

*Homesteading*

**COLORADO'S**

# **PURGATOIRE RIVER REGION**

*A*   
**Home** *on the* **Range**  






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# THE HOMESTEADING ACT OF 1862

Under the Homestead Act of 1862, the federal government promoted the settlement of the West by granting 160 acres of public land to individuals who lived on the land and put it to agricultural use and added improvements. A romanticized image of the homesteader quickly entered into American popular culture. Homesteaders were generally described as hardworking, sturdy, cheerful, loyal, honest, patriotic, energetic, and leading an idealized simple life. Politicians declared that it was through the efforts of settlers that the United States would achieve its Manifest Destiny.





Homesteading was an essential part of Colorado's settlement. Trailing only Montana and Nebraska in the total number of acres homesteaded, over 22 million acres or 33 percent of the state were settled in Colorado under the homesteading acts, which included the Enlarged Homestead Act (1909) and the Stock-Raising Homestead Act (1916). Over 100,000 homesteads were claimed statewide between 1864 and 1934.

Men or unmarried women at least 21 years of age could file for homesteads. Those filing had to be citizens of the United States, or declare their intention to become citizens. Married women could file for a homestead if they had been deserted by their husband, if their husband was incapacitated by illness or injury and unable to work, or if their husband was imprisoned. If a single female homesteader decided to marry, she could keep the homestead as long as the man she was marrying had not also claimed land under the homestead law. If two homesteaders married, then one had to relinquish a homestead.

For those interested in homesteading, the first step was to find out what land was available by contacting a local land office. Homesteaders were then encouraged to visit the land. The next step for a prospective homesteader was the filing of a claim, which included


the payment of a \$16 filing fee and swearing that they were "well acquainted with the character of the land." After filing, homesteaders had six months to establish residency

on the land. Homesteaders had to build a residence, make agricultural improvements, and reside on the land for five years. The residency requirement was reduced to three years after 1912. An extended absence from the homestead without permission resulted in cancellation of the homestead entry.





# INITIAL SETTLEMENT OF THE PURGATOIRE RIVER REGION

 The settlement and agricultural development of the Purgatoire River region was not easy. The landscape and climate presented many challenges, leading to dramatic boom and bust cycles. The region's ups and downs have been shaped by numerous internal and external factors including cycles of drought, federal land policies, and fluctuating agricultural markets.

Significant settlement in the Purgatoire River region began in the 1860s. Most of the early settlers along the Purgatoire River were Hispanic families from New Mexico pushed north by population pressures. The 1860s also saw a scattering of Anglo-American settlers arrive in the region. Many of these early settlers had initially come to the region while working on the Santa Fe Trail or for the Army. Others had been drawn by Colorado's mining industry and turned to agriculture after failing to strike it rich.

Encouraged by boosters' proclamations that "rain follows the plow," homesteaders believed that eastern Colorado had a climate conducive to agriculture and held potential for new markets. During the initial settlement period, a mix of subsistence-level

farming and livestock raising occurred alongside the development of large-scale cattle and sheep ranching operations. Though the smaller farmers and ranchers initially had some success, especially those who arrived early enough to claim land with water access, many were eventually pushed out by the larger livestock operations.

Early ranchers found buffalo and grama grass covering much of the Colorado plains ideal for stockraising. These short hardy grasses could withstand trampling and drought and provide winter forage even when dormant. The early large-scale ranching industry depended on the availability of unclaimed public lands for grazing. The ranch headquarters was located on homesteaded or purchased land, but the cattle or sheep ranged over a much larger area in search of grass. This system only worked as long as the region was sparsely settled with large amounts of unclaimed land. Many ranchers purchased or otherwise acquired, at times by having their hired hands homestead land for them, nearby land parcels with good springs. This ensured a good source of water for their livestock. By controlling access to all water, it discouraged others from settling in the area.

Though ranchers had initial success, by the 1890s the industry was struggling due to competition for grazing land and overgrazing. Many ranches had never been able to fully recover from the hard winter of 1885-1886, which was estimated to have killed as many as half the cattle on the plains.



Roundup on Dry Creek—McIntosh homestead about 1909.



