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## MAPPING THE DISPOSSESSION: SCANDINAVIAN HOMESTEADING AT FORT TOTTEN, 1900-1930

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**ABSTRACT**—Once Spirit Lake Dakota Reservation was opened to white homesteading in 1904, the turnover of land from Dakota to Euro-American hands was rapid. Scandinavians, the largest foreign-born group in the state, took advantage of this land-taking opportunity and moved onto the reservation in great numbers, acquiring approximately 25% of the land within six years. In effect, while the Scandinavians lived as neighbors with the Dakota, they also became the harbinger of the dispossession of Dakota land.

Using quantitative analysis of landownership specified in plat maps of the reservation in 1910, this article analyzes the gender and ethnicity of the landowners. Oral histories contextualize the processes of land taking and land dispossession. The article then takes stock of landownership in 1929, finding that Dakota landownership declined 50% in less than two decades.

**Key Words:** Fort Totten, homesteading, landowning, Scandinavian, Spirit Lake Dakota Reservation

### INTRODUCTION

With the passage of the General Land Allotment Act of 1887 (also known as the Dawes Act), the Congress of the United States drew upon the legal logic of homesteading to further its expansionist agenda. Instead of preserving the integrity of bounded territories for Indian nations, the legislation allotted parcels of reservation land to individual Indians to own privately. By design, the subdivision of the reservation land meant that non-Indians could homestead *unallotted* land—newly designated as “extra” land on reservations. In so doing, this legislation enticed Euro-Americans to settle on Indian reservations. At Fort Totten Agency in North Dakota, the promise of new homestead land in the early 20th century brought Scandinavian settlers and made them neighbors of the Dakota, the indigenous people they had partially displaced.

In effect, the U.S. government created an integrated “contact zone” at Fort Totten and on other reservations. A contact zone is a place where “peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (Pratt 1992:6). White settlers were recruited as instruments of the twin federal policies of westward expansion and “Americanization” of the Indians. On the reservation, legal, structural, and cultural barriers divided white homesteaders from their Dakota neighbors. Yet these Scandinavian immigrants hardly fulfilled the colonial ideal: exceedingly poor and speaking little English, they were subject to widespread discrimination and scorn. They brought no tradition of evangelizing their religion and were motivated primarily to improve their impoverished lives through landownership.

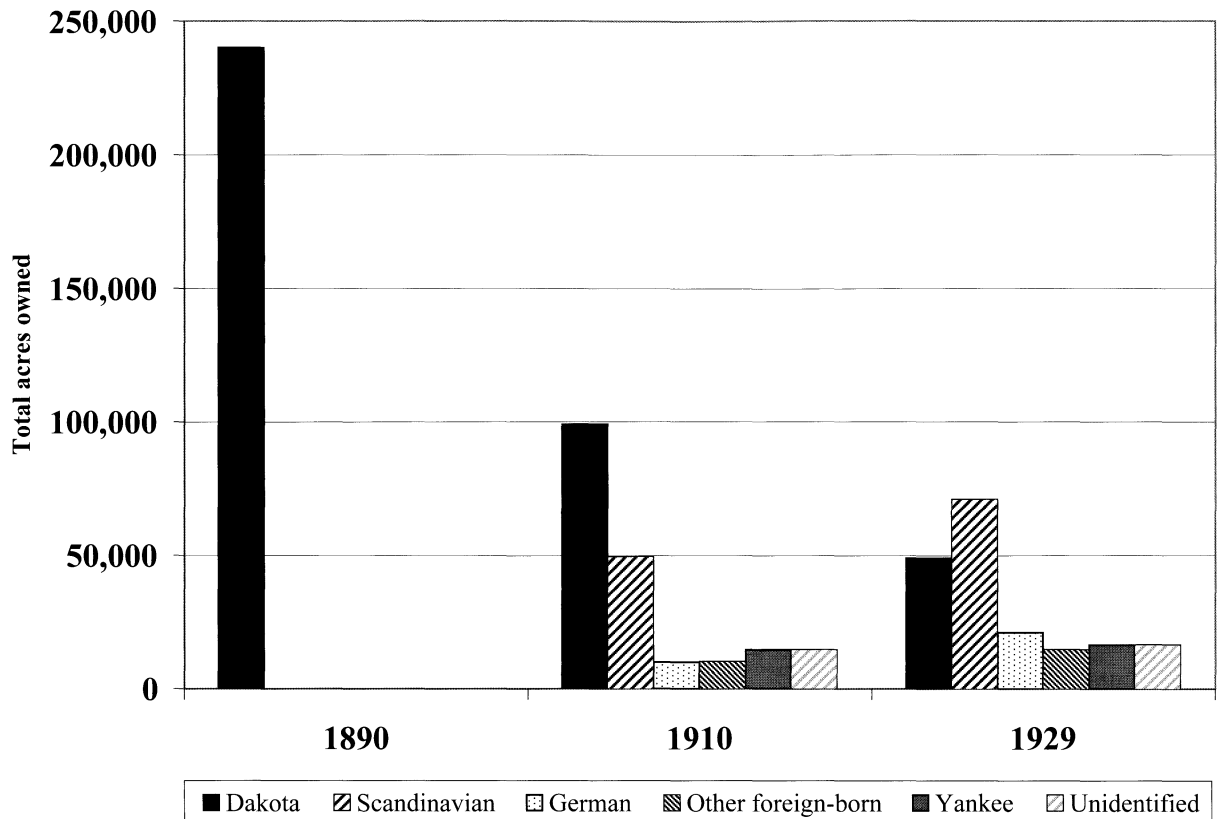


Figure 1. Total acres owned by race-ethnicity, 1890-1929.

Put into operation at different times on reservations across the country, the Dawes Act set the terms for massively eroding the land base of Native American nations well into the 20th century. This article is part of a larger project exploring the many layers of conflict and mutuality that characterized relations between Scandinavians and the Dakota in this contact zone created by the implementation of the Dawes Act at Fort Totten. It focuses on a foundational piece of that process: the ownership of the land itself on the reservation. A close examination of patterns of landownership by race-ethnicity as well as by gender reveals profound differences between these two groups in access to land, the cultural meanings of land, land use, and gender hierarchies. At the same time, maps of landownership represent a mosaic of racial-ethnic diversity within the boundaries of the reservation. Nonetheless the stage was set for these two groups to live side by side as they looked to the land to make a living and to perpetuate connections to their culture and kin. All those living off the land in North Dakota in the early 20th century faced formidable challenges, and it is the potential for shared experiences

within this highly contested context that makes this case so fascinating.

