

## Section 4

### Farming in the West

#### Section 4 Focus Question

How did farmers on the Plains struggle to make a living? To begin answering this question,

- Find out about the impact of homesteading.
- Discover the hardships of life on the Plains.
- Learn about the last rush for land.
- Read about how farmers organized politically.

#### Section 4 Summary

Homesteading boomed in the West after the Civil War, but times were not easy for farmers.

#### Homesteading

The Homestead Act of 1862 offered 160 acres on the Great Plains to those who agreed to live on and farm the land for five years. This created thousands of **homesteaders**, settlers who acquired free land offered by the government.

But only one third of homesteaders on the Great Plains lasted the required five years. On the dry Plains, 160 acres was not enough land to support a family.

The railroads also promoted farming. They gave away some of the 180 million acres that they got from the government. More farms meant more shipping for the railroads. ✓

#### A Hard Life on the Plains

Life on the Great Plains was not easy. Water was scarce, and crops were hard to grow. The soil of the Plains was fertile, but the tough **sod**, a thick layer of roots of grasses tangled with soil, had to be removed. This was backbreaking work.

New farming methods helped Plains farmers. They used steel plows, which were stronger and lighter than other plows. New drills allowed them to bury seeds deep down where there was moisture. They used reapers to harvest crops and threshers to beat off the hard coverings of the grains. Farmers used windmills to pump water from deep underground. They used barbed wire, a new type of twisted wire, to keep cattle from trampling their crops.

By the 1880s, 70,000 African Americans had settled in Kansas. They were known as Exodusters because they felt like the Jews who fled slavery in Egypt, a biblical story told in the book of Exodus. ✓

#### Key Events

1867

First cattle drive on Chisholm Trail.

1887

Dawes Act breaks up Native American tribal lands.

1889

Oklahoma opens to homesteaders.

#### Vocabulary Builder

Based on context clues, define *homestead*.

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#### ✓ Checkpoint

Name two conditions that homesteaders had to live up to.

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#### ✓ Checkpoint

List two things that made farming the Plains so difficult.

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### ✓ Checkpoint

How much land was up for grabs in the Oklahoma Land Rush?

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### Reading Strategy

Reread the bracketed paragraphs. Then, using one of the blank pages at the back of this book, create a timeline of the events described in the paragraphs.

### ✓ Checkpoint

Name two things that Populists wanted.

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## A Last Rush for Land

By the 1880s, few areas on the Plains remained free to settlers. In 1889, nearly 100,000 people gathered at a line in Oklahoma. They were ready to enter what was once Indian Territory to claim some of the two million acres being offered by the government. A few people, known as **sooners**, had already sneaked onto the land. They came out of hiding to claim the best land. By 1890, the free land had run out. ✓

## Farmers Organize

As in mining and ranching, farming had a few big organizations that did well. But small farmers scraped by. Overproduction drove down prices. Small farmers borrowed money to expand or to buy new equipment. When prices for their crops fell, the farmers could not pay off the loans, and they lost their land.

Many farmers formed **granges**, groups that met for lectures, sewing bees, and other events. In 1867, local granges joined to form the National Grange. In the 1870s and 1880s, Grangers demanded the low rates from railroads and grain warehouses that big farmers got. In time, **farm cooperatives** were formed. These were groups of farmers who pooled their money to make large purchases of tools, seed, and other supplies at a discount.

In 1892, farmers joined labor unions to form the Populist Party. They pushed for social reforms like public ownership of railroads and warehouses to control rates. They called for both an income tax to replace property taxes and an eight-hour workday. Populists also wanted the government to back the dollar with silver as well as gold. They hoped this would bring on **inflation**, or a general rise in prices. This would raise crop prices. But after the presidential election of 1896, which Populist candidate **William Jennings Bryan** lost, Populism faded away. ✓

## Check Your Progress

1. Why did railroads support farming on the Plains?

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2. What did the National Grange demand?

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