

Conflict, Community, and Covered Wagons:
A Reconsideration of the Role of History and Historiography on the Dakota Prairie

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Introduction and Analysis

In the summer of 1896, North Dakota farmer and Civil War veteran John Boren found himself alone in his sod home on the open prairie near the present township of Menoken. His wife, Mary Jane, had left their homestead earlier in the spring in order to visit family and friends in Illinois. The Boren's had done well on their farm over the last few years. Records show they were producing a higher yield of crops and more revenue with their land than that of their neighbors. John and Mary Jane had even made multiple additions onto their home over the several years they had lived in the new state of North Dakota. However, John Boren was alone on their homestead and on the prairie that summer. He felt the weight of this loneliness as he sat composing heartbreaking letters to his wife only a few yards away from their prosperous fields, as well as the graves of at least two of their children. "[My Dear wife, come home. I want to see you so bad I can't hardly wait till you come. You don't have any idea how lonesome I am without you]."¹

Life during the homesteading and settling period of North Dakota was one filled with internal and external hardships as shown by the experiences of John Boren. Many Europeans also felt a complex set of emotions when dealing with their new environment. German immigrants from Russia² understood these immense struggles of resettling on the plains through the phrase "Auswandern ist der halbe Tod" (Emigration is half a death). Both external and internal hardships took an immense toll on many of those Euro-Americans who choose to settle

¹ John Boren & Barbara Handy-Marchello, ed. "Love Sickness is the Worst Sickness" *North Dakota History* 75, no. 1 (2008): 13. Boren's words have been edited for spelling for the sake of clarity.

² German settlers from Russia have one of the more unique stories of any ethnic group to settle in North Dakota. While often called German-Russians, the name is a bit of a misnomer. Thousands of German immigrants settled in modern Ukraine and Russia along the Black Sea and Volga River during the 1700's during the rule of Catherine the Great and Peter I who granted their communities a certain level of autonomy. However, in the late 1800's, the Russian government began to roll back that autonomy and forced Russian religion, linguistics, and military service on the German settlers. Angered by these moves, thousands would settle in North and South Dakota with a culture distinct from Germans and Russians.

North Dakota's prairie. However, a dichotomy exists between the reality of these types of experiences found in the primary sources and the written interpretations of the period. Over the last century, many historians and authors have imagined the homesteading and settlement period of North Dakota through narrative lenses of romantic individualism, romanticization of the environment and time, and by framing interactions on the plains purely as antagonistic.

Together these long-lasting perspectives have neglected or sidelined certain realities of the early history of the state. These idealistic interpretations of the homesteading and settling period of North Dakota were not new when historians started to devote books and papers to the period in the 1920's and 1930's. In fact, this romanticization and the use of mythic imagery evolved from North Dakota's own attempt to write itself into the history books. Their propaganda became a powerful tool in marketing the new state to potential settlers in Europe and the Eastern United States. These narratives of natural exaggerations and "work and win" philosophies then morphed into the historical and cultural writings of the 1930's that have cast a lasting shadow on the popular understanding of the period.

Writing in that romantic tradition, historians like Walter Prescott Webb even claimed that men experienced adventure and a new found zest for life on the wide-open prairies, while women were simply too afraid and homesick to leave their cabins. These ideas expressed by many historians and writers evolved despite the experiences of hardship and struggle like that of John Boren.³ Various discrepancies like this one exist between the primary accounts of the time and the romanticized writing on the settling of North Dakota. For the last century, historians and other writers have also told the story of the settling of North Dakota as one of conflict. The historian Edwin Torrey wrote that true Euro-American settlement and "normal ways of living"

³ Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1931), 505-506. Boren's words have been edited for spelling for the sake of clarity.

were only achieved on the plains after “the Sioux west of the Missouri river were defeated at Wounded Knee.”⁴ However, the Norwegian immigrant Nels Arntzen recounted decades later how mutual trading networks between settlers and the Santee Dakota on the Sisseton Reservation ensured the survival of unprepared homesteaders through the brutal winters of the 1890s.⁵ Cooperation, not just conflict, shaped the settling of Dakota prairie. As historians and North Dakotans, how do we rethink our history in ways that reconsider this gap between the written stories of settling and the primary sources?