## BACKGROUND

From its founding in 1867 until 1890, most of the approximately 240,000-acre Devils Lake Sioux Indian Reservation (renamed the Spirit Lake Dakota Reservation in the 1990s) at Fort Totten Agency belonged to the Dakota as a nation (with the exception of the military reserve within its boundaries). Most Dakota were allotted individual parcels in 1890 and 1891, and the land was held in trust for individuals by the U.S. government for a period of 25 years. Theoretically, the government was to ensure that land would not be sold or swindled from tribal members during this interim period of landownership (Prucha 1984). Through a 1901 agreement and the Land Allotment Act of 1904, Fort Totten Agency moved into the subsequent phase stipulated by the Dawes Act and opened reservation land to Euro-American homesteading. By 1910 white settlers owned almost half the land on the reservation (see Fig. 1). By 1929, approximately three

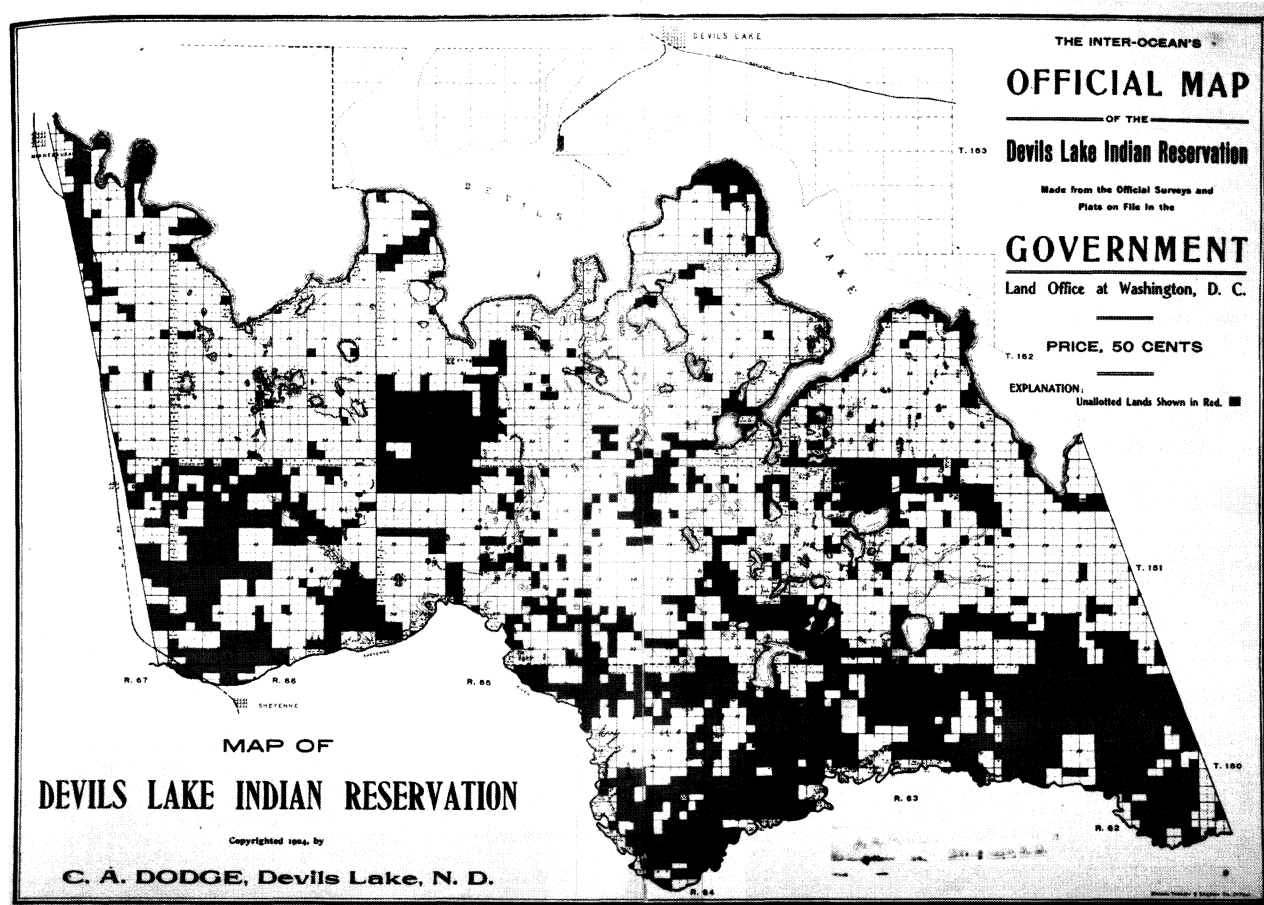


Figure 2. Devils Lake Sioux Indian Reservation, unallotted lands, 1904.

decades after allotment, the Dakota owned only 24% of the land. Scandinavians were by far the largest beneficiaries of this dispossession, owning more total acres of the reservation than the Dakota or any other racial-ethnic group.

Located in northeastern North Dakota, the Spirit Lake Dakota Reservation at Fort Totten Agency is bounded on the north by Devils Lake and on the south by the Sheyenne River. The northern portions of the reservation are hilly, wooded, and rocky, suitable for ranching and harvesting wood. The land on the southern belt of the reservation is flatter and has fertile topsoil, ideal for farming. While the Dakota allotments were concentrated on the northern, less arable land of the reservation, many homesteads in the fertile plains of the southern portion were available for Scandinavian settlers to claim. Figure 2 displays a broadside of those sections of Spirit Lake that were *not* allotted to Dakota and therefore available for white homesteading, starting in 1904.

## METHODS OF INQUIRY

The centerpiece of our analysis is the plat map (see Fig. 3), which plots individual ownership of land by section, within a surveyed grid of a 36-square-mile township. Fort Totten was first platted in 1910, and again in 1929. To translate the hand-recorded owners' names on the plat maps into quantifiable data, we coded all property owners' names, as well as the acreage of parcels they owned, into a Microsoft Excel program. Through a labor-intensive process of combing through original manuscript census forms and Bureau of Indian Affairs enrollment lists, as well as drawing on knowledge from our informants on the reservation, we were able to identify both the ethnic origin and gender for over 90% of the landowners on the reservation in both 1910 and 1929. We then used SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) to generate descriptive statistics and GIS (Geographic Information Systems) to array them spatially.

