

Homesteading— The final dream is disappearing



It was summertime when Luke Lavender pulled up to the corner of what is now 14th and O Sts. Accompanied by his wife and four children, Lavender had just arrived from Dayton, Ohio, to settle in Nebraska.

In 1863 the site of Lavender's three-room log cabin bore little resemblance to the busy downtown intersection it is today.

Lavender was the first homesteader to arrive at

what four years later would become the city of Lincoln. A commemorative plaque at 14th and O Sts. is all that remains of the first Lincoln homesteader, who abandoned 19th century civilization for the unsettled West and a piece of land he could call his own.

Every so often the dream of leaving everything and striking out to claim your own isolated bit of land seems as distant as the days when Lavender first arrived in Nebraska.

Sitting in my fluorescent-lighted, climate-controlled office, it seemed likely that with the convenience of a WATS line I could contact some nebulous bureaucrat in some concrete-gray office in a modern magapolis half way across the country who could tell me where to find my land.

But a few touch tones later, I was dismayed to find that escape to an unclaimed piece of land I could call my own was unreachable. Homesteading has gone the way of the Wild West and Lavender's log cabin.

For all practical purposes, it doesn't exist anymore.

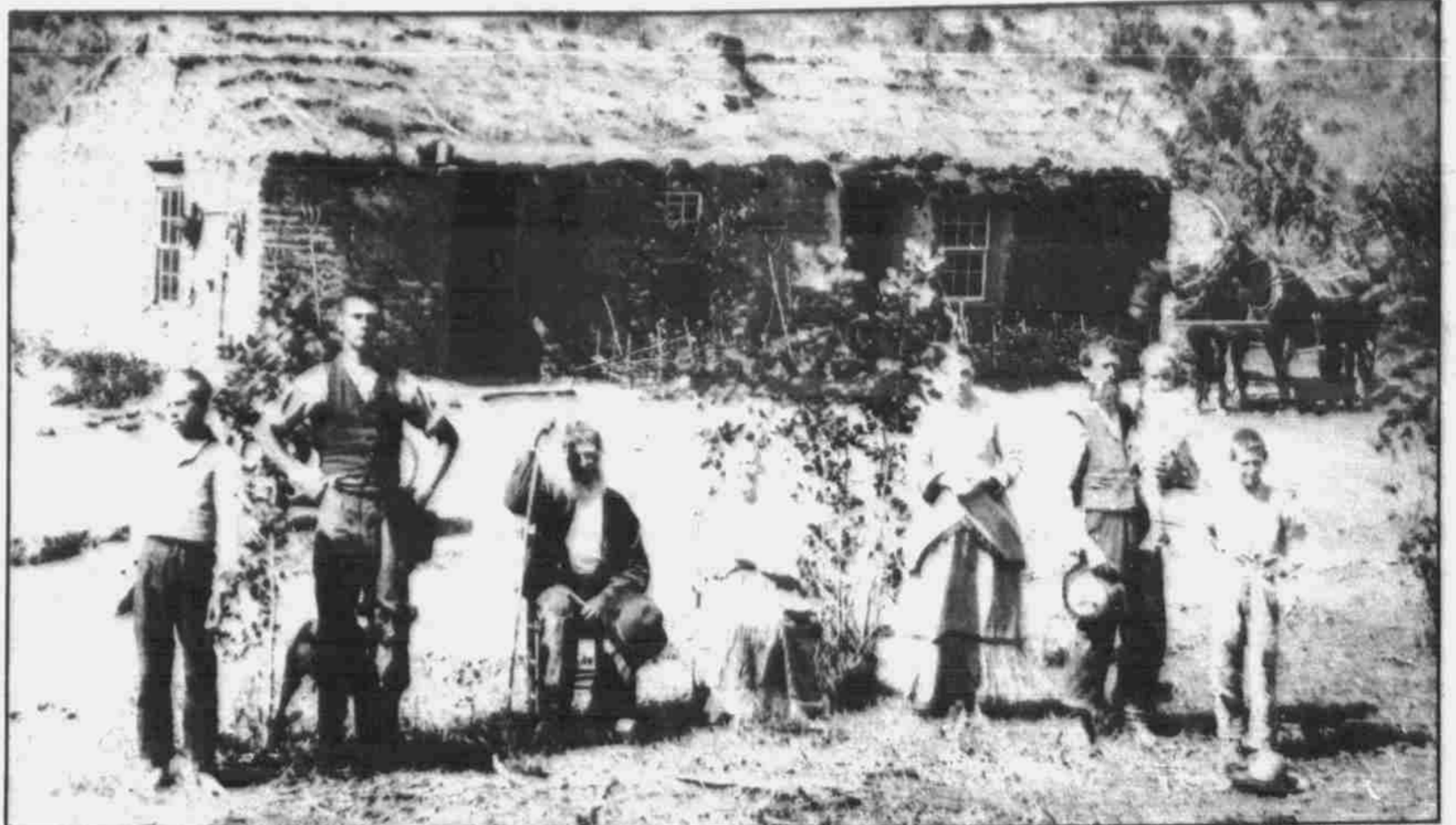
In fact, homesteading in the United States has been legally extinct for almost a year. According to Paul Herndon, a public information specialist with the U.S. Dept. of the Interior, "there has been no homesteading to amount to anything for the last 50 years."

