

History of the Pawnee National Grassland

During the early stages of American expansion, the high plains of northeastern Colorado were prime grazing land for large populations of deer, antelope, elk and buffalo. The human population consisted of Indians and a few fur trappers. Before 1850, a fur trader named Elbridge Gerry settled where Crow Creek joined the South Platte River east of present-day Greeley. In 1861, John Wesley Iliff started his first cow camp on Crow Creek. The next year, Iliff established a cow camp approximately five miles down Crow Creek from above the Uhl Homestead to provide beef to the railroad crews and also establish a shipping point to the East.



Chalk Bluff Line Camp, constructed in 1867 by J.W. Iliff. Perspective and Primary views.

In 1868, he bought \$40,000 worth of cattle from Charles Goodnight, who trailed them north from Texas. This established the Goodnight-Loving trail through this area. Goodnight continued trailing herds for Iliff through 1876. By 1877, Iliff's domain stretched from the South Platte River north to the Chalk Bluffs by the Colorado-Wyoming border, and from the mountains east to the present Kansas border. He was the biggest cattleman in Colorado.

The Homestead Act of 1862 allowed only 160 acres per homestead, and at least one-quarter (40 acres) of that had to be tilled. Later Acts allowed a total of 320 acres. One of these was the Timber Culture Act, enacted in 1873, allowing the settler to pick up an additional 160 acres by agreeing to plant 2,700 seedlings on 10 acres, of which 675 should be alive and healthy at the time of final proving, five years later. These acts/laws were aimed primarily at land east of and along the west bank of the Mississippi River and were not appropriate for the high plains. Major John Wesley Powell, an explorer of the West and later director of the United States Geological Survey, wrote a report in 1875, called "Lands of the Arid Region of the U.S." He recommended that settlement areas be blocked out in no less than 1,275 acres, giving the settler a reasonable chance of survival. He further recommended that without a dependable water supply, it was futile to plow the grasslands. The lands should be left in grass, and that plots of less than 2,560 acres would not be successful in this dry area. The wisdom of these recommendations was demonstrated in later years.

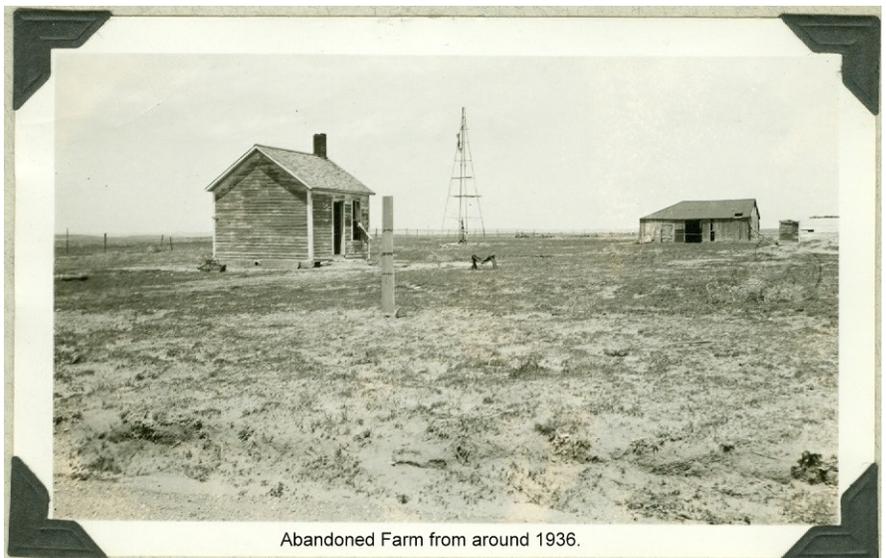
Barbed wire was invented in 1874 and cattlemen were soon using it to enclose public lands for their free

and exclusive use. By manipulating the Homestead Act of 1862, Iliff had his cowhands homestead and fence 160 acres at key locations surrounding water. He then purchased the established "homestead" from the cowhands. For example, the earliest record of homestead entry in the Pawnee Buttes area was by Peter Welch in 1887. However, he sold his tract to Iliff two years earlier. In 1885, President Grover Cleveland ordered all fences removed from public land. Although it took several years for this to be accomplished, it was the beginning of the end for the big ranchers like Iliff.