Since the centennial of the homesteading period on the Great Plains in the 1980s and 1990s, many historians have looked back at the historical interpretations of previous decades and noticed missing pieces in this complex puzzle. For example, H. Elaine Lindgren in her 1991 book *Land in Her Own Name: Women as Homesteaders in North Dakota* wrote to dispel the earlier historical myth that it was “only men who pressed on across the Great Plains” as some had believed. Lindgren’s research has shown that in some western North Dakota counties, single women made up to twenty percent of all land claims and played a significant role in the development of western North Dakota.⁶ In fact, Richard Edwards, Jacob Friefeld, and Rebecca Wingo in their 2017 book *Homesteading the Plains: Towards a New History* argue many of the stories and experiences of not only women, but also American Indian tribes and European immigrants had largely been sidelined up to that point. Many early writers moved away from those sources in favor of political or economic histories of the founding of states like North Dakota instead. The authors of *Homesteading the Plains* believed older historians arrived at “wrong or seriously misleading” conclusions based on limited data, research, and unspoken

⁴ Edwin Torrey, *Early Days in Dakota* (Glendale, California: Arthur H Clark Publishing Company, 1925), 154.

⁵ Nels Arntzen, “Trouble with an Irishman,” in *The Way It Was: Norwegian Homesteaders*, ed. Everett Albers & Tweton, Jerome (Fessenden: The Grass Roots Press, 1998), 14.

⁶ H. Elaine Lindgren, *Land in Her Own Name: Women Homesteaders in North Dakota* (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1991), xii-xiii.

biases and assumptions which had been carried on since the 1930s or even the earlier ideas put forth by North Dakota's own marketing.⁷ This new homesteading history has pushed for a broader and a deeper historical appreciation for the many voices of Dakota prairie.

This thesis hopes to further substantiate these broader revisionist perspectives by arguing that cooperation and community ought to be reconsidered in the history of North Dakota's settling period because much of the historical and literary writing on the subject has been influenced by romantic notions of idealism and individualism originating from early marketing and propaganda material. I will demonstrate this thesis by examining the themes of North Dakota's mass marketing, the influence this had on the work of historians and authors, and finally the disconnect this material has with the reality of the homesteading experiences seen through primary sources in three categories; hardship, conflict, and community. The material will focus on North Dakota during the timeframe of the "Second Dakota Boom" when migration and homesteading claims in the state quadrupled from 1888, just prior to statehood, to 1910.⁸

Mythicizing the Homesteading

The growth of North Dakota during the "Second Dakota Boom" was a result of mass migration of "Yankees" coming from the Eastern United States as well as immigration from a number of European countries. In order to boost those numbers and solidify the agricultural labor force that the new state was based around, those within the state government set out to market the region to as many prospective migrating farmers as possible. This marketing, essentially propaganda, which took the form of posters, advertisements, pamphlets, testimonials, books, etc. was supported by taxpayer dollars and carried out by the state's Department of Agriculture and

⁷ Richard Edwards & Jacob Friefeld & Rebecca Wingo, *Homesteading the Plains: Toward a New History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 26.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

Labor.⁹ All of the material heavily mythicized and romanticized the state's arable land and ease for which success and achievement could be reached.

This heavily-romanticizing propaganda eventually brought around 250,000 European immigrants during the "Second Dakota Boom" to a "new land of Canaan" as it was being called.¹⁰ North Dakota was described in similar terms across the board as more and more immigrants began to flow into the state. Metaphors of a mythic, promised land described North Dakota as one of the most comfortable and easy places to live for a farmer.¹¹ This image of an idyllic climate and landscape were coupled with the notions of romantic individualism which the state also produced. In the state-sponsored novel *Where Grit and Pluck Prosper*, a young man from Virginia wandered the nation until he found work as a cowboy in North Dakota and then eventually purchased his own farm within two years.¹² The message was clear. Anyone from anywhere could make it in North Dakota with pluck and hardwork. Nothing could stand in the way of progress and modern civilization in this "new empire in the making." as it was being advertised.¹³

The impact of this mass marketing campaign can not be understated. When North Dakota became a state in 1889, 30 million acres of arable land were lying idle, not contributing to the economic development of the new state.¹⁴ During the "Second Dakota Boom" around 250,000 immigrants were drawn into the state. This amounted to 50,000 more than were expected to be needed in order to farm the millions of available acres.¹⁵ Promises ran high in many of these advertisements. In 1902, the *Twentieth Century Farmer* declared that year's harvest would net

⁹ Warren Henke, "Imagery, Immigration, and the Myth of North Dakota" *North Dakota History* 38 no. 4 (1971): 414.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 428.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 435.

