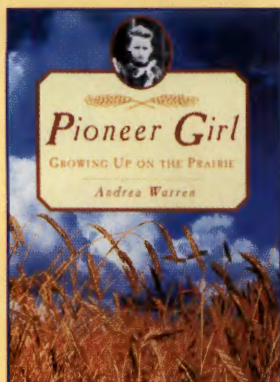


Pioneer Girl



California
Standards

Standards to
Achieve

Reading

- Inferences/
generalizations
(R2.4)

Social Science

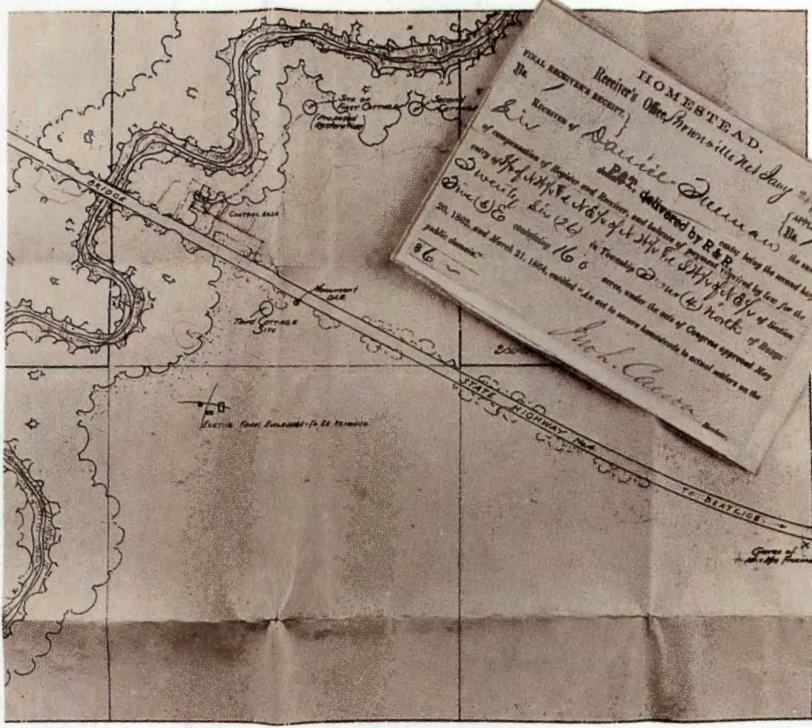
- Settlers move to
West (HSS5.8.4)

Claiming the Land



For years, European **pioneers** thought of the Great Plains as a place to cross, not a place to live. Then in 1862 a new law was passed — the Homestead Act. Settlers could claim a **homestead** on 160 acres of **prairie** land. If they lived on their claims and farmed the land for five years, they would become the owners. Thousands of homesteaders like the family you will meet in *Pioneer Girl* eagerly rushed to settle in Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakota Territories. Among them were recent **immigrants** from Sweden, Norway, Denmark, France, Germany, and Russia.





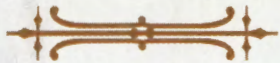
◀ With this receipt for a filing fee, a settler officially owned a **claim** on a Nebraska lot — a piece of land the size of eighty city blocks.

The grasslands were **fertile** for growing crops, if the weather cooperated. But many farm families grew **discouraged** living in houses of **sod**, or earth blocks, far from neighbors.



MEET THE AUTHOR

Andrea Warren



Childhood: Warren grew up in a small Nebraska town on the edge of the Great Plains, where she spent hours reading at the local library. Although she loved to read as a child, she didn't think about becoming a writer until she was an adult. -

Work: Warren had several jobs before she decided to write full time, including teaching, editing, and newspaper reporting. She says that each of those jobs has "in some way connected me to words and the joy of writing, or teaching writing."


Writing: Warren has written books for several age groups, including novels for adults and young adults, and books for younger readers. *Pioneer Girl* is her second nonfiction book for children. Her first was *Orphan Train Rider: One Boy's True Story*, which won the *Boston Globe-Horn Book Award*.



Internet



To find out more about Andrea Warren, visit Education Place. www.eduplace.com/kids



Pioneer Girl

GROWING UP ON THE PRAIRIE

Andrea Warren

Strategy Focus

As you read about a pioneer family in the 1880s, think of **questions** that you can ask your classmates about details of their life.

RICH FARMING LANDS!

ON THE LINE OF THE

Union Pacific Railroad!

Located in the GREAT CENTRAL BELT of POPULATION, COMMERCE and WEALTH, and adjoining the WORLD'S HIGHWAY from OCEAN TO OCEAN.

