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Article Summary: The Homestead Act provided land for millions of settlers, as widely-distributed advertisements claimed. In many cases, however, the land did not turn out to be free. Settlers very often found themselves obliged to pay a claim club member or someone who had applied for a homestead with the intention of reselling that land for a profit.

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FREE HOMES FOR THE MILLIONS

BY EVERETT N. DICK

FREE land, or near free land, was the lodestone which drew the multitudes of Europeans to America for three centuries following the first English settlement in 1607. Furthermore it was the compelling motive which irresistibly drew the resident of the settled East to brave the danger of Indian hostilities and hardship of a life in the untamed wilderness. In Europe, land ownership was a symbol of status since the landed person was of superior social class. The Scotch immigrant girl who married a homesteader in Iowa illustrates that point of view. She triumphantly wrote back across the sea to her commoner friends: "I'm a lady now. I married a lord." Ownership of land, then, was considered the sure way to rise in the world.

Said Albert D. Richardson who observed the rush into Kansas just before the Civil War: "David's covetousness for the wife of Uriah was no stronger than the lust of the

Dr. Dick, research professor of American history at Union College, is one of the recognized authorities on this aspect of our history. He delivered this paper at the Society Spring Meeting in Beatrice on May 27, 1962.

frontier Yankee for territory. Town shares and quarter sections passed as currently as bank notes or gold dollars."[1]

We, in 1962, celebrate the centennial of the Homestead Act as the beginning of free homes for the millions. Yet our program did not come about spontaneously in 1862. Europe was just emerging from the feudal system when the colonization of America began. Whether a settler came as an employee or member of a company, a resident upon a royal grant, or a settler upon the land of a proprietor, there was no thought of the tiller of the soil actually owning the land he cultivated. He was a tenant upon land owned by a lord.

This landlord system lost its virility upon the impact of the distance from the homeland, the life and death struggle for survival amidst primitive nature, and the proximity of unoccupied land. Pennsylvania furnishes a good example of settlers using the land free of rent. The William Penn family sent agents to invite the people to come to Pennsylvania where they could have land on good terms. The Irish, especially, came and made themselves at home, squatting on the proprietor's land without consent. Proprietors' agents invoked the law against trespass and officers evicted some of the squatters and burned their cabins. But no sooner were they gone than the land hungry resumed normal frontier life. If pressed too hard, they moved a little farther west and took new land or badgered the proprietor into selling the land at advantageous terms.

The royal government found the same sort of audacity on the part of the American settlers. When George III in his famous proclamation of 1763 requested his "loyal subjects" not to settle west of the line along the crest of the Appalachian Mountains, they paid not one whit of attention to his majesty's gracious words.

Trespassing upon the public domain did not stop with the change of proprietorship from Great Britain to the new

[1] Albert D. Richardson, *Beyond the Mississippi* (Hartford, Conn., 1869), p. 71.

American nation. A veritable stream of settlement poured over the Appalachians and spread out upon Government land beyond.

The inability of the Government to control squatting led to an entirely different method of land disposal from that envisioned by the new government, and in time caused the laws to be changed to conform to the illegal usage which grew up on the frontier. The squatter wanted, illegally, to run ahead of Indian treaties, land surveys, and land sales, seek out the choice locations, and be allowed the right to buy the land at the minimum price which, after 1820, was $1.25 an acre. Such a privilege was known as a preemption right. The word preemption actually means a preference or prior right of purchase. This usage had gradually grown up in colonial times in the Middle and Southern states.

To make their "squatting" effective, settlers formed claim clubs or squatters associations. These existed on the frontier from colonial days but were most common in the Midwest.

The settlers in a given area would organize, establish the boundaries of their organization, draw up a constitution, provide for officers and draw up land laws for themselves. Each club decided the amount of land a squatter could hold. The most common amount was 160 acres but in Wisconsin a section was frequently the maximum, while in Iowa the usual amount was a half section. Where competition was keen in connection with a good townsite, eighty acres were not unusual, and around the Twin Cities in Minnesota only forty acres were allowed. In case of dispute over land the club convened a court of arbitration and settled the matter. In such a court no person was sworn and professional lawyers were barred.