¹² *Ibid.*, 437-438.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 439.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 417.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 428.

more “gold... than has ever been coined by all the mints of the United States, England, Germany, and France in any single year.”¹⁶ These mass propaganda and marketing plans brought thousands of agricultural laborers and families to North Dakota under the mythic pretenses of natural splendor and the ease for which one could succeed on the plains. This wave of immigration to the new state was “no doubt due, in large measure, to the advertising of our state...” according to Governor John Burke as he addressed the state legislation in 1907.

These ideas would be the birthplaces for the romantic tradition in prairie literature and would eventually continue into the work of early historians of the 20th century. The image of the lone frontiersman and his family alone in a sod house has typified the period. On the campus of the University of Mary, for example, there is a monument to this idea. Behind the Gary Tharaldson School of Business there is a granite slab with an etching of a solitary frontiersman standing firm with a smokey city to his back, an axe in his hand, and a fur cap on his head. Carved just below the pioneer are the words “The Vanishing American.” This scene by artist Vaughn Shoemaker paints the romantic life of a settler that North Dakota pushed in the 1890’s and 1900’s in order to bring in European immigrants to farm the state’s immense prairies. Early historical writing on the period would also back up this simplified view of homesteading for those that traveled far from North Dakota. Historian Edwin Torrey wrote in 1931 that settling and farming in North Dakota was actually a “far simpler process” for immigrants who mythically overcame obstacles on the prairie.¹⁷

This image is also reflected in great literary works like Willa Cather’s *O Pioneers* (1913), O.E. Rolvaag’s *Giants in the Earth* (1927), and Laura Ingalls Wilder’s hit book *Little House on the Prairie* (1935). These popular stories often simplified the many struggles homesteaders faced

¹⁶ Jerome Tweton, “The Golden Age of Agriculture: 1897-1917” *North Dakota History* 37, no. 1 (1970) 46.

¹⁷ Torrey, *Early Days in Dakota*, 12.

by reducing them to obstacles that could be overcome with a can-do attitude and determination. These authors who had lived through the period and were writing about it decades after often used many of the same lenses and devices that had been employed by the state of North Dakota to induce immigration. The protagonists of Rolvaag's and Wilder's works can best be described as American mythic "proto-farmers." These characters were able to find success in the same ways that the propaganda had described.¹⁸ Rolvaag's main character Per Hansa, a Norwegian immigrant, is constantly able to out-work and out-think any obstacle the plot sets before him. These books and Glendon Swarthout's *Homesman* (1988) have also stressed the view of homesteading women as homesick, weepy, and as people not cut out for the rigors of prairie life. Views of the issue of mental health while homesteading have largely been framed as an issue exclusive to the feminine inhabitants of North Dakota by both historical and literary circles. While Rolvaag's father character, Per Hansa, is strong-willed and adventurous, his wife Beret is distraught, weepy, and depressed as the natural environment takes a toll on her sanity increasingly throughout the book.

An overemphasis on women being too weak for homesteading and men being the ones who turned North Dakota into an agricultural powerhouse are also prevalent throughout the historical literature. In the introduction to his collection of edited interviews, historian Everett Albers described the hardships of settling on the prairies only with examples of women struggling to cope in their new environment and brings forth no first-hand accounts of the same struggles men also endured. While women certainly struggled on the plains, Albers gives the perception that the feminine inhabitants were the real victims of homesteading.¹⁹ Perhaps the worst

¹⁸ Karen Hansen, *Encounter on the Great Plains: Scandinavian Settlers and the Dispossession of Dakota Indians, 1890-1930*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 76.

