



North Dakota

FARMING & RANCHING

A State Divided

During the 1800's, European immigrants poured into the state, hoping to claim a piece of land and make a homestead. They quickly learned how diverse the landscape was. The eastern part of the state flourished with farmers and the west with ranchers.

Farming the Valley

The first farms in North Dakota were small and neighbors were nearby. The average farm was about 160 acres and consisted of the farmhouse, a barn, a pigsty, a chicken coop, and a machine or tack shed for repairing harnesses, pitch forks, shovels, etc. There was less machinery in the yard than today – only things the horses could pull. If a farmer could afford a hired hand, they would often sleep in the barn with the animals. Most farms had horses, cows, chickens, and pigs.

Towards the early part of the 1870's, bonanza farming started to take off in the Red River Valley. Eastern investors bought up large chunks of land and ran farms like a business, making large profits on wheat. By the late 1800's; there were over 27,000 farms scattered across the state, consuming 7,700,000 acres of land. By comparison, the average North Dakota farm today is 1,238 acres, with 39,600,000 total acres in use as farmland.

The great bonanza farming boom lasted just ten years. The price of wheat dropped from almost a dollar a bushel to 60 cents. Profits fell significantly and investors began breaking the large farms into small parcels for faster sale. Farming in North Dakota began to go back to the way it started, as family-run operations.

Ranching in the Badlands

Although the western half of the state wasn't known for great farming, the ranching opportunities were vast. As opportunity and growth expanded in the Red River Valley, the west experienced its own "Beef Bonanza." During the 1880's, large cattle outfits moved north into North Dakota's badlands and spread up and across the western half of the state. Eastern investors saw not only the value of wheat production in the state; but that of cattle as well.

As the beef trade started to pick up, two well-known eastern men made a name for themselves here in North Dakota: Marquis de Morès and Theodore Roosevelt. Marquis de Morès was a French investor who moved out to the area now known as Medora, which he named after his wife. De Morès built a slaughterhouse in Medora in order to prepare the meat locally and ship it east. Although in the end his business plan failed, he did bring national attention to the cattle industry in North Dakota.

Most famously, Theodore Roosevelt spent time in the Medora, falling in love with the state. He started two ranches that had minor success. But the harsh winter of 1886-1887 that ended open range ranching in the state was the end of his own cattle career as well.

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