The supreme moment for the club was at the auction when every man was pledged to be on hand ready to "do his duty." Should a nervy individual attempt to bid on claim club land it was the duty of the nearest man to "Strike! for his altars and his fires!" to "knock the stranger sensible! before his bid was recognized by the

Government auctioneer."[2] After the system was established seldom was there a bid on claim club land except the minimum bid by its secretary.

Under this system a claimant at Green Bay, Wisconsin, bought his claim for $1.25 an acre and sold it immediately after the auction for $8,000. By means of the claim club a provident squatter could within a few years accumulate enough money simply by speculation on claims to buy a quarter section and thus have a free home without the passage of the homestead law. By selecting a valuable claim and sitting on it until the land came into sale, he could sell it for a hundred dollars to someone who came along later and was willing to pay that much above the Government price. After two such transactions, if he saved the money, he could buy the quarter section he settled upon next time with his two hundred dollars.

Finally in 1841 Congress passed the Preemption Act which, in a general way, legalized the practice of the past quarter of a century. But still the claim club did not die. In the first place, the Preemption Act allowed preemption of only a quarter section. Furthermore, preemptions could be made on surveyed land only, and the claim club made it possible to hold unsurveyed land. Men would dash into an area even before Indian title had been extinguished and with a grape vine or lasso rope measure off a claim and hold it by claim club until the surveyors had run their lines. The description of such a claim in Sarpy County, Nebraska, reads:

> Beginning at J. N. Enoch's southeast corner, running due east along line to B. P. Rankin's west line, thence north along said line to a stake about 200 yards north of said Rankin's northwest corner, thence west a half mile, or to J. N. Enoch's northeast corner, thence south to the place of beginning, containing 320 acres more or less, or what I suppose to be.[3]

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[2] Jesse Macy, "Institutional Beginnings in a Western State," *Annals of Iowa,* third series, Volume III, 329.

[3] Edward L. Sayre, "Early Days in and about Bellevue," *Collections,* Nebraska State Historical Society, Vol. XVI, (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1911), p. 91.

When the surveyors ran their lines, there were causes for disputes. Perhaps the cherished orchard which the squatter set out was now on his neighbor's back eighty or perhaps his neighbor's barn was on the squatter's home forty. The claim club straightened out these difficulties—usually by requiring neighbors to deed and redeed land occupied by improvements.

The second important function of claim organizations after 1841 was to hold double the amount of land allowed by law—320 acres. The whole country about Omaha was claimed in 320-acre plots under claim club law. This was, of course, contrary to United States law but the territorial legislature followed that of Iowa and passed a law allowing the double amount. Naturally newcomers who knew the United States law would come in and attempt to exercise their legal rights and settle on the extra quarter section being thus illegally held. The club would warn the "jumper". Then if he failed to heed the might of the club, he was beaten or ducked in the icy waters of the Missouri until he decided on second thought that he didn't want the land very bad anyway or he was "put over the River." In extreme cases "over" meant that the jumper never reached the Iowa side.

With immigration surging into the territory in a great wave, the best land along the river was soon gobbled up by claim clubs, and later comers either had to go into the interior or buy from the earlier arrivals who had gotten a monopoly on the accessible claims. The extra quarter sections were now worth twice as much as they were originally and men were able to sell their claim club title to their illegally held quarter for $1.25 an acre and buy the one they were lawfully holding. Thus they got 160 acres free. In this way for nearly a decade before the Homestead Act was passed, settlers were securing their free land in Iowa and Nebraska.