¹⁹ Everett Albers, "Reading Between the Lines" in *The Way It Was: The SodBusters*, ed. Everett Albers & Tweton, Jerome (Fessenden: The Grass Roots Press, 1998), viii-ix.

neglect of women in the written historical record of homesteading comes from Walter Prescott Webb in his 1931 book *The Great Plains*. This book devoted two pages of his nearly 600-page tome to the question of women on the frontier. His answer to the question of women's experiences was that while men experienced adventure and zest for life, women had to contend with fear, distrust, and an absence of the high society they may have once had in the East.²⁰

Another popular college text claimed that the mental and physical hardships of settling the West were "starkly revealed in the lives of pioneer women."²¹ Once again reiterating the idea that women's mental health was exclusively vulnerable on the plains when compared to the male inhabitants who endured the hardships. It seems that the historic and literary writing on the plains had learned many of the same lessons from the state-sponsored marketing campaigns which built up a romantic vision of male homesteading and that work would overcome any of the minor obstacles found in North Dakota. Contemporaries of the early writers and historians even pointed this out at the time. Archival letters have shown Rolvaag's colleague from St. Olaf's College, Clarence Clausen, suggested changing the plot of *Giants in the Earth* to better reflect the realities of the homesteading experiences he endured instead of Rolvaag's deceptive mythic portrait.²²

Reconsidering External and Environmental Hardship

Despite these early historical and literary claims of an Eden on the Missouri and a "land flowing with milk and honey", many of the primary sources tell a different story.²³ Life during the homesteading and settling period of North Dakota was not an easy one. The climate, landscape, and subsequent isolation took a toll on all that settled the prairies regardless of national origin or gender. These external hardships inherent to the agricultural life many

²⁰ Webb, *The Great Plains*, 505-506.

²¹ Sara Brooks Sunberg, "'Picturing the Past': Farm Women on the Frontier Grasslands, 1850—1900." *Great Plains Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (2010): 203.

²² Hansen, *Encounter on the Great Plains*, 76.

²³ Henke, "Imagery, Immigration, and the Myth of North Dakota", 428 & 435.

Euro-American settlers had chosen eventually morphed into severe internal stressors that would compound the privations of the plains.

Those who would try to eventually stake out North Dakota for agriculture would come to find mother nature as one of their main opponents despite marketing claims of “a land flowing with milk and honey.”²⁴ In fact, the region had largely been considered the “Great American Desert” for decades prior to statehood. North Dakota was still seen as land to be passed over to get to more lucrative places even in the 1880’s. Passing between Fargo and Bismarck in 1881, the settler Lucy Clark Allen remarked that the area was desolate, dreary and “would not amount to much as farming land” as they crossed the region in covered wagons.²⁵

To begin, winters could be, and often were, deadly. The 1888 “Children’s Blizzard” killed around 230 people and thousands of head of livestock in the span of a week.²⁶ The piercing cold and feet of snow that the prairies received each year were blindly ignored in most of North Dakota’s advertising materials despite the important role they played in the lives of thousands. Swiss immigrant Agatha Jerel Arms remembered that spring was often the time to unearth and unthaw both the human and animal casualties of the months of snow and ice.²⁷ The summer months brought little relief as drought and prairie fires became commonplace for a number of years. Fires had destroyed a number of previous owner’s lands and crops before Enid Bern’s family lost their own small house and dozens of miles of farmland to a prairie fire in 1910.²⁸

Despite claims that hard work and determination would overcome these hurdles to settlement, agricultural development stumbled and dragged on for many immigrants attempting

²⁴ Ibid., 435.

²⁵ Lucy Clark Allen, “Minnesota to Montana, 1881,” in *Covered Wagon Women: Diaries and Letters from the Western Trails 1875-1883*, ed. Kenneth Holmes (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 145.

²⁶ David Laskin, *The Children’s Blizzard* (New York City: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004), 13.

²⁷ Agatha Jerel Arms, “From Switzerland to Dakota,” in *The Way It Was: Sodbusters*, ed. Everett Albers & Tweton, Jerome (Fessenden: The Grass Roots Press, 1996), 3.

