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## From saeter to sod: Single women homesteaders of Norwegian descent farming their land in Dakota territory, 1862-1929

Sara Marie Skindeliën  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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FROM SAETER TO SOD: SINGLE WOMEN HOMESTEADERS OF  
NORWEGIAN DESCENT FARMING THEIR LAND IN  
DAKOTA TERRITORY, 1862-1929

An Abstract of a Thesis  
Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

Sara Marie Skindeliën  
University of Northern Iowa  
August 2013

## ABSTRACT

On May 20, 1862 Congress signed into effect the Homestead Act which provided 160 acres of surveyed government land to any citizen over the age of twenty-one and who was a head of household. One of the most historical aspects of this act was that it allowed single women the opportunity to own land. Not only were native-born women taking advantage of such a lucrative offer, but the women of Norway saw just the opening they needed to venture out on their own. They joined thousands of their countrymen across the Atlantic to find a bit of land where they could indulge in the cornucopia of bounty that they were assured the Dakota plains had to offer.

Norwegians have a rich farming history and take great pride in working the land. Women were trained from a young age to work long hours in the fields cutting and drying hay as well as managing the milking herds in the saeters (mountain pasture) of their native Norway. This strong work ethic was transported to the many Norwegian-American farm communities that dotted the Upper Midwest where it was not uncommon to find young women working alongside their fathers and brothers in the fields and barnyards. It can be no wonder that these women were able to slip right into the profession of farmer on their small claims. But no one did it alone. Along with their often tight-knit Norwegian communities and the available government resources, single women of Norwegian descent were able to apply their knowledge and experience to their Dakota homesteads to become successful farmers and pass their love for farming and land onto future generations.



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APPROVAL PAGE

This Study by: Sara Marie Skindeliën

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Farming Their Land in Dakota Territory, 1862-1929

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the

Degree of Master of Arts

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Trudy Eden, Chair, Thesis Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Robert F. Martin, Thesis Committee Member

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Emily A. Machen, Thesis Committee Member

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Michael J. Licari, Dean, Graduate College

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

While I always knew I descended from hardy, independent and spirited Norwegian women, I did not realize the extent of such traits. I soon realized just how far these roots ran when I discovered in a family oral history transcript that my great-great-grandmother Helene Saeter Engen was the driving force behind my family's emigration from Norway to Minnesota. I also discovered that she, not her husband, farmed their homestead. While I did not have the pleasure of meeting Helene, I have been told from a very young age that my stubbornness, my inquisitive nature, and independent spirit were traits I inherited from the great women who preceded me. Mange takk tippoldemor og takk for inspirasjon!

While Helene was encouraging me in spirit, Dr. Trudy Eden provided encouragement through email and Skype. Not only did Dr. Eden offer wonderful guidance and ideas, she also dealt out a great deal of patience with me being hundreds of miles away from Iowa. I would also like to thank Dr. Robert Martin for offering to fill in at the last minute to fill the third committee chair on such short notice and Dr. Emily Machen for taking time out of her busy schedule to agree to be on my committee as well as their kind words of support.

Thank you to Jerome Montgomery for keeping Thor and Stig at bay while I worked and for providing the much needed technology for me to complete my project.

This whole topic of single Norwegian homesteaders would not have been conceivable without the cultural heritage my parents and grandparents instilled in me from a very early age. I thank my parents for their knowledge of the Norwegian language and instilling in me a strong work ethic, which I believe, has made me want to see this project to the end. Also special thanks to my large family who have fostered my interest in our Norwegian culture, language, food and heritage. Mange takk mor, far, soster og brodre.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Historically, the American West has held a great interest in the nation's imagination, particularly how it has encouraged the rugged and adventurous to exhibit their hardiness in taming a desolated land. Women's roles in helping to build the American West have, until the latter quarter of the twentieth century, gone largely unrecognized despite their obvious existence. When women were mentioned in histories, it was usually in the form of stereotypical images that largely placed them in positions of subordination and weakness. Recent scholarship has reviewed some of the experiences of women who ventured west and how they participated in claiming lands associated with the Homestead Act of 1862. The many women who participated in the Homestead Act as individuals rather than as a family unit have been slowly documented but at a rate that only allows their general stories to be told. As historians begin to delve deeper into their narratives, they are beginning to sift out narrative intricacies such as ethnicity. By reviewing the history of immigrant groups such as the Norwegians, historians can appreciate how the often perceived ideals of womanhood played a very insignificant role in women's lives as they worked and toiled their new American lands.

One of the most notable features of the Homestead Act, besides the offer of land, was its intentional inclusion of single women. This aspect was especially appealing to women with an agricultural background such as the rural women of Norwegian ancestry who had a long history of working the soil. These women were

trained from a young age to toil long hours in the fields tilling, cutting and drying hay, and managing the dairy herds in the saeters (mountain summer homes) in addition to performing their domestic duties of cleaning, cooking, and churning cream into butter.

Since many Norwegians tended to settle together in one area, often times the only thing that changed in their lives was the physical landscape. Norwegians were known to isolate themselves. They relied heavily on each other in the New World to the point where those who emigrated from states neighboring Dakota Territory often created “sister colonies,” some even settling with Norwegians from the same regions in Norway. The Norwegians who then continued to flow into the existing Norwegian colonies encouraged such isolationism and reinforced the cooperative ideals they so valued. This isolation provided a unique environment that created a sub-culture of Norwegian ideologies, many of which have been preserved well into the twenty-first century.

Native-born as well as Norwegian-born Americans who homesteaded inherently possessed the skills to farm their homesteads. Not only did they have the familial background of working on a farm but in their adopted country they had access to university extension programs, government literature and, most importantly, they had the aid and support of their extensive Norwegian community. Single women of Norwegian descent, like many other women of their time, were not all acolytes of the middle-class ideals of womanhood. Many grasped the opportunity to acquire land in their own name and farm it as generations of women had before them.

Inspired in part by H. Elaine Lindgren's work on single women homesteaders of North Dakota, the research presented here offers an initial look at the women of Norwegian descent who homesteaded alone during the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and farmed their land. To explore these women more deeply, this thesis relied heavily upon Lindgren's extensive interviews and data collection to show the number of women of Norwegian descent who took out claims and farmed their own land. It concludes that these women, like so many other laboring class women in the rural United States, did not adhere to the middle-class ideals of womanhood and instead continued in the agricultural tradition in their new country much as their mothers and grandmothers had done before them in the old.



## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior to the vast technological advances of the television and computer games, young men and women of the early twentieth century fulfilled their entertainment appetites with inexpensive and adventurous dime novels and the burgeoning number of films produced for their consumption. The early dime novels and films of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century have often been credited with instilling into the American psyche the early stereotypes of the men and women who settled the American West. Historians have had over a century to dispel these myths but have been slow to do so. For instance, Walter Prescott Webb's 1931 book, *The Great Plains*, notes how the area appealed to men's sense of adventure and "zest in life." Men's hardiness made them "insensible to the hardships and lack of refinement," unlike the women, whom he believed were "repelled" by the lack of material offerings only found in the East.<sup>1</sup> Nearly thirty years later in 1958, Dee Brown reviewed the writings of homesteaders and commented on how they depicted men as tamers of the physical West and women as tamers of the social West.<sup>2</sup> Both Webb and Brown enforced the image of the West being men's rugged terrain in which women seemed out of place, a conclusion that future historians worked to refute.

Prior to the 1970s and 1980s, women rarely received any attention in the writings of western history. When women were mentioned it was often as supporting

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Prescott Webb. *The Great Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1931), 505.

<sup>2</sup> Dee Brown. *The Gentle Tamers: Women of the old Wild West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1958).

characters. It is sometimes difficult to comprehend how women's role in helping to develop and build the American West went unnoticed for so long. This may be due to what Margaret Walsh attributed to early historians' obsessions with the romanticism of the frontier, the political process of state-making or the triumph of western development, all of which allowed historians to casually mention women or all-together ignore their contributions.<sup>3</sup> Susan Armitage made the valid point that a great deal of history is incomplete, especially as it pertains to women, because of men's failure to consider the female experience altogether.<sup>4</sup>

### Stereotypes

Perhaps because women's roles could no longer be overlooked or because historians had exhausted the male homesteading story, women began to gain recognition for their contributions in helping to settle the American West. Initial studies featured women who ventured with their husbands and families, albeit as subsidiaries to their husbands, the real homesteaders. Such stereotypes still lay embedded in popular culture when, in 1921, Emerson Hough described the pioneer woman as "the gaunt and sad-faced woman sitting on the front seat of a wagon, following her lord where he might lead," her face hidden by a ragged sunbonnet.<sup>5</sup> Such descriptions established men as the true community builders and placed women

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<sup>3</sup> Margaret Walsh, "Women's Place on the American Frontier," *Journal of American Studies* 29, no. 2 (August 1995): 242.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Armitage. *The Women's West*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 383.

<sup>5</sup> Emerson Hough. *The Passing of the Frontier: A Chronicle of the Old West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1921), 93.

in a social support role.<sup>6</sup> Such placement pigeonholed women as secondary to men and shadowed any “depth” these women and their stories had.<sup>7</sup>

For the women who did not have a male to define their role, the single women who ventured west alone presented a challenge for historians writing on the American west. These women did not seem to fit into any known or comfortable social categories and, as a result, often were viewed to be living beyond the parameters of respectability. Historians tended to place these women in one of two groups – a prostitute or a spinster. While it is quite clear that women did engage in prostitution in the American West, a single woman venturing out on her own for a life other than for pleasing lonely men was an image hard for historians to reshape, especially for those women deemed “public” – women who dared to venture outside their homes unescorted – as they would “be suspected of participating in something immoral or socially marginal.”<sup>8</sup> Single women who either did not find a suitable companion or had made a conscious decision not to marry were awarded a tag of spinster or oddity. Mari Sandov referred to these women as “Boston old maids” or “Chicago widows.”<sup>9</sup> A woman who engaged in “non-feminine activities”-- and homesteading alone could

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<sup>6</sup> Sandra L. Myers. *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience 1800-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 6.

<sup>7</sup> Glenda Riley. *The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and the Plains* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 8.

<sup>8</sup> Susan M. Cruca, “Changing Ideals of Womanhood During the Nineteenth-Century Woman Movement,” *The American Transcendental Quarterly* 19 no. 3 (2005): 194.

<sup>9</sup> Mari Sandov. *Hostiles and Friendlies* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1959), xvi.

be placed in that category--was not considered a woman in the true sense of the word but an “exception, an aberration.”<sup>10</sup>

### Stereotypes Debunked

Sandra Myers’s analysis of the letters and diaries of women who moved across the country to settle with their families found many instances where these stereotypes could not be substantiated. In the early 1980s Myers found that women played instrumental roles in the settling of the West. They prepared carefully for their journeys as indicated by the supply lists they wrote in their journal entries. She also noted that while many women’s letters and diaries indicated they were apprehensive about their new experience homesteading, they were also quite optimistic and looked forward to their new surroundings.<sup>11</sup> Lucy Jane Bedsoe refutes the conclusions of historians such as Julie Roy Jeffrey, John Mack Faragher and Christine Stansell who asserted that women were “followers” and “lacked a sense of inclusion.” In reviewing the diaries and letters of women homesteaders, Bedsoe found numerous instances in which wives participated fully in the decisions to emigrate across the country, one woman even listing “adventure and a desire to see what was new and strange” as her reasons for homesteading.<sup>12</sup>

When historians finally acknowledged that women were indeed an important part of the homesteading experience, they began to examine just exactly what that meant. Women were often expected to and did establish cultural institutions such as

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<sup>10</sup>Sandra L. Myers. *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience 1800-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 8.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid, 36.

<sup>12</sup>Lucy Jane Bledsoe, “Adventuresome Women on the Oregon Trail: 1840-1867,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 7 no. 2 *Women on the Frontier* (1984):25.

schools and churches in conjunction with introducing a “broad spectrum of social reforms.”<sup>13</sup> Women’s performance of such public roles as school teachers and voting in school affairs in Western communities eroded the stereotype of “public” women, perhaps changing the belief that such activities caused any sort of “defeminization of women.”<sup>14</sup>

### Single Women

After historians included married women in their studies, they began to highlight the lives of single women. As Susan Hallgarth advised, historians needed to not only concentrate on the early years of homesteading and the married women who participated but to view the women who settled in the American west as a whole and that includes the role single women played.<sup>15</sup> The early stereotypes associated with married homesteaders may have discouraged historians and society from accepting or investigating single women homesteaders. The women who helped settle the West began to fill this void. Some wrote firsthand accounts of their homesteading experiences, de-mystifying many of the images the country had of single women homesteading alone. One of these women, Elinore Pruitt Stewart, had her homesteading experiences published in letter form in *Atlantic Monthly* and later published as a book in 1914.<sup>16</sup> Contemporary non-participants wrote articles about

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<sup>13</sup>Glenda Riley. *The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and the Plains* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 2.

<sup>14</sup>Sandra L. Myers. *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience 1800-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 185.

<sup>15</sup>Susan A. Hallgarth, “Women Settlers on the Frontier: Unwed, Unreluctant, Unrepentant,” *Women's Studies Quarterly* 17 no. 3-4 *Women's Nontraditional Literature* (Fall-Winter 1989): 23.

<sup>16</sup>Elinore Pruitt Stewart. *Letters of a Woman Homesteader* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914).

single women homesteaders, such as the one published in 1916 in *Overland Monthly* that described how one single woman gave up teaching for the life of a homesteader because she had “a longing for horizons instead of walls.”<sup>17</sup> Mabel Lewis Stuart’s article in *The Independent* depicted life for the single woman homesteader as a test in one’s “perseverance in triumphing over the trying conditions of pioneer life.”<sup>18</sup> In another, written as if the government mascot Uncle Sam was, indeed, a close relative, a single woman homesteader explained to readers how, despite being a cantankerous old man, Uncle Sam was also “fair and generous” and encouraged her readers to exercise their “family right” and take their dear old Uncle Sam up on his offer for free farm land.<sup>19</sup>

Most of the recent historiography provides a platform for stories of the brave, often adventuresome single women who answered the call to homestead alone. In most cases such narratives serve as lenses to refute the stereotype of women as reluctant pioneers that has been ingrained in our popular fiction and histories of homesteaders in the west. Historians such as Glenda Riley led the way in demystifying such stereotypes, replacing the image of isolated, insane-driven prairie maidens with one of resourceful, independent women who eventually found ways to

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<sup>17</sup>Metta Loomis, “From a School Room to a Montana Ranch,” *Overland Monthly* LXVII no. 1 (January 1916): 59-64.