In the meantime, frontier usage and opinion had been moving in the direction of free land in other ways. From time to time, for one reason or another for limited periods

and in restricted areas, land was given to those who would make their homes upon it. These statutes were known as Donation laws. The first act commonly known by that title became operative in 1828. The passage of the act came about in this way: During the execution of the policy of removing the Cherokee Indians from east of the Mississippi River to an area in the West, the Government signed a treaty with the Cherokees giving them the land west of a line drawn north and south in western Arkansas. While this treaty was under discussion, squatters who had already settled on the area, raised a great outcry which touched to the quick reelection-sensitive Western Congressmen. As a sort of indemnity to these squatters for giving up allegedly improved lands, this Donation law was passed.

The act made it the duty of the register and receiver to take testimony of actual settlement and subsequent removal. The Commissioner of the General Land Office warned the register and receiver that it would be exceedingly difficult to guard against fraud and to use caution in executing the law. In spite of this warning a great deal of fraud accompanied the administration of the law. An eye-witness mentioned some of the pieces of legerdemain: the figure 21 was placed in the shoes of young people who stood brazenly before the land officers and swore that they were "over 21" and entitled to a donation; white men who had lived with the Cherokees for years and still were doing so, proved up on donations; removals from the forbidden Indian territory were made by crossing the line with a horse and then returning to their improvements after they had entered their donation lands; boatmen who engaged upon the river and had no claim to land in the Indian territory proved up claims. The frontier conscience, always pliable, was extended like a rubber band as innumerable witnesses could be found to swear to the necessary residence, age, and other conditions to secure free land.

Donation laws were passed involving land in Florida and New Mexico also, but the act which gained the greatest attention was that pertaining to the Oregon Country. During the early Forties bills had been introduced in Congress

granting land to actual settlers. One such law passed the senate as early as January 1843. Feeling certain that Congress would shortly pass this act or a similar one, many set out for Oregon certain that they would be granted a large area of free land. The volume increased until the census of 1850 showed a population of about 13,000, and by the end of 1853 there were 35,000 in the territory. After long delay the Donation Land Law upon which the people had depended so much, passed September 27, 1850. It provided that the settler had to live on his claim for four years to receive title to it. A single man who had been resident before December 1, 1850 was entitled to a half section of land. If a man were married, his wife received a like amount. If the settler had come after December 1, 1850, the benefit was reduced one-half in each case.

Since it was estimated there were twenty men for each woman in the country, there was a tremendous scurrying about to secure wives in order that the maximum of land might be secured. The nursery was robbed in the interest of land. Marriage of girls under fifteen was the rule. One observer said he witnessed a wedding near Salem where the bride was thirteen and the groom over three times her age. Another remembered an old man who had a charming daughter—a mere child. A good friend of the father was very fond of the little girl. The girl was receptive to his affection but he was reluctant to marry one so young. When the father urged the premature nuptials, the younger man hesitated: "Uncle Jimmy, Sally is too young."

"I know she is too young but we must save the land," the father urged. So they went through the marriage ceremony and Joe left Sally at her home where she attended elementary school for three years while her bridegroom built a cabin, got the land under cultivation and fenced. Then the marriage was consummated and they went to live on the donation.[4]

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[4] William A. Goulder, *Reminiscences in the Life of a Pioneer,* (Reagan, Oregon, 1909), p. 169.

As early as 1845 Andrew Johnson, later president of the United States, introduced a homestead bill in the House and four years later Stephen A Douglas introduced one in the Senate. Finally these efforts bore fruit in the passage of a bill in both houses, only to have it vetoed by James Buchanan in June, 1860. Of those who favored free land, the West and especially the actual settlers and those anticipating moving West stood foremost. They argued that the hardships, privations, and the service rendered the country in taming the wilds and in developing the resources of the country entitled the borderer to a gift of raw land which could with long years of hard work and good management become a home.