# THE HOMESTEADING BOOM OF THE 1910S

Limited public land was left for homesteading by the early 20th century, and what land remained was in drier, rockier areas such as the Purgatoire River region. Despite the challenges of this region, it experienced a homesteading boom in the 1910s because it offered the last chance for would-be homesteaders to pursue their dream of free land. In 1909, there were still 1.6 million acres of unclaimed homestead land in Las Animas County and over 600,000 acres available in Otero County. By 1917, the amount of available land had dropped to just over 300,000 acres in Las Animas County and less than 14,000 acres in Otero County. New homesteaders were drawn to the region by higher than average rainfall in the 1910s, high agricultural prices during World War I, the construction of large-scale irrigation projects, and the passage of two new homestead acts, the Enlarged Homestead Act and the Stock-Raising Homestead Act. Homesteaders during this boom period continued to include a mix of New Mexican Hispanics and Anglo-Americans, as well as some immigrants.



Acres allowed per homesteader

Early settlers in this region had realized that the 160 acres allotted under the Homestead Act of 1862 was not enough for a successful farm or ranch. Under the Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909, homesteaders were able to claim 320 acres for dryland farming, while the Stock Raising Act of 1916 allocated 640 acres for raising livestock. These acts were viewed as a vehicle for promoting the economic development and growth of the West, through which homesteaders built new homes, made barren lands productive, and increased tax rolls.

Many homesteaders were likely lured by promotional guides touting new dryland farming methods which endorsed plowing, cultivation, and tillage techniques designed to hold moisture in the soil. These guides, however, rarely described the challenges of agriculture in the Purgatoire River region. Most homesteaders planted no more than 50 acres due to uneven ground and harsh conditions. In his homestead patent Charles Coy described his planted land as “60 acres cultivated

**CHARLES COY DESCRIBED HIS PLANTED LAND AS “60 ACRES CULTIVATED AND IS SCATTERED ALL OVER THE PLACE IN PATCHES ON ACCOUNT OF THE LAND BEING ROCKY.”**

and is scattered all over the place in patches on account of the land being rocky.” Corn, beans, sugar cane, milo, and wheat were the most commonly grown crops, but homesteaders tried to plant a wide variety, including rye, millet, potatoes, barley, broomcorn, oats, melons, pumpkins, peas, flax, and fruit trees. The remainder of the land was generally used for grazing. Few homesteaders attempting dryland farming found success in the region.

Agriculture was much different for the homesteaders arriving in the early 20th century than it had been for those who arrived in the preceding decades. Cash crops such as wheat and dry beans replaced the more diverse subsistence crops of early settlers. And for those raising cattle and sheep, open ranges were replaced by fenced pastures. Ranchers saw that realizing a profit from raising livestock depended on managing the land in such a way that maintained its ability to sustain cattle grazing.

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## BUILDING THE HOMESTEAD

The architecture of homesteading changed little from decade to decade, with 20th-century homestead building complexes being very similar to those from the 19th century. The architecture of homesteading in the Purgatoire River region was largely shaped by the landscape, the isolation of the homesteads and the limited access to manufactured building materials. Early settlers brought building traditions with them into the Purgatoire River region, but these often had to be adapted to local materials and conditions. The strongest cultural influence can be seen in the New Mexican

**THE ARCHITECTURE OF HOMESTEADING IN THE REGION WAS SHAPED BY THE LANDSCAPE, THE ISOLATION OF THE HOMESTEADS & THE LIMITED ACCESS TO MANUFACTURED BUILDING MATERIALS.**

design traditions brought to the region including adobe, jacal, and flat roofs composed of vigas and latillas. These architectural traditions had been developed in an environment similar to southeastern Colorado, and were already adapted to the climate and limited natural resources of the area. Key design features of Purgatoire

River region homesteads include dugouts, buildings constructed of locally quarried sandstone with adobe mortar, buildings constructed of adobe block, large stacked stone and boulder animal pens, incorporation of rock outcroppings and canyon walls into construction, hand-hewn timbers of piñon, cedar, and juniper, and corrals of wood and wire.

When homesteaders arrived on the land, they usually began with a temporary shelter, often a tent. Next came a building that could be constructed quickly and simply with little technical skill. The original homestead dwellings were generally quite small, often only 12' x 14'. Within a few years, these might be converted to another use, and replaced by a new, more permanent, dwelling of stone or adobe construction.

Livestock buildings and structures were an essential part of most homestead complexes. In addition to raising crops many farmers also grazed beef cattle, while others kept dairy cattle and sold cream to local markets. Homesteaders generally kept horses for work and travel as well as some chickens for eggs. Some also raised goats. Due to the relatively mild climate, homesteaders generally did not need to build extensive structures to house their livestock. Cattle typically had only the shelter of a three-sided loafing shed. Homesteads might include a small barn for tack, storage, and to shelter a horse or two in case of bad weather. Those involved in dairying might have a building for milking and cream storage.