<sup>18</sup>Mabel Lewis Stuart, “The Lady Honyocker: How Girls Take Up Claims and Make Their Own Homes on the Prairie,” *The Independent* (17 July 1913): 135, 137.

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Abbey Everett, “Uncle’s Gift,” *The Independent* 74 no. 3345 (9 January 1913): 99-100.

conquer and even love the challenges that the prairies and plains presented to all homesteaders.<sup>20</sup>

Riley's scholarship inspired other historians to look more closely at single women homesteaders, and, eventually, to do so on a state-by-state basis. In reviewing specific geographical areas, these historians looked more closely at single women homesteaders and their reasons for selecting specific areas. For instance, Cheryl Patterson-Black studied land records of Colorado and Wyoming from 1887 to 1908 and found an average of 11.9% of the sample of homestead entrants were women, a number that increased over time.<sup>21</sup> H. Elaine Lindgren concentrated her research on North Dakota by reviewing the processes that the women underwent in order to successfully claim land.<sup>22</sup> Paula Nelson researched South Dakota, where she found most of the women had been "absentee," meaning they had no real intention of making a long-term commitment to their claim and sold or rented their land soon after proving up.<sup>23</sup> Through analysis of homesteading records in Minnesota, Anne Webb found that of the 259 she sampled most women who were on the land alone did not inherit the land from a male figure but rather applied for the land in their own name.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Glenda Riley. *The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and the Plains* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 3.

<sup>21</sup>Sheryll Patterson-Black, "Women Homesteaders on the Great Plains Frontier," *A Journal of Women Studies* 1, no. 2 (Spring 1976): 68.

<sup>22</sup>H. Elaine Lindgren. *Land in Her Own Name: Women as Homesteaders in North Dakota* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

<sup>23</sup>Paula Nelson. *After the West Was Won: Homesteaders and Town-Builders in Western South Dakota, 1900-1917* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1986), 42.

<sup>24</sup>Anne Webb, "Minnesota Women Homesteaders: 1863-1889," *Journal of Social History* 23 no. 1 (Autumn 1989): 119.

## Immigrants

While such specific cases provide a wealth of information on individual women who chose to homestead in various regions, most of these studies concentrated on the native-born Americans. With such a plethora of information on the “classic” white, Protestant American-born single woman homesteader, the matter of the immigrant woman slowly came to light. Katherine Benton-Cohen compared and contrasted Mexican-American and Mormon women in Cochise County, Arizona and found that both groups were well represented in the number of single women who homesteaded and along with their “classic” sisters, also tended to exercise their right to own land as an economic endeavor to extend their families land holdings.<sup>25</sup> Janet Schulte reviewed how a Jewish community attempted to settle as a group and while, the women suffered hardships common to homesteaders, they were unable to adapt their Jewish culture to the prairie life in North Dakota and abruptly ended their homesteading effort.<sup>26</sup> H. Elaine Lindgren touched upon the ethnic homesteader’s stories in her analysis of North Dakota where she found significant numbers of Jewish, Lebanese,<sup>27</sup> German-Russians, and Norwegians, giving insight into the cultural aspects of and the roles women played in pioneer settlements. However, she ended her

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<sup>25</sup> Katherine Benton-Cohen, “Common Purposes, Worlds Apart: Mexican-American, Mormon and Midwestern Women Homesteaders in Cochise County, Arizona,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 36 no. 4 (Winter 2005): 43.

<sup>26</sup> Janet E. Schulte, “Proving up and Moving up”: Jewish Homesteading Activity in North Dakota, 1900-1920,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 10 (Fall 1990): 228-244.

<sup>27</sup> H. Elaine Lindgren. *Land in Her Own Name: Women as Homesteaders in North Dakota* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 22-23.



research at the proving up stage and did not address what these women did with their land.<sup>28</sup>

While such diverse groups may have differed in culture, race or reason for homesteading, the majority of them were not completely alone in establishing a homestead. Through her research, Lindgren found that only about seven percent would have been considered “lone adventurers” without any support of family or friends. Typically single women came in pairs or groups settling next to each other, and this practice is most evident in groups such as the Norwegians.<sup>29</sup>

### Norwegians

In the overview of the history of the American West, the Norwegian women’s immigrant story is quite limited. The journal dedicated to the Norwegian immigrant’s experiences, *The Norwegian-American Studies and Records*, published immigrant women’s stories, although they were not by noted historians, but typically by minister’s wives outlining their fundraising efforts or their roles in the local Ladies’ Aids. In other words, the Lutheran Church was their main subject of these entries.<sup>30</sup> Other publications included women homesteaders, but not always in the most flattering light.

Perhaps for most, the first image provided of Norwegian women settling in the American West--although a fictional one--was that of Beret Hansa, the reluctant wife

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<sup>28</sup>H. Elaine Lindgren, “Ethnic Women Homesteading on the Plains of North Dakota,” *Great Plains Quarterly*, 9 (Summer 1989): 157-173, 157-173.

<sup>29</sup>H. Elaine Lindgren. *Land in Her Own Name: Women as Homesteaders in North Dakota* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 24.

<sup>30</sup>See Norwegian-American Historical Association. *Norwegian-American Studies and Records*. <http://www.naha.stolaf.edu/pubs/nastudies.htm> for complete volumes (accessed June 5, 2012).

of O.E. Rolvaag's classic *Giants in the Earth*. Believed to have relied on the experiences of his in-laws, Rolvaag portrayed Beret as a fearful and helpless creature forced to leave her beloved Norway and family to follow the dreams of her enthusiastic and adventuresome husband Per to the prairies of Dakota Territory.<sup>31</sup> The theme of helpless woman and heroic husband still sold even as late as 1927. While Rolvaag never personally homesteaded, he wrote with such authority it may have been difficult for others to either want to contradict the professor or simply felt that such stereotypes had some sort of basis. When reviewing some of the more distinguished Norwegian-American historians such as Odd Lovoll, Carlton C. Qualey and Jon Gjerde, little information is provided on independent women homesteading alone or women in general. In Lovoll's *The Promise of America*, his only mention of a single Norwegian homesteader is found in a photograph caption.<sup>32</sup> Qualey does admit that the whole story of Norwegian immigration has not yet been written, but his primary focus remains on the men and their occupations and where they created settlements across the Midwest.<sup>33</sup> In Jon Gjerde's analysis of Norwegian-American settlement in Wisconsin, he concludes that women were merely "helpmates" of their husbands during the early periods of homesteads only because hired help was scarce.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> O.E. Rolvaag. *Giants in the Earth: A Saga of the Prairie* (New York: Harper, 1927).

<sup>32</sup> Odd Lovoll. *The Promise of America: A History of the Norwegian-American People* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 86.

<sup>33</sup> Carlton C. Qualey. *Norwegian Settlement in the United States* (Northfield, Minnesota; Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1938).

<sup>34</sup> Jon Gjerde. *From Peasants to Farmers: The Migration from Balestrand, Norway to the Upper Middle West* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 9.

### Single Norwegian Women

While single women have gone virtually unnoticed in the scholarship of Norwegian homesteaders, there are instances in which their stories have been published. One of the most extensive narratives of a single Norwegian woman who took advantage of the Homestead Act is Erling Sannes's story of his grandmother Bertine, who settled in North Dakota alongside other Norwegians from her hometown of Snasa. Presented primarily as a family history rather than an objective view of such pioneers, it does, however, provide some background information on the recruiting processes and how a poor peasant girl could find a new life through homesteading in America.<sup>35</sup> H. Elaine Lindgren's *Land in Her Own Name* addresses single Norwegian homesteaders as part of a larger group of ethnic women but ends at the proving-up stage. One of the most recent historical analyses of single Norwegian women homesteading in Dakota Territory comes from Lori Ann Lahlum's dissertation. Lahlum interjected examples of single women of Norwegian descent who homesteaded alone in Dakota Territory but her main emphasis dealt with how these women reacted to the physical landscape, contrasted between Norway and the prairies and does not address their farming experiences.<sup>36</sup> While Gjerde primarily focused on how Yankees and European immigrants clashed over views of community and interpretation of land ownership, he ended his narrative at the end of the nineteenth

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<sup>35</sup> Erling Sannes, "Free Land For All: A Young Norwegian Woman Homesteads in North Dakota," *North Dakota History* 60 no. 2 (1993): 24-28.

<sup>36</sup>Lori Ann Lahlum, "There Are No Trees Here: Norwegian Women Encounter the Northern Prairies and Plains" (PhD diss., University of Idaho, 2003).

century, even though the Norwegian immigration flow had barely hit its second wave, and overlooked single women homesteaders completely.<sup>37</sup>

### Ideals of Womanhood

During the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century, the Western world reeled from the effects of the Industrial Revolution, which not only brought technological advancements to homes, but also had social and cultural implications. With men now working away from the home, women's roles had to be redefined. Labeled by historians as "cult of domesticity," this set of ideals stressed men's work outside the home and women's responsibility for creating a safe haven from the harsh, public world."<sup>38</sup> In a nutshell, this meant a life of leisure for the middle- and upper-classes, since the women were expected to produce and care for children and create calm, serene homes for their men. As members of these two classes, most women had the financial resources to pay servants and housekeepers to do the heavy physical labor they themselves were discouraged from doing. Such ideals, whether realistic or not, certainly did not and could not apply to the women who made up the lower- or working-classes. Their skills were still very essential to the families' survival on the frontier and nowhere was it most evident than in the lives of the farming immigrant.

Historians of women have long challenged this set of ideals as the norm for many middle-class women and particularly those in the working- or lower-classes. As Glenda Riley revealed, there is a difference between the ideal and the reality. She

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<sup>37</sup>Jon Gjerde. *The Minds of the West: Ethnocultural Evolution in the Rural Middle West, 1830-1917* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

<sup>38</sup>Cynthia Culver Prescott. *Gender and Generation on the Far Western Frontier* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2007), 5.

pointed out that, by simply glancing at some of the contemporaneous materials such as newspapers or ladies' journals, one could believe that a "true woman" of this time period must have been a domestic goddess who had "planned kitchens, professionalized homesteading skills and the latest training in the domestic arts."<sup>39</sup> However, Riley went on to say such publications may have been overcompensating for the fact that the number of women who acted less like domestic goddesses was diminishing.<sup>40</sup> Julie Roy Jeffrey supported Riley's argument when she observed that domesticity described the ideals and not the actual conduct of American women. She pointed out that women's behavior was much more diverse and complex than what ideology would indicate.<sup>41</sup>

As editors, Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson organized a varied group of women's historians to help answer the question of whether the Victorian culture roles and values placed upon women were challenged in the West. The volume's goal was to switch the focus from white, middle-class women's Western experience to working class women who, until then, had largely gone unnoticed.<sup>42</sup> Sandra Myers found that some of the women's journals such as the very popular *Godey's Lady's Book*,

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<sup>39</sup>Glenda Riley. *Frontierswomen: The Iowa Experience* (Iowa City: The Iowa State University Press, 1981), 31.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid*, 51.

<sup>41</sup>Julie Roy Jeffrey. *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West 1840-1880* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), 10.

<sup>42</sup>Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson, eds. *The Western Women* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987).

textbooks, and sermons all preached the message that women were not valued as workers but as the guardians of morality and family and thereby the nation.<sup>43</sup>

The struggle to change these social demands on women seemed to be an uphill battle. Barbara Welter found that even women who believed they were fighting against inequality helped to perpetuate the different spheres in which men and women were placed. Using language such as “sweep Uncle Sam’s kitchen” and “tidy up our country’s house,” the message was clear to both men and women that a woman’s place was still in the home and that women really were not capable of stepping over into the male sphere of work.<sup>44</sup>

Later scholars continued to investigate women who broke free from the nineteenth century “patriarchal ideals.”<sup>45</sup> Elizabeth Jameson cautioned those scholars who found information on Victorian ideals in western women’s writing to keep in mind who was not writing.<sup>46</sup> There were many women who, being illiterate, pressed for time, or not particularly affected by such ideals, did not put down on paper their thoughts or feelings on the ideals of womanhood.

### Single Women

Women’s primary source materials are being viewed and their motivations for homesteading are also being examined. Glenda Riley credited the fact that historians

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<sup>43</sup>Sandra L. Myers. *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience 1800-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 6.

<sup>44</sup>Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18 no. 2, Part I (Summer 1966): 174.

<sup>45</sup>Sandra L. Myers. *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience 1800-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 233, 235.

<sup>46</sup>Elizabeth Jameson, “Women as Workers, Women as Civilizers: True Womanhood in the American West,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 7 no. 3 *Women on the Western Frontier* (1984): 2.

have often overlooked this aspect to the habit of lumping women together as appendages to men's settling of the West.<sup>47</sup> Some historians believe that single women were encouraged to settle the west merely as an imperialistic move by Congress to ensure that mainly whites settled the American West and not necessarily as a liberating courtesy.<sup>48</sup>

Historians of women's history have amply noted that the realities do not necessarily match the ideologies but they have overlooked how such ideologies factored in Norwegian women's decision to farm their homesteads. Norwegians in the United States have been found to reject the middle-class ideals of leisure but historians have not addressed how such ideals relate to women working their own land.<sup>49</sup> Ase Elin Langeland discovered that the women's journal *Kvinden og Hjemmet* (Women and Home) written by Norwegian-American women for Norwegian-Americans, often encouraged women to think of themselves as more than mothers and housewives and regularly included stories of women who stepped out of non-traditional women's roles to enter male-dominated occupations. Unfortunately Langeland does not include farming as one of those professions.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>Glenda Riley. *Frontierswomen: The Iowa Experience* (Iowa City: The Iowa State University Press, 1981), 5.

<sup>48</sup>Tonia Compton, "Proper Women/Propertied Women: Federal Land Laws and Gender Order(s) in the Nineteenth-Century Imperial American West" (PhD diss., University of Nebraska – Lincoln, 2009), 16.

<sup>49</sup>Jane Marie Pedersen. *Between Memory and Reality: Family and Community in Rural Wisconsin, 1870-1970* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 161.

<sup>50</sup>Ase Elin Langeland, "Adjusting to America: A Study in *Kvinden og Hjemmet*: A Monthly Journal for the Scandinavian Women in America, 1888-1947 (Hovudfag Thesis, University of Bergen, 2001), 13, 24.