With the exception of some liberals like Horace Greeley and humanitarians like Daniel Webster, the East was against the homestead movement. It was argued that the measure, if passed, would draw off the population of the East, hurt real estate values, and raise wages since it was thought many artisans would go West. Others disliked the idea of giving foreigners a quarter section of land upon the mere statement that they intended to become United States citizens. Speculators and investors argued that it wasn't fair to give land away when they had so recently bought land and were holding it. Finally the vested interests, fearing that their economic well-being would be injured by the loss of revenue to the Government, shed great quantities of tears over the plight of the settlers whose self-respect and lofty spirit of independence would be destroyed by this ignoble plan. The South had other reasons to fight the idea of free homes. Since there was little likelihood of great numbers of slaveholders moving west to form slave-holding states and there was considerable prospect of the Northerners building up free states, the Southerners did not feel like encouraging a program which would soon sink them into a hopeless minority in the Senate.

When the Republican party was on the rise, Horace Greeley saw a new day for the common man and in 1859 taunted the speculators:

"But gentlemen speculators! You have had a long day and a merry one! . . . Your sun has shown and you have made your hay; now stand back and give the settler a chance."[5]

The election of Lincoln enabled the passage of a Homestead bill and it was signed and became law on May 20, 1862.

The Homestead Law provided that anyone who was the head of a family or had reached the age of twenty-one who was a citizen of the United States or had filed his intention of becoming one, and had not borne arms against the United States was entitled to 160 acres of land. In certain areas—for example, within a railroad grant—the individual was allowed only 80 acres upon the assumption that land there was twice as valuable as the ordinary run of claims. The land was given on the basis that the recipient intended to make it his home and that he would live on it and make substantial improvements. From the date of application, called filing, he was allowed six months to move onto the tract and begin his improvements. He was required to make it his continuous residence for five years from the time of filing. Any time after completing the five years' residence but before seven and a half years from the time of filing had passed, he could take out his final papers, a process known as proving up, and receive a patent or United States title for the land. Proving up consisted of giving evidence supported by two witnesses that the conditions had been fulfilled. In the Trans-Missouri Country the filing fee was fourteen dollars and the final fee was four dollars. In the highlands a little farther west the fee was higher since the expense of surveying was greater.

The Homestead Law stimulated immigration after the war. When the Civil War broke out, the frontier line had barely passed the eastern borders of Kansas and Nebraska, but by 1870 a flood of migration was inundating the central portions of those states. Whole counties were settled in a

[5] R. M. Robbins, *Our Landed Heritage* (Glouchester, Massachusetts, 1960), p. 179.

season or two. The *Republican Valley Empire* of Clyde, Kansas, stated that whereas in October, 1869, there were but four settlers on Buffalo Creek in Jewell County, on July 12, 1870, one hundred fifty claims had been taken. On July 4, 1870, at a celebration in Buffalo County, Nebraska, five hundred children sang Sunday school hymns where eighteen months before wild Indians and buffalo roamed the prairies. According to the State Superintendent of Immigration, Nebraska, in 1871, showed an increase in population of 40,000 or thirty-eight per cent from the census figures of 1870.

When the immigrant reached a partially settled area he had to get someone to help him locate a claim. Settlers were often happy to have neighbors, and were glad to tell the newcomer where unoccupied land lay, and help him get the description of the tract. This was not always true, however, since many of the old settlers were attempting to hold claims for a preemption for themselves or a homestead for a father, uncle, father-in-law, brother-in-law or old neighbor back East who, unbeknown to himself, perhaps, had a homestead reserved for him. Or it might well be that the homesteader was holding a claim for his minor son who would be old enough to homestead in a year or two. Often the newcomer secured the services of a professional locator who regularly tramped the whole area, knew every piece of vacant land, and could send the settler back to the land office with the exact description of the claim he selected. These locators bulked large in land activities over the years.

So great was the rush of settlement at times that it was not safe to start back to the land office, often fifty to eighty miles away, without first digging a hole indicating a well or plowing a furrow or two to indicate occupancy. By getting a couple of neighbors to witness this gesture at improvement, a settler could legally hold the claim even though someone arrived at the land office and entered the homestead before he got there. Nevertheless it was customary to race for the land office at the earliest possible minute after making a selection in order that there might be no possibility of a contest which cost money and brought bad feeling.