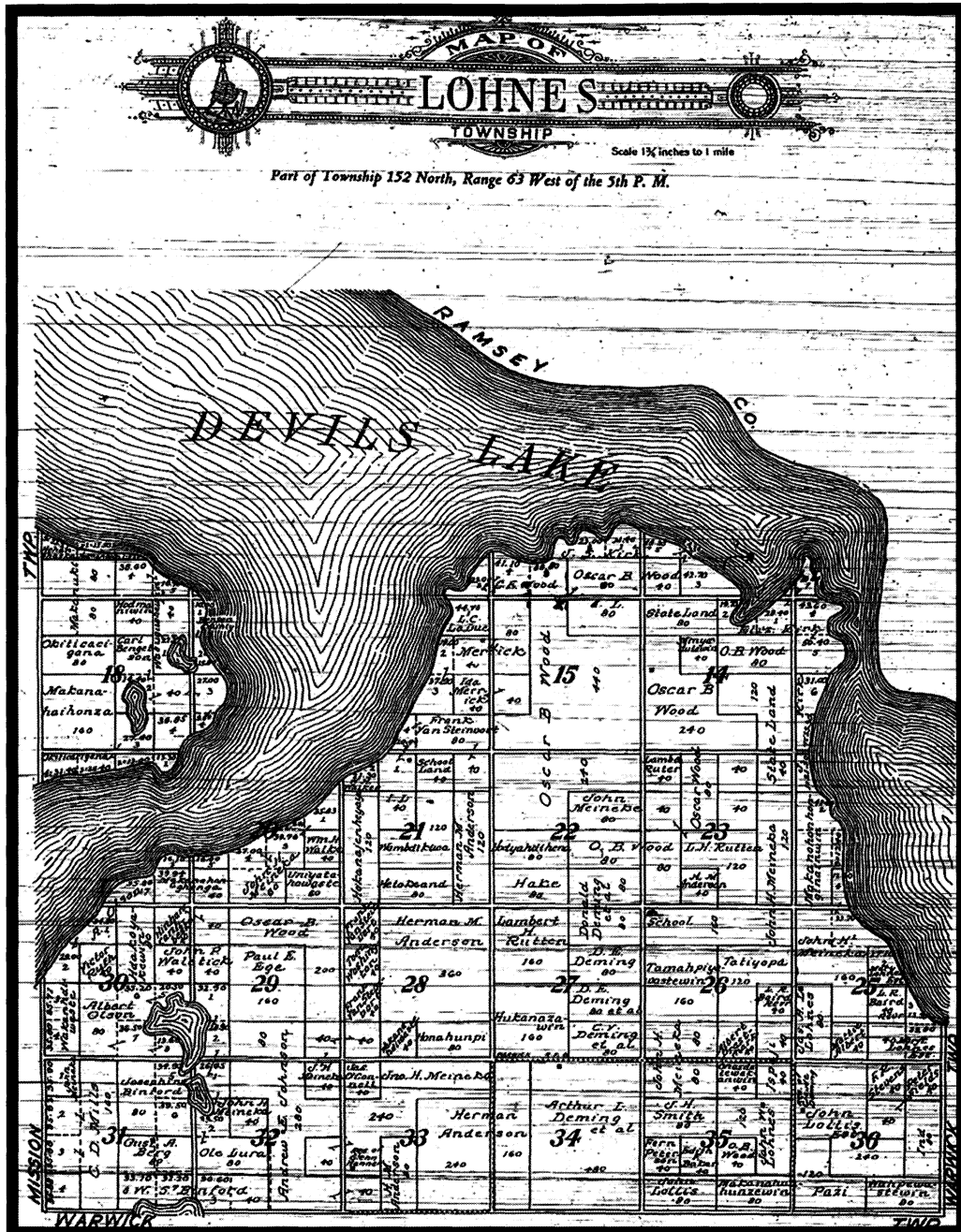


Figure 3. Plat map of Lohnes Township, North Dakota, 1910.

The essential complement to the quantitative analysis of landownership has been the collection of personal narratives through oral histories, individual and family memoirs, and town histories. Hansen has conducted 25 oral history interviews with those who grew up on and near the reservation—both Dakota and Scandinavian elders—with the sanction of the Brandeis Committee

for Protection of Human Subjects. In addition, Hansen has performed extensive analysis of 50 oral histories conducted in 1975 and 1976 held at the State Historical Society of North Dakota.

Studying race and ethnicity, especially historically, always raises particular challenges in categorization. We use the term “racial-ethnic” to connote the situational

meanings of the assigned and adopted identities. Maxine Baca Zinn defines a racial-ethnic group as one that would be labeled as a race “in the context of certain historical, social, and material conditions” (Baca Zinn 1998:39). She states that ethnicity refers to a common ancestry and often a shared culture. Given the importance of national origin and native language to recent immigrants and to Indians, and the contested nature of U.S. Census racial categories, this term accurately captures the dynamic fluidity of identities in the Great Plains.

One man interviewed for the project, Bjorne Knudson, perfectly illustrates the socially constructed nature of these categories. Bjorne boasted that he was born and raised on the reservation, and he was a “full-blooded” Norwegian. At the same time, he declared his ethnic identification of little consequence, although he did marry a woman who was similarly second-generation Norwegian American, and he belonged to the Norwegian Lutheran Church and the Sons of Norway. The 1920 manuscript census enumeration of the Knudson household reveals that his father had in fact been born in Sweden, even though he claimed Norwegian as his native tongue. Bjorne’s mother was born in Norway, but *her* mother had been born in Sweden. Many possible explanations lead to Norwegian ethnicity, but at the very least, the story is more complicated than Bjorne’s “full-blooded” claim represents. The same can be said of the tribal affiliations and bloodedness assessments recorded by the census takers (see Meyer 1994). Racial-ethnic identity is contextual and rarely clear-cut.

Our choices of categories and terminology attempt to mark specific (albeit socially constructed) ethnicities on the Fort Totten reservation at a particular historical moment. Although the majority of settlers on the reservation had Norwegian ancestry, it is difficult to draw clear boundaries between those from Norway and those from Sweden and other Scandinavian countries. We use the term “Scandinavian” to capture any landowner who was either born in one of the Scandinavian countries or descended from a Scandinavian immigrant. And we use Indian or Native American to refer to both the Dakota and the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa who were allotted land on the reservation. The reservation is formally Dakota, so we refer to the Dakota as representing the dominant story. People on the reservation refer to themselves commonly as Indian or Dakota; rarely do they call themselves Native American. We also distinguish German immigrants and their descendants, other foreign-born settlers, and “Yankees” (those born in the United States who are not of Scandinavian, German, or Indian origin) in our larger analysis.

## RACIAL-ETHNIC DIFFERENCES IN LAND ACQUISITION

Studies have consistently found that ethnicity played a large role on the Great Plains—in shaping concentrations of landholdings, language use, political opinion and voting behavior, religious observance, and the gendered division of labor (Morlan 1985; Sherman 1988; Lagerquist 1991; Handy-Marchello 2005). These studies rarely include Native Americans in discussions of Euro-American landowning, but they do consistently find the enduring imprint of ethnicity, however defined, over several generations (Sherman 1983).

The racial-ethnic context of the reservation at Fort Totten frames allotment of Indian land and the subsequent homesteading. The land’s legal designation as a Native American reservation continued even with the arrival of white settlers. Thus at a minimum, the distinction of being a tribal member held legal consequences in relation to land acquisition and ownership.