### Farming and Farmers

As technology improved rapidly in the latter part of the nineteenth century, many industries utilized the advances to increase productivity. These production changes caused great disturbances in the lives of the urban men and women of the era. Advances such as the development of the assembly line and other industrial factors began to replace men and women in the workforce. Rural residents were not immune to such advances as the country experienced a move from an agrarian to a mechanized society, displacing many rural workers. Women in the industrialized and overpopulated cities of the east were faced with limited options as to where they could find safe, clean employment. Land ownership offered an escape from the dirty, diseased and corrupted cities and Dakota Territory, for both men and women, seemed the ideal place.

Wheat was king in Dakota Territory.<sup>51</sup> The subsistence farming of wheat required a surge in the labor force, particularly during harvest, a demand for male and female immigrants.<sup>52</sup> Although despite women's contribution, the profession of farming held a masculine connotation.<sup>53</sup> Marilyn Holt argued that the term 'farmer', in fact, was not gender specific, because women, as well as men, engaged in agricultural pursuits.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>Oliver E Baker, "Agricultural Regions of North America. Part VI- The Spring Wheat Region," *Economic Geography* 4 no. 4 (October 1928): 419.

<sup>52</sup>Carolyn E. Sachs. *The Invisible Farmers: Women in Agricultural Production* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983), 19.

<sup>53</sup>Mary Neth, "Gender and the Family Labor System: Defining Work in the Rural Midwest," *Journal of Social History* 27 no. 3 (Spring 1994): 565.

<sup>54</sup> Marilyn Holt. *Linoleum, Better Babies and the Modern Farm Women, 1890-1930* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press 1995), 7.



In the early years of settlement, hired help was scarce and as Cynthia Prescott and others have pointed out, farm wives were expected to work in the fields alongside their husbands but were only given credit for “helping out.”<sup>55</sup> Deborah Fink found that the ideals of the agrarian lifestyle, with its emphasis on the family farm, forced women to take a subordinate role to their husbands since they were expected to be wives and mothers only and not considered their husband’s equal.<sup>56</sup> In fact, various reform movements of the early twentieth century that attempted to improve the lives of farm families encouraged farm wives to raise their children to participate in separate spheres - sons to continue the farming lifestyle and daughters to be good farm wives.<sup>57</sup> Previous studies performed by agricultural agencies described women’s labor as “separate from the farm operation,” however they tended to concentrate on large commercial farms.<sup>58</sup> Feminist historians have been accused of fixating on the “drudgery” farm wives endured, particularly how their husbands failed to appreciate all the work their wives did. However, farm women regularly commented in their diaries and reminiscences how their husbands assisted them in their household chores as much as they assisted their husbands.<sup>59</sup> A farm couple’s marital relationship and how they valued and experienced the wife’s contribution to the family farm has been

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<sup>55</sup>Cynthia Culver Prescott. *Gender and Generation on the Far Western Frontier* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2007), 18.

<sup>56</sup>Deborah Fink. *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

<sup>57</sup>Marilyn Holt. *Linoleum, Better Babies and the Modern Farm Women, 1890-1930* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press 1995), 10.

<sup>58</sup>Mary Neth, “Gender and the Family Labor System: Defining Work in the Rural Midwest,” *Journal of Social History* 27 no. 3 (Spring 1994): 546.

<sup>59</sup> Sandra L. Myers. *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience 1800-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 164.

found to be a better indicator as to how women's labor was valued.<sup>60</sup> The historiographical debate has not yet been settled since some historians see the oppression of women in agrarian societies whereas others see women as experiencing a more equal role.<sup>61</sup>

### Single Women and Farming

Some of the early writings on white women who engaged in agriculture concentrated their attention on the eastern portion of the United States, however, most pertained to women as landowners or farm managers and not necessarily as women who broke soil or worked the land themselves. Many more women than men in the early twentieth century leased out their land rather than working it themselves, particularly in the eastern portion of the United States, and so women's landownership patterns have largely gone unnoticed by researchers.<sup>62</sup> Women as farm managers and landowners finally came to light in the 1970s. Ann Effland attributes this void to the fact that "women's equality issues in general" disappeared from the popular press between the years 1930 and 1970 because of what was going on in the world around them. In the 1930s the economy collapsed and the 1940s brought World War II. During the 1950s everyone was desperately trying to re-establish order and the non-traditional lifestyles of women were certainly not part of the conversation.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Mary Neth, "Gender and the Family Labor System: Defining Work in the Rural Midwest," *Journal of Social History* 27 no. 3 (Spring 1994): 570.

<sup>61</sup> Marilyn Holt. *Linoleum, Better Babies and the Modern Farm Women, 1890-1930* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press 1995), 6.

<sup>62</sup> Anne B. Effland, Denise M. Rogers, Valerie Grim, "Women as Agricultural Landowners: What do we know about them?" *Agricultural History* 67, no. 2 *American Rural and Farm Women in Historical Perspective* (Spring 1993): 236.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 256.

As a result of the Homestead Act of 1862, the number of women who gained title to land definitely increased and since the 1970s, historians, particularly those concentrating on western women, have uncovered a great deal of evidence on single women landowners and farm managers. Analysis of homesteading records in Minnesota indicated that 259 women who were single landowners did not inherit the land from a male figure but rather applied for the land in their own name.<sup>64</sup> The Homestead Act endorsed single women to join in the homesteading prospects which allowed them to gain title to land, thus giving them the ability to determine how they wanted to use their land. Technically, any woman who gained title to her land as a result of the Homestead Act was granted the title of landowner but many women did not take advantage of the Act until well into the twentieth century.<sup>65</sup>

Something lacking in the historiography is how the American ideals of womanhood affected single women of Norwegian descent and their work in farming. While noted Norwegian-American historian Jon Gjerde mentioned women and farming, it is in the form of tracking farm wives' exodus from field to home as a result of "bourgeois behavior" on an international scale. However, his study concentrated on a small sample of Norwegian-Americans in Wisconsin and therefore did not address single women who were in the fields.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>Anne Webb, "Minnesota Women Homesteaders: 1863-1889," *Journal of Social History* 23 no. 1 (Autumn 1989): 119.

<sup>65</sup>Anne B. Effland, Denise M. Rogers, Valerie Grim, "Women as Agricultural Landowners: What do we know about them?" *Agricultural History* 67, no. 2 *American Rural and Farm Women in Historical Perspective* (Spring 1993):253.

<sup>66</sup>Jon Gjerde. *From Peasants to Farmers: The Migration from Balestrand, Norway to the Upper Middle West* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 222-235.

Single women who were widowed and had children certainly could not afford to rely on the ideals of womanhood to support their families and homesteading was an attractive option.<sup>67</sup> Widows who migrated from the eastern United States to homestead varied in the amount of heavy labor they engaged in. Most of the women living in Minnesota and Iowa made the day-to-day decisions on their farms and did much of their own work.<sup>68</sup> The Norwegian women who had been widowed on the frontier were found to have farmed their land just as women did in Norway.<sup>69</sup>

Sources on single women who took up farming as a profession are quite rare and often scattered but there is no question of their existence.<sup>70</sup> While in the minority and sometimes viewed as odd, more single women owned and farmed their land than married women primarily due to the restrictive property and inheritance laws of the times.<sup>71</sup>

#### Norwegians/Norwegian-Americans

In an interview of 13 Norwegian women, 12 stated they had worked in some capacity in both the barnyard and field work.<sup>72</sup> While immigrants were initially excused from adhering to the ideals of womanhood, they were encouraged to quickly

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<sup>67</sup>Glenda Riley. *The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and the Plains* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 134.

<sup>68</sup>Anne Webb, "Forgotten Persephones: Women Farmers on the Frontier." *Minnesota History* (Winter 1986): 148.

<sup>69</sup>Jane Marie Pedersen. *Between Memory and Reality: Family and Community in Rural Wisconsin, 1870-1970* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 163.

<sup>70</sup>Carolyn E. Sachs. *The Invisible Farmers: Women in Agricultural Production* (Totowa, NJ: Roman & Allanheld, 1983), 16.

<sup>71</sup>Anne B. Effland, Denise M. Rogers, Valerie Grim, "Women as Agricultural Landowners: What do we know about them?" *Agricultural History* 67, no. 2 *American Rural and Farm Women in Historical Perspective* (Spring 1993):260.

<sup>72</sup>Mary Neth, "Gender and the Family Labor System: Defining Work in the Rural Midwest," *Journal of Social History* 27 no. 3 (Spring 1994): 566.

Americanize and adopt such ideals but little is known of the Norwegian women who claimed homesteads on their own and continued to farm their land after the proving up stage.

## CHAPTER 3

### SINGLE NORWEGIAN WOMEN HOMESTEADERS

Most of the current historiographical research deals with trying to provide a platform for the stories of the brave, often adventuresome single women who answered the call to homestead alone. In most cases such narratives are used as a lens to reveal how women were not necessarily the reluctant pioneers that had been so ingrained in our popular fiction on homesteaders of the west. However, an area that lacks in-depth analysis is to what extent the so-called American ideals of womanhood really had on the lives of the women of Norwegian descent and their farming culture. These ideals, which dictated that women's place was in the home, failed to recognize the impracticality of such roles. Historians of women's history have established quite succinctly that the ideals did not fit the norm but they have failed to notice how the Norwegian immigrants factored in to the story.

Norwegians, by nature, are a farming culture. They have long since engaged in agricultural endeavors for centuries and the vast majority who emigrated to the United States chose the Upper Midwest for the specific reason to farm the land. Single women of Norwegian-descent were part of this group and had access to the same resources as their male counterparts which women utilized to the fullest. Many grew up on farms. With the years of personal experience under their belts, the farming region of the Dakota Territory held a natural and familiar draw for them. Nowhere is this more evident than in the letters they wrote home to family and friends in Norway. They systematically wrote of the crops, animal prices and the affects the various

weather conditions had on the family crops.<sup>73</sup> What was not included is equally interesting. Women writing home to their families were either not concerned with the stringent parameters laid out for women in America or they were completely unaware such social ideals existed. Instead, the majority of these women wrote home about topics that revolved around the world of agriculture; a topic that they knew their friends and family back in Norway could relate to and a topic on which these women could write on with authority.<sup>74</sup> This lack of social restrictions on women in the Norwegian community also exists in Laura Alete Iversen Abrahamson's diary. Her diary concentrated on her work with the family's homestead and later her own and not the social conventions of women's work.<sup>75</sup> She did not seem to pay much attention to "what was women's work or men's work. The main thing was to get done what lay at hand."<sup>76</sup>

Women of Norwegian descent traveled to the United States with much the same dreams and desires as women of other immigrant groups. One factor that separates Norwegian women from other immigrant women was that many homesteaded alone and worked their land after the proving up stage. Norwegian women still assumed the responsibility of running households; however they were not limited to such activities. A Norwegian woman working in the field brought great

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<sup>73</sup>The Promise of America, [http://www.nb.no/emigrasjon/brev\\_oversikt\\_forfatter.php?lang=eng](http://www.nb.no/emigrasjon/brev_oversikt_forfatter.php?lang=eng) Brev fra Toneta Aaberg datert 9 Februar 1899 (accessed June 5, 2012).

<sup>74</sup> See The Promise of America, [http://www.nb.no/emigrasjon/brev\\_oversikt\\_forfatter.php?lang=eng](http://www.nb.no/emigrasjon/brev_oversikt_forfatter.php?lang=eng) (accessed June 5, 2012).

<sup>75</sup> Philip L. Gerber, introduction by. "Herding Cows and Waiting Tables: The Diary of Laura Alete Iversen Abrahamson," *South Dakota History* 20 no. 1 (Spring 1990): 17-50.

<sup>76</sup> Dorothy Skardal. *The Divided Heart: Scandinavian Immigrant Experience Through Literary Source* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1974), 242.

family pride for she showed strength, endurance and a strong work ethic. For many Norwegian women, womanhood was not determined by their domesticity so the fact they continued their farming lifestyle in their new American homes was not so unusual. Much as their male counterparts, these women wanted to continue the farming lifestyle they were accustomed to and looked towards the Dakota prairies in which to fulfill their farming way of life. The single women who emigrated from Norway would have agreed with Mrs. O. A. Knudtson who observed, “Many a young Norwegian girl has left home, kindred and friends and emigrated to America in order to better her condition. The United States has been pictured as a land of great promise, and to the young girl who wants an opportunity to improve conditions it has been a haven of opportunities.”<sup>77</sup>

Single Norwegian women who choose farming as a profession were in a unique position to access the same resources as their Norwegian fathers and brothers, unlike many of the other male-dominated professions of their day. They were able to tap into resources such as family, their past experience, community, cooperatives and government publications, which all provided Norwegian women with the information they would need to be successful farmers on the American frontier.

### Proving Up

In its attempts to settle the land west of the Mississippi River, the United States Congress held numerous debates on how to put into place a law that would allow

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<sup>77</sup>Mrs. Alma A. Gutterson and Mrs. Regina Hilleboe Christensen, editors. *Souvenir “Norse-American Women”, 1825-1925: A Symposium of Prose and Poetry, Newspaper Articles, and Biographies, Contributed by One Hundred Percent Women* (St. Paul, Minnesota: The Lutheran Free Press Publishing Co., 1926), 181.



land-seeking men and women to not only gain affordable land but also to populate the West in hopes of building prosperous communities. A few of the Congressmen felt that women were an intricate part of building new communities and fought for their inclusion in what would become the Homestead Act of 1862. While married women were excluded from for this event, single women were specifically considered in the drafting of the law. William Barry from Mississippi offered the most support for single female homesteaders, arguing that:

If a female desires to possess a home, and is willing to conform to the requirements of the law, there is no reason why she should be an alien to the justice or the charity of her country. If she is unfettered by marriage ties she has the same natural right to be provided a home from the public domain that the unmarried man of the same age has.<sup>78</sup>

According to the requirements of the Homestead Act, 160 acres of surveyed government land would be allotted to any citizen over the age of twenty-one, and head of the household, including immigrants who intended to become citizens. This was very important to Norwegian women, who like their brothers and fathers, saw the importance of land ownership and yearned to own a piece of land they could call their own. To obtain the legal title to her land, homesteaders had to prove that she had met all the requirements. Along with two credible witnesses, the homesteader testified to the Land Agent that she had built living quarters, plowed and seeded at least twenty acres, accessed a water source, and had resided on her claim for the minimum of five months out of the year for at least five years.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup>*Congressional Globe*, 33rd Congress, 1st Session (February 28, 1854), 503.