Often the rush to claim land was so great that the entrymen upon arrival at the land office had to wait for hours or even days to get into the office. At Garden City, Kansas, in the Eighties the press was so great that the land office workers could not gain entrance nor exit through the front door but erected a ladder to a second story window in order to avoid the throng which crowded about the office day and night. At Beatrice the crowd gathered before daybreak, shivering in the cold until the office opened. One of the land seekers was a woman. When the door opened the room was crammed full of humanity in a moment. By common consent the woman was given first chance. The Beatrice *Express* commented:

> The jam was terrible, and the poor woman was obliged to beg for more room from fear of fainting. The applications poured in as fast as they could be taken care of all day, the crowd inside and out never growing smaller for as fast as one applicant, with papers properly fixed up, would worm his way through the crowd to the door, and be cast out, panting and dripping with perspiration, another would squeeze in, and become a part of the solid surging mass within.[6]

As in the case of other land laws, fraud crept into homesteading practices. Many, perhaps the majority, of homesteaders never intended to live on their farms even though this was a condition for receiving land. The newspaper editor, the town lawyer, the merchant, the blacksmith each took homesteads, often far from town. His real residence would be near his work in town, but he visited his claim occasionally in order to keep up the fiction of its being his home.

Then, too, the old habitual claim taker or perennial squatter found his place in the new order. In some places claim clubs were organized again as in preemption days. The organization at Camden, Nebraska, was called "The Homesteaders League." Another was called "The Riders." Organized to protect the homesteader in his rights and to prohibit unfair claim-jumping, they were sometimes the refuge of multiple claim takers and other schemers who operated illegally.

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[6] *The Beatrice Express,* Beatrice, Nebraska, November 18, 1871.

Eugene Ware, late captain of an Iowa Cavalry troop during the Civil War, staked off a claim on Lightning Creek near the site of the present city of Oswego, Kansas, put up a log cabin, and broke some land. While on his way to Ft. Scott, the nearest town—some fifty miles away, he found a section which he thought would be just the right location for himself, his father, and two brothers. He named this "Sun-Gold Section," hired a man to haul up a few logs, and laid up claim pens on two quarters. He then joined the claim club and sent for his folks who then and there, as he remarked, had unbeknown to themselves taken claims. Captain Ware spent the winter working in Ft. Scott and the next spring when he and his two brothers arrived back at Sun-Gold Section he found that others had jumped their claim. Legally not one of the Ware claimants was entitled to the land. Ware had another claim and could not properly hold two claims, the two brothers had visited their claims but had never really established their residence there. The father had visited the section once.

Nevertheless a show of force outweighed legal niceties on the frontier and the three brothers were backed by the old soldiers of the claim club who threatened to remove the actual legal occupants. When the jumpers were forced off, the three brothers alternated between Lightning Creek and Sun-Gold in a successful effort to hold five claims. To make the fiction appear more realistic, they averred that the Lightning Creek claim belonged to their mother, and claim club custom ruled that a woman could hold a claim. Finally after having illegally held the Lightning Creek claim for about three years, they sold it for $1,500. Captain Ware moved to Ft. Scott to edit the Ft. Scott *Monitor* and the other two boys, the father, and the mother held the four quarters of Sun-Gold Section. Such was the way the ordinary frontier citizen looked at the Homestead Law and how the program was carried out under it.

Often a person homesteaded under one name in Kansas, another in Nebraska, and still another in the Dakotas. The fact is that it was neither healthy nor polite to inquire too

pointedly about a man's past in the West. A popular song bearing on this point ran:

> Oh, what was your name in the states
> Was it Thompson or Johnson or Bates?
> Did you murder your wife and fly for your life?
> Say, what was your name in the States?[7]

As a complement to this multiple claim taking, the old settler would sometimes tell the newcomer that all the good claims in the vicinity were taken and that it would be necessary to go miles farther inland to get a good homestead. Having thus established this untruth, the old timer would offer to sell his claim at a fancy price. Often the green immigrant bought, only to find that good land could have been found near at hand by searching for it.