After allotments were assigned to a majority of tribal members in 1890-91, an agreement negotiated (1901), and the Land Allotment Act of 1904 was passed by Congress, approximately 100,000 acres of unallotted land was opened to white settlement (Land Allotment Act 1904). In 1904 the federal government sponsored a land lottery. Through a random drawing, 600 lottery entrants were selected to pick from available lands and homestead on the reservation. In an example of how Scandinavians settled on the reservation, Gust and Annie Berg, both of whom claim Swedish ancestry, relayed what they knew of the process in a State Historical Society oral history. Gust and Annie were married in 1922, long after the homestead land on the reservation had been claimed. Unlike Gust’s father and brother who homesteaded, they had to buy land on the reservation.

*Interviewer:* How did [your father and brother] homestead the land if it was a reservation?

*Gust:* Well, it’s something through the government, I don’t know, I don’t, I can’t tell you exactly what. All they had to do was go to Devils Lake and they showed what piece of land they was supposed to get, and then they had to pay four dollars and a half.

*Annie:* You see in those days, the Indians was not, they didn’t care.

*Gust:* The Indians was more friendly then.

*Annie:* The Indians was more nice.

*Gust:* Well, the old ones are good, but the young ones, they seem to think they can do any damn thing they want to, and get away with by doing it.

*Interviewer:* Did your dad have to pay any money to the Indians then or anything?

*Gust:* No, no. No he paid it . . . when he registered this. I suppose it went to the government, I don't know just how they done it. Because I wasn't, I was 15 years old, I'd be. (Berg 1976)

The Bergs raise many issues in this brief excerpt; however, we want to draw your attention to two. First, they characterize their elder Indian neighbors as amiable. The nostalgia of their account is no doubt related to retrospective reinterpretation—remembering earlier times more fondly than the confounding and polarized present. In the context of the benign benevolence the Bergs construct about the past, they find it galling that their current young Indian neighbors might not be so accommodating to them and their needs. This interview was conducted in 1976, a time of heightened political conflict in the United States and the midst of a pan-American Indian political mobilization. This political moment could very well have affected the Bergs' perceptions of young people's attitudes and behavior.

Second, while Gust declaims ignorance about the land-taking process, he actually gets the particulars right. The law specified that a person had to be 21 years old to homestead and Gust was but 15 when the reservation opened. A homestead entitled a person to 160 acres—a “quarter section”—for the price of \$4.50 an acre, to be paid over time (Land Allotment Act 1904). Land on the open market in this part of North Dakota was selling for around \$20 an acre at that time. Homesteaders had to live on the land, and they had to “improve” the land—that is, cultivate a certain number of acres each year. Once they had done this, and they could provide witnesses to that effect, they could take the patent, or the deed to the land. While Gust's father and older brother homesteaded, Gust had to buy land when he came of age. The land made available to homestead was quickly claimed; by 1910 there were few unclaimed sections. And many of those without a formal title had people living on them who had simply not yet proved up. Some failed in that process. Land then became available for purchase when claims were abandoned, relinquished, or canceled (Burtzloff 2007); banks foreclosed on mortgaged homesteads; and original allottees died with no apparent heir.

Bjorne Knudson adopts a larger historical perspective as he reflects on Indians' feelings toward whites on the reservation: “The Indian people didn't care much about the white people in those days. . . . The white man came into this country and took their land away from 'em. And they weren't reimbursed properly for it” (Knudson 1999). The government land office collected the homesteading fees for the U.S. Treasury, and funds were subsequently transferred to the Bureau of Indian Affairs and eventually paid to the tribe for the land. Despite the treaties and laws, as Bjorne Knudson suggests, parties dispute what constituted “proper” reimbursement.

By 1910 the Dakota people, who previously had dominion as a nation over the entire reservation, owned but 99,038 acres as individuals. Scandinavians owned almost 50,000 acres—nearly half of the land that had been opened to white settlement. Also telling is the pronounced difference in the average size of landholdings between the Dakota and the Scandinavians. As we know from the history of agriculture in the Great Plains, to be economically viable in an increasingly industrialized world, farms had to grow in size to create economies of scale (Neth 1995). When the Homestead Act was passed in 1862, built on a vision of yeoman self-sufficiency, sound minds differed about whether 160 acres could reasonably support a family. However, approximately 30 to 40 years later, both the allotments to Dakota men and homestead claims for settlers remained only 160 acres. Individuals in both groups could acquire more land only through purchase or inheritance. Therefore, the fact that the average acreage owned by individuals in ethnic groups varies so dramatically as early as 1910 says something about their land-taking strategies. It also affects their potential for success as farmers.

The smallest average parcels of land belonged to the Dakota: 98.7 average acres, in contrast to 149.5 average parcel size for the Scandinavians (see Fig. 4). Twenty years after original allotments, virtually everyone in the Dakota community who owned land had obtained it via allotment or inheritance. While some Dakota made bids to buy land as it became available, the notion of private property was still new and foreign. Louis Garcia, the honorary tribal historian for the Spirit Lake Dakota, explains the cultural logic. He gives the example of what contemporary maps call “Devils Heart,” a hill on the reservation just south of the lake. Garcia explained that the Dakota name, *Mniwakan Cante Paha*, literally means “Heart Hill of the Sacred Water.” He claims it is “the most sacred elevation in all of North Dakota” (Garcia 2007). But it is currently owned by a white farmer. He told me, “Owning