<sup>79</sup>Anna Guttormsen Hought. *Anna: Norse Roots in Homestead Soil* (Seattle: Welcome Press, 1986), 75.

After paying filing fees and placing a notice in the local newspaper, a homesteader could then claim the deed to the land and receive a patent (deed) from Washington, D.C. The homesteader would then be free and clear to do with the land as she wished. If there was any dispute as to whether a homesteader had met all the requirements, her claim could be challenged. Mina Westby, a Norwegian-born woman who became an American citizen shortly after arriving in the United States, followed her father to Minnesota where she worked shortly as a domestic in Minneapolis and later homesteaded in North Dakota with two of her Norwegian-American cousins. Mina Westby encountered a challenge to her claim when the land inspector paid her a visit while she happened to be away from her claim. After she proved that she was off her claim working as a housemaid to help pay for her homestead improvements, she was finally given the final deed to her land.<sup>80</sup>

Homesteaders who had access to ready cash could pay for the land outright at \$1.25 per acre with a shorter period of residency.<sup>81</sup> Bertine Sem homesteaded in 1902 from Snasa, Norway and took full advantage of such a provision and paid a small fee which allowed her to gain title to the land before the mandatory five-year period.<sup>82</sup>

The Homestead Act allowed thousands of women a new opportunity to provide for themselves economically and in some cases ideologically. These women were given the opportunity to obtain an asset they could work or sell but landownership

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<sup>80</sup>Lori Ann Lahlum, "Mina Westbye: Norwegian Immigrant, North Dakota Homesteader, Studio Photographer, 'New Woman'," *Montana History* 60 no. 4 (Winter 2010): 10-11.

<sup>81</sup>Richard Edwards. "Changing Perceptions of Homesteading as a Polity of Public Domain Disposal," *Great Plains Quarterly* 29 (Summer 2009): 182.

<sup>82</sup>Erling Sannes, "Free Land For All: A Young Norwegian Woman Homesteads in North Dakota," *North Dakota History* 60 no. 2 (1993): 25, 27.

offered a freedom to participate in an agricultural livelihood--a freedom many men and women coveted previously but had been denied. This was particularly significant for women of Norway such as Bertine Sem, Mina Westbye and Anna Guttormsen Hought, who homesteaded next to her brother John.<sup>83</sup> Seeing just the opening they needed to venture out on their own, these women joined thousands of their countrymen across the Atlantic to find a bit of land where they could capture the bounty that they believed awaited them in America.

Many women, drawn to Dakota Territory for its farming potential, flourished while others had a harder time making a living off their land. When most immigrants arrived on the prairie, many were not equipped with even the essential tools to break the soil. Often it would take a few years to acquire enough money to purchase these materials. In the meantime, neighbors helped one another, the more established homesteaders helping the new arrivals to get settled. This usually meant helping to break the rocky, virgin prairies.<sup>84</sup>

Lacking the funds or the inability to trade their domestic services for the aid of a neighbor or family member to break the soil for them, some women had no choice but to do the field work themselves. Bertine Sem's homestead testimony notes she homesteaded without family and was unmarried but homesteaded with the sole intention of owning land to become an American farmer.<sup>85</sup> At the end of her second

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<sup>83</sup>Lori Ann Lahlum, "Mina Westbye: Norwegian Immigrant, North Dakota Homesteader, Studio Photographer, 'New Woman'," *Montana History* 60 no. 4 (Winter 2010): 3-15; Anna Guttormsen Hought. *Anna: Norse Roots in Homestead Soil* (Seattle: Welcome Press, 1986).

<sup>84</sup>H. Elaine Lindgren. *Land in Her Own Name: Women as Homesteaders in North Dakota* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 121.

<sup>85</sup>Digital Horizons: A Plains Media Resource, <http://digitalhorizonsonline.org> (accessed June 5, 2012).

year she had enough money to buy two horses, a walking plow and to construct a combination barn and granary. By the end of the 1904 planting season, she had 80 acres broken and planted a crop of flax and listed the value of her homestead at \$450.00.<sup>86</sup> With the money she earned from her first crop, Bertine was able to pay for a new shack and the final title for her land before the end of the usual five years.<sup>87</sup>

Some women, however, happened to prefer fieldwork to domestic chores and viewed housework as the “hard” work.<sup>88</sup> Norwegian-American Laura Alete Iversen Abrahamson, an only child who grew up on a cattle farm, helped her father by herding the cattle and haying. In her diary, Laura wrote extensively on her fieldwork which held her attention far more than the domestic chores she performed for her mother.<sup>89</sup> Laura’s father relied so heavily upon her experience and skills, that when his Norwegian nephews imported to help him on their South Dakota homestead failed to sufficiently handle the horses or drive the mower, Laura typically stepped in to help.<sup>90</sup> Women who favored fieldwork over domestic work even sent for young relatives from Norway to care for their children and perform domestic work while they tended the

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<sup>86</sup> Digital Horizons: A Plains Media Resource, <http://digitalhorizonsonline.org> (accessed June 5, 2012).

<sup>87</sup> Erling Sannes, “Free Land For All: A Young Norwegian Woman Homesteads in North Dakota,” *North Dakota History* 60 no. 2 (1993): 26-27, 29.

<sup>88</sup> H. Elaine Lindgren. *Land in Her Own Name: Women as Homesteaders in North Dakota* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 121-122.

<sup>89</sup> Philip L. Gerber, introduction by. “Herding Cows and Waiting Tables: The Diary of Laura Alete Iversen Abrahamson,” *South Dakota History* 20 no. 1 (Spring 1990): 17-50.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, 32.

fields.<sup>91</sup> Others dreaded the loneliness and monotony of working alone in the house and longed to join the men in the fields.<sup>92</sup>

Like many farmers before them, single women who tried their hand at farming often met conditions out of their control. Weather, insects, and economic crashes all determined the success of a farmer. When these calamities occurred, some rode out the storm in hopes for better years while others cashed in early and moved on to other adventures, believing that the land they selected could not provide a prosperous future.<sup>93</sup>

Seeing the economic potential land held, some women homesteaded alone for the simple fact of obtaining land and making a profit from it. They had no desire or inclination to farm the land themselves and gave no impression that they wanted to become agriculturalists. Viewing land ownership as a way to earn quick cash, many women immediately sold their claims as soon as they obtained title to the land. At premium prices, a single woman could get as much as \$2,000 for her land,<sup>94</sup> which would roughly equal \$50,000 in 2012. Many women re-invested the money they received from the rental or sale of their land in businesses, education or to help family members who were interested in farming.<sup>95</sup> Mina Westby did not view herself as an agriculturalist but she did see great value in land as an investment. After paying off

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<sup>91</sup> H. Elaine Lindgren. *Land in Her Own Name: Women as Homesteaders in North Dakota* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 16.

<sup>92</sup> Jon Gjerde. *The Minds of the West: Ethnocultural Evolution in the Rural Middle West, 1830-1917* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 374.

<sup>93</sup> H. Elaine Lindgren. *Land in Her Own Name: Women as Homesteaders in North Dakota* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 194.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-37.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 115, 37; Lori Ann Lahlum, "Mina Westbye: Norwegian Immigrant, North Dakota Homesteader, Studio Photographer, 'New Woman'," *Montana History* 60 no. 4 (Winter 2010): 3-15; Myers, *Westering Women*, 197, 259.

the debts she incurred from her homestead, Mina used the remaining money to return to Norway and to attend photography school.<sup>96</sup> One Norwegian-American woman attributed her immediate selling of land shortly after proving up to the fact that “improvements removed the joys of real pioneer days, and robbed the wildness of its enchantment.”<sup>97</sup>

### Farming

Women who farmed in Norway continued to do so on the prairies. According to the 1890 census data, a significant number of women labored in agriculture. Norwegian women had greater numbers than other immigrant groups in the agricultural profession. In 1900, 14% of Norwegian-Americans listed their occupation under some sort of agricultural-related field.<sup>98</sup> Norwegian women are well represented in the 1885 census for Dakota Territory where they are listed in various agriculture-related occupations such as farm laborer, landlady, farm servant, and farmer and shoemaker, farmer’s wife, farming, and farmer. There were a total of ten women born in Norway who listed “farmer” as their occupation in this census.<sup>99</sup> Many saw the profits of farming and the women who had been drawn to the city and domestic work were known to abandon such work for the harvest field where they

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<sup>96</sup>Lori Ann Lahlum, “Mina Westbye: Norwegian Immigrant, North Dakota Homesteader, Studio Photographer, ‘New Woman’,” *Montana History* 60 no. 4 (Winter 2010): 14.

<sup>97</sup>Mrs. Alma A. Guttersen and Mrs. Regina Hilleboe Christensen, editors. *Souvenir “Norse-American Women”, 1825-1925: A Symposium of Prose and Poetry, Newspaper Articles, and Biographies, Contributed by One Hundred Percent Women* (St. Paul, Minnesota: The Lutheran Free Press Publishing Co., 1926), 425.

<sup>98</sup>Odd Lovoll. *The Promised Land Fulfilled: A Portrait of Norwegian Americans Today* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 142-143.

<sup>99</sup>North Dakota State University Institute for Regional Studies & University Archives, “Dakota Territory 1895 Census records,”

<http://library.ndsu.edu/db/census/results?activepage=15&resultcount=25000&lastpage=500&newsearch=1&maxpageresults=50> (accessed August 1, 2012).

could earn nearly as much as men.<sup>100</sup> This abandonment caused consternation in some of the wealthier homes of St. Paul when the cherished Norwegian domestics left to work the fields where they could earn higher wages.<sup>101</sup> The Norwegian girls who had been brought up on farms in Norway or the upper Midwest certainly knew their farming skills were in high demand and took advantage of the labor shortage to better utilize their knowledge and skills.

Both men and women relied upon the experiences of those who traveled before them and many received information about such experiences from the multitude of letters that were sent from America back to Norway, often referred to as *Amerika brev*, or America letters. These letters were read and re-read, often passed around from family to family, town to town and farm to farm, stirring up “American fever.” A few were even published in newspapers thus reaching a wider audience.<sup>102</sup> These letters described the journey across the ocean, provided advice on what food and clothing to bring, where to settle and, more importantly, gave advice on what types of crops to plant and the current prices for livestock and crop yields.<sup>103</sup> Writers took great pains not to paint a utopian picture of the New World to avoid being labeled dishonest. They did not want to be responsible for encouraging someone who was ill-prepared to

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<sup>100</sup> *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, 1 August 1868 pg. 2 found in L. DeAne Lagerquist, *In America the Men Milk the Cows: Factors of Gender, Ethnicity and Religion in the Americanization of Norwegian-American Women* (New York: Carlson Publishing Co., 1991), 74.

<sup>101</sup> *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, 21 August 1869 pg. 4 found in L. DeAne Lagerquist, *In America the Men Milk the Cows: Factors of Gender, Ethnicity and Religion in the Americanization of Norwegian-American Women* (New York: Carlson Publishing Co., 1991), 74.

<sup>102</sup> L. DeAne Lagerquist, *In America, the Men Milk the Cows: Factors of Gender, Ethnicity and Religion in the Americanization of Norwegian-American Women* (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1991), 37.

<sup>103</sup> The Promise of America, [http://www.nb.no/emigrasjon/brev\\_oversikt\\_forfatter.php?lang=eng](http://www.nb.no/emigrasjon/brev_oversikt_forfatter.php?lang=eng) (accessed June 5, 2012).

emigrate. They always encouraged would-be emigrants to weigh their options and to certainly make the decision on their own.<sup>104</sup>

The early publication of *Ole Rynning's True Account of America* was also a valuable resource that addressed specific questions many emigrants had in terms of how to find available land and the steps to take in obtaining it. Originally written in Norwegian, Rynning's goal was to educate Norwegian emigrants as much as possible to avoid some of the pitfalls those before them endured. He attempted to address every possible scenario a Norwegian emigrant would encounter and covered a wide range of topics like the history of America, suggestions on what supplies to carry and even what dangers to expect during their journey as well as once they arrived.<sup>105</sup>

Rynning explained to Norwegians how townships are platted and how to go about locating land sections to purchase from the government for the final deed. He encouraged Norwegians to purchase their land from the government rather than private individuals to avoid being swindled by dishonest sellers who "like beasts of prey, lie in wait for the stranger."<sup>106</sup> *True Account* also provided current prices for items such as barrels of corn, wheat, coffee and salt and Rynning informed his readers that as one ventured further West to expect commodity prices to increase as well.<sup>107</sup>

For those who could read English, the immigration department of the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railway Company published *A Handy Pocket Volume*

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<sup>104</sup> Pauline Farseth, ed. and Theodore Blegen, translators. *Frontier Mother: The Letters of Gro Svendsen*. (Northfield, MN: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1950), 56.

<sup>105</sup>Theodore C. Blegen, trans. *Ole Rynning's True Account of America* (Minneapolis: The Norwegian American Historical Association, 1926), 65-66.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid, 33-34.

<sup>107</sup>Ibid, 35.



*Containing the Facts and Figures About Dakota.* As more of a propagandist tool, the publishers provided information on how to claim land, where best to claim it and the most ideal crops to plant, although according to the publishers, there really was no crop that the fertile soils of the Dakotas could not handle.<sup>108</sup>

### Family Support

When Norwegian women decided to pack up and venture west they often did so with the support of their families. Guri Endreson urged her daughter Gjaertru to emigrate so that she could farm the land.<sup>109</sup> In many cases women were urged to homestead by the men in their families – particularly brothers, uncles, and fathers. While it could be argued that these men persuaded their women to claim land to eventually be handed over to a male relative, it could also be argued that most family members would not present such a challenging experience if they were not confident that their sisters, nieces or daughters were capable of fulfilling the requirements. If a single woman's male family members deceived her into claiming land to benefit themselves, more single women family members would have been persuaded to file and the numbers of single women homesteaders would have been much higher than reported. The male relatives may have provided these women with support and the confidence needed to homestead alone but they had to find the courage within themselves to leave home, to raise the money to build a shelter and break the sod, and, ultimately, what to do with the land.

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<sup>108</sup>A *Handy Pocket Volume Containing the Facts and Figures About Dakota* (Milwaukee: King, Fowle & Katz Printers, 1886).