By the mid 1880s, the homesteaders had begun breaking sod in the grassland country. The railroads encouraged settlers to come west with statements like "the rain-belt has moved westward" and "rain follows the plow." They wanted to attract farmers from the East and Midwest hoping that they would become future freight customers. In 1887, a branch of the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy was built from Kansas through Sterling into Cheyenne. The bitter winter of 1886-87 brought the loss of thousands of cattle by starvation or freezing to death. At this time Chicago beef prices also took a big drop and the large ranchers went broke. Farmers flocked to the big ranches which were being carved into quarter section (160 acres) homesteads. The dry years of 1889 and 1890 forced many newcomers to leave, and by 1893-94 it was so severe that many of the new towns that had sprung

By 1905 to approximately 1910, the rains returned to the grasslands and settlers migrated to the area in even greater numbers. Keota boomed, as did Grover and Briggsdale. Homesteading continued to increase over the next few years and reached its peak between 1914 and 1918. Over 35 percent of the land was plowed, forcing most of the large stockmen out of the area. By this time Iliff had moved on to Texas. In the area east of the Rockies, from Texas to Montana, dryland farming became the major economy and large areas were plowed. During wet years, the yield was bountiful and more land came under the plow. With the advent of tractors and combines, even more land could be cultivated. By 1930 about 60 percent of the high plains grassland in Weld County had been plowed up. The big ranches were gone and dryland farming was the dominant economy.

In the 1930s the drought and winds returned. Winds of 50-60 miles an hour became common along the Front Range of the Rockies from Texas to the Canadian border, carrying away the dry topsoil. The farms were literally blown away and this "Dust Bowl" area became a virtual desert. These dry years and low prices again took their toll on farmers. Bankruptcy and tax sales were common and many of the farmers gave up and moved on, leaving the land to be claimed by creditors for delinquent taxes. By the mid 1930s, the northeastern Weld County population dwindled from a high of over 600 families to a low of around 64.



Abandoned Farm from around 1936.

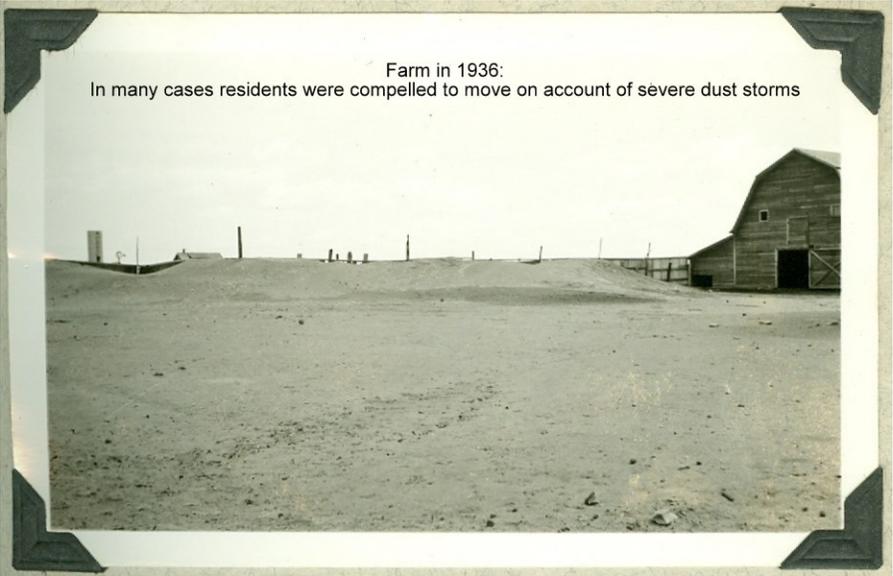
During 1933-34, the federal government undertook a relief effort through the Work Project Administration (WPA) and the Public Works Administration (PWA) to stabilize the economy. Emergency funding was soon provided to resettle some of the families.



This man homesteaded here in 1911. He was successful until 1929, when he increased farming operations and curtailed livestock production.

It was the Farm Security Administration, the Land Policy Section of the Agriculture Department, and the Bureau of Agriculture Economics. Finally, in 1938 responsibility was given to the Soil Conservation Service where it remained until 1954, when it was transferred to the United States Forest Service (USFS).

During the period of 1934-54, most of the present area was acquired through purchase and in some cases by mutual transfer (swapping). The acquired land was in many cases, small isolated parcels. The "swapping" was done to form more economic and manageable tracts for both the private owner and the government.



Farm in 1936:
In many cases residents were compelled to move on account of severe dust storms



Family of nine living in a two-room house.
Cannot farm this year because no funds for operating are available. Circa 1935

As part of Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal" the Resettlement Administration created a headquarters north of



The Resettlement Administration Headquarters around 1935 at the beginning of the Land Utilization Project.

