

# Sod Busting: How Families Made Farms on the 19th-Century Plains

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ISSN 0003-4827

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## Recommended Citation

Bremer, Jeff. "Sod Busting: How Families Made Farms on the 19th-Century Plains." *The Annals of Iowa* 74 (2015), 196-197.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12198>

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for democracy and equality for “propagandistic purposes” throughout the world after World War II. As America flexed its international muscle, ideals of democracy and equality became an international mantra of American identity, and Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address became a beautiful conveyor of that message. Peatman argues convincingly that it was in that specific context that the speech became a revered document not only for Americans but also for people throughout the world striving for freedom and democracy for themselves.

As Peatman concludes, “For a hundred years, the nation had lost Lincoln’s meaning at Gettysburg, for almost no one in the ensuing century discussed or acted on Lincoln’s demand that democracy must include equality” (191). But by January 19, 1963, at the centennial commemoration of Lincoln’s speech, the Gettysburg Address was as important to American identity as the U.S. Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. And it was *then* that the Gettysburg Address had the power to inspire the unprecedented equal rights legislation of the 1960s.

*Sod Busting: How Families Made Farms on the 19th-Century Plains*, by David B. Danbom. *How Things Worked*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. x, 129 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliographical essay, index. \$44.95 hardcover, \$19.95 paper.

Reviewer Jeff Bremer is assistant professor of history at Iowa State University. He is the author of *A Store Almost in Sight: The Economic Transformation of Missouri from the Louisiana Purchase to the Civil War* (2014).

This concise book is a volume in Johns Hopkins University Press’s series *How Things Worked*. Written by historian David B. Danbom, author of the best one-volume history on rural America, *Sod Busting* is an excellent introduction to the challenges and opportunities of agricultural life in a difficult region for farming. Written for nonspecialists, it is an accessible and clear survey of the settlement of the Great Plains. Danbom breaks no new ground, using only published sources, but this is a rewarding story, focused on the struggles of individuals and families fighting to prosper in an unforgiving region.

The book focuses on four states – Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, and North Dakota – that have similar topography and climate. All were settled after the Civil War, and agriculture dominated their economies. In the 1860s and the 1870s Indian tribes were forced onto reservations, opening up the northern plains for settlement. Railroad construction and the Homestead Act helped to populate these territories and states.

The region was hard on American and European settlers. Winters were severe, wood was scarce, and water could be hard to find.

Danbom's story details the acquisition of land, the building of farms, and how families paid for their property, as well as the creation of communities and towns. Policies of the federal government were crucial to the settling of the northern plains, making land available for sale and encouraging economic development. While the Homestead Act did not account for more than 20 percent of land distributed in these four states, federal land policy and support for railroads helped bring settlers to the region.

There were many challenges to building farms. Weather on the northern plains could be treacherous, with blizzards, hailstorms, and tornadoes endangering humans, crops, and livestock. A lack of timber forced many families to build sod houses or dugouts. Insects and snakes found such housing hospitable. Hordes of grasshoppers threatened crops, and tough prairie grass made breaking land difficult. It took many years for new farms to become a success. Costs were high, and everyone in the family labored for years to build a home. A boom-and-bust cycle in the late nineteenth century only exacerbated these challenges.

The third chapter details the importance of credit for families on the plains. Most people needed \$500–\$800 to meet costs in their first year. Farmers needed short-term credit to pay for seed, animals, and emergency expenses. Family members, local banks, and general stores met this need. Long-term credit included mortgages on land, but such loans were different from today. Mortgages usually lasted less than ten years and required annual interest payments, with payment of the principal at the end of the loan.

The fourth chapter reviews how settlers built communities. Migrants brought institutions and values with them to the Great Plains from eastern states or Europe. Churches and schools operated as centers for local people. Shared labor, such as barn-raising or quilting parties, bonded neighbors. Towns provided commercial opportunities and often hosted fraternal organizations. Capitalism did not threaten communities, and people did not see themselves as competing with each other as much as battling railroads and banks, which seemed to exploit average folk.

Danbom's *Sod Busting* is an outstanding survey of farm making on the Great Plains. This elegantly written, well-researched volume will find an audience with students, historians, and general readers. Those with an interest in Iowa history will find much useful information here that helps to explain settlement in the western part of the state. Anyone teaching or studying the Great Plains will want to add this book to their library.