12,000,000 ACRES!

3,000,000 Acres in Central and Eastern Nebraska, in the Platte Valley, now for sale!

We invite the attention of all parties seeking a HOME, to the LANDS offered for sale by this Company.

The Vast Quantity of Land from which to select, enables every one to secure such a location as he desires, suitable to any branch of farming or stock raising.

The Prices are Extremely Low. The amount of land owned by the Company is so large that they are determined to sell at the cheapest possible rates, ranging from \$1.50 to \$8.00 per acre.

The Terms of Payment are Easy. Ten years' credit at six per cent interest. A deduction of ten per cent for cash.

The Location is Central, along the 41st parallel, the favorite latitude of America. Equally well adapted to corn or wheat; free from the long, cold winters of the Northern, and the hot, unhealthy influences of the Southern States.

The Face of the Country is diversified with hill and dale, grain land and meadow, rich bottoms, low bluffs, and undulating tables, all covered with a thick growth of sweet nutritious grasses.

The Soil is a dark loam, slightly impregnated with lime, free from stone and gravel, and eminently adapted to grass, grain and root crops; the subsoil is usually light and porous, retaining moisture with wonderful tenacity.

The Climate is mild and healthful; the atmosphere dry and pure. Epidemic diseases never prevail; Fever and Ague are unknown. The greatest amount of rain falls between March and October. The Winters are dry with but little snow.

The Productions are wheat, corn, oats, barley, rye and root crops, and vegetables generally. Flax, sweet potatoes, sorghum, etc., etc., do well and yield largely.

Fruits, both Wild and Cultivated, do remarkably well. The freedom from frosts in May and September, in connection with the dry Winters and warm soil, renders this State eminently adapted to fruit culture.

Stock Raising in all its branches, is particularly profitable on the wide ranges of rich pasturage. Cattle and sheep

feed with avidity and fatten upon the nutritious grasses without grain; hogs thrive well, and wool growing is exceedingly remunerative.

Timber is found on the streams and grows rapidly.

Coal of excellent quality, exists in vast quantities on the line of the road in Wyoming, and is furnished to settlers at reduced rates.

Market Facilities are the best in the West; the great mining regions of Wyoming, Colorado, Utah and Nevada, are supplied by the farmers of Platte Valley.

The Title given the purchaser is absolute, in fee simple, and free from all incumbrances, derived directly from the United States.

Soldiers of the Late War are entitled to a Homestead of one hundred and sixty acres, within Railroad limits, which is equal to a bounty of \$400.

Persons of Foreign Birth are also entitled to the benefits of the Free Homestead Law, on declaring their intentions of becoming citizens of the United States; this they may do immediately on their arrival in this country.

For Colonies, the lands on the line of the Union Pacific Railroad afford the best locations in the West.

TOWN LOTS FOR SALE VERY CHEAP in the most important towns on the line of the Road, affording excellent opportunities for business or investments.

Full information in regard to lands, prices, terms of sale, &c., together with pamphlets, circulars and maps, may be obtained from all the Agents of the Department, also the

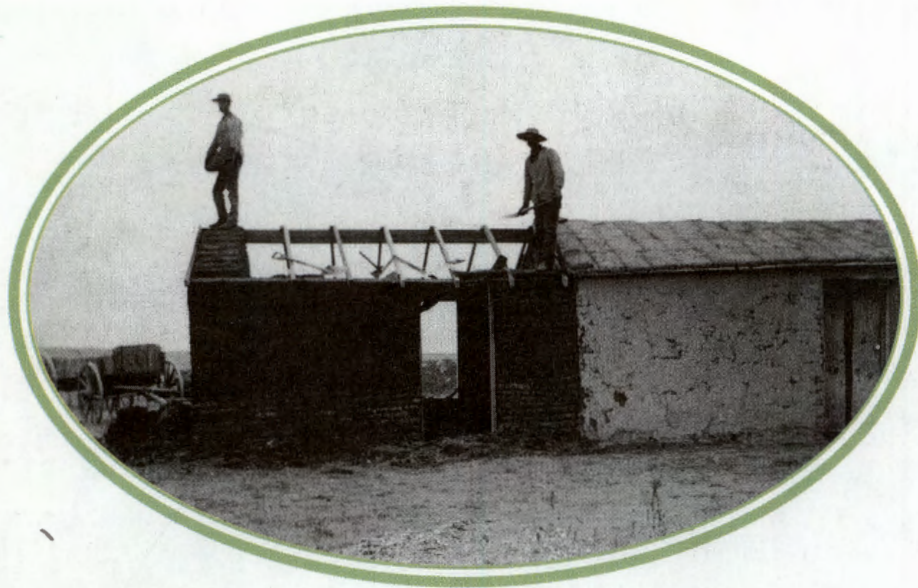
"PIONEER."