Briggsdale, Co. The Resettlement Administration Headquarters started the Land Utilization Project to purchase sub-marginal and eroded lands, restore them, and then convert them to grazing, forestry, wildlife or recreation areas. The area along Crow Creek near Briggsdale was the first reclamation and demonstration plot in this area. Seventy acres of meadow improvement began with the construction of two

dams and three diversion ditches to spread the flood water over the meadows and provide limited irrigation on other areas. Throughout the other acquired areas, existing fences were torn down, moved or new fences constructed to surround an economically manageable pasture. Springs were developed and wells dug. Windmills were erected and "catch basins" constructed to collect as much run-off water as possible.

The plowed and denuded lands were planted to mostly crested wheatgrass, an introduced species from Russia which is well adapted to our climate and is palatable to livestock. Trees were planted to form wind breaks and provide habitat for wildlife. Within two years, the planted grasses revegetated the plowed areas and grazing was allowed on a limited basis.



Excavating blow dirt into "contour furrows" to stop wind erosion. Circa 1956.

The Crow Valley Grazing Association was formed in 1937 in northwestern Weld County; the next year it changed its name to the Crow Valley Livestock Cooperative, Inc. The association was composed of the ranchers in the area and the Soil Conservation Service on a cooperative basis. Grazing rules were agreed upon and the association was responsible for their execution. The Soil Conservation Service continued to develop conservation practices, rehabilitate the land and monitor its use. The Pawnee area in northeastern Weld County was acquired in 1938, and the Pawnee Livestock Cooperative Association was formed in 1941. The next year the name was changed to the Pawnee Cooperative Grazing Association and its organization was patterned after the Crow Valley Association's success.



Great Plains Experiment Range Cattle Grazing, North East of Nunn, CO. Photo taken 8/17/1951

Ranger examines seed production variation. September 1967



Formation of the grazing associations, fencing the area into larger tracts and the use of range riders eliminated the unauthorized use of the public lands by "day herders" (ranchers from outside the area bringing in large herds and badly overgrazing the land, an off-shoot of the open range practice of former years). From the early days of the reclamation process to the present, grazing has shown an increase from practically none to around 9,000 head of cattle. The native grasses are slowly replacing the crested wheat and other grasses planted as a conservation measure. The soil blows very little now, but constant watch must be kept to prevent another dust bowl .



The USFS began managing the area by the multiple-use sustained-yield concept in 1954. The USFS was given permanent control in 1960, and the "National Grasslands" were formed. The Pawnee National Grassland is one of 19 throughout the nation: one each in Oregon and Idaho, the rest are scattered from Texas to North Dakota.

In 1960, the Multiple Use-Sustained Yield Act reaffirmed the right to develop mineral resources, primarily oil and gas. The USFS specifies the revegetation procedures to be followed by the private

operators while conducting their exploration, drilling and production activities. Currently there are 210 active oil and gas leases (managed by the Bureau of Land Management) on the Pawnee National Grassland. As of June 1986, 21 of these have producing wells on them.

There have been 12 Minuteman missile sites constructed on the grassland. These fenced areas (approximately two acres each) are administered by the US Air Force and public access is not permitted.



Atlas E. Site Circa 1962

The Crow Valley Recreation Area, near Briggsdale, was part of one of the first reclamation projects in the area. A ball diamond and picnic area with shelter, fire grates, roads and rest rooms were constructed, mainly with Work Project Administration (WPA) labor. The town of Briggsdale formed a park committee, who contracted with the Resettlement Administration to maintain it in good condition and to make improvements for a period of 10 years. The contract could be renewed if both parties were agreeable. However, it was renewed only once. In 1959, the community decided it did not wish to continue maintenance of the site, but retained the ball diamond under a Special Use Permit until 1977.



Opening of the Crow Valley Campground 1938



Baseball game at the Crow Valley Recreation Area around 1938.

The Forest Service has since developed campsites, a cooking shelter, a water system and an education center, constructed with the help of the Daughters of the American Revolution. It was dedicated in 1981 to the memory of Steward J. Adams, District Ranger of the Pawnee National Grassland at the time of his death in 1979. The Crow Valley Recreation Area is the only camping facility in this area.

This history of the Pawnee National Grassland was researched and prepared by Dorothy and Lee Rhoads, former USFS volunteers who lived near Briggsdale.