²⁸ Enid Bern, “The Enchanted Years on the Prairie,” *North Dakota History* 40, no. 4 (1973): 12 & 17.

to find a new life in North Dakota. The Scandanavian Amble family first broke ground on their Walsh County homestead in 1890, but were not able to harvest a financially beneficial crop until 1905 after years of fires, frosts, and gophers wiping out harvest after harvest.²⁹ North Dakota farmers were at the mercy of mother nature on the plains more so than their own determination, pluck, and boldness despite the tales they had been told which brought them to the plains.

This utter reliance on nature and weather for economic survival created a fragile atmosphere for settlers in North Dakota. One hard summer or winter could take a tremendous toll financially and spiritually as debt from poor harvests and bodies from natural disasters often stacked on top of each other. During the worst droughts in the 1890s, no rainfall meant that crops and grass for grazing did not grow. Thus animals and profits began to die off for many homesteaders across the region. The German-Russian immigrants who settled south of Bismarck and Jamestown in places like McIntosh County remembered having to walk to those larger towns in an attempt to find any work they could in order to make some money after their own harvests had failed because of drought.³⁰

Recent sociological and psychological research in modern rural settings have shown that unstable and fragile economies, like those in homesteading North Dakota when there was little protection from mother nature, tend to put immense pressure on the mental wellbeing of those involved.³¹ The isolation and long miles that separated people in modern rural American have shown the difficulty of providing services for medical and educational needs as well as communal and developmental assistance. Historically, nationwide economic downturns have also first been felt in rural areas as crops and communities at the mercy of so many different

²⁹ Hans and Betsy Amble, "When a Norwegian Marries a Swede," in *The Way It Was: Sodbusters*, ed. Everett Albers & Tweton, Jerome (Fessenden: The Grass Roots Press, 1996), 8.

³⁰ Gordon L. Iseminger, "C.C. Becker: McIntosh County German-Russian Pioneer" *North Dakota History* 50, no. 3 (1983): 8.

³¹ James Ciarlo and Pearlanne T. Zelarney, "Focusing on "Frontier": Isolated Rural America" *Journal of the Washington Academy of Sciences* 86, no. 3 (2000): 7.

factors fail to provide.³² While little research has been done on these trends during the “Second Dakota Boom”, a comparison is apt in providing some of the background in the experiences of those who settled the state. The stress that the isolation, climate, and economic fragility of life in North Dakota put on these early settlers should not be understated.

Even when North Dakota success stories were found and tested by the state’s marketing and press, everything was still very much in the hands of the fragile agricultural economy governing the lives of thousands. *The Warwick Weekly Sentinel* praised the story of the Swedish immigrant family of Grant S. Berg who had recently arrived in North Dakota after winning a land grant lottery for a plot near Warwick on the shores of Devils Lake. Within a year of settling on their land the family was even able to produce a successful harvest.³³ Similar stories were told through North Dakota’s mass marketing campaigns and stories like that of the Berg’s were read from Chicago to Odessa in an attempt to bring in more immigration and highlight the “work and win” attitudes of many.³⁴ However, what most of these stories neglected to tell was the immense external and internal hardships these success stories were associated with. The Bergs had lost three children while in North Dakota and Grant Berg constantly pined to go back to either Illinois or Sweden which, as his daughter remembered, led him to alcoholism later in life. During the economic and agricultural downturn after World War I, Grant Berg succumbed to massive amounts of debt and the actions of unscrupulous bankers to keep his family afloat. Berg died in 1929 at the age of 58. His sons struggled to bring together \$10 to bury their father, despite the family owning hundreds of acres of land.³⁵ Hardships such as these were a common event in the

³² Ibid., 8.

³³ Hansen, *Encounter on the Great Plains*, 221.

³⁴ Henke, “Imagery, Immigration, and the Myth of North Dakota” *North Dakota History*, 422.

³⁵ Hansen, *Encounter on the Great Plains*, 221-222.

lives of many settling rural North Dakota, but has rarely shown its importance in either the romanticized marketing of the time nor the historical writing of the period.

Reconsidering Internal Hardships

These external hardships based on the land and climate of North Dakota would eventually also give way to fear, loneliness, and homesickness on the plains. Whether these internal struggles manifested on the plains or not, the immense external factors of struggling compounded them daily. These internal struggles were not gender specific and affected all types of people on the plains. In some cases these facts stand in direct opposition to what has been seen in the popular and historical writings on the period.

