

## The Homestead Act

The Homestead Act was passed by Congress in 1862. This law allowed people to acquire up to 160 acres of unclaimed government land and establish new homes by living on the land for five years and making improvements such as buildings, water wells, or agricultural fields. After five years, with improvements made, they could patent, or receive title, to the land. Simply stated, if you moved out West and survived the environment, you earned “free land.” The bill came in the midst of the Civil War but the impacts would extend over the next 70 years. By 1934, when the Taylor Grazing Act effectively ended the various homesteading acts, millions of acres had been granted to individuals throughout the West.

Dry farming: the Hildebrand Farm House near Carpenter. J. E. Stimson Photo Collection, 1908. Wyoming State Archives, negative 2252.

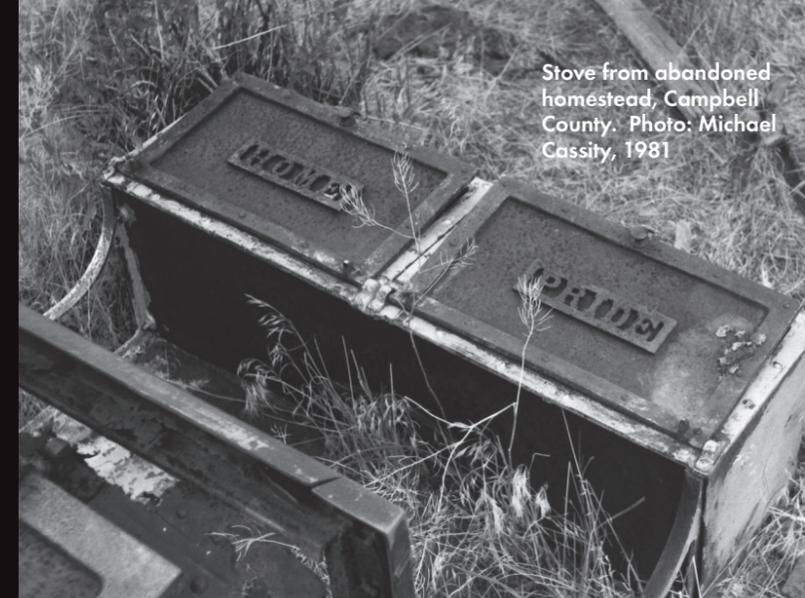


Homesteading was a challenging life. The desert, plains, basins, and mountains that were homesteaded by many often did not lend themselves to the small-scale farming efforts with which people from the East and Midwest were familiar. The government increased the acreage individual homesteaders could claim, but even this did not ensure their success. In the end, many homesteaders eventually abandoned their homesteads, leaving behind a rich archaeological record.

## Archaeology and Homesteading

Archaeology is uniquely suited to providing information about people who could not write for themselves or lacked the time or inclination to do so. Many homesteaders possessed rudimentary writing skills but left behind scant written records of their lives. What they did leave behind were physical reminders of labor and life on the Great Plains, basins, and mountains of Wyoming. Ceramic fragments, glass shards, and iron artifacts tell the tale of both lifestyles and foodways. The micro-botanical evidence left in abandoned homes and barns indicates what the settlers ate and how well or how poorly they adapted to the new environment they moved into.

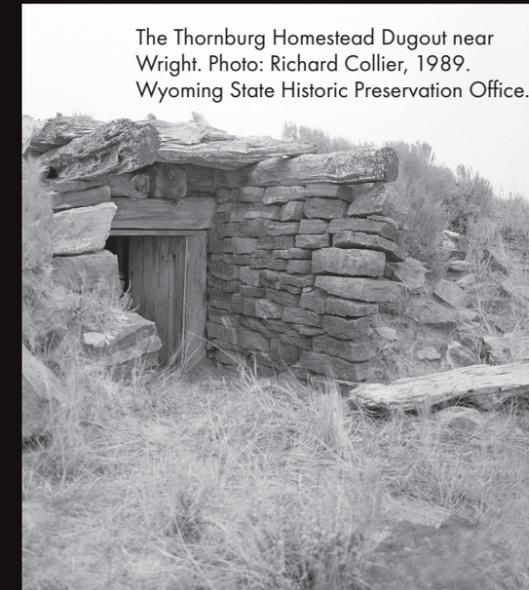
We know more about European and Asian immigrants who settled in the West through archeological study than from written records. What they ate varied, but the faunal (animal) and floral (plant) remains found in archaeological excavations show that many settlers relied on a mix of small wild game and domesticated sheep and cattle. While they grew crops like wheat and barley, they also learned to rely on locally available plants such as currants, rose hips, lambs quarter, buffalo berries, service berries, raspberries, and, where available, pine nuts. Adapting to a new land meant adjusting to what the land provided, and in the arid west plant and animal resources had to be understood and properly utilized to ensure success. The



Stove from abandoned homestead, Campbell County. Photo: Michael Cassity, 1981

archeological records suggest how well or poorly homesteaders understood the new environment in which they had settled.