<sup>109</sup>Theodore Blegen, "Immigrant Women and the American Frontier," *Norwegian-American Historical Association Studies and Records* 5 (1930): 29.

Regardless of all the preparations an immigrant farmer may have made prior to emigrating, those who settled in the Great Plains experienced a bit of culture shock upon arriving in the United States. For the Norwegians, the transition from farming in Norway to a homestead on the prairie certainly presented its challenges, although the 160 acres provided under the Homestead Act may not have been one of them. The amount of land typical to Norwegian farms was often quite small, ranging from 1/4 acre to 2 full American acres,<sup>110</sup> “and the great effort to wring out an existence, bred resourcefulness, industry, and thrift.”<sup>111</sup> So the gift of 160 acres offered may not have been substantial enough to support a large family, but it certainly was enough for a single woman on which to produce a living and not too much to manage alone without investing all her earnings in heavy equipment.

Viewing land as a long-term investment was something both men and women of Norwegian descent valued. Unlike married women in the United States, married women in Norway could own land in their own names. Land inheritance laws there allowed family farms to be passed down to the eldest sons or daughters if there were no sons.<sup>112</sup> Such a law would have allowed women to decide how to manage their land as well as providing an opportunity for their daughters to gain the valuable experience they would need to run their own homesteads in the United States.

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<sup>110</sup>Lori Ann Lahlum, “Norwegian Women and the Northern Prairies and Plains” (paper presented at Minot State University, Minot, ND, February 17, 2005).

<sup>111</sup>Theodore Saloutos. “The Immigrant Contribution to American Agriculture,” *Agricultural History* 50 no. 1, *Bicentennial Symposium: Two Centuries of American Agriculture* (January 1976): 54.

<sup>112</sup>Pat Lindgren, Beverly Lundeen and Jean Shogren. *Skindeliien (Smedhaugen) Family in America: Saga of the Descendants of Marit Pedersdatter Skindeliien*, (Unpublished family genealogy), 6.

### Past Experience

Most Norwegian women gained experience in farming in their youth. In Norway, women were responsible for the management and care of the family's livestock and so they become quite accustomed to heavy work both in and out of the house.<sup>113</sup> In reviewing some of the historical photographs taken at the turn of the twentieth century portraying women at work in Norway, it is interesting to note the array of photographs of women working in the fields haying, harvesting grain, and milking. While it was common for Norwegian women to work in agriculture, it is interesting to note the dress they chose to wear for their photos. These women were captured wearing their everyday aprons covering their long, dark skirts. The images of the women performing chores such as haying, harvesting, milking or gathering fodder for their herds not only provides visual proof that women were active in Norwegian agriculture but also shows how much they were valued for their abilities and contribution to the family farm. As rare as photographs were at the time in the isolated valleys of Norway, one would perhaps expect a woman to want to have her photograph taken in her best outfit, most likely in her colorful homemade traditional bunad, or traditional costume. Instead, many chose to be portrayed just as they were; giving the impression that they were just as proud of their work in the fields as they were of their handwork.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>113</sup>L. DeAne Lagerquist, *In America the Men Milk the Cows: Factors of Gender, Ethnicity and Religion in the Americanization of Norwegian-American Women* (New York: Carlson Publishing Co., 1991), 17.

<sup>114</sup> See [www.digitalmuseum.no](http://www.digitalmuseum.no) for historical photographs of Norwegian women working on farms.

As young women, the *budeie* (milkmaid) milked and cared for the cattle in the saeters, or mountain pasture, during the summer months while women of all ages participated in the planting, mowing and drying of the hay for their herds.<sup>115</sup> Laura Alete Iversen Abrahamson upheld the tradition of women raking hay and noted often in her diary about such a task.<sup>116</sup> A woman's experience calculating winter fodder and care for the family's livestock would have provided a young woman the practical experiences she would need on her small Dakota farm. Women would have to adapt to the hot summers where they did not have access to the cool mountains in which to store their dairy products since the summer heat would spoil their dairying efforts.<sup>117</sup> But the women of Norwegian descent could keep their traditional operation of milking small since at this period of time in the Dakotas, particularly North Dakota, markets had not yet been set up for transporting great distances perishable products such as fresh milk thus providing her home with dairy products and cash from the sale to neighbors and local stores.<sup>118</sup> Bertine Sem's small herd of milking cows was around 12-14, which she milked by hand twice a day and provided her with extra cash for her homestead. Even after her marriage, the sale of her dairy products often kept the family farm afloat during the lean crop years.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Margaret Wilson Vine, "Social Change in a Norwegian Valley Community," *Rural Sociology* 22 no. 1 (March 1957): 68.

<sup>116</sup> Philip L. Gerber, introduction by. "Herding Cows and Waiting Tables: The Diary of Laura Alete Iversen Abrahamson," *South Dakota History* 20 no. 1 (Spring 1990): 28.

<sup>117</sup> Pauline Farseth, ed. and Theodore Blegen, translators. *Frontier Mother: The Letters of Gro Svendsen*. (Northfield, MN: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1950), 39.

<sup>118</sup> David B. Danborn, "The North Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station and the Struggle to Create a Dairy State," *Agricultural History* 63 no. 2, Climate, Agriculture and History (Spring 1989): 179.

<sup>119</sup> Philip L. Gerber, introduction by. "Herding Cows and Waiting Tables: The Diary of Laura Alete Iversen Abrahamson," *South Dakota History* 20 no. 1 (Spring 1990): 29.

The Norwegian-American women who had been raised on farms in the Midwest could also incorporate their previous work history to their Dakota homestead such as Laura Alete Iversen Abrahamson, who documented her experiences homesteading in South Dakota. Being an only child, Laura was raised to work outdoors with her father rather than indoors with her mother. This may have been out of necessity due to the family's inability to hire male labor, but it does not explain why Laura then choose to claim 160 acres of land in her own name while she continued to help her father on the family farm 45 miles away where she was still in charge of herding and watering the cattle.<sup>120</sup>

### Community Support

As Laura Iversen Abrahamson's father knew, a homesteading farmer could not do it all alone. Homesteaders from all ethnic backgrounds knew that they needed to combine their efforts in order for their farming community to survive. The Norwegian American settlements were no exception and much as they had in Norway, community networks became as important as familial ones. Nowhere was this more evident than in the settlement patterns Norwegians created. Norwegians emigrated, settled, moved again, and resettled within a framework of ties originating in Norway to other settlements on the American prairie.<sup>121</sup> As one observer noted in 1913, "The Norwegians have managed to isolate and clump themselves together in colonies and maintain their Norwegian memories and customs. I often had to rub my eyes and ask

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<sup>120</sup>Philip L. Gerber, introduction by. "Herding Cows and Waiting Tables: The Diary of Laura Alete Iversen Abrahamson," *South Dakota History* 20 no. 1 (Spring 1990): 17-50.

<sup>121</sup>Jon Gjerde. *From Peasants to Farmers: The Migration from Balestrand, Norway to the Upper Middle West* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 140.

if I really was in America...”<sup>122</sup> They not only brought with them the farming skills they had developed in previous settlements but also the social traditions needed for survival and their ultimate ability to thrive on the prairies.<sup>123</sup>

The Norwegians’ view on collective help offered a way for the community as a whole to develop and prosper. In the case of most homesteaders, if they were unable to rely on each other, the community was doomed for failure. In Norway, the isolated valleys and fjords developed social traditions immigrants brought with them to the Dakota Territory commonly referred to as *dugnad*, which loosely translated means “volunteer.” Anna Guttormsen Hought and her brother John lacked the horses they needed so by borrowing their neighbor’s, who “volunteered” his horses, they were able to plow their initial twenty acres.<sup>124</sup>

This community help was a way of life in Norway for survival as it was in the Dakota Territory. Neighbors helped each to other to build homes, barns, cultivate fields, loan each other equipment, and collectively own farm animals.<sup>125</sup> While going through her father’s bookkeeping notebooks after his death, Barbara Levorsen noted the many number of entries involving the varying amount of sums of money her father loaned out to many of their neighbors. She attributed this due to the circumstances that

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<sup>122</sup>Kristofer Janson, *Hvad jed har oplevet* found in Jon Gjerde. *The Minds of the West: Ethnocultural Evolution in the Rural Middle West, 1830-1917* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 107.

<sup>123</sup>Jane Marie Pedersen. *Between Memory and Reality: Family and Community in Rural Wisconsin, 1870-1970* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 148.

<sup>124</sup>Anna Guttormsen Hought. *Anna: Norse Roots in Homestead Soil* (Seattle: Welcome Press, 1986), 76.

<sup>125</sup>Ingrid Semmingsen. *Norway to America: A History of the Migration* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), 88; H. Elaine Lindgren. *Land in Her Own Name: Women as Homesteaders in North Dakota* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 27; Aagot Raaen, *Grass of the Earth* (Northfield, MN: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1950), 25.

many Norwegian immigrants arrived near their North Dakota farm without the machinery and supplies needed to establish their homesteads. She was proud that her more established Norwegian father was in a position where he was able to assist the newcomers<sup>126</sup>

Besides the *dugnad*, a single woman of Norwegian descent could also engage in *bytesarbeid*, which was basically exchange work.<sup>127</sup> Paper money was not easy to come by either in the Norwegian valleys or the Dakota prairies. Often done during seasonal chores such as slaughter, harvesting or flatbread making, it was a way to keep each other company during the long hours of work as well as to help a neighbor and to receive future help. It could also be used as a barter exchange where a single woman of Norwegian descent who lacked farming equipment could exchange the use of a plow or equipment for sewn materials or other domestic chores. Bertine Sem was able to count on *bytesarbeid* when she traded her sewing and laundry services for help from her bachelor neighbors in picking the many rocks that littered her Dakota farm land.<sup>128</sup> The important thing is that both of these arrangements involved an exchange – one did not receive something for nothing and the emphasis was on an equitable exchange. Again, survival of one was survival of the whole.

Single women who homesteaded alone would have benefited the most from the *dugnad* initially since they often arrived with little more than the few clothes and household supplies needed in the short term. These women would have relied heavily

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<sup>126</sup>Barbara Levorsen, "Early Years in Dakota," *Norwegian-American Studies* 21 (1962): 189.

<sup>127</sup>Betty A. Bergland and Lori Ann Lahlum eds. *Norwegian American Women: Migration, Communities, and Identities*. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2011): 216.

<sup>128</sup>Erling Sannes, "Free Land For All: A Young Norwegian Woman Homesteads in North Dakota," *North Dakota History* 60 no. 2 (1993): 26.

on their Norwegian neighbors to help break sod and build a shack. If the single woman was fortunate enough to have settled next to family as Anna Guttormsen Hought had with her brother John, they would likely have worked their homesteads in tandem “to farm it together.”<sup>129</sup>

The social network was also a great resource to assist new settlers in the area with farming advice. The single women of Norwegian descent certainly would have taken advantage of the knowledge from those who had settled earlier to avoid making the same mistakes. They were not in the position to waste a lot of time experimenting themselves, as they would have wanted to plow and seed as soon as possible in a region with a very short growing season. Mina Westbye relied on her Norwegian neighbor’s past experience when he planted flax for her, knowing that this was a typical crop for virgin soil.<sup>130</sup> Some Norwegians had the reputation of being innovators in their farming practices. One writer observed how Norwegian farmers were noted to readily adopt new farming methods, try new machinery, and experiment with new crops to insure they produced a successful farm in the United States.<sup>131</sup> The knowledge these early Norwegian farmers gained from their innovations were readily shared around their community from which both men and women farmers could benefit.

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<sup>129</sup> Anna Guttormsen Hought. *Anna: Norse Roots in Homestead Soil* (Seattle: Welcome Press, 1986), 75.

<sup>130</sup>Lori Ann Lahlum, “Mina Westbye: Norwegian Immigrant, North Dakota Homesteader, Studio Photographer, ‘New Woman’,” *Montana History* 60 no. 4 (Winter 2010): 9.

<sup>131</sup> Harry Sundby-Hansen, editor. *Norwegian Immigrant Contributions to America* (New York: International Press, 1921): 32.



### Co-Operatives

For the women who had the practical experience of farming, many lacked the basic English skills needed to communicate with Yankee businessmen or any other ethnic group. This lack of knowledge instilled insecurity in many Norwegians to the point where they developed a suspicion toward the Yankee's who had settled before them. Not wanting to be taken advantage of due to their lack of understanding the American system, Norwegians established the reliable co-operatives they had depended upon in Norway out on the Dakota frontier. Often, these co-ops provided loans to the farmers minus the exorbitant interest rates the Yankee banks would charge.<sup>132</sup> At the co-ops, the newly arrived Norwegian women who were without the immediate capital needed to establish their homestead and farm, would be able to find the help they needed, thus providing a valuable outlet for single women. Co-ops also provided a way for small landowners to sell their produce on a much smaller scale, such as Bertine Sem's dairy products, and providing ready cash or a barter system to obtain the necessary supplies for the farm and home.

### Government Resources

Shortly after passing the Homestead Act of 1862, Congress passed the Morrill Act, which granted states land to develop public educational institutions. Many state colleges and universities, such as North Dakota State University and South Dakota State University, were formed as a result of this Act. To further assist farmers in this region, the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 was passed which provided extension services,

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<sup>132</sup> Eric Dregni. *Vikings in the Attic: In Search of Nordic America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011):151-152.

affiliated with the state colleges and universities, to be established in each county to inform farmers of the current scientific farming practices where agents would travel around the county and provide advice on agriculture methods on a case by case basis.<sup>133</sup> It was observed that the sons and daughters of Norwegian emigrants had high attendance at the agricultural schools and colleges, more so than other professions.<sup>134</sup>

Agricultural experiment stations at these same colleges and universities were designed to take some of the guess work out of crop planting for many Norwegian women homesteaders and their neighbors. These stations experimented with crop, soil, and moisture elements and provided the public with their results and listed crop yields for wheat, oats, barley and potatoes.<sup>135</sup> Bulletins and booklets were published and disseminated across the counties, providing both men and women farmers the ability to keep abreast of the current farming practices. The bulletins also listed the various correspondence classes one could take and the books needed for the class. Some of these publications were free of charge while others required a small fee.<sup>136</sup>

*The South Dakota Farmer*, a Sioux Falls newspaper combined the information from government bulletins and provided advice on agricultural issues into a weekly newspaper. The newspaper was also a supporter of women's agricultural programs.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> *United States Department of Agriculture, Office of the Secretary, Report No. 105* (Washington: Government Printing Office, March 22, 1915), 77.