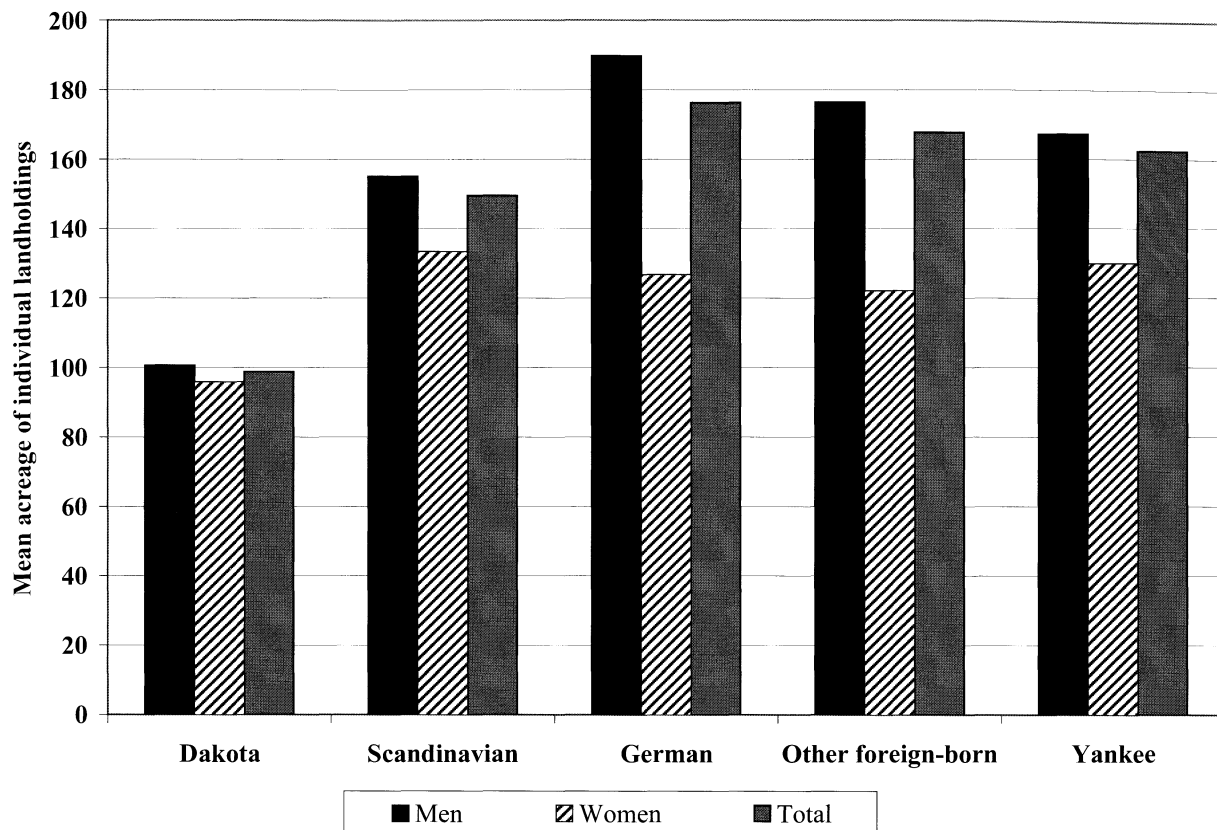


Figure 4. Average size of individual landholdings, 1910.

land is against the American Indian's train of thought. They never thought anybody could own the land. And so in this case here, a non-Indian purchased this piece of property that has . . . Heart Hill on it, simply because no Indian would" (Garcia 2005). He postulates that a white person would say to an Indian, "Why didn't you select that?" And an Indian person would reply, "What are you crazy? That's like desecrating [it]! It's against your philosophy of owning a sacred place" (Garcia 2005).

Even those Dakota who had the resources to buy land typically did not approach the sale of land as an opportunity to accumulate—sacred land or no. Historically, their way of life had relied on having an extensive territory, with boundaries contested and changing over time. They were accustomed, in living memory, to having access to an abundance of land. The idea of land being scarce, like the concept of "owning" the land, was entirely foreign. And while they had kept gardens in their seminomadic past, the Dakota had not been farmers. Indeed, on the reservation, many Dakota leased their land to farmers rather than farm themselves. To many Dakota, the purchase of new land may not have seemed a pressing priority.

In dramatic contrast, Scandinavians came to North America in pursuit of land. After 1850, those who immigrated were largely landless cotters, farm laborers who tilled the soil for others in Scandinavia (Semmingen 1978; Lovell 1984). They revered land and the idea of owning it (Semmingen 1978; Lovell 1984; Lagerquist 1991). Their culture prized *landownership* for many reasons: it provided a place to live, a livelihood, a stake in the country, and a defense against grinding poverty. While the average parcel size in 1910 for Scandinavians was slightly less than the 160-acre homestead size, it was half again as big as the Dakotas'.

The largest farms on the reservation were held not by Dakota nor Scandinavians but by the much smaller group of second-generation Germans. The average land base for this group of 57 landowners was 176.28 acres. And the two largest landholders on the reservation were German: John Weninger, a merchant who owned 1,190 acres, and F.H. Stoltze, a lumber and coal dealer working with the Great Northern railroad (Hudson 1985:83), who owned an astonishing 2,766 acres. When the reservation opened to white settlement, some of the second-generation Germans



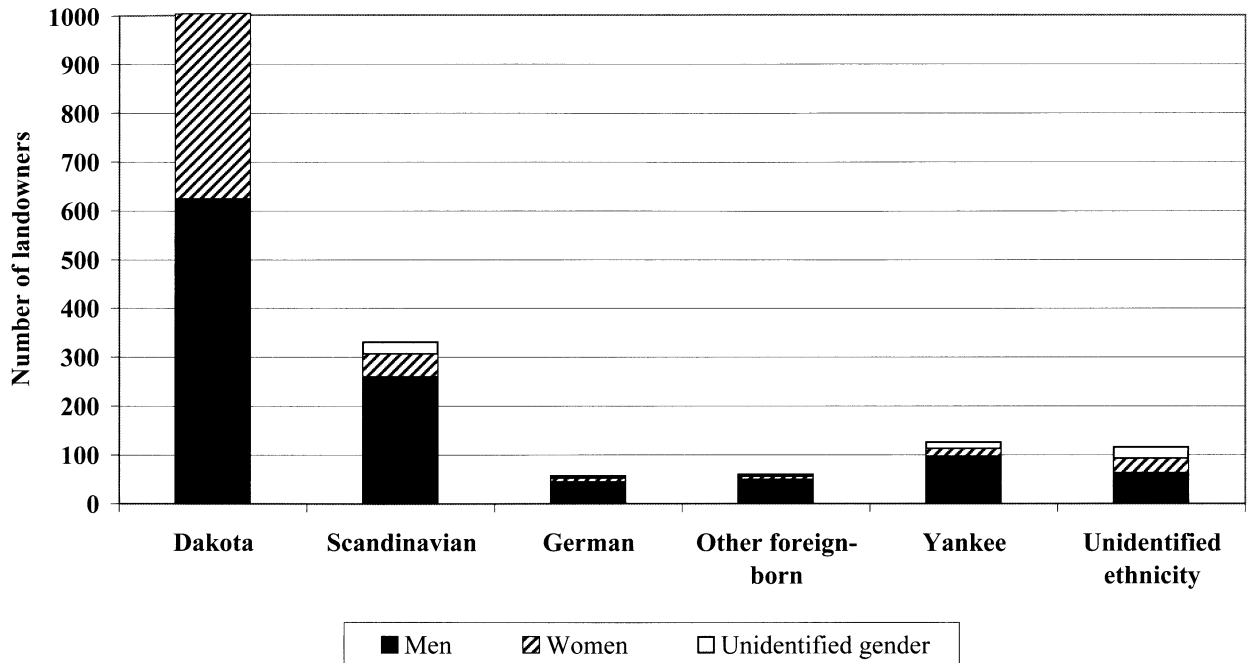


Figure 5. Gender and race-ethnicity of landowners, 1910.

came with the clear agenda of accumulating land—otherwise such a feat by 1910, six short years later, would have been impossible. The magnitude of purchase required large amounts of capital, which most settlers could only imagine.