Obviously, homesteaders built homes. The kinds of homes they built reflected more their new environment than those of the places they had left to move west. In Wyoming, places that contain timber sufficient for building homes and barns are uncommon. With little wood and little money, homesteaders faced constructing shelter without materials traditionally used in the East. Stone and earth served as the principle building materials. Adobe homes and earthen dugouts served as first homes. Where stone was available it could be used but most settlers spent

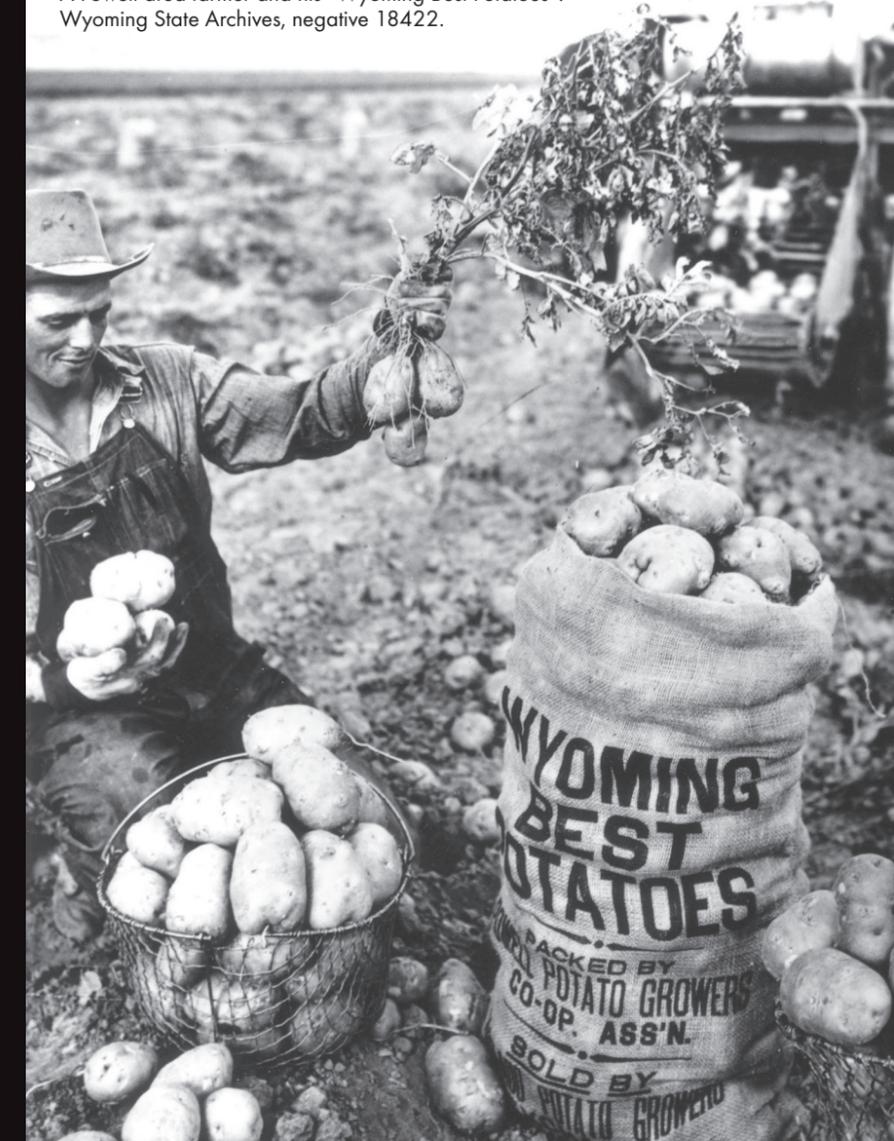


The Thornburg Homestead Dugout near Wright. Photo: Richard Collier, 1989. Wyoming State Historic Preservation Office.

