines are so called because they combine cutting and threshing.



Threshing machines separated the valuable grain from the straw and chaff. At first horse-driven power sweeps were used to run these big machines, but by the mid-1880s steam engines began to be used.



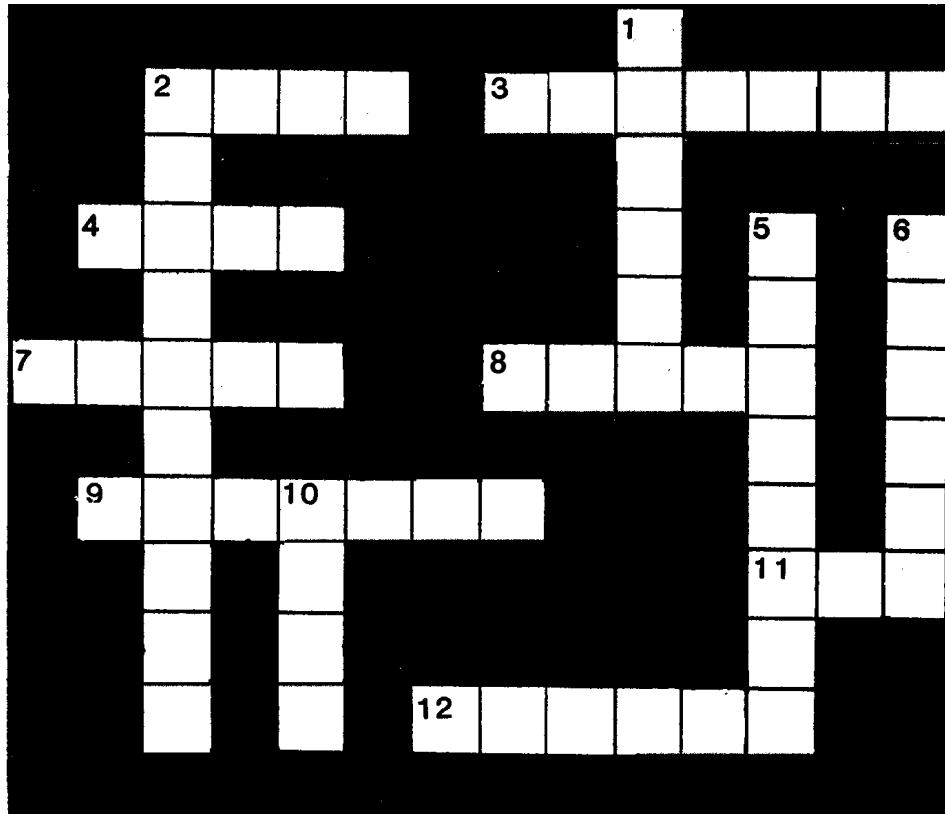
By 1900 plows were being pulled by huge steam tractors. This gang plow turned over six furrows at a time. These were used on some of the very large farms, but on small farms horse-drawn plows were still in use.



Mechanical corn pickers required so much power to operate that they were not successful until gasoline engine tractors were perfected. Corn pickers and tractors were expensive, so many farmers continued to pick and husk corn by hand. Our state nickname "Cornhuskers" is derived from the early method of harvesting corn.



## FARM IMPLEMENT PUZZLE



### ACROSS

- 2 - 3. puts kernels of corn into soil (two words)
- 4. turns over the soil
- 7. used to plant small grain
- 8. used to cut hay
- 9. used to haul hay
- 11. garden tool
- 12. cuts grain and ties it into bundles

### DOWN

- 1. breaks up clods of dirt after plowing
- 2. used to combat weeds
- 5. separates grain from straw when harvesting
- 6. long-handled blade for cutting hay or grain
- 10. gathers hay into rows

