

Homesteading in Jackson Hole

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Jackson Hole Historical Society and Museum
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Recording info

Voice: Female, age 25- 40, white, Midwestern sounding, as though a homesteader with male voice giving more legislative or fill in information.

Background: Ox carts, animals on the trail, people calling, children shouting,

Soundtrack: Western music interlaced with other sounds.

Female: We left our families and homes behind and headed west gambling on starting a new life. Some were Mormons, in search of religious freedoms. Others were hoping for a new chance to own land, and dreamed of wealth and prosperity. We came for more reasons than there are stars in the sky. Most of us had no idea of the monotony we would endure, how hard we would work, and the absence of any amenities and conveniences in this wild and fierce country.

Male: Like other parts of the West, homesteading in Jackson Hole, Wyoming was the foundation of Western European history. Settlement across the West was facilitated by the Homestead Act of 1862 and by creative use of other federal land law that allowed stock-raising or agricultural enterprises to expand. Though mountain men trapped beaver in the area during the early 1800s, it was the settlers who established towns and communities to support each other, paving the way for permanent white settlement.

Female: I didn't know the term when I first heard it...homesteading...what was that? My brother told me it was a new government program where the federal government gave anyone who was 21 years of age and head of a household a full 160 acres free of charge! Getting something for nothing, seemed too hard to believe. I asked him how that applies to me, since my Dan had died in a mine accident 2 years before. He said it includes single, divorced or even widowed women. The only requirements were a filing fee that we could scrape together, and that the filers "prove up" on the land. "Prove up" means living on the land, building a house and doing things such as irrigating and farming the land, and building fences for at least five years. The thought of owning my own land parcel instead of this business of taking in boarders, doing laundry, and always having strangers underfoot took hold of me. Eugene, my brother, thought we could go, and get homesteads next to one another, and enlarge our homestead claims together.

Male: Homesteaders came to Jackson Hole later than to other western locales because of the valley's isolation, extreme climate, and land not conducive to farming. High altitudes ranging between 6,400 feet and 8,000 feet above sea level, severe winters with heavy snows for six months a year, and an extremely short growing season of less than three months made ranching and agricultural enterprises marginal at best. To ease the challenge of making a living in the valley, the Stock-Raising Homestead Act of 1916 allowed people to preempt up to 640 acres of land considered suitable only for grazing.

People had to travel over high mountain passes or through treacherous canyons to reach Jackson Hole.

Female:

We arrived in Jackson Hole in July 1884, after a long and hard trip over Togwotee Pass. We forded more rivers and traversed more rocky canyons than I care to remember. Imagine my surprise to find out most of the other homesteaders already there were bachelors! So while I had many suitors, I was lonely for female friends. Eugene and I were from a practical upbringing, and wasted no time in looking for good land with water and grassy meadows for our farming operation. Others had chosen spots near Wilson or south of Jackson, and we staked our claim just outside Wilson too. Over the next five years, I finally had some female neighbors to visit with as more families began to arrive from Utah. They were coming over Teton Pass from Idaho. Many of them were Mormon folk from Utah and Idaho.

Male voice:

Between 1890 and 1900 most Jackson Hole settlers arrive from Utah and Idaho. It was during this time that 10 homesteaders claimed land north of present-day Jackson. They formed a tight-knit community called Gros Ventre. In Jackson Hole, there were few, if any, isolated homesteading families. They needed other families and a sense of community to prevail in a land of challenges. Communities sprang up around the valley, providing necessary services: schools, churches, mail delivery, medical care and commercial services. Today, people can visit Gros Ventre, now called Mormon Row, a cultural remnant of the valley's homesteading past that Grand Teton National Park is preserving, and visitors can wonder about life's challenges more than a century ago. Descendants of these pioneering families still live in Jackson Hole.

Female voice:

We had to be self-sufficient. With our cows, we produced our own milk, cheese, and yogurt, grew enormous gardens, raised beef cattle and hunted elk. We traded our extra goods with others. Even so, we barely subsisted and had to turn to creative ways to make a living. When fall would come, Eugene made extra money by leading hunting trips into the mountains. I raised chickens and pigs for eggs and meat and sold them to neighbors. As more easterners began coming to the valley, many of our ranching neighbors found it easier and much more profitable wrangling dudes instead of cows. By the early 1900's, there weren't many of us left in the valley that weren't in the direct business of summer tourism.

Male voice:

In the early 20th century, war and economic downturns in stock-raising further encouraged the rise of dude ranches. Tourism became a significant business in the valley. The peak of settlement in Jackson Hole occurred between 1908 and 1919. Homesteaders succumbed to failure after the drought of 1919, and the nationwide depression of the 1920s further challenged those trying to eek out a living on their land. The homesteader's frontier ended in 1927 when President Calvin Coolidge signed an executive order that

withdrew virtually all public lands in Jackson Hole from settlement. This order was closely tied to plans for a future Grand Teton National Park.

Female:

It was a hard time at first gettin' started, making a home in the wilds of Wyoming. But we grew to love the place, the rugged mountains, the spring run-off, and flowers, the haunting calls of the elk and wolf. Eventually, it truly did become home. By that time, I knew I'd live out my days here. When the President Coolidge closed the settling of Jackson Hole, we had a community, a school, and a post office. And I knew, like me, others would come later, drawn to this land of mountains and sky. Some would visit and others would make it home too. Enjoy this place. We love it here.

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