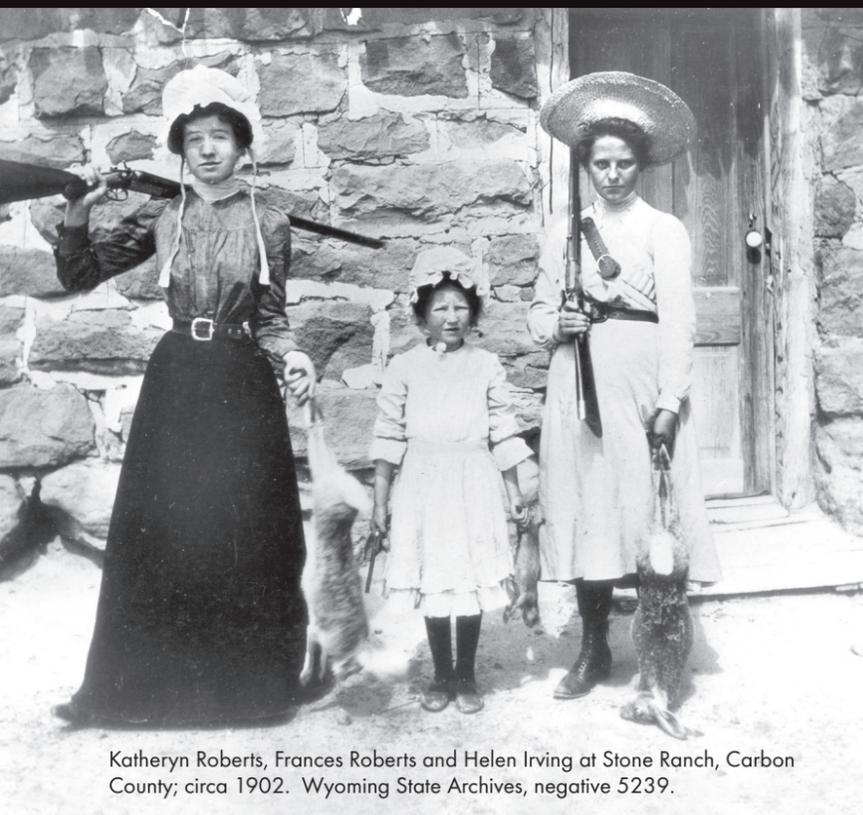
their first years in some form of earthen structure. These structures melted into the landscape when the builders left or moved into a more substantial home. The earliest homes of adobe or earth are now often identifiable only through methods employed by archaeologists.

Archaeologists in Wyoming have identified the footprints of these homes, the food ways of the inhabitants, their

A Powell area farmer and his “Wyoming Best Potatoes”. Wyoming State Archives, negative 18422.



lifestyles, and ethnicity. The settlement of the West was accomplished by people speaking diverse languages, and Wyoming attracted Chinese, Greek, Italian, Slavic, Irish, German and other immigrants. Irish homesteaders brought with them concepts of how to plot gardens and raise cattle. The archaeological record shows that their gardens mirrored those in Ireland—but what the Irish settler found was that only a few vegetables, like turnips and potatoes, did well in Wyoming. Cattle, however, thrived and based on the archaeological record we have learned that wild grasses made up at least some of the hay crop. Irish immigrants made due with little, and so did other homesteaders.



Katheryn Roberts, Frances Roberts and Helen Irving at Stone Ranch, Carbon County; circa 1902. Wyoming State Archives, negative 5239.

When surveying and excavating small homestead sites in Wyoming, one is struck by the contradictions. Although in sheer numbers, artifacts are often not numerous, there is considerable diversity in the assemblage. French saucers, German stines, Chinese tea cups, and English tableware reflect not only where the homesteaders came from, but they indicate personal preferences for items not available in Wyoming.

Tableware was not the only thing to reflect the desire to use items from the homeland. Food ways reflect the cultural preferences of the homesteader. Archaeological evidence (especially food remains such as animal bones and plant seeds) reflects what foods homesteaders ate. While it has sometimes been thought that homesteaders lived on a steady diet of deer and potatoes, rabbits and wild plants is closer to reality. The archaeological record indicates 19th-century homesteaders in Wyoming ate trout, rabbit, sage grouse, chicken, currants, raspberries, gooseberries, rose hips, lambs quarter, and a variety of wild plants. But they also imported sea bass, oysters, figs, dates, and an array of seasonings including pepper, salt, hot peppers, ginger, and cinnamon.

## The Osborn Homestead

*Jamie Schoen, Bridger-Teton National Forest Archaeologist*

The site featured on the 2012 Wyoming Archaeology Awareness Month poster was first settled for ranching by Robert L. Osborn, a former army scout, buffalo hunter, Civil War veteran, and tie hack who moved with his wife to the property in the early 1900s. The first county record of his location on site is a mortgage deed loan of \$400 with the Rock Springs National Bank, dated November 21, 1908. Having paid back the loan on May 17, 1909, Osborn patented the homestead on August 4, 1911. Sublette County records indicate that he took into partnership or interest Rock Springs banker John W. Hay and local rancher Abner Luman. Luman, from Cora, Wyoming,

the major rancher along the upper Green River, eventually assumed primary ownership of the property, apparently through foreclosure. Luman operated the property as summer pasture until the Depression. On April 4, 1931 he sold the ranch to the Green River Lake Lodge for \$4000 to meet financial obligations. The Green River Lake Lodge, a dude ranch already operating on the west side of the river was managed by W.N. Hobson. Stanley Decker, Jr., a Utah banker and partner with Hobson, eventually assumed complete ownership of the Green River Lake Lodge when Hobson was unable to meet his financial obligations during the Depression. Decker incorporated the lodge into the Gannett Peak (or G-P Bar) Ranch. On December 8, 1966, he sold the homestead back to the U.S. Government for \$44,891, at which time it reverted to Bridger-Teton National Forest administration.

For information about Wyoming  
Archaeology Awareness Month activities:  
[wyoshpo.state.wy.us/aamonth](http://wyoshpo.state.wy.us/aamonth)

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*Archaeology and Homesteads*

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