A handsome ILLUSTRATED PAPER, with maps, etc., and containing the HOMESTEAD LAW. Mailed free to all applicants. Address

O. F. DAVIS,
Land Commissioner, U. P. R. R.

OMAHA, NEB.

Posters like this one, advertising land for sale by the railroad, drew settlers to the prairie.



In 1885, the McCance family of Missouri filed a claim on 160 acres of land in central Nebraska, headed west, and became “homesteaders.” Poppie McCance built a house on the windswept prairie out of blocks of earth, or sod. The new farm brought both adventures and hardships for the McCance children – Grace, Florry, and Stella – and their hardworking parents. Grace had a remarkable memory and could recall details from even her very early years. Whenever she is quoted, the words are directly from her memoir.



During the fall, Grace and Florry played outside whenever they could. Their favorite place was the old buffalo trail that wound over the prairie and out of sight from the house. Their cat liked to go with them. Sometimes they found tiny shells in the soil and would bring them home to Mama. She explained how, millions of years ago, glaciers covered the land. When they melted, they created a sea. That’s where the shells had come from.

Later Grace learned that the Midwest was dry because the Rocky Mountains in Colorado blocked moisture blowing inland from the Pacific Ocean. Nebraska was one of the driest Midwest states. The few trees grew mostly along the rivers. Rainfall also affected how tall the grass grew. Travelers going west noticed that the closer they got to the Rocky Mountains, the shorter the grass was. “Shortgrass” grew only six to twelve inches tall.



The McCance family reunion, 1892: Mama and Poppie are standing to the far right. In front of them are babies Elsie and Nelie.

On the eastern side of the Midwest, known as the “tallgrass” prairie, native grasses got enough rain to grow six to twelve feet in height. In the shortgrass area where the McCances lived, Poppie planted types of wheat and corn that needed little rainfall. His crops still had to have some rain, however, and like all farmers he kept one eye on the weather.

The weather was always a concern. Hailstorms could pound crops to pieces in a matter of minutes, and injure or kill birds and animals. Hailstones even killed people caught without shelter. Lightning was another danger. Grace once saw a horse that had been killed by lightning. When the weather was dry, lightning, a spark from a campfire, or a gun discharge could start prairie fires, and the wind would spread them.

Settlers banded together to fight the fires. Sometimes they tried setting backfires — burning a strip of land in the fire’s path so that when the fire reached the strip, it either burned out or turned in a different direction. Like every settler, Poppie tried to keep firebreaks — grassless ditches the fires could not cross — plowed around his land. But sometimes, if prairie fires



Seated to the far right are (left to right) Stella, Florry, Grace, and Ethel.

were moving fast enough, they could jump firebreaks and be stopped only by a river or a creek.

Grace never forgot her first prairie fire. As soon as Poppie saw smoke in the far hills, he took off in the wagon with a barrel of water. Mama, Florry, and Grace watched all morning as the fire drew closer to their land. Grace was frightened.

Mama told the girls that if the fire jumped the firebreak they would run to the middle of the big bare field where the fire would have nothing to burn and would either go around them or die out. When the flames reached the firebreaks, Grace was ready to run. Then she saw that the fire was going out. When Poppie finally came home, his clothes and skin were black from soot.

A few months after the fire, a rainstorm struck the homestead. The howling of the wind woke everyone up. Suddenly "the darkness, black and thick as velvet, was ripped apart by a terrible blue flash of lightning," Grace remembered. "Then there was a cracking, tearing sound, and the soddy seemed to quiver."

The noise was the roof being torn off the kitchen. When the storm finally stopped, the house was “a sorry-looking mess. Every last thing had blown off the walls, and all Mama’s little shelves, brackets, whatnots, and pictures were either smashed to bits or gone entirely.” Grace remembered that “Mama went around in a kind of a daze, picking some of her torn and broken things out of the hash on the floor and sweeping out the worst of the mud. The hot sun was pouring down on our heads when Poppie, hard put to keep a cheerful expression on his face, offered thanks for the cornmeal mush and fried eggs we finally sat down to.”

The girls helped Mama carry water to clean up. Poppie hunted for roof boards that had blown away and set to work rebuilding the roof. Grace and her mother walked through the fields looking for their belongings. They “found half of the marriage certificate, but no part of the frame or glass. Just that half, ripped from the rest, its doves and cupids hardly stained by the mud and rain.”