Problems arising from these issues and general mental health are seen in almost every first-hand account of the period. Homesickness, in particular, is an issue noted by almost all European immigrants and many who travelled from the Eastern United States regardless of gender. The Germans from Russia who settled in North Dakota in the 1890s and 1900s expressed this feeling in the saying “Emigration is half a death” or the common folk song “To the Homeland I Would Like to Go”.³⁶ Expressing very similar attitudes, Menoken Farmer and Civil War veteran John Boren wrote to his wife in 1896, “[If you was to die tonight...I would want to die. If you was to write to me to tell me you was not coming back I would not stay here twenty four hours. Love Sickness is the worst sickness that I ever had. I can’t sleep, never eat, never nothing else but think of you all the time.]”³⁷ Fears and doubts loomed over many settlers in the state despite the historical claims that men experienced adventure on the prairies, while only women dealt with these issues of mental wellbeing.³⁸ When asked if he ever questioned the

³⁶ Iseminger, “C.C. Becker,” *North Dakota History*, 5 & 7.

³⁷ Boren & Handy-Marchello, “Love Sickness is the Worst Sickness.” *North Dakota History*, 13.

³⁸ Webb, *The Great Plains*, 505-506.

decision to relocate to the United States, The German-Russian immigrant C.C. Becker bleakly recounted, “Ach Gott, yes, I wish I was back in Russia.”³⁹

Not only were Yankees and immigrants facing these internal battles with loneliness and homesickness, many also faced outward expressions of these issues. Lillian Jensen, a first-generation American born in 1902, remembered that her father had stated many of those who homesteaded alongside their family were now “either in an insane asylum or dead.”⁴⁰ In fact, looking at rates of institutionalization among those homesteading in the 1880’s through to the 1910’s can disprove many of the cultural and early historic myths of weak homesteading women. Within North Dakota itself, institutional rates among the general public were not higher than other parts of the nation. However, immigrants made up a larger percentage of those who were hospitalized for mental illness.⁴¹ Another empirical study done in 1932 found that (accounting for age and percentage of population) male Norwegian immigrants in Minnesota during the settling period were more likely to be institutionalized for mental instability than women of any group.⁴² The historian Barbara Handy-Marchello surmised that immigrants brought with them heightened distress related to cultural isolation. She and others have also argued that those in North Dakota particularly were affected by the disappointment of the promises of good, free land.⁴³ The mythic marketing which North Dakota had put tens of thousands of dollars into had, actually in turn, created frustration and heightened hardship once those immigrants who had been told of milk and honey arrived and stayed.

³⁹ Iseminger, “C.C. Becker” *North Dakota History*, 7-8.

⁴⁰ Hansen, *Encounter on the Great Plains*, 74.

⁴¹ Barbara Handy-Marchello, *Women on the Northern Plains: Gender and Settlement on the Homestead Frontier* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2005), 79.

⁴² Ornulv Odegaard, “Emmigration and Insanity: A study of mental disease among the Norwegian-born Population of Minnesota,” *Acta Psychiatrica et Neurologica* (1932): 11-190.

⁴³ Handy-Marchello, *Women on the Northern Plains*, 81.

Reconsidering Euro-Native Cooperation

The hardships settlers faced, both internal and external, were largely ignored by early writers and historians. However, as will be shown, these struggles played an important role in the building of cooperation among vastly different people groups on the plains. This cooperation and the communities that then resulted have also been largely ignored by the earliest literary and historical writing. Instead they would focus on the conflictual aspects of the settling period as different Euro-American cultures interacted with native American Indian populations as well as other European settlers.

