

Summary: Life on the Great Plains

Settling the Great Plains

In the early 1800s, few people lived on the Great Plains. The Great Plains are in the middle of the United States. People did not think the land was good for farming. It was very dry and flat.

In 1862 the Homestead Act was passed. The government helped people to settle on the Great Plains. The government sold adults 160 acres of land for a small amount of money. If they could farm the land for five years, they could own it. A settler's home and land was called a homestead. Many homesteaders came from the east coast, where farmland cost a lot. In the Great Plains, land was cheaper. Settlers also came from Europe, where there was not much land to buy. There was a lot of land to buy in the Great Plains. African Americans also wanted to start farms. Many African Americans were poor. They faced prejudice and violence after the Civil War. They started their own towns in Kansas. African Americans were called Exodusters, after a book in the Bible that tells the story of how people escaped slavery.

Settlers Face Hardships

Settlers had to learn how to farm on the Great Plains. The soil was held together by grass roots. It was called sod. Settlers were called sodbusters because they had to break through the sod to plant crops. There was not a lot of wood, so settlers used sod to build homes. Winters were long and cold. Summers were hot and dry. There were many droughts. There were grass fires because it was so dry. Farmers had to grow crops that did not need much water. They carried water from streams. Some farmers used windmills to pump water from underground. In the 1870s millions of grasshoppers ate the crops. There weren't many people in the area to do farm work, so farmers made new and better farm machines. New machines made it faster and easier to grow more crops.



Before You Read

Find and underline each vocabulary word.

homestead *noun*, a settler's home and land

Exodusters *noun*, African Americans who moved to the Great Plains

drought *noun*, a long period with little or no rain

sodbusters *noun*, name given to settlers who had to break through sod to build houses and plant crops



After You Read

REVIEW Why did settlers from Europe and the East move to the Great Plains?

Circle two reasons why these settlers moved.

REVIEW Why was life on the Great Plains so difficult? Underline sentences that describe the land.

REVIEW How did settlers adapt to the lack of extra workers on the Great Plains? Underline what the settlers did to make growing crops easier and faster.