Storms could destroy a pioneer family's house and fields.



Windmills built over wells pumped water to the surface and also showed travelers where houses were located.

Still, Poppie was not discouraged. Like most farmers, he lived on hope, always convinced that the next year would be better.

When early November's chill made it too cold to play outside, Grace and Florry gathered up their cob dolls and settled into the sod house for the winter. "Flour sacks full of beans and dried corn hung in the kitchen corner that winter, and heaps of onions, turnips, pumpkins, cabbage, and potatoes filled the cellar cave."

Just before Thanksgiving, Poppie came home from one of his weekly trips to town with three barrels in the back of the wagon. They had come by railroad from Grandma and Grandpa Blaine, Mama's parents back in Missouri. Grace and Florry and even little Stella were almost beside themselves with excitement when Poppie started to pry off the lids.



A rare photograph of the crowded interior of a one-room sod house.

The first one was filled with molasses to sweeten their cereal and Mama's baked goods. The second was full of red apples from Grandpa Blaine's orchard behind the big white house. Grace saw the faraway look in Mama's eyes when she took one and held it in her hands.

The third barrel was the best. First they pulled out bags of black walnuts from Grandpa's nut trees and sweet potatoes from his garden. Then came Grandma's bundles. One contained a dress length of new calico fabric for Mama and each of the girls. The other held clothes from Mama's younger sister, Aunt Ollie, who always wore the latest styles. She had sent along jackets, dresses, and petticoats she did not want anymore.

Mama laid everything out on the bed, and Grace and Florry gazed at the lovely garments. Mama would make over the clothes so the girls would have new outfits. And she promised to have their new calico dresses made in time for Christmas dinner.

That first Christmas, Mama and Poppie could not afford any presents, but Poppie cut down a little wild plum bush and Grace and Florry decorated it with paper chains and strings of popcorn. All three girls wore their new dresses when the neighbors came to feast on a roast turkey dinner. Grace's only complaint was that the table was not big enough. She and Florry and the neighbors' children had to wait until the adults finished at "first table" before it was their turn to eat. "While hard knots of hunger grew and grew inside us, we had to sit back, smelling the good smells, and hoping there would be enough of everything left for us," she recalled. "Homestead children had to put up with a lot of hard things, but one of the hardest was waiting for second table."



Spring came again, and the prairie turned soft green. Grace was now four and lingered outside. "The first day of going barefoot was almost as good as Christmas, or the Fourth of July," she recalled. "There is almost no describing it; the good feeling to tender, bare soles of cushiony new buffalo grass, or of the fine, warm dust of a cow trail."

Everything on the homestead was humming and growing. The horse gave birth to a colt. Pearlie the cow had a calf. Little chicks followed the fussy old turkey. Poppie planted his wheat, and then had to use his shotgun to fight off flocks of geese flying north that kept stealing the precious seeds. Mama planted her garden again, a bigger one this year. "Poppie said, for the hundredth time, that he had never seen such a land as this, so rich, so fertile. But Mama said only that she wished we had a well in our own yard."

Poppie kept after the well men, but they had so much business from all the new homesteaders in the area that they raised their rates. Poppie said they did not have enough money. He would have to keep hauling water until he could dig the well himself.

Their second year on the prairie passed much as the first. Grace and Florry still begged to go whenever Poppie loaded up the water barrels. If Mama would relent, "we had fun, jouncing along in the wagon and singing



Pioneers used buffalo or cow chips for fuel because there were few trees on the prairie. The little girl is holding her corn husk doll.

with Poppie above the rattle and bang of the empty barrels. . . . When we pulled up at the well, our neighbor, Mrs. Totten, would come out to visit with us while Poppie filled the barrels, or maybe she would take us to the house with her.”

The Tottens were only a few miles away, but Mama still felt as if she lived in the middle of nowhere. That changed when the Yoders, who had been the McCances’ neighbors in Missouri, took a claim nearby. “Their arrival made Mama happier than anything that had happened since we came to Nebraska,” Grace realized.

On Mama’s birthday in April, Mama decided the family should visit the Yoders since their son’s birthday was the same day. Mama began preparing food to take with them. Grace and Florry did their chores and took baths, put on their best petticoats, and tried to stand still while Mama braided their long hair. Then Mama brushed her own hair and arranged it stylishly on her head. Just as they all finished dressing, Mama glanced out the window and cried, “Merciful heavens, there’s the Yoders, the whole family, and look at this house!”