The Scandinavians had no equivalent to these formidable land giants. Goodnow Torrison was the largest Scandinavian landowner in 1910, owning a total of 535 acres on the reservation. He was followed by John Walde with 480, and most others did not come close. The Scandinavians' more modest holdings reflect a strategy of owning land to support a family, not a strategy of accumulating great amounts of land and wealth. Land taking varied not only by race-ethnicity but also by gender. Between groups, there was a great deal of variation in the practice of women homesteading and buying land.

### GENDER AND LAND ACQUISITION

The legal and cultural differences that marked the land acquisition process among the Dakota and the Scandinavians were not uniform within these ethnic groups. In fact, gender played a pivotal role in determining individuals' rights to land and relationship to it. Dakota women and Scandinavian women were part of this contact-zone community, and an examination of their land-holding patterns illuminates some of the continuities and

contradictions in gender relations in the Great Plains at the turn of the century.

For the reservation as a whole in 1910, 28% of the landowners were female. Compared to studies of other counties in North Dakota and in other western states, this percentage is high (Patterson-Black 1976; Harris 1983; Lindgren 1991). To put it in context, one national study of women's general landownership published in 1946 found that on average, men owned 91% of farmland, women only 9%, with some regional variation (Efland et al. 1993). In her study of homesteaders in North Dakota, Lindgren finds that women claimed between 6% and 20% of the homesteads, with an average of 12% for the nine counties she surveyed (Lindgren 1991:53). Lindgren, however, focused on homesteading alone, which was only one path to landownership, and none of the counties she studied included reservation land. As a result, Indian tribes were not included in her study. At Fort Totten, the 28% figure includes Dakota women landowners.

In 1910, 379 Dakota women owned land, constituting 37.8% of the Dakota landowners. By contrast, only 13.9% of the Scandinavian landowners were women. Notably, other groups of immigrants and native-born landowners included an even smaller proportion of women. The greater gender parity among the Dakota has legal as well as cultural roots (see Fig. 5).

The law structured gender inequality in the land allotment process. The Dawes Act stipulated that Indian men were to receive 160 acres and women only 80, unless they were heads of households. Minor children were to receive 40 acres, and no land was reserved for future generations. In the homesteading laws that applied to non-Indian settlers, adult white men—single or married—had the greatest advantage in the land-taking system. Only single Euro-American women or widows could homestead; married women could *not* (except in unusual circumstances as head of a household).

In part, because of the distributive principle codified in the Dawes Act, more Dakota women owned land than did women from any other ethnic group. This equality of circumstance was consistent with Dakota culture. Women's autonomy from men coexisted with interdependence, and carried forward from an earlier nomadic time into life on the reservation. Historically, Dakota women had owned household items—cookware as well as tepees. They also had the power to divorce men without stigma, and in the process they retained possession of the household and its goods. Relations between men and women “were complementary and consistent with a wider Dakota ethos which idealized both individual integrity and collective responsibility” (Albers 1985:117-18). Importantly, according to anthropologist Patricia Albers, “Men did not exert any control over the products of female subsistence and manufacturing activity. Women had the right to determine how the products of their labor would be used” (Albers 1985:119). Whether owning land translated into other kinds of power for women is not clear, a lingering research question. How did women make decisions about the use of their land? Did owning land prompt them to think differently about the immigrant and Euro-American settlers? Even without these answers, the documentation of the Dakota women's land base is an important backdrop to understanding their lives and their relationships with men and their extended kin.

Scandinavian women also owned land; they homesteaded, improved the land, made claims, and filed for patents. In addition, they bid on available Indian land for purchase. In these many ways, they actively took part in the land-taking process. Scholars have successfully dismantled the “myth of the female as reluctant pioneer” (Riley 1988; Lindgren 1991:52). They have documented the many ways that Yankee and immigrant women actively sought life in the western states and land in their own name. Women sought economic self-sufficiency, adventure, and strategic contributions to the landholdings of their current kin and future households, despite legal

constraints. In her memoir, Rachel Calof, a Russian Jewish woman who in 1894 married into a small community north of Devils Lake, ND, observed: “Of course all engaged girls in this territory filed claims before marriage” (Calof 1995:25). In effect, the young single women were assembling *de facto* dowries and trying to leverage some wealth of their own before becoming ineligible to take land.

### MEANINGS OF LAND IN THE CONTACT ZONE

Gender fundamentally shaped the federal approach to landowning and programs for Native American self-sufficiency. Its profound effect is evident in a story told by Grace Lambert, a Dakota elder. She described the process her father went through, as the federal government experimented with different programs to end tribal dependency. “They gave him eighty acres or forty acres I don't know which they gave him. . . . Then they made them shoot that arrow first, you remember? I suppose you have heard that.” When I affirmed that I had read about the ritual symbolizing the change of citizenship, I asked her to describe how events unfolded.

They figured that these men here and their families could run a farm. . . . My dad said they put all these men in a row and they gave them a bow and arrow and each one had to shoot it. They'd shoot that, and say that they're shooting away their culture. And that from now on they're going to be in the white man's way. So they gave up all their rights as an Indian. They were never going to accept the rations, if they had rations, to give away, or payment was going to be given, they would not be eligible for it. So they stood there and I guess they passed that bow and arrow to each one and they shot it. (Lambert 1999)

In effect, the federal government attempted to impose its definition of economic self-sufficiency on Native peoples. It devised this ritual, variously applied in different tribes, as a way of symbolizing the transition to U.S. citizenship and self-sufficiency and away from “Indianness” (Prucha 1984). Citizenship underlay the system of private property, and it was buttressed by gender hierarchy (Glenn 2002) and conceptions of an appropriate gender division of labor. This was also true for immigrants, who could make a homestead claim but could not take title until they became naturalized U.S. citizens. Through these policies,

the government defined masculinity (and femininity) as well as citizenship.

Dakota women were not given plows, horses, and seed, like the Dakota men. Unlike the men, Dakota women were not trained to become farmers even though they had been responsible for agricultural production in an earlier time. Instead, through Bureau of Indian Affairs school curriculum, the government taught girls to sew cloth, cook with Euro-American foodstuffs (like flour), and clean their households (Child 2000). The government assumed women were subordinate to men and therefore did not need comparable amounts of land.

Yet, as the plat maps reveal, some women owned land. And a subset of those farmed their land. Bjerne Knudson described the importance of his mother's time in the fields, while his father earned income for the family through carpentry. "Mother would try and farm and I can remember when she would have three horses on a walking plow. We called it a walking plow, because you had to walk behind it and hold it as you plowed the ground. So we farmed, as the kids got a little older, us kids, we helped her all we could" (Knudson 1999). But despite her fundamental contributions to field work, in the 1920 U.S. manuscript census, Mrs. Knudson's occupation was listed as "none." Historical studies of women's work on farms repeatedly document the extent to which women contributed to the farm economy (Sachs 1983; Schlissel 1988; Lagerquist 1991; Nelson 1996; Murphy 1997; Handy-Marchello 2005). And yet, only rarely are women designated as farmers in the census. In the few cases we have identified on the reservation, female farmers are also widowed heads of households. Working in the fields, seasonally or regularly, like Mrs. Knudson, did not entitle one to the label "farmer," clearly a gendered and contested yet valued term. Lois Olson Jones declared that her aunt, Ida Olson, was not a "real farmer." She *owned* the land; but her father and her brother *farmed* her land (Jones 2005). For Jones, the hallowed title required personally working the land.