A man who took advantage of the slackness of a settler in failing to fulfill the terms of residence and moved onto the claim, notifying the land office that he wished to enter the vacated claim, was said to have contested the homestead. When after an unauthorized absence from the claim, the settler found a contestant on his claim he had to do one of three things: shoot him or scare him out; buy him off; relinquish to him at the best possible figure. Even if the settler was entirely in the right, there was considerable expense in fighting the case and the wisest thing was to make the best possible terms with the jumper. In some cases pettifoggers ran a racket in claim contests. Some of these "contest sharks" contested as many as a hundred claims of people living on their homesteads at one time. For a price the self-styled lawyer would drop the case.

Two features of the original Homestead Act were destined to counteract the democratic principle, that thereafter the lands were to be used for homes for the homeless rather than for speculative purposes. These were commutation and relinquishment.

The commutation clause allowed the homesteader who grew weary of living on tax-free land belonging to the Government to secure a patent upon payment of the declared

[7] Bruce Nelson, *Land of the Dakotas* (Minneapolis, 1946), p. 112.

valuation of the land—ordinarily $1.25 an acre. Since the homesteader could live on it seven years without taking out his patent and hence could enjoy a tax-free sinecure, it is obvious that the person who commuted did so in order to sell the land rather than to make it his home. This made it possible for speculating interests who wanted to gain possession of large tracts of forest or other valuable lands to plant dummy entrymen on the land, go through the form of settling and proving improvements, commute, and turn the land over to the land-grabber who had hired them to act as his agents.

Since the Preemption Act had not been repealed with the passage of the Homestead Act, its continued operation likewise allowed land to be bought outright for $1.25 an acre. Lumber barons of Wisconsin requisitioned the hotel registers of Chicago and Milwaukee to secure names of dummy preemptors and homesteaders. If the land officers were men of integrity and were not working hand in glove with the timber looters, the latter made a show of compliance with the law. A dry-goods box with some holes cut for windows and a door, a few shingles for a suggestion of a roof, and a whiskey bottle placed in each window opening enabled the claimant to swear he had a house with glass windows and shingle roof.

The other vehicle which served the speculators was the relinquishment. When, after having lived on a claim for a time, the settler gave up his rights and moved off, he was said to have relinquished it. How many claims were relinquished because the settler or his wife became discouraged or starved out no one will ever know, but certainly during the dry years on the trans-Missouri frontier, in the 1880's there were many. A mortgage agent for an Eastern loan company who visited many abandoned claims in Nebraska and South Dakota observed:

> The prairie has a solitude way beyond the mere absence of human beings. In a country of trees whether it be peopled or not, the range of vision is circumscribed. Lift the eyes and they meet objects; perhaps not objects of special interest, yet they do engage the eye. They furnish it with normal occupation.

> But raise the eyes to the bare prairie, and they sweep the horizon. Nothing stops them. They stare, stare and sometimes the prairie gets to staring back. Always the trembling horizon, a motionless expanse in between and the blazing sky above. . . . How much of the exodus from this frontier of the eighties was due to the women—both the women who stayed until the prairie broke them and the many more who fled from the terror of it—nobody knows.[8]

But many relinquishments were part of a scheme for using Government land or for holding it until there should be an increase in the value of the land. Some historians have cited the number of relinquishments as proof that the Homestead Act was a failure. A study of the situation reveals, however, that a speculator would hire a crew of dummy entrymen each of whom held a claim for three or four years. Then they would relinquish the land and since it was immediately open to reentry, the dummies rotated, each filing on a new tract immediately. In some cases this was repeated as many as five times. As a result the land so reserved from entry by bona fide homesteaders in time acquired considerable value and was sold at a good figure. On the Plains during the year ending June 30, 1887, there were 26,780 relinquishments for an area totaling 4,284,800 acres. Professor Harold Dunham estimates that possibly half of these entries were honest-to-goodness relinquishments by washed-out settlers. It is easy to deduce that the others were relinquishments, which were being held by ranch hands as alleged claims while their real trade was that of cowpunchers. The speculator used them tax free for years while they multiplied in market value.