Immigrants, like this French family who pioneered in Kansas, played an important role in helping to settle the Midwest.

Grace and Florry looked — at a tub of cold dirty bathwater, clothes strewn everywhere, and the kitchen not yet tidied from breakfast. While Mama hurriedly picked up, Grace and Florry grabbed the bath basin and dragged it outside, just as their unexpected guests came to the door. They had brought a birthday dinner for Mama and their son, all ready to eat.

The homesteaders settling around the McCances were mostly Swedish immigrants. When the farmers gathered together to help harvest one another's wheat crops, Poppie, whose ancestors were Scottish and Irish, missed out on most of the conversation, which was in Swedish.

Immigrants who settled in the Midwest usually came for the rich farmland. In the countries they left behind, they either could not afford to own land or were not allowed to. Some also came to find religious freedom, to escape paying unfair taxes, or to avoid serving in the military. So many Germans settled in Kansas during the 1860s and 1870s that one tribe of Kansas Indians spoke German as a second language instead of English. In 1870, over half of Nebraska's population was made up of foreign-born immigrants and their American-born children.

Like Poppie, many people born in the United States also wanted to homestead. Some had lost their homes in the Civil War or thought the East was getting too crowded. Freed slaves came because they wanted to leave the South, and homesteading was a way they could own land. Sometimes freed slaves established a community, such as the little Kansas town of Nicodemus.

Most homesteaders were poor. Children were often barefoot because they owned no shoes. One child remembered that his parents used kegs for chairs during family meals and the children stood. Before they had those kegs, they sat on pumpkins.

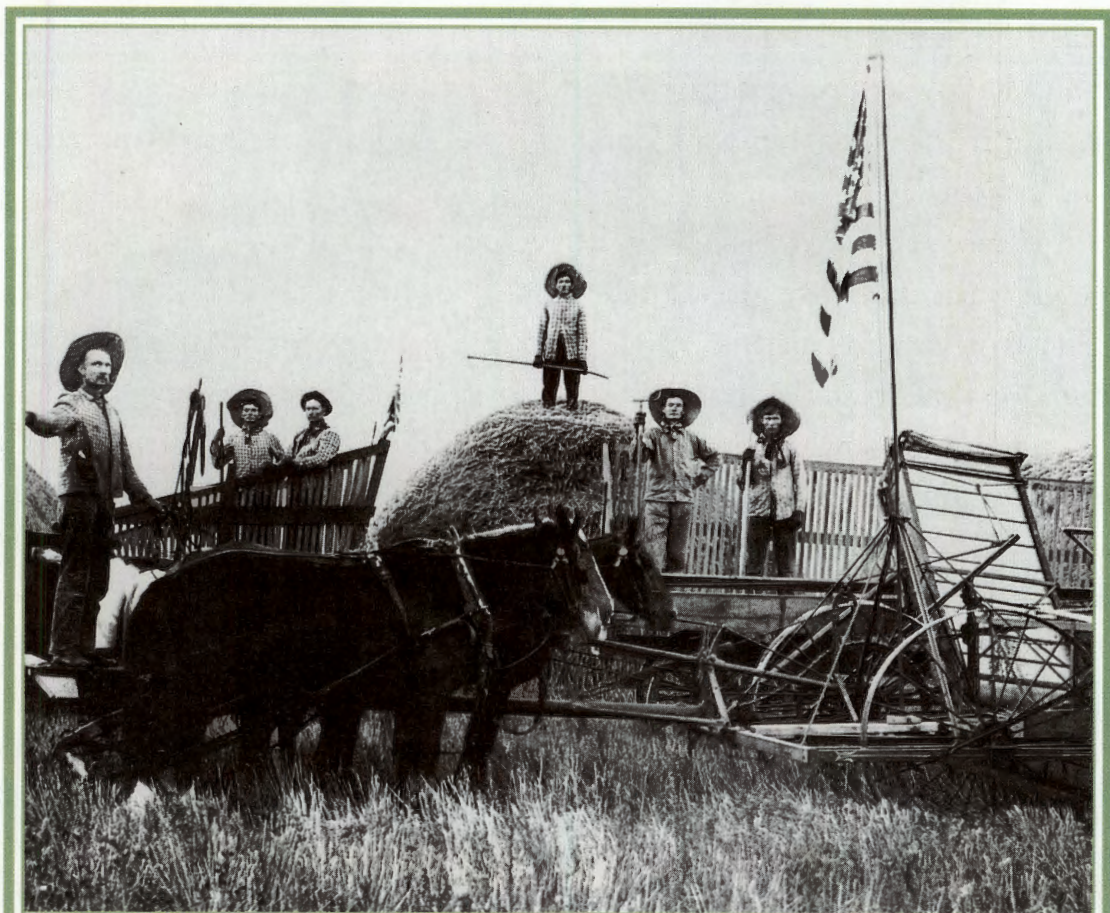
Everyone worked six days a week, including small children. Three-year-olds could act as human scarecrows to chase grain-eating birds out of the fields and help gather chips for fuel. Four-year-olds ran errands, took water to field-workers, and gathered eggs. Five-year-olds helped break up clods in the fields, pull weeds, feed the cookstove, milk cows, and even plow. One six-year-old boy sent to find stray cattle was gone several days before his father set out to search for him and found him not far from home, returning with the lost cows.