Not surprisingly, married women's names were not listed on their husband's land titles, with the exception of a few large landowners. The reverse is also true. Lois Olson Jones precisely specifies whose name was on the title of family land. Her grandfather homesteaded just northeast of the reservation, while her grandmother had an 80-acre tree claim. Her grandmother took seriously her responsibility as the caretaker of the land: she planted and tended the trees that entitled her to the deed. Lois reflects: "She took her four kids and this old oxen . . . to pull a stone boat. And it's just a flat thing, and she had a barrel on

there and she could put water in and they'd go, it was like a mile and a half or two miles to the lake." This routine was necessary to water the trees essential to her claim. When her grandmother died, Lois's mother inherited that land. Lois said, "That was her land and I think it gave her a sense of superiority, maybe, that she owned land" (Jones 2005).

Even when women were not farmers, or landowners, in this rural area—without electricity, without indoor plumbing, in homes heated by coal and wood-burning stoves—mere subsistence demanded grueling physical labor. In this way, women's lives, regardless of race-ethnicity, were quite similar (Riley 1988). Elizabeth Hampsten finds a strikingly common reality for white women in North Dakota, "Depending on where he lives, a man can be a cattle raiser, a whaler, or a miner; what women do all day long is much the same from one place to another" (Hampsten 1982:31). Women's work in a rural area meant hours of back-breaking work in the barnyard, in the house, in the fields. For example, when Grace Lambert, a Dakota elder, described her life in the 1920s, she spoke of her responsibility for chopping wood—mountains of wood—to keep warm in winter. She boasted that the chopping made her "strong and mighty" (Lambert 1999). Grace Pearson, a Norwegian who lived just off the reservation, told a similar kind of tale: "Thomas in the winter, hauled logs from the river. And in the fall, we had an old Model T that he had remodeled, with a box behind. When he was out working in the field, threshing and that, then I'd go down to my sister's, and she'd help me load it. And I'd haul wood home, in that old Model T" (Pearson 1976). The gendered division of labor assigned the women, such as Grace Lambert, Grace Pearson, and Grace's sister, the task of hauling logs and chopping wood.

Dakota and Scandinavian women also shared some perspectives on the land. They faced economic and cultural challenges for survival in a U.S. economy, and landownership helped them to meet those. Both groups of women report growing vegetable gardens so they could feed their families. Vitally, the land provided a foundation on which to build a physical as well as metaphorical home. Hampsten finds that Euro-American women were unlikely to identify *emotionally* with the land in their diary and memoir writing; instead, they focused on the continuity and livelihood it provided. One Norwegian woman wrote about her land near Devils Lake: "I have it mainly because as long as I keep it we have a home" (Hampsten 1982:34). Owning the land was a critical part of providing a place to live and a means to feed the family.

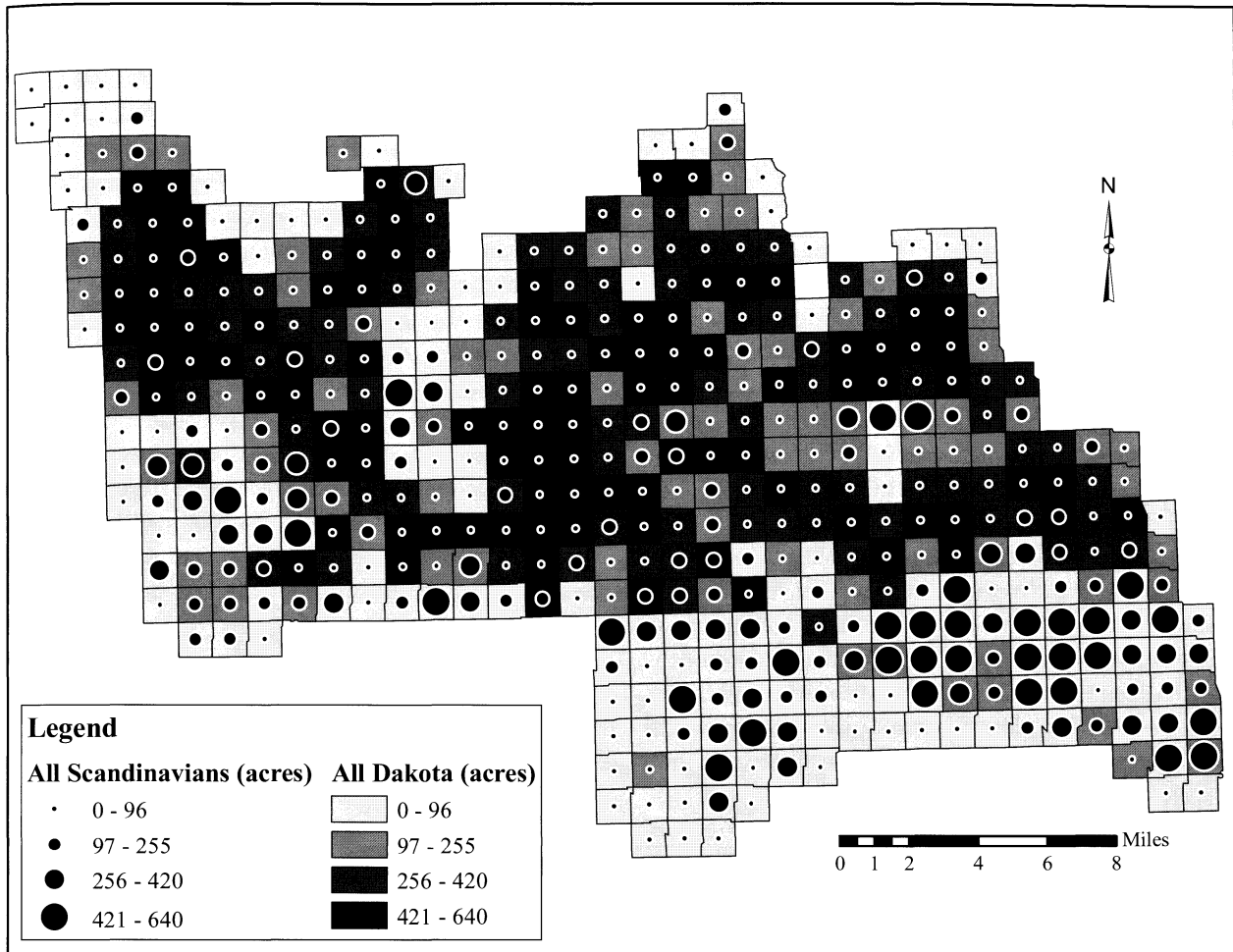


Figure 6. Map of Scandinavian and Dakota landownership by square-mile sections, 1910.