<sup>134</sup> T. A. Hoverstad. *Norwegian Farmers in the United States* (Fargo, ND: Hans Jervell Publishing Company, 1915): 29-30.

<sup>135</sup> *South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 1*, November, 1887.

<sup>136</sup> *South Dakota Experiment Station Annual Reports 1897-1916*: 11-20.

<sup>137</sup> Marilyn Irvin Holt, "Farm Women, Domestic Economy, and South Dakota's Agrarian Press," *South Dakota History* 24, No. 2 (Summer 1994):77.

Women were noted to read the free handouts distributed by the United States Agricultural Department in preparation for the following planting season.<sup>138</sup>

While most Norwegian-born women were quite literate, they would not have had the ability to read English at this level in order to capitalize on the information provided by the extension services. For the Norwegian women who were unable to read reports and bulletins in English, they could rely on the numerous newspapers that were published in their native language to provide any advice and instruction for farming in the Dakotas and nearby states. Newspapers such as the *Skandinaven*, which was published in Chicago, or *Decorah Posten* published in Decorah, Iowa, provided news from Norway, from the United States and around the world, on subjects such as politics and commodity prices. Women of Norwegian descent may have even been persuaded to claim land as some editors encouraged Norwegians to homestead land. One editor printed handbills explaining the process and handed them out to Norwegians arriving in Chicago. It offered advice for farmers on what type of seeds to buy and when to plant and even on what livestock to purchase. It also encouraged Norwegians to participate in co-ops for the sake of their communities.<sup>139</sup> In 1901 one newspaper editor even served as a mediator for homesteaders in Bottineau, North Dakota to receive final claim to their land after they were having difficulty with the local government land agent.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>138</sup>Metta Loomis, "From a School Room to a Montana Ranch," *Overland Monthly* LXVII no. 1 (January 1916): 60.

<sup>139</sup>Harry Sundby-Hansen, ed. *Norwegian Immigrant Contributions to America* (New York: International Press, 1921), 35.

<sup>140</sup>Agnes Larson, "The Editorial Policy of *Skandinaven*, 1900-1913," *Norwegian-American Studies and Records* 8 (1934), 117, 129-30.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

As many historians of women's history have noted, the realities do not always match the ideologies and the Norwegian women who homesteaded and farmed in the United States were no exception. Women of this time period were not as easy to label and compartmentalize as previous stereotypes may have tried. By understanding this fluidity of ideals and not placing women in an either/or category, it is easier to understand how many of these women, American-born or Norwegian-born, had the courage, support and resources to venture out on their own to fulfill their dreams of owning land and making a life from it.

The importance of highlighting women who engaged in farming is to show that rural women were not the secluded, reluctant helpmates of their male relations. It is a way to empower women by viewing different lifestyles and choices they were offered and accepted, during a period of history that many average Americans believe was a suffering and repressive time for women, particularly those women who settled on the vast plains of the Dakotas. Since Norwegians made up a large part of this immigrant farming population, it would be convenient to include women of Norwegian descent as being repressive and dominated. However, the fact that women emigrated, homesteaded and worked the land themselves would suggest otherwise.

One goal of this work is to encourage other scholars to explore the ethnic and social implications placed upon women that either encouraged or discouraged them to claim and work land in their own names.

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APPENDIX  
DIGITAL EXHIBIT

## From Norwegian Saeter to Dakota Sod: Refashioning Womanly Ideals, 1862-1929

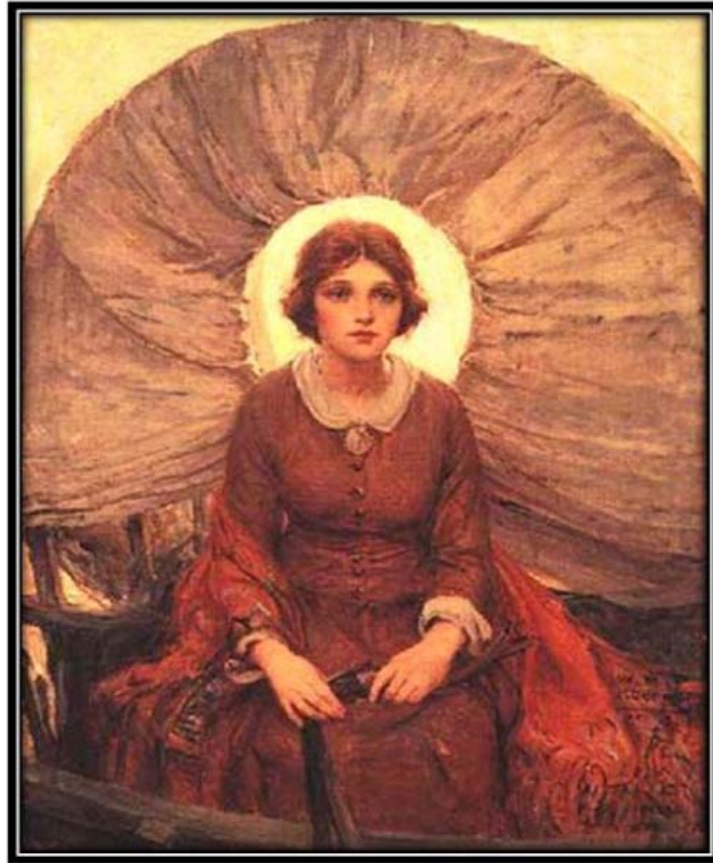


Source: Enderlin Historical Society and Museum, Inc.

# Introduction

On May 20, 1862, President Abraham Lincoln signed into effect the Homestead Act to draw settlement to the West. Coincidentally, available farmland in Norway became increasingly sparse and thousands of women packed up and left the valley farms for a new life on the sod land of Dakota Territory. As cultural guardians, Norwegian women brought their own unique version of what it meant to be genteel while clinging to their farming roots and keeping their femininity. They adjusted American views on womanhood with their own ideas of refinement to become successful Norwegian-American women farmers.

Fascinated by the American West, American readers misconceived women who, forced by fathers or husbands to leave the civilized world, ventured West alone to be reluctant pioneers.



Source: W.H.D. Koerner, "The Madonna of the Prairie"  
1921 (original at the Whitney Gallery of Western Art)

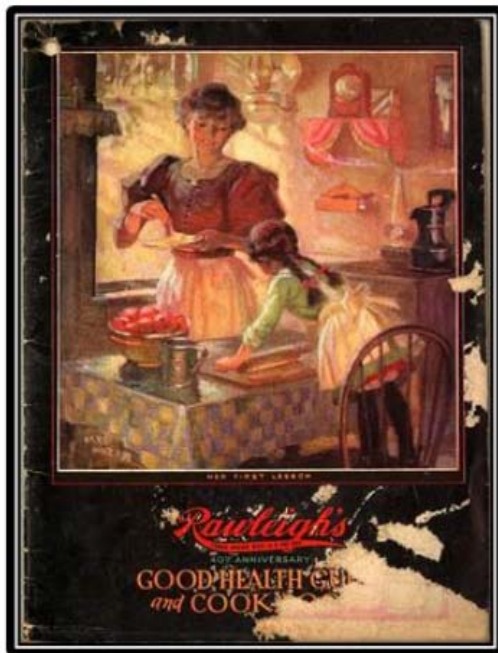


Source: Minnesota Historical Society

Ole Rolvaag's classic novel, *Giants in the Earth*, portrayed reluctant Norwegian women pioneers on the South Dakota prairie as scared and isolated.



American women raised their daughters to be ladies who avoided strenuous work and remained in the home to cook and clean. Norwegian immigrants arrived with a new definition of womanhood that encouraged their daughters to work outdoors and farm.



Source:

<http://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/scriptorium/ea/cookbooks/CK0063/CK0063-01-72dpi.html> [accessed 4/18/2013]



Source: North Dakota Institute of Regional Studies



Source: Erling Sannes

On a beautiful spring day in 1902, twenty-three year old Bertine Sem packed up her meager belongings and left her family farm near Snasa, Norway, with the sole intention of becoming a farmer in North Dakota. Bertine, like many Norwegian-American women, became a successful farmer because of the skills and experience she gained on her Norwegian farm and saeter. In doing so, she created her own Norwegian-American form of genteel womanhood on the Dakota prairie.

Early photo of Bertine Sem taken in Norway ca. 1899, three years before she emigrated to North Dakota.

## Farm Work in Norway



Source: University of Bergen Photograph Collection. Photographer: Truls Wiel Wilson

Bertine Sem gained her early farming experience working in the family fields. This photograph and those following show how Norwegian women were involved in all aspects of farming.



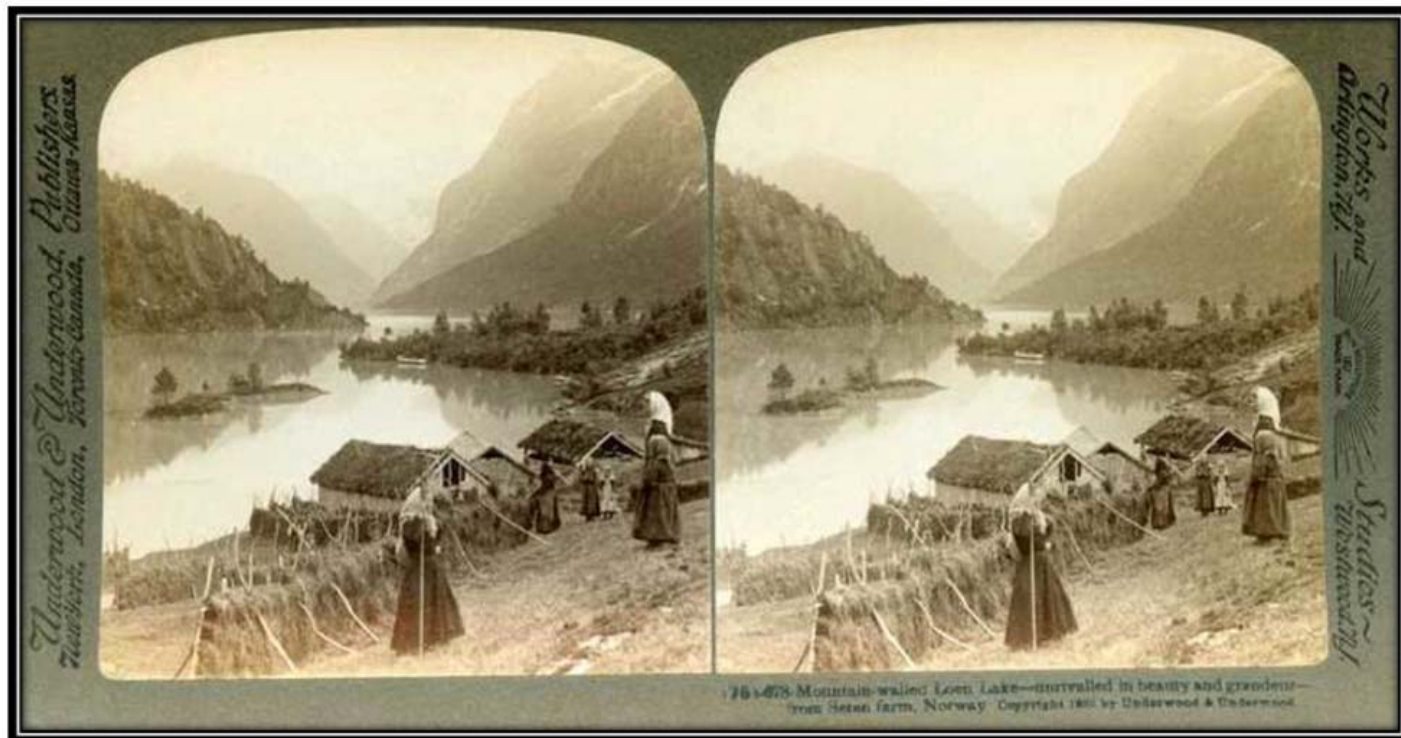
Source: Photographer, Knud Knudsen, University of Bergen Photograph Collection

Caring for the livestock included planting, raking and drying hay. Bertine and other young girls worked from an early age alongside their mothers and grandmothers in the hayfields.



Source: University of Bergen Photograph Collection

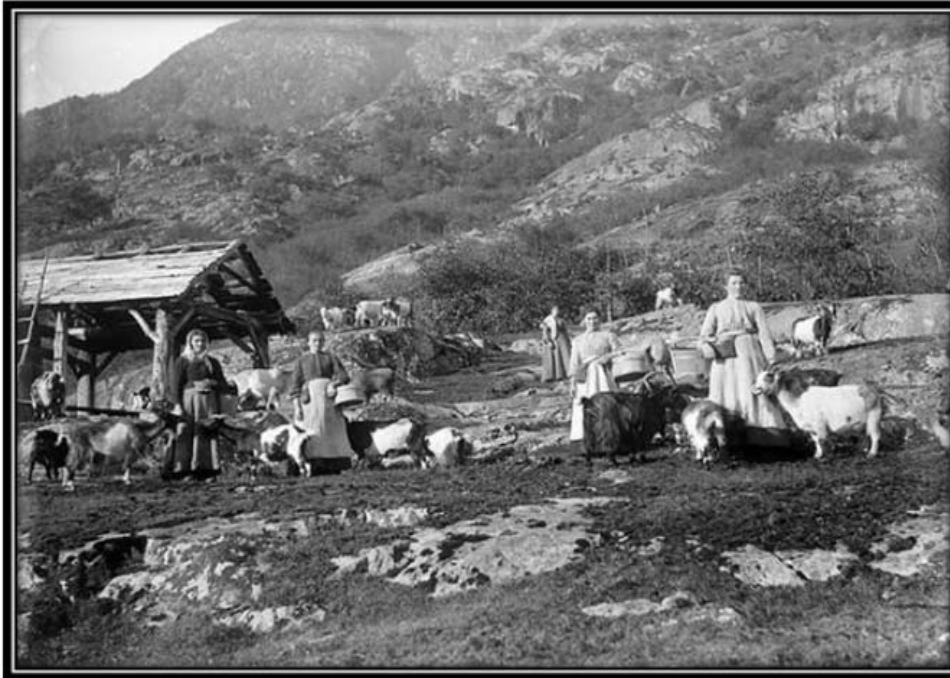
Accustomed to hard work, Bertine, her mother and other Norwegian girls and women often cared for their entire farm operation when their men left for extended periods to fish or work in the timber industry for supplemental income.