"When Congress repealed the Homestead Act in 1976, we'd been out of good homesteading land for 50 years," Herndon said.

The Homestead Act, passed by Congress in 1862, allowed settlers to claim as much as 160 acres of free land, with the stipulation that they live on and cultivate that land for five years. Congress repealed the act in October, 1976, closing the last American frontier.

Only Alaska, which has a 10-year extension on the repeal remains open for homesteading. But don't pack up your tents and sleeping bags yet. Herndon explained that unsettled Alaskan land must first be divided between the state, the Federal government, and the native Alaskan tribes before being opened to homesteading.

"It means absolutely nothing to a person in Lincoln until we get the native claims settled," Herndon said. He added that it was his personal speculation that Alaska would never be opened for homesteading again.



Soloman D. Buther Collection/Nebraska State Historical Society

Some early Nebraskan homesteaders.

Despite the legal action, many Americans seem to think the western United States is still unexplored territory.

Haywood Meeks, also a public information specialist with the Dept. of the Interior, said his office receives calls regularly from citizens seeking homesteading information.

"Mostly they're city dwellers," Meeks said. "They think there's a mountain top somewhere where they can go."

Herndon added that most callers don't realize what homesteading entails.

"A lot of this is spur-of-the-moment interest. A small percentage would go if they could. Why do people think it's simple to become a farmer?" Herndon said.

Although Herndon admittedly thinks homesteading is a "romantic deception" to most Americans, there are a few options for the serious land seeker.

"There's a lot of scattered land," he said. "We can't get around very often to review it, so it's just better to sell it." Herndon added that the land is sold at the government's convenience rather than to meet public demand.

"Real estate, no matter where it is, is expensive. Most public land would cost more than comparable private land," Herndon said.

Canada is another option for homesteaders, but Herndon was quick to add that he was sure they wouldn't listen to anyone unless they gave up their American citizenship.

The Canadian Embassy in Washington, D.C., confirmed Herndon's prediction.

Canadian homesteading is strictly for that country's citizens, according to Mrs. M. Fabian, embassy librarian.

Fabian added that there is practically no land left in the country for homesteaders.

"I get at least ten questions a week on homesteading," Fabian said. She added that she does not handle homesteading claims because what little land is still available must be negotiated with the government in the respective province.

Homesteading is not as glorious as most people envision it, Herndon said.

"Men really had to work at it to become a successful homesteader," he said. "The guy who had to go out there and just make a living off the land had a hard time."

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