Although both Scandinavians and Dakota sought to live in community with kin and people who spoke their language, the organization of allotments and homesteads structured segregation and isolation. In the Great Plains survey grid, quarter-section divides meant households were often at least a half mile from each other. Some people made efforts to build adjacent to a property line, or even on the line itself, as siblings owning contiguous parcels sometimes did (Lindgren 1991). Nonetheless, for the majority, neighbors and kin were some distance away, a distance made greater by the lack of adequate roads, easy transportation, and sufficient telephones. Anthropologist Beatrice Medicine discussed the impact of scattered Dakota households, separated by miles. She writes, “Each ‘family unit’ was expected to live by itself, often miles from their other relatives. Now every chance to foregather with relatives was precious. ‘Farmers’ left their small gardens to dry up and their stock to fend for themselves while

they went away on lengthy visits” (Medicine 2001:272). Oftentimes, kinship obligations and the need for sociability trumped the requirements of farming. The cluster of allotments on the north side of the reservation (see Fig. 6) can be interpreted as attempts to live in community to the extent possible.

The Scandinavians were similarly isolated on quarter-section homesteads, in addition to being immigrants from a distant land. However, with their land-taking strategy, they sought to live as close to one another as possible. Nonetheless, they remained largely separated. The pockets of community they created, such as the village of Warwick, ND, centered around stores and a church, can be understood as a means for sociability, kinship ties, religious worship, and using their native language (Gjerde 1991). Handy-Marchello makes the point that Norwegian women fought to keep the land because it was an anchor to their fragile status in a new culture and economy:

They had established a community where Norwegian culture was understood and Norsk was the everyday language. The homestead right was a one-time opportunity. If they lost their land claim to mortgage foreclosure they would not be able to claim another quarter-section under that law. In addition, these Norwegian immigrant women understood that losing the farm might mean moving out of the community. If they had to move, they might end up in a Yankee community where they would be outsiders. (Handy-Marchello 1996:228)

That deep commitment to the preservation of land can be heard in the family land-keeping ethic Lois Olson Jones, of Swedish and Irish ancestry, described: "It's instilled on *me* that land, you don't sell land, once you get it. You hang onto land." When asked why, Jones replied, "Because it's secure. We're the people that feed the world. And if you have land, you can have cattle and you can have gardens and whatever" (Jones 2005). In other words, land means that one has a place to raise a family, a way to feed them, and a method for serving a greater calling to produce food for a hungry world.

The threat of land loss was equally grave to the Dakota, but it took different forms. If Dakota lost land, they would still live on the reservation; they would simply do so as landless individuals. In an interview, Agnes Greene, a Dakota elder, reflected on the precarious state of the white homesteaders, "The farmers were poor too. They didn't have nothing. And they were worse off, because if they didn't keep up their payments, well, the banks took their land and they had to get off, *go*. Where the Indians, they just stayed here. They had the reservation to live on" (Greene 1999). As Native American Indians, the Dakota lived as a nation, but under the jurisdiction of the U.S. government. The loss of land meant individuals would lose a source of income and wealth, and the tribe would be working with a diminished collective land base. However, as Agnes Greene said, they nonetheless lived on the reservation. It provided a bounded area, however insufficient, in which to live and worship and from which the Dakota could raise their children.

## CONCLUSION

Accounts of the dispossession of Indian territorial lands largely focus on the nineteenth century and the periods of war, forced relocation of Native peoples onto reservations, and the successive contraction of reservation acreage. And

yet, the dispossession does not end in 1900. The Dawes Act of 1887 put in motion a process that progressively diminished the land reserved for Indians. A less frequently told tale is that of Euro-Americans and immigrants coming to live *on the reservations*, to own land there, and to coexist with Indians on the reservations. The 20th-century story is one of continued dispossession that went hand in hand with the intrusion of immigrant and Euro-American cultures and the growth of an agricultural economy on land formerly belonging to Native Americans.

Our research uniquely documents the amount of land that was acquired and lost by various racial-ethnic groups on one reservation in the early part of the 20th century. While the history of ownership of land on other reservations will undoubtedly differ because of the combination of tribal affiliation, historical moment, the racial-ethnic composition of immigrant groups, and the mixture of Yankee settlement, the overarching story of the dispossession of Native peoples remains constant. This case study allows us to examine the particularities of one place and better understand the complicated dynamics of subsequent coexistence.

Two decades after the first platting of the reservation, fewer Dakota owned land; they owned less acreage in total; and they held smaller lots per person. The story of Dakota ownership of land at Fort Totten parallels the process of dispossession on other reservations around the country (Meyer 1994; Wishart 1994).

The northern Great Plains saw drought and depression early in the 1920s, and yet at Fort Totten the Scandinavians expanded their land base while that of the Dakota contracted. The experience for the Scandinavian landowners reflected, in some measure, the economic consolidation underway in other parts of the country. By 1929, a smaller, slightly better-off group of Scandinavians owned *more* land, in *larger* parcels.

While the consolidation of farms in an industrializing agricultural economy explains Scandinavian men's landholding, it does not capture women's. Startlingly, in contrast to the men, and more than all other groups of women, the *proportion* of Scandinavian women owning land increased. By 1929, 24% of Scandinavian landowners were women (versus 13% in 1910). The average number of acres they owned also increased, to 145, still less than a quarter section. The need for bigger farms to survive economically spurred land accumulation. In spite of women's increased land wealth, their holdings continued to be dwarfed by men's. Over time, the disparity between them grew.

For Dakota women, the process amounted to unmitigated disaster. Like Dakota men, they lost traction as a

landowning base—in their absolute numbers and in the size of their holdings. A few Dakota women owned more land in 1929, but they were the exceptions.

The arrival of Scandinavian settlers at Fort Totten created a contact zone rife with contradictions, conflict, and structural inequalities. The land taking meant men and women of contrasting cultures learned to coexist. But they did so while viewing the world through their specific cultural lenses, struggling with their changing understandings of appropriate land use, and approaching the U.S. economy with historically informed proclivities and agendas, all the while trying to raise children, speak their language, and observe their religion.

Dakota and Scandinavian people came to own land through profoundly different processes. While the notion of private property ownership was imposed on the Dakota, Scandinavians embraced it with a passion. Nonetheless, landholding gave each group some economic autonomy, a pathway to a form of political power, and a material foundation from which to practice and reinvent their respective cultures.

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