One of the main ways this conflict was shown was through Euro-American dominance over the various tribes that called North Dakota home for centuries. In fact, Dakota Territory had been an epicenter for some of the most hostile interactions between the US government and American Indian tribes during the 1860's and 1870's prior to large scale Euro-American settlement. The names George Custer⁴⁴ and Sitting Bull⁴⁵ still loom over the popular understanding of the area for many people. Many historical and popular works have sidelined the story of native American Indians or failed to connect their stories to the larger narrative of the West after the events of the South Dakota Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890. Edwin Torrey, for example, claimed in his 1925 book *Early Days in Dakota* that some government intervention should have been set up to preserve the buffalo on government reservations, because the

⁴⁴ George Armstrong Custer (1839-1876) was a US Army officer and cavalry commander during the US Civil War and during later campaigns against American Indian groups. He is most famous for his "Last Stand" at the Battle of the Little BigHorn in June 1876 which saw half of the 7th Cavalry Regiment including himself perish. His death sparked widespread retribution and forcible relocation of Lakota and Cheyenne people to government reservations.

⁴⁵ Sitting Bull (1831-1890) was a Hunkpapa Lakota leader known for his resistance to US settlement of the Great Plains region. He is best known for his leadership during the Battle of the Little BigHorn which has cemented him as an icon of American Indian resistance and autonomy. He was killed in 1890 on the Standing Rock Reservation due to suspicion of his connection with the Ghost Dance movement.

reservation system had “worked out for his brother, the Indian.”⁴⁶ Views like these effectively regulated American Indian people groups to the historical sidelines of the story of North Dakota.

Early histories of the plains tended to see the native populations of the region as a force of nature to be tamed by the incoming Euro-American settlers than as actual people who played their own important roles in the story. In part, this reflected the original fears of some Euro-Americans settlers from the period. Many people new to the state settled within a few day’s ride of the Standing Rock, Spirit Lake, Sisseton, Turtle Mountain, or Fort Berthold Reservations and many brought with them exaggerated fears of the danger for upcoming Indian wars.

Many of these fears came from cultural misunderstandings as Euro-Americans interacted more and more with native tribal nations of North Dakota for the first time. Norwegian and German immigrants near the Spirit Lake Reservation often noted how Dakota people visited homes and farms unannounced and expected gifts. They remembered this phenomenon as “Dakotas did not knock”.⁴⁷ However, traditional Dakota heritage did not see these personal barriers and walls between families and groups of people, but also expected reciprocal gift giving as important parts of the social structure. These facts were normally lost on new European or Yankee settlers to the region who continued to fear native peoples out of these misunderstandings. The homesteader Lucy Clark Allen, coming close to her final destination in 1881, remarked that “the people around here are anxious for us to settle here but there are too menny [sic] Indians for me.”⁴⁸ This type of anxiety surrounding settler interactions with American Indian groups can be seen throughout first-hand accounts of the period. One

⁴⁶ Torrey, *Early Days in Dakota*, 116-120.

⁴⁷ Hansen, *Encounter on the Great Plains*, 29-30.

⁴⁸ Allen, “Minnesota to Montana, 1881,” in *Covered Wagon Women*, 160.

Norwegian settler remembered having an immense fear of being attacked and scalped near the Spirit Lake Reservation as a young boy in the early 1900s.⁴⁹

Thus, historians such as Barns who had lived through the homesteading process lumped “the Indian, the outlaw, the horse thief, the gunman, the murderer,... and depraved denizen” together in their barbarity before they could be “restrained” by the order and law of the settlers of Nebraska in his 1930 book *The Sod House*.⁵⁰ Edwin Torrey perhaps summed up this conflictual historiography best when he wrote that “when the Sioux west of the Missouri river were defeated at Wounded Knee” white settlers could finally “return to normal ways of living.”⁵¹ To many of these writers and historians, American Indian tribes and peoples played no role in the development of the state of North Dakota and the survival of Euro-American settlers. Many of these tribes were thought of only as an obstacle to be overcome by North Dakotans.

Of course, the history of the tribal peoples of North Dakota did not stop in 1890 at Wounded Knee like Edwin Torrey may have surmised. Important interactions between native and Euro-American peoples continued into the 20th century and should not just be viewed through the lens of defeat and fear. Relationships and a need for survival would belay many of the fears amongst settlers and allow for a meeting and diffusion across these wide cultural lines. After all, North Dakota had been the site of some of the first positive interactions between the federal government and native peoples during the 1804 expedition led by Lewis and Clark.⁵²

Small interactions between individuals or family groups were quite common as waves of immigrants flooded into the state during the “Second Dakota Boom”. The settler Lