

## Homesteading on the Plains: Toward a New History

Paula Nelson

*University of Wisconsin-Platteville*

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He practices what he preaches. O'Brien's ranch follows a free-range, sustainable approach, unlike the mass herding typical of the cattle industry. As he summarizes his view, "A buffalo that does not move at least a few miles per day is not a buffalo" (99). To some extent, *Great Plains Bison* reads as an extended explanation of why he treats his herd the way he does. (Readers can access his personal website at [www.wildideabuffalo.com](http://www.wildideabuffalo.com) for more information.)

The chapters on Native Americans and the conservation of the buffalo are a little weaker, with several minor errors, such as referring to the 1848 Free Soil Party as a coalition of Democrats and Republicans (the latter did not yet exist as a political party) and stating that the American Bison Society supplied the animals for the Wichita Bison Preserve, the nation's first (it was the New York Zoological Society). Both are topics with an expansive literature and historiography that are underrepresented in the bibliography.

For those with little knowledge of the history of the buffalo or the Great Plains, O'Brien provides a handy introduction to the subject, although without reference notes and with only a small, somewhat dated bibliography, readers might struggle to find where to go from here if they wish to read more. Readers already familiar with the buffalo may also find value in O'Brien's telling of the story.

*Homesteading the Plains: Toward a New History*, by Richard Edwards, Jacob K. Friefeld, and Rebecca S. Wingo. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017. vi, 294 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, graphs, charts, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 hardcover.

Reviewer Paula M. Nelson is professor of history emeritus at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. She is the author of *After the West Was Won: Homesteaders and Town-Builders in Western South Dakota, 1900–1917* (1986) and *The Prairie Winnows Out Its Own: The West River Country of South Dakota in the Years of Depression and Dust* (1996).

In 1873 D. John Johnson, his wife, Kristina, and their two children left Dalarna, Sweden, and emigrated to Minnesota. After working awhile elsewhere, they took up a homestead in Winfield Township, Renville County, earned their patent, and, by 1888, owned 400 acres of land. John and Kristina were my great-grandparents. I am one of their many descendants, and we are all part of the 46 million or more Americans who today descend from homesteading families. The authors of *Homesteading the Plains* provide that surprisingly large 46 million figure (1). They also challenge many negative academic assumptions about the impact and importance of homesteading for American history, as-

sumptions that have limited further research into the subject. The American public holds a different, much more positive view of homesteading and homesteaders, one the authors, academics themselves, find to be closer to their own estimations of its role.

Why have homesteading studies languished? Authors Richard Edwards, Jacob K. Friefeld, and Rebecca S. Wingo spell out four “stylized facts” – that is, what everyone “knows” to be true – that result in a lack of scholarly interest in the subject: (1) homesteading was unimportant to the acquisition of farmland because most bought their land; (2) homesteaders often failed to earn their claims; (3) homesteaders and the homesteading process were corrupt as people lied and cheated to gain land; (4) and homesteading was a major cause of Native American land loss as homesteaders moved in and pushed tribes aside. After carefully analyzing each “fact” to determine its veracity, the authors find that none are indisputably true. Fred Shannon, a well-known “public land scholar” (14), is especially at fault for the “homesteaders failed” canard, for example. He assumed that claim abandonment meant failure, developed a statistical analysis of that data point, used it as gospel, and others then followed along. Interpretations of all of these issues froze in place. As often happens in academia in such cases, scholars lose interest, graduate advisers tell their doctoral students to look elsewhere for topics because “it’s been done,” and a likely field of study falls by the wayside.

*Homesteading the Plains* is a carefully done and interesting investigation of old interpretations. Step by step the authors dismantle old knowledge and replace it with new. In each case they provide detailed accountings of their reasoning and their calculations. Their study of fraud in homesteading is especially interesting, providing as it does stories of individuals and their actions. Their analysis of the “fact” of Indian dispossession concludes that government and booster actions in Dakota do demonstrate a link between homesteading and dispossession. Elsewhere the link is not established. The book also suggests new fields for investigation. The authors develop innovative ways to identify community leaders in homesteading neighborhoods. Homesteaders had to supply witnesses who would testify that they had followed the rules and fulfilled requirements to prove up on their lands. The same names appear as witnesses for homesteader after homesteader. These men were usually early arrivals who had earned the respect of their neighbors and who felt responsible for the success of the community. Women homesteaders receive considerable attention here as well. The authors assess residency, land sales, community links, the problems posed by widowhood, and the importance of neighborhood coopera-

tion for their survival and success. Mapping techniques help assess community formation, ethnic concentration, places of origin, and other information important for community success. The digitization of land records, which is bringing voluminous and often scattered documents together and making them accessible to everyone, the application of geographical tools such as GIS, and innovative techniques such as analysis of claim proof witnesses create a world of research possibilities.

*Homesteading the Plains* is an important book. The authors apply new tools and innovative techniques to an old, nearly moribund topic. A regeneration of the field should certainly follow. Anyone interested in the history of the Great Plains will benefit from this exciting research.

*They Sang for Norway: Olaf Oleson's Immigrant Choir*, by Ane-Charlotte Five Aarset. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2017. ix, 266 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95 paperback.

Reviewer Kristin Elmquist teaches history at Park Center Senior High School in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota. She earned an M.A. in cultural anthropology at New York University, specializing in immigration history.

*They Sang for Norway* tells the story of the author's ancestor Olaf Oleson, who emigrated from Norway in the 1870s and rose to prominence in Fort Dodge, Iowa, as a businessman and philanthropist and as the driving force behind Norwegian men's choirs in the United States. Oleson's life is a classic example of an immigrant success story. Trained as a gardener and botanist in Norway, after arriving in the United States he established a successful pharmacy in the growing city of Fort Dodge. He became one of the city's most successful early residents and shaped its development in lasting ways: he financed a department store and other real estate projects, supported a church, became politically active, and made many charitable contributions. At the same time, he devoted much of his energy and resources to his passion for music. He began by forming a small singing quartet. Later, he was instrumental in promoting Norwegian male choirs through supporting organizations and planning festivals throughout the United States and abroad where these choirs would perform. Music was the medium he used to promote the influence of Norwegians in the United States.

Oleson's story is one of many examples of immigrant success in the United States. But in the context of his family and political events in Norway it becomes exceptional. One of Olaf's brothers who stayed behind—Ola Five—was the founder of an armed militia rooted in Norwegian nationalism and liberal politics and devoted to independence from Sweden. He is the subject of a previous text by this author.