Source: Norsk Folkmuseum

After they raked the hay, women hung cut grass on *hesjes* (hay drying racks) to be fed to their livestock during the winter.





As Bertine Sem and her friends got older, they worked during the summer months as *budeie* (milkmaids) tending cows and goats in the *saeters*, (mountain pastures) where fresh grass was plentiful.

Photographer Andreas Mathias Anderssen

Source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/fylkesarkiv/3455385929/in/photostream/>  
[accessed 4/18/13]



Source: Norsk Folkemuseum

Twice a day, dairy maids milked their animals and carried the fresh supply down from the saeters to be churned into butter and cheese, with any surplus sold to local co-operatives.





To prevent their livestock from starving, milkmaids stripped leaves to add to the winter feed supply.

Source: University of Bergen Photograph Collection. Photographer: Knud Knudsen



Source: University of Bergen Photograph Collection. Photographer: Unknown

Norwegian girls, like Bertine, also helped their mothers haul water from fresh springs to be used for cooking, bathing, washing and for the livestock.



Source: University of Bergen Photograph Collection. Photographer: Knud Knudsen



To feed the family, women planted small gardens that included a good crop of potatoes, a staple in the Norwegian diet.

Source: University of Bergen Photograph Collection. Photographer: Knud Knudsen



Women had an endless supply of duties to perform year round. After feeding and milking the livestock, they made potato *lefse*, *klubb* and flatbread, passing their skills to their daughters as they did so.

Source: University of Bergen Photograph Collection. Photographer: Unknown

The winter months kept women busy spinning thread, sewing and mending for the family. Bertine and other Norwegian immigrants to Dakota found these particular skills lucrative on the Dakota plains because of the large number of bachelors who paid to have their clothes repaired.



Source: University of Bergen Photograph Collection. Photographer: Unknown



Source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/fylkesarkiv/3612848493/>  
[accessed 4/18/2013] Photographer: Samuel J. Beckett



Source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs  
Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA  
<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print> [accessed 4/18/2013]  
Photographer: Unknown

**Left Photo:** Proud of their farming culture and their ability to contribute, Norwegian women and girls stopped briefly to have their photographs taken. They may have tidied their aprons or fixed their hair but they did not waste time changing their clothes into their colorful *bunads*, or traditional costume. **Right Photo:** They saved the bunads for the city studio portrait, like the one above, and their work clothes for the farm.

# Norwegian Emigration

Norwegian emigration, like that from other countries, was a push/pull situation. The “push” came from the economics of scarcity. Homesteading opportunities and the lure of abundance provided the “pull”, as demonstrated by letters, flyers and books.



## The Push Factors

With only 3% arable land in their country, Norwegians found farm land to be scarce and expensive. Bertine Sem's family farm, like many other farms in the country, was situated between dense forest and fjords with no room for expansion to accommodate Norway's growing population.



Source:  
[http://mapas.owje.com/maps/8577\\_norway-land-utilization-map.html](http://mapas.owje.com/maps/8577_norway-land-utilization-map.html)  
[accessed 4/18/2013]





Source: University of Bergen Photograph Collection. Photographer: Knud Knudsen

As Norway underwent economic and social changes, the country experienced a surge in its population. To accommodate a growing family, farms were broken up into smaller plots to satisfy the next generation's farming needs.



Source: University of Bergen Photograph Collection. Photographer: Knud Knudsen

After a farm was broken up, the average size became only 1/4 acre to 2 full acres, making it very difficult to provide for a family. Farming was not an easy life but young women such as Bertine Sem, who wanted to own and farm their own land, decided it was worth the effort . In order to continue their farming lifestyle, Bertine and others had to leave Norway to do so.

# Pull Factors

# The Homestead Act

To populate the West and build prosperous communities, the United States Congress passed the Homestead Act of 1862. It allowed 160 acres of surveyed government land to any man or single woman who was over the age of twenty-one and a head of a household. Immigrants had to intend to become citizens.

To gain legal title, a homesteader applied for the land at the local land office and lived on his or her plot for at least five months a year for five years. During that time he or she had to plant crops on at least 20 acres, supply water, and build one shelter. A deed was granted when the homesteader paid a filing fee, placed a notice in the local newspaper and provided two credible witnesses to affirm that he or she had met the requirements.

As soon as the Homestead Act passed, marketers and others worked hard to advertise its benefits to people within and outside the United States, as the following seven images depict.



Source: National Park Service

At the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, South Dakota displayed all the technological advances in farming and industry it had to offer to the enthusiastic immigrants. This "Lady Homestead" passed out free homes to people from all ethnic and economic backgrounds and sold South Dakota as a prosperous farming state.

Kjøbe og ingen Kreaturer paa Cunard Linens Dampere.  
**Kjøb Billetter nu medens Prisen er saa lav.**  
**F. G. Whiting.** **P. S. Du Bernet.**  
 Manager, Western Dep't. Agent, 13 Randolph St., Chicago.

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**Bedste Hvede- og Eng-Land**  
 paa Kontinentet langs  
**Northern Pacific Jernbanen**  
 i MINNESOTA, DAKOTA og MONTANA.  
**God Avling ogsaa i 1881.**

Laveste Priser og lang Betalingstid. Billige Billetter for Landdygere og  
 reducerede Fragtpreiser til alle Settlers. Uppertlig Anledning til at udsøge  
 godt Jernbane- og Regjeringsland umiddelbart langs Jernbanelinien  
 Vest af Missourifloden. Adresser

eller **J. A. Blomqvist,** **R. R. Newport,**  
 General Land Agent,  
 45 Jackson St., St. Paul, Minn.

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**CHARFIELD HANS LIV OG SNIGMORD**  
 tilmed  
 En biografisk Skizze af Charles J. Guiteau.  
 af David Conrad Scherer.

Source: St. Olaf College Library

Railroad companies heavily recruited women like Bertine Sem to emigrate to the Dakota Plains. They stationed agents across Norway who distributed posters and maps, displayed grain samples and attended agricultural fairs. They assisted emigrants with travel arrangements to and within the United States. This image is an advertisement from the Northern Pacific Railroad printed in the Norwegian newspaper *Verdens Gang* offering “the best wheat and meadow land in Minnesota, Dakota, and Montana.”

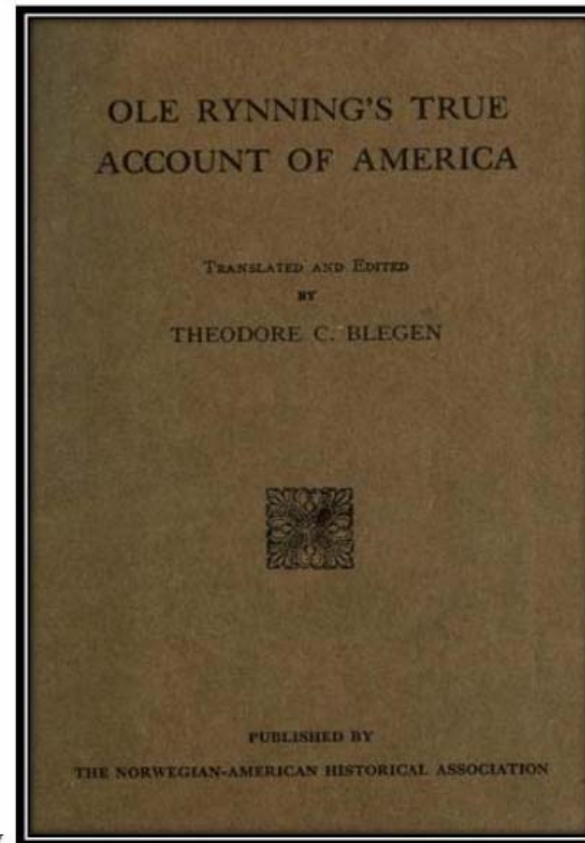


Source: St. Olaf College Library

State Immigration Bureaus also aimed their efforts towards Norwegians. This pamphlet reads... “the world’s richest granary, a country full of sunshine. Its fertile fields, flourishing cities and growing industry invite and welcome you to take advantage of this golden opportunity to livelihood.”



Ole Rynning wrote a booklet for his countrymen that described American townships and acreages, suggested items to bring on the journey, and explained how to claim land.



Source: Merrill-Cazier Library





Source: Ryfylkemuseet

*Amerika brev*, or America letters written from the United States back to Norway also pulled Norwegians to the United States and most likely played some part in Bertine Sem's decision to emigrate. These letters explained firsthand experience and disseminated information about the journey and life in the United States. Passed from family to family and town to town and published in local newspapers, such letters added the tug of personal relationships to the information published in booklets.

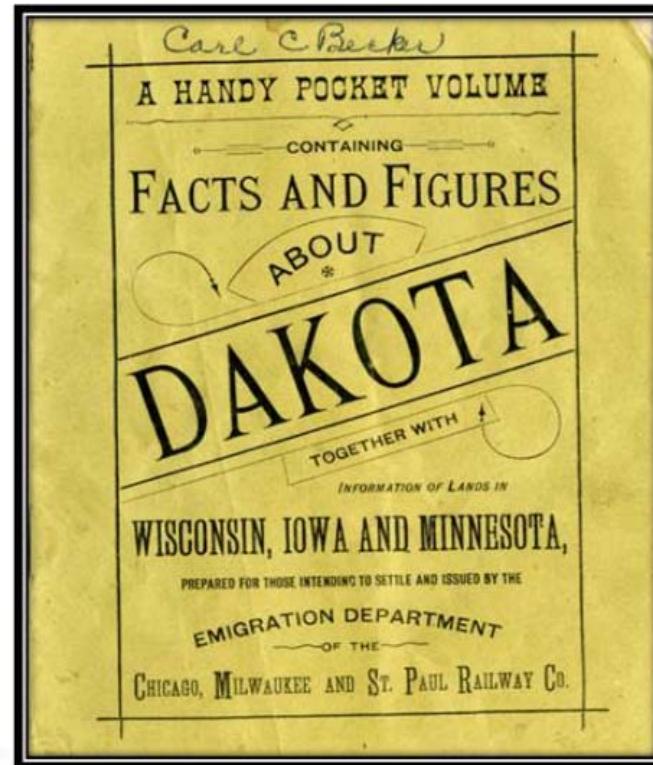


Bertine may have read a letter similar to the one Guri Rosseland wrote from Minnesota to her daughter in Norway in which she encouraged her to claim land under a new law called the Homestead Act.

Guri Endresen Rosseland,  
date unknown

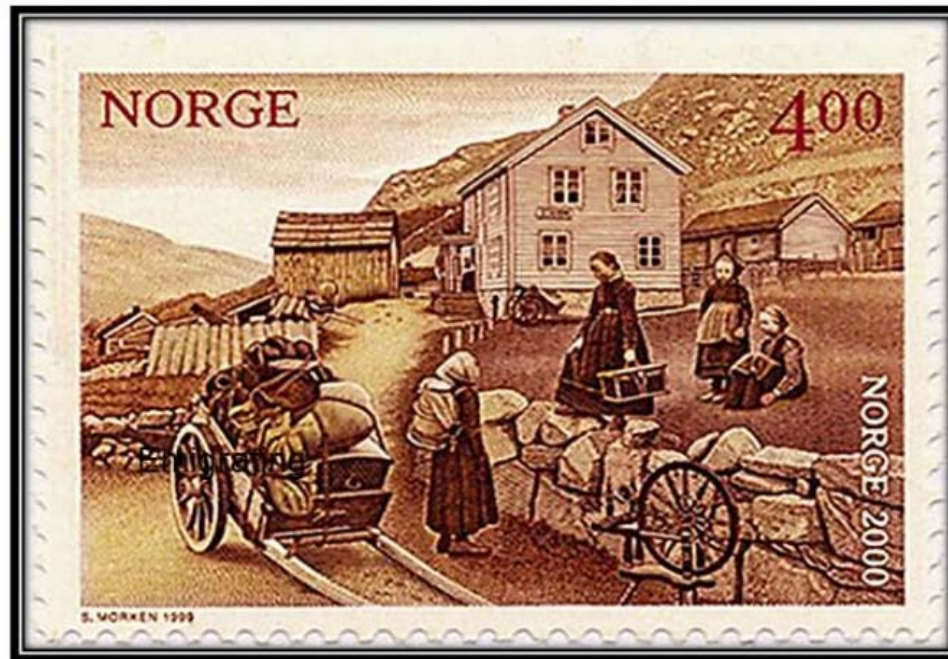
Source: Nasjonalbiblioteket, avdeling Oslo - Norsk-am. saml.

But Bertine Sem, as many Norwegians, set her sights on North Dakota where Norwegians made up the largest ethnic group. The *Amerika brev* letters that circulated around Norway and booklets such as this one convinced many people to settle in the northern portion of Dakota Territory.



Source: Barnes County Historical Society

# Emigrating



Source: Nasjonalbiblioteket, avdeling Oslo - Norsk-am. saml.

Norwegians emigrated as family units and as individuals like Bertine Sem. This Norwegian postage stamp from 2000, inspired by a late nineteenth-century photograph by Axel Lindahl may accurately depict what Bertine Sem experienced as she left her home in Snasa—a small cart packed with only the essentials and a heartbroken mother in the doorway who never saw her daughter again.





Source: Norsk Utvandremuseum. Photographer: Unknown

Norwegians read letters and booklets that described the north Atlantic journey as quite tumultuous. Bertine Sem's own experience on the seas proved to be such when her boat ran aground near Halifax, Nova Scotia. She lost all of her luggage and arrived in America with a small handbag and the dress clothes she wore on board. Despite these conditions, the emigrants dressed to impress and maintained their desire to be respectable.



Source: Nasjonalbiblioteket, avdeling Oslo - Norsk-am. saml.

When Bertine Sem arrived at Ellis Island with her small handbag in 1902, like the women in the above image she may have been met by a railroad recruiting agent who would have assisted her onto the train that carried her to the Dakota plains.

# The North Dakota Homestead

Upon arriving in Dakota Territory, Bertine Sem wasted little time finding her farm land. On May 7, 1902, she declared her intention to become a United States citizen, filled out this homestead application and paid a \$14 filing fee.