## SANDSTONE BUILDING

The dominant construction material of homesteads in the region was sandstone. With natural sandstone outcroppings throughout the area, sandstone had the advantage of being easily accessible as well as strong and durable. Though quarrying and finishing stones was labor intensive, stone could be quarried by homesteaders at no cost. Sandstone walls in the region were typically double-coursed, with a layer of adobe and chinking in between the exterior and interior layers of the wall.



## ADOBE BUILDING

Used as mortar for stone buildings, applied as stucco, or shaped into blocks and dried under the sun, adobe was a common building material throughout the region in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Adobe construction techniques in the southwestern United

States combined Native American (Pueblo) and Hispanic traditions. Brought to the Purgatoire River region by New Mexican settlers, adobe soon became a common building material for all of the region's residents. Adobe was cheap and durable (if kept dry) and did not require skilled craftsmen.



## DUGOUT

Dugouts ranged from holes in the ground covered with branches to multi-room buildings lined with sandstone and covered with gable roofs. With limited access to large trees and other building materials, digging into the ground was a simple solution to the immediate need for housing. Dugouts were cheap and needed little skill to construct. They provided warmth in the winter and were cool in the summer heat. Infestations of insects and prairie dogs, poor lighting and ventilation, and problems with flooding and seepage, however, typically made dugouts temporary accommodations rather than permanent dwellings.



## JACAL

Utilized by Hispanic cultures as well as by Native Americans, the origins of jacal construction are unclear. Easy to construct and incorporating local materials available at no cost, jacals appear to have been used most often in the Purgatoire River region as temporary housing on new homesteads and for outbuildings, including storage and animal pens. Jacal construction could take advantage of whatever type of wood was available, ideal in the Purgatoire River region which offered mainly scrub trees. The walls of the jacal were formed by placing a row of upright posts into the ground, usually into shallow holes dug specifically for each post. The space between the vertical posts was filled with small rocks, mud, or lime chinking and then plastered over with adobe.





# THE DUST BOWL AND A RANCHING RESURGENCE

Though the Homestead Act was widely celebrated as offering land ownership to all, it has also been harshly criticized for failing to live up to expectations. The Purgatoire River region homesteading boom of the 1910s was brief, with homesteaders starting to give up and move out by the mid-1920s. During the 1930s the region was hit with the combined impact of severe drought, dust storms, and economic depression. The drought intensified problems brought on by overgrazing and brought increased attention to the need for improved range management methods.

The Roosevelt administration created a variety of New Deal programs to assist ranchers and farmers, including the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, Resettlement Administration, Farm Security Administration, Land Utilization Program, and Soil Conservation Service. These programs sought to reverse the damage caused to the

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Plains by overgrazing, dryland farming, erosion, and dust. After decades of encouraging settlement of the plains and giving away land through the Homestead Acts, under the Resettlement Administration the government began to buy back land it determined unsuitable for farming. These New Deal agencies also marked the beginning of much greater government involvement in agricultural practice and policy including loans, subsidies, price controls, educational programs, and controlled grazing on government lands. With the Taylor Grazing Act of

1934, the government closed remaining public lands to homesteaders. The government also provided temporary employment through the Civil Works Administration (CWA) and Works Progress Administration (WPA). The supplemental income provided by these programs helped the region's farmers and ranchers survive the Great Depression. They worked on a variety of construction projects within the region including roads, bridges and culverts, and schools.

Many of the region's ranchers were able to make it through the Depression. Some were even able to expand their ranches, buying out neighboring homesteaders who decided to leave. With the country's entrance into World War II, higher employment levels and better wages resulted in more people eating beef, and cattle prices rose. While Americans had eaten an average of 50 pounds of beef per year in the early 1930s, by 1955 they were eating nearly double that.

In 1933 and 1935, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the National Industrial Act and Emergency Relief Appropriations Act which gave the Federal Government authority to purchase failed crop lands in an effort to begin healing the devastated land. Under these and other New Deal programs, thousands of farms were purchased and retired from cultivation and families resettled elsewhere, providing economic relief to many. The bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act of 1937 gave the Department of Agriculture the authority to manage a the land for restoration, protection from soil erosion, and resource protection. Four million acres of Land Utilization projects (mostly in the Great Plains) were transferred to the US Forest Service. In 1960, Congress designated the areas managed by the Forest Service as National Grasslands, including the Comanche National Grassland.



Dust blizzard—Pritchett, Colorado.





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