Grace and Florry had always helped out. Grace was five and Florry was seven when they were given a new chore: looking for turkey nests. When chicken and turkey hens turned "broody" in the spring, they stopped laying for several weeks so they could sit on one batch of eggs long enough for them to hatch into baby chicks. But they often laid their eggs far from home, where skunks and snakes could get them and where coyotes could kill the hens. The girls' job was to find the nests and get the hens to "brood" them back at the stable. Grace recalled, "The hens would stroll the prairie for hours, acting as if they had nowhere to go and nothing to do. Sometimes we sat watching a hen for a solid half day, and then somehow missed her when she slipped, like the shadow of a cloud, into some patch of brush or tall grass and disappeared."

The fall of 1887, Poppie bought a small herd of cattle. Since there were no boys in the family, he called on five-year-old Grace, nicknaming her Pete because she would be doing work usually done by a boy. He said, "You'll have to be my herd boy now, Pete. Mommie needs Florry to help her in the

house and you'll have to do it all alone. Think you can?" Grace was thrilled. She disliked housework and far preferred to work outdoors.

Her job was to drive the cattle to the fields in the morning, stay with them all day, and bring them home in the evening. Herding would have gone fine, had it not been for one mean-tempered heifer who constantly threatened Grace with her sharp horns. Grace had to carry a stout stick to protect herself. One evening the cows turned contrary and wanted to stay inside the cave they had created in the big haystack: "No matter how much I ran and yelled and whacked, they outran me and dodged back into the cave. Finally, I pushed past them into the hole and began pounding on their heads with my stick. The older cows gave up and backed out together, leaving me suddenly face-to-face with the long-nosed, ornery heifer."



Boys helped bring in the crops.

As the heifer rushed her, Grace flattened herself against the hay, but the heifer gouged a deep cut from her hip to armpit. As much as it hurt, Grace got the cows home, even the heifer. When she was finally in the house, she burst into tears. Mama cared for her, then told Poppie he had to get rid of the heifer or Grace could no longer herd. Poppie said he would sell the heifer the next time he went to town. In the meantime, he would keep her in the corral.

A few days later, when Grace was in the barn helping with the milking, she heard a snort behind her. She whirled around and saw the heifer, head down, coming straight for her. Grace made a mad dash, ducking under one of the cows and rolling under the barbed-wire fence. She was unhurt, but she was wearing her favorite calico dress and ripped it so badly it was ruined. That made her cry more than the scare. Poppie sold the heifer in town the next day.



Even very young pioneer children helped feed animals, milk cows, and do other chores.

GRACE McCANCE SNYDER

1882–1982



When I was growing up in Newman Grove, Nebraska, I could see a cornfield from my bedroom window, and I marked the seasons by its growth and colors. My view now is of city streets, and I sometimes wish I could still see that cornfield every day as a reminder of the pioneer families who settled the Midwest.

Many pioneer children grew up on hardscrabble homesteads, working alongside their parents in harsh conditions to nurture the growth of crops and cattle. In researching the lives of children on the prairie, however, I did not hear many complaints. These children were needed by their families and had a strong sense of purpose. Because they knew no other life, they did not feel deprived. The prairie was their home. Their optimism, steadfastness, and hard work have given those of us fortunate enough to live in this beautiful part of the world a proud legacy.

When I first read Grace McCance Snyder's memoir, *No Time on My Hands*, I knew I wanted to write about her pioneer childhood. I liked her spunk and spirit. She dared to dream, and she saw her dreams come true.

I hope readers will enjoy her story as it is told here and, through her, will gain new appreciation of what it meant to grow up on the prairie.

