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North Dakota

LIFE ON THE HOMESTEAD

Women of the Prairie

Women played an important role in keeping the family afloat on the homestead. They took care of the home, children, and the farm animals. During rough years when the crops didn't produce, women would sell eggs and butter to help pay for expenses. Sundays were a day of rest, a day spent with family and in worship. Socializing was rare; church was really the only occasion that women were able to socialize.

Women on the prairie were incredibly self-reliant. They were buying and working land, whether they had a husband or not. When they had a husband, he was often off building the railroad, leaving his wife alone for months at a time to tend the farm, family, and house.

Settlers' Children

Most children were born into large families. Many farmers could not afford hired hands so children provided the labor. The entire family was working hard to simply survive another year, so schooling came second if at all. Children often shared a room until they moved out. Sometimes the girls and boys would be split into different rooms, just separated by a sheet.

Church or school were the only opportunities the children had to play with others. When families started homesteading, they brought very few items, so children didn't have many toys. Most playthings were created from natural materials or from odds and ends they could find. However, children didn't have much time for toys and games because they started performing chores as early as the age of 3.

Homesteaders

When settlers first moved to North Dakota, they had to be self-sustaining. Homesteaders had to make or build almost everything from materials found in nature - from the house itself to utensils and pillows. If you were cut open, usually you were sewn up or mud would be put on it. When the injury was serious, most people simply did not survive because medical professionals were far and few between. If you were able to locate a doctor, it could take days or weeks for them to arrive at your homestead, and the odds were, you couldn't afford one anyway.

The weather was one of the most dangerous parts of living on the homestead, due to prairie fires, blizzards, flooding and more. People would often lose everything: crops, livestock, homes, and lives. If the home or farm was destroyed by a natural disaster, the settlers would just start over.

The content above came from North Dakota State Library items, ND Studies materials and the State Archives.
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