

The Homestead Act, Seen Through Letters From Eastern Oregon 1905-1908

Synopsis July 10th, 2017

This one-frame exhibit shows the requirements for and process of the Homestead Act of 1862 through quotes from a selection of letters sent to and from the Land Office in La Grande in eastern Oregon between 1905 and 1908. A copy of the exhibit can be viewed online at <http://www.sheryll.net/HA/ha.htm>

Purpose

It aims to give the general viewer an understanding of who could homestead and how it was to be done. At the same time, these letters bring the Homestead Act alive for the general viewer, who should come away from the frame with an insight into and appreciation of the hardships that faced homesteaders in the early 1900s.

Scope

The exhibit does not go into details about subsequent acts and how they affected homesteaders. Nor does it delve deeply into the types of claims that were available. These items are mentioned though, for viewer awareness.

The one-frame format was chosen as the general viewer may become bored or lost in the material were this a multi-frame exhibit.

Importance

This exhibit reflects an important part of the history of the United States. Albeit, the homesteaders of the late 19th century may have experienced more hardships, but each homesteader had to follow the same procedures as those of earlier times.

This exhibit rates well on exhibit importance as, whilst covers to and from the Land Office can easily be found, they do not generally contain the original letters, especially a group of them such as those in this exhibit.

Treatment

The exhibit begins with a summary statement of the Homestead Act followed by a plan of the exhibit (p1). It outlines the factors which brought the Homestead ACT into being, and subsequent acts which affected the homesteaders in eastern Oregon. The viewer is then introduced to the Land Office in La Grande, from where these letters were sent or received.

Definitions and illustrations of surveying terms follow in pp3 and 4, using the first of a series of letters to or from the Land Office in La Grande, eastern Oregon.

The first six steps involved in acquiring land under the Homestead Act are laid out on the following 3 rows, separated in the middle by a copy of the Homestead Act itself (simplified wording), and an actual certified copy of a patent signed by President W.H. Taft. The receiving of the patent (7th step) was much looked forward to as the reward for all the effort the homestead claimant had put in with working the land and making improvements over the required five years.

Each of the first 6 steps is shown on a wide 10 ¾" x 14" page with a "wood-grain" background, and is illustrated with a letter which is quoted in part or in full. The format of each of these pages is the same. A feature of the layout is the use of a range of fonts for the quotes in the letters, as though the claimants wrote them themselves. This helps to bring the claimant to life for the viewer. As well, the success or failure of the homesteader's eventual acquisition of his or her patent is noted.

Rarity

All the material is equally significant, so none is specially singled out.

The letters in this exhibit are unique in themselves. No other group of homesteading letters for eastern Oregon is known to me. I have not seen any since acquiring this group of letters.

Prices of U.S. Land Office covers on eBay today range from \$4 for a scruffy cover to \$85 for the most expensive of the 15 covers with a letter enclosed.

The Homestead Act, Seen Through Letters From Eastern Oregon 1905-1908

Synopsis July 10th, 2017

Condition

Condition of covers varies from smoke-damaged to some opened less than carefully. Letters and covers were put on a spike when received by the land office. Examples of covers on eBay look worn as well, indicating that pristine covers are the exception to the norm. As these letters were important to the claimants, they were probably carried around by the claimants and the envelopes therefore became creased, soiled, etc before mailing or after reception.

The letters themselves are in better condition, I attribute this to the lack of acid in the paper of letters of this era. Letters are selected for the exhibit not by condition but by how well they illustrated the steps involved in acquiring the claimant's patent.

Knowledge, Study, Research and References

Four of the 6 Steps pages have a section called "*Did you Know?*", which passes on nuggets of knowledge, study or research to the viewer.

The Act

To understand the Homestead Act, I used the Internet to find summaries, school lesson plans, the Shmoop homework aid website and the original text of the Act.

Ref H1. Shmoop website – **The Homestead Act of 1862** - puts each part of the Homestead Act into a vernacular that young adults (and those of us a tad older) can easily understand
<http://www.shmoop.com/historical-texts/homestead-act/summary.html>

Ref H2. *Homestead History* - Series of lesson plans on the Homestead Act
<https://www.nps.gov/home/learn/education/upload/Unit%202.pdf>

The Letters

To learn more about the individuals who wrote the letters, I found these websites most useful:

Ref L1. *Bureau of Land Management records database*. Here you can look up information on claimants, claims, sections, check patents, order them (cheap at \$2 for a certified copy), see the actual claims on a map, etc.
<https://gloreCORDS.blm.gov/search/default.aspx>

Ref L2. *A History of the United States General Land Office in Oregon*.
Excellent book online in PDF format, containing historical events in Oregon relating to the land office, dates of opening and closing of land offices, etc, etc.
<https://www.blm.gov/or/landsrealty/glo200/files/glo-book.pdf>

Also useful were various regional newspapers, including the *La Grande Evening Observer*, the *Pendleton Record* and the *Enterprise News-Record*. The *Evening Observer* contained notices such as land sales, notices of claims registered and notices of applications for proofing the claim. The Register or Receiver's name was appended to the *Observer's* notices.

The Survey Terms

Ref S1. *Article - The Public Land Survey System (PLSS)* – good use of diagrams to illustrate the explanations, short but relevant glossary
https://nationalmap.gov/small_scale/a_plss.html

Ref S2. Tutorial on the Public Land Survey System Descriptions – easy to understand description and diagrams
<http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/forestmanagement/documents/plsstutorial.pdf>

Ref S3. *Glossaries of BLM Surveying and Mapping Terms* – Very comprehensive website on survey terms. One can easily get side-tracked and read up about other terms and thereby learn more about US survey procedures.
http://www.dot.ca.gov/hq/row/landsurveys/Study_material/BLM_References/BLMglossery.pdf