A glaring weakness of the land policy of the United States during the last half of the nineteenth century was the failure to recognize that as the frontier crept beyond the Missouri River the settlers faced an increasingly more arid region until on the Great Plains they found a country valuable primarily for grazing purposes. The Homestead Law was suited to humid agriculture where sufficient rainfall made it possible for a family to cultivate and subsist upon 160 acres. The area beyond the 100th meridian re-

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[8] Seth K. Humphrey, *Following the Prairie Frontier* (Minneapolis, 1931), pp. 131-132.

quired ten or twenty acres or more to graze a steer. Hence, the rancher who chose to operate his business needed far more land than the homesteader. Accordingly he homesteaded a water-hole, built a ranch-house, and used his cowboys to help him control the surrounding range by one illegal method or another. Sometimes this was accomplished by sheer show of force, but more often by use of land laws suited to Illinois or Iowa rather than the Great Plains. Commutation, relinquishment, fencing the public domain, and other means were used to hold enough land for his business, since there was no suitable land law for his purpose.

Major John W. Powell in 1878 proposed a grazing homestead of four sections or sixteen times the size of the standard homestead. Congress did not follow the suggestion. However a Nebraskan, Representative Moses Kinkaid, got Congress to pass a compromise measure for use in northwestern Nebraska. This called for homesteads of one section and was considered a successful auxiliary to the Homestead Act. Other acts intended for the same purpose were passed, but in general they could be classed as "too little and too late."

The various states sent immigrant agents overseas to invite the people there to come to the land of opportunity—America. Their slogan in the Seventies and Eighties was: "Free Homes for the Millions." This alluring phrase was printed on dodgers, in pamphlets, and even published in the newspapers of the European countries advising the common people who could never hope to own land if they stayed in Europe, that they could have free land in America for the taking. Naturally this caused a tremendous interest in migration. With the fervor of evangelists, the agents went through the various countries vieing with one another for the favor of the people of the region which they were working. A letter from C. B. Neilson, Nebraska's immigrant agent for Denmark, Sweden, and Norway reveals the situation in 1871:

> Dear Sir: Victory! The battle is won for our state, but it was a hard fought battle; a great deal harder than I imagined. The fall emigration to Nebraska of people with sufficent capital to commence work on our prairies will be large. On Monday I go to Sweden and Norway, and will have easy work there. I shall try my best to beat the agent for Minnesota, Col. Mathison, formerly Secretary of State, but now in Sweden. The truth shall and must be known all over this country.
>
> All the papers here will now come out in favor of our state: but I had to face them by threatening to lecture publicly about Nebraska—a step now unnecessary.[9]

Railway immigrant agents worked equally hard for settlers, using the same slogan: "Free Homes for the Millions." Settlers made traffic on their lines, and they knew that the immigrants with money would see that it would be to their advantage to buy railroad land close to the line rather than accept free land in a remote place, and the railroads would be able to sell land to people who originally planned to enter a free Government homestead. If the settlers decided not to buy railroad land, their very presence as homesteaders enhanced the value of company holdings.

It is true that there were defects in the Homestead Law and that it was not appropriate for every area of the country. Nor can it be disputed that many abuses of the law were tolerated by a benevolent Government. But in spite of these weaknesses, *when in the history of the world* was there ever such an Arabian-Night-story-come-true as the offer heard far overseas decade after decade for seventy years, "Free Homes for the Millions"?

[9] *Nebraska Statesman,* Lincoln, Nebraska, July 29, 1871.