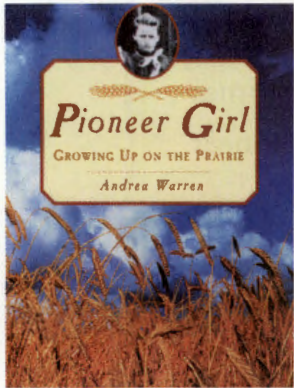
— Andrea Warren



*Grace posed on horseback
for her ninetieth birthday.*

Responding

Think About the Selection



1. How do Grace and Florry's chores compare with the chores you do at home?
2. The author writes that Poppie and the other farmers "lived on hope." Give examples from the selection that show this.
3. What do you think would have been the best and worst things about being a child in a homesteading family? Explain your answer.
4. Based on the information in the selection, would you expect the McCance family's farm to become successful? Why or why not?
5. Do you think it was fair to lure homesteaders to the prairie with ads promising rich farmland? Explain.
6. What can Americans today learn from the experiences of ordinary people of earlier generations, like Grace McCance Snyder?
7. **Connecting/Comparing** Compare how the Lakota people in *A Boy Called Slow* and the McCance family in *Pioneer Girl* adapted to life on the Great Plains.

Explaining

Write Instructions

Think about the chores a child would have to do in a homesteading family. Someone who took over those chores for a few days might need instructions. Write instructions for two of the chores, telling how to do each one.

Tips

- Use imperative sentences when giving directions.
- Use words such as *first*, *then*, *next*, and *last* to make the order of the steps clear.

MATH

Make a Diagram

Draw a diagram of a sod house and the furniture inside it. Use information from the selection to help you decide the size of the living area and the objects in it. Include the approximate measurements of each room.

Bonus Suppose you were building a sod house out of sod blocks 3' long by 1' wide by 4" thick. How many blocks would you need for a one-foot-thick wall measuring 12' long by 9' high?

ART

Create an Illustration

Use the photographs, events, and descriptions in *Pioneer Girl* to create your own illustration for the story. Think about the clothes the characters might have worn and other details of the landscape and weather.



Internet

Send an E-Postcard

Send a friend an e-postcard telling about the McCance homestead. You might give a few details from the selection, and invite your friend to read *Pioneer Girl*. You'll find the postcard at Education Place. www.eduplace.com/kids

Skill: How to Read a Social Studies Article

Before you read . . .

- Identify the topic. Ask what you know about it. Think about what you want to learn.
- Preview photographs, captions, and illustrations.

As you read . . .

- Look for words that signal when and where events take place.
- Compare the time and place in the article with your own.

California
Standards

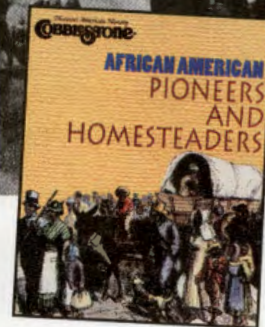
Standards to Achieve

Reading

- Understand text features (R2.1)

Social Science

- Settlers move to West (HSS5.8.4)



Nicodemus Stakes a Claim In History

By Angela Bates-Tompkins

In 1877, 350 former slaves moved from Kentucky to northwest Kansas. The town in which they settled was given the name Nicodemus. It was named after the first slave to purchase his freedom in the United States. W.R. Hill, a white town builder, and W.H. Smith, an African American homesteader, were partners in organizing this all-black settlement.



A buffalo soldier demonstration in Nicodemus in 1998.



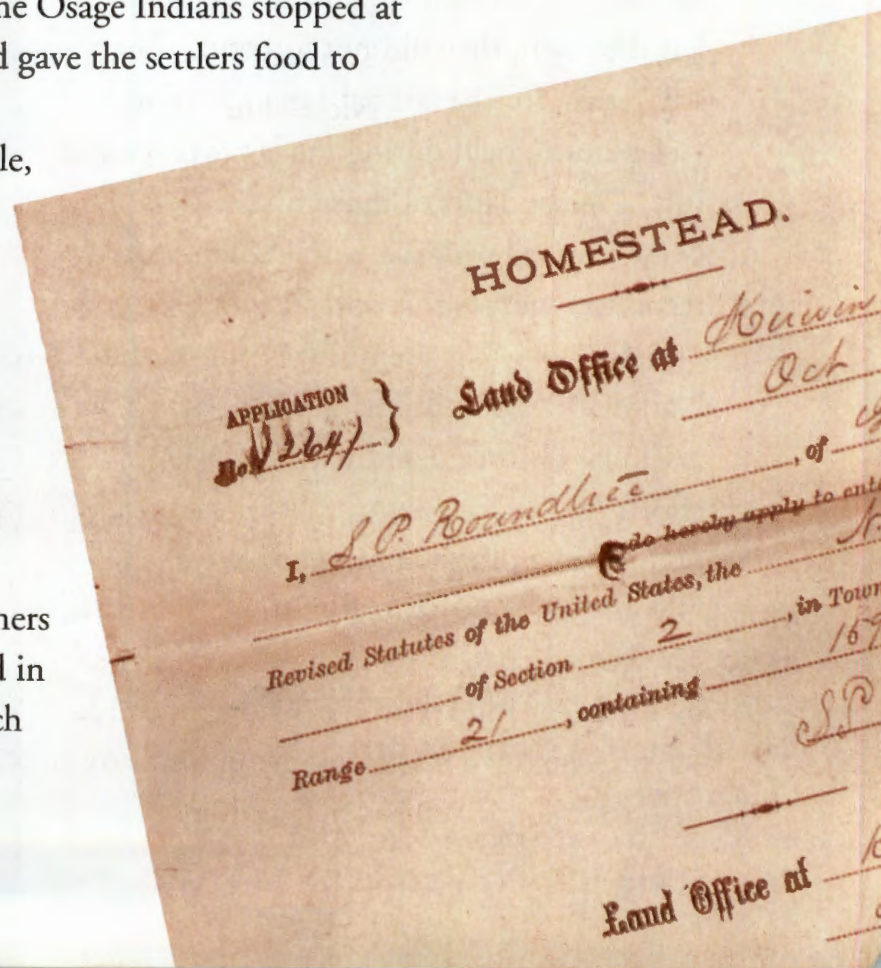
The townspeople of Nicodemus, Kansas, gather on Main Street around 1885 (left). Today fewer than thirty people live in the town.

This October 1, 1879 homestead application (below) was submitted by S.P. Roundtree, one of the founders of Nicodemus.

Hill and Smith were joined by five African American ministers who had been living in Topeka, Kansas. In April 1877, the group founded the Nicodemus Town Company and sought settlers from Kentucky to move to Kansas.

The first 350 recruits arrived in Nicodemus in September 1877 with high hopes. They were soon disappointed. They found themselves surrounded by a treeless landscape. Some of the town organizers even were living in dugouts. As many as sixty families returned to Kentucky. Those who stayed had brought only a few belongings with them. Their supplies soon ran out. Fortunately, some Osage Indians stopped at Nicodemus while on a hunting trip and gave the settlers food to survive the winter.

Though the first year was a struggle, several other groups of settlers soon joined the original bands. By 1885, the population of Nicodemus had grown to nearly seven hundred people. The town had two newspapers, livery stables, a post office, a general store, a doctor, hotels, restaurants, schools, and churches. From the late 1800s to the 1940s, the largest number of black farmers and African American-owned farmland in Kansas was in Graham County, of which Nicodemus was the central city.



In 1887, residents of Nicodemus raised money to try to help bring a railroad through their town. Trains and railroads meant progress. The townspeople hoped that a train station would carry people and goods to the town. The railroad bypassed the town, however. Many settlers became discouraged and began to leave. Some merchants moved their businesses to the newly organized railroad town of Bogue, just six miles to the west.

Difficult years followed, but Nicodemus residents still hoped to succeed. A drought came, making it hard to grow crops. When the crops did flourish, locusts ate them.

In the 1930s, the United States was faced with the Great Depression. In Nicodemus, as elsewhere in the country, people lost their jobs and new jobs were almost impossible to find. Townspeople left for what they hoped would be new starts in better places.

Despite the decline in population, Nicodemus remained a cultural center for African American life. And although people left the town, they did not forget it. They still return for the annual Emancipation Celebration, held during the last weekend of July. Descendants of those first settlers come from all over the United States to reconnect with family and friends.

In 1976, Nicodemus was put on the National Register of Historic Places as a National Historic Landmark. In 1991, efforts by the Nicodemus Historical Society resulted in a proposal to establish Nicodemus as a National Historic Site/Park. The bill was passed by Congress and signed by President Bill Clinton on November 12, 1996. The town is now receiving funds to help restore its five historic buildings.



The National Park Service is providing assistance in interpreting the town's rich African American history and its unique contribution to the economic, social, and political development of Kansas and the West.

Nicodemus is the oldest and only remaining all-African American town west of the Mississippi River. On August 1, 1998, during the 120th Emancipation Celebration, Nicodemus was dedicated as a National Historic Site/Park.