NO. 4-007

**HOMESTEAD.**

APPLICATION  
No. 15347

LAND OFFICE AT MINOT, NORTH DAKOTA,  
May 7, 1902.

I, Bertine Sem of Bottineau, N. Dak. do hereby apply to enter under Section 2280, Revised Statutes of the United States, the Southeast Quarter (SE  $\frac{1}{4}$ ) of Section 10, in Township 162 N., of Range 81 W., containing 160 acres.

Bertine Sem

LAND OFFICE AT MINOT, NORTH DAKOTA  
May 8, 1902.

I, R. C. Sanborn Register of the Land Office, do hereby certify that the above application is for Surveyed Land of the class which the applicant is legally entitled to enter under Section 2280, Revised Statutes of the United States, and that there is no prior valid adverse right to the same. Received from Irving R. Barlow, Clerk District Court, Bottineau, N. Dak.

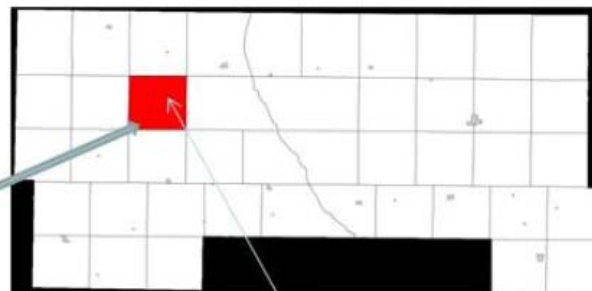
R. C. Sanborn  
Register.

Source: State Historical Society of North Dakota



Bertine Sem settled in Section 2289 in the south east quarter of Section 10, in Bentrwick Township 162 N. of Range 81 W. in Bottineau County, North Dakota. Thousands of other Norwegians settled in North Dakota, primarily in Traill, Walsh, Grand Forks, Mountrail, McKenzie, Williams, Burke and Divide counties but Norwegians communities were scattered across the state.

Bentrwick Township, North Dakota



Source: Wikipedia.org

Approximate location of Bertine Sem's homestead.



Source: [www.digital-topo-maps.com/county-map/north-dakota.shtml](http://www.digital-topo-maps.com/county-map/north-dakota.shtml) [accessed 4/18/2013]



Source: Norsk Utvandremuseum. Photographer: Unknown

Although she arrived in North Dakota in May and had time to have a sod home constructed on her claim, Bertine Sem chose to build her dwelling like the one above - out of tar paper which demanded less time, skill and manpower and fewer tools to construct. Women such as Bertine continued genteel activities such as reading. In the image above, the tidy shack and the bonnet, worn by the reader to protect her skin from the harsh North Dakota sun and wind, are other signs of gentility.

Numerous other homesteaders chose to build their houses out of sod. In treeless Dakota, sod provided a ready and sturdy building that could be snug and lived in for some time. So popular was the sod house that Norway commemorated it along with 150 years of Norwegian emigration. The engraver of this stamp, issued in 1975, used a photograph of Norwegian-American John Bakken's sod home as a model.



Sources: North Dakota State University Libraries, Institute for Regional Studies. Photographer: John McCarthy



Source: Nasjonalbiblioteket, avdeling Oslo - Norsk-am. saml.



Source: Nebraska State Historical Society. Photographer: Unknown

Sod slabs above, appropriately called "prairie marble," measured 1 foot wide by 2 feet long, 4 inches thick and weighed up to 50 pounds. Building sod homes required collaborative effort.



Source: Norsk Utvandremuseum. Photographer: Carrie Johnson

Even though their homes were constructed of sod or thin tar paper, Norwegian immigrant women insisted on a sustained air of feminine respectability. As this Norwegian woman's classic shack shows, women maintained very clean homes despite the Dakota winds that swirled fine dust everywhere. The wooden floors are swept clean and photographs and pictures neatly decorate the walls. China and white linens are being used for afternoon *kaffe* where the women likely discuss traditional women's topics such as clothes, cooking, family, and a bit of neighborly gossip.



The requirement to supply water was not an easy task on the open plains. Homesteaders either had to dig a well, haul water from a nearby stream, or capture fresh rain water in barrels.



Source: State Archives and Historical Research Library, Bismarck, North Dakota. Photographer: Unknown



Source: North Dakota Institute of Regional Studies. Photographer: Unknown



Source: Sylvia Abrahamson Aronsen. Photographer: Unknown

## Making Money

To acquire enough money to make required improvements to the land, cash-poor homesteaders worked off-site in various industries. Women tended to find long-term employment as teachers, shopkeepers, domestics and cooks but made quick money by gathering bones, cooking and mending for neighbors and selling eggs and dairy products to local markets.

The following seven images show women carrying out various income-earning chores. These women are not wearing the white dress shirts used for church or entertaining and do not look genteel in the American idealistic sense. Yet, they were comfortable and proud enough in their womanly ideals to be photographed as workers.



Source: State Historical Society of Wisconsin. Photographer: Charles J. Van Schaick

Norwegian domestic workers were in high demand. As the photo shows, the women's specialties included cleaning, child care, and baking. Urban employers in Minnesota and Wisconsin often lost many of their Norwegian domestic workers to the fields of the Dakotas where they made more money.





Source: Fred Hultstrand History in Pictures Collection, NDIRS-NDSU, Fargo

A nearby school meant a woman did not have to travel or live off her homestead to earn extra money. Bertine Sem's status as a non-native English speaker, prevented her from teaching even though teachers were in high demand on the developing prairie.



Source: The Autry/Women of the West or Nebraska Historical Society Photographer: Unknown

Other women made money in non-traditional ways. The woman in this photo has gathered cow dung to be used for fuel. Bertine Sem picked buffalo bones and sold them fertilizer and sugar refining companies.

When Bertine Sem mended and washed clothes for her bachelor neighbors to pay for additional acres of plowed soil, she would have done it like the women in the following photos.



Source: Fred Hultstrand History in Pictures Collection, NDIRS-NDSU, Fargo

In areas where bachelor men resided, seamstresses were in high demand.

Source: Minnesota Historical Society.  
Photographer: Ole Mattiason Aarseth



Source: Fred Hultstrand History in Pictures Collection, NDIRS-NDSU, Fargo

Bertine Sem cooked for a nearby farmer's threshing crew and used the money to plant her first crop of flax.



Source: Fred Hultstrand History in Pictures Collection, NDIRS-NDSU, Fargo

For women like Bertine Sem who cared for the milking herd in the saeters of Norway, it was natural to own a few head of cows that supplied dairy products for the home and extra cash from neighbors and local markets.



Source: Institute for Regional Studies, NDSU, Fargo Photographer: Unknown

The sale of eggs and chickens provided much needed cash. Poultry were cheap to house and feed which made poultry-raising an ideal business venture for women who wanted to re-invest in their farms.

## Gaining Title

Once the minimum requirements had been met, a homesteader had to provide two credible witnesses to testify that all the requirements had been met. After she paid for a filing fee and a notice in the local newspaper, she would then receive the deed to her land. Some homesteaders sold off their land for a profit while others remained on their land and continued to farm it.

Homestead Proof--Testimony of Claimant.

Bertine Sem being called as witness in his own behalf in support of the Homestead entry No. 15349 for 16 1/4 of section 10 in township 162 n of Range 81 w testifies as follows:

Ques. 1--What is your name, age and present address?  
 Ans. Bertine Sem 24 years, Washhope, N.D.

Ques. 2--Are you a native born citizen of the United States, and if so, in what State or Territory were you born?  
 Ans. No. Not naturalized

Ques. 3--Are you the identical person who made Homestead Entry No. 15349 at the Land Office on the 8th day of May 1902, and what is the true description of the land now claimed by you?  
 Ans. 16 1/4 of section 10 in township 162 n of Range 81 w

Ques. 4--When was your house built on the land and when did you establish actual residence thereon? (Describe said house and other improvements which you have placed on the land, giving total value thereof.)  
 Ans. House 1902. In June 1902. Frame house 12 x 10 feet, double board  
no paper on roof, double frame stable & granary combined 8 feet  
cell. 20 x 20 or broken \$450.00

Ques. 5--Of whom does your family consist, and have you and your family resided continuously on the land since first establishing residence thereon? (If unmarried, state the fact.)  
 Ans. No family. Yes. Unmarried.

Ques. 6--For what period or periods have you been absent from the homestead since making settlement, and for what purpose; and if temporarily absent, did your family reside upon and cultivate the land during such absence?  
 Ans. See February 1903 April & May, See May & Sept 1903 & Nov & Dec 1903 & Jan  
January & middle of March 1904, Worked for wages during said  
absence. Also absent part of Aug & Sept, 1903

Ques. 7--How much of the land have you cultivated each season, and for how many seasons have you raised crops thereon?  
 Ans. 16 acres in 1902, 65 in 1903, 80 in 1904, Raised crops 3 seasons.

Ques. 8--Is your present claim within the limits of an incorporated town or selected site of a city or town, or used in any way for trade or business?  
 Ans. No

Ques. 9--What is the character of the land? Is it timber, noncultivable, prairie, grazing, or ordinary agricultural land? State its kind and quality and for what purpose it is most valuable.  
 Ans. Ordinary farm land

Ques. 10--Are there any indications of coal, oil, or minerals of any kind on the land? (If so, describe what they are, and state whether the land is more valuable for agricultural than for mineral purposes.)  
 Ans. No

Ques. 11--Have you ever made any other homestead entry? (If so, describe the same.)  
 Ans. No

Ques. 12--Have you sold, conveyed or mortgaged any portion of the land; and if so, to whom and for what purpose?  
 Ans. No

Ques. 13--Have you any personal property of any kind elsewhere than on this claim? (If so describe the same, and state where the same is kept.)  
 Ans. No

Source: State Historical Society of North Dakota

In this, her final claimant affidavit completed in 1904, Bertine Sem noted she had no family, was single, had built a 12 feet by 10 feet home, dug a well, plowed and planted 80 acres, and built a combined stable and granary. Bertine Sem estimated her homestead to be worth \$450.00 or \$11,535.46 in 2013 dollars.



Bertine Sem accomplished her goal of becoming a farmer in North Dakota on December 22, 1904—just two and a half years after she filed her initial claim. She used the money she received from the previous year's crop sales to take advantage of a provision in the Homestead Act that allowed her to pay \$1.25 an acre to obtain the final deed to her land.

I HEREBY CERTIFY that the foregoing testimony was read to the claimant before being subscribed and was sworn to before me this 22 day of December 1904 at my office at Ward County, ND.

[See note above]

John M. Little  
 Notary Public for North Dakota

[NOTE:—The officer called upon whose testimony is taken should call the attention of the witness to the following section of the Revised Statutes, and state to him that it is in the purpose of the Government, if it be ascertained that he truthfully, to procure him to the full extent of the law.]

THE 125.—CRIMES.—Ch. 4.

Sec. 1251. Every person who, having taken an oath before a competent judicial officer or judge, in any case in which a law of the United States authorizes an oath to be administered, that he will testify, depose, declare, affirm or swear truthfully, and who thereafter willfully swears or declares falsely, shall be deemed guilty of perjury, and shall be fined not more than \$1,000, or imprisoned not more than one year, or both, at the discretion of the court.

4-300

**HOMESTEAD PROOF**

Law made at  
Minot, North Dakota.

Original Application No. 15344

Final Certificate No. 8445

Approved  
John M. Little

Filed for report of Special Agent  
DEC 23 1904  
John M. Little  
 U. S. Land Office, Minot, N. D.

**Final Affidavit Required of Homestead Claimants.**

Section 2301 of the Revised Statutes of the United States.

I, Bertine Sem having made a homestead entry of the South East quarter Section No. 18 in Township No. 102 of Range No. 10 subject to entry at Minot, ND under section No. 2200 of the Revised Statutes of the United States, do now apply to perfect my claim thereto by virtue of section No. 2301 of the Revised Statutes of the United States, and for that purpose do solemnly swear that I own no real estate

Witness of the United States, that I have made actual settlement upon and have cultivated and sowed upon said land since the 22 day of June 1902 to the present time; that no part of said land has been alienated, except as provided in section 2204 of the Revised Statutes, and that I am the sole bona fide owner as an actual settler; that I will bear true allegiance to the Government of the United States, and, further, that I have not heretofore performed or abandoned an entry made under the homestead laws of the United States, except as provided in section 2204 of the Revised Statutes, and that I have not heretofore been convicted of a crime under any law of the United States.

I, John M. Little Notary Public for North Dakota, do hereby certify that the above affidavit was subscribed and sworn to before me this 22 day of December 1904 at my office at Ward County, North Dakota.

John M. Little  
 Notary Public for North Dakota

Filed and examined by J. M. Little

Source: State Historical Society of North Dakota

Unlike Bertine Sem, some women had no aspirations to become North Dakota farmers. They did, however, understand the value of land. Mina Westbye, pictured right, was one of them. She emigrated to the United States and worked as a domestic, determined to find economic freedom in land ownership. In May 1908, Mina Westbye sold her claim for \$1,000 (\$25,000 in 2013 dollars.) She used the money to pay off debts, for boat fare back to Norway, and for tuition to photography school.



Mina Westbye circa 1900

Source: Norsk Utvandremuseum. Photographer: Unknown



Source: Erling Sannes Photographer: Unknown

Shortly after she received the deed to her land, Bertine Sem married her Norwegian neighbor Erick Sannes. They remained on her land where they expanded their land, dairy production and family. Bertine continued to work in the fields after marriage and milked up to fourteen cows by hand twice a day.

When Bertine passed away in 1955, she was one of the last original homesteaders in Bentinick Township. She not only accomplished her goal to become a North Dakota farmer but also provided a secure future for generations of Norwegian-American farmers to come.

## Conclusion

The Homestead Act of 1862 drew men and women to the American West to establish farms and communities. Norwegian men and women, who were experiencing a land shortage and a population surge, heeded the call to own land in droves. They were accustomed to field work and many wanted to continue this tradition. Independent-minded Norwegian women such as Bertine Sem, who were accustomed to and wanted to continue field work, made the decision to emigrate. They brought with them a rich cultural history that included food, language and a unique perception of genteel agricultural womanhood that paralleled the American view that a woman's sole duty was to house and family. The women who participated in agricultural endeavors proved that they could retain many of their feminine qualities while still fulfilling their Norwegian heritage of working with the soil.



Source: North Dakota State University Libraries, Institute for Regional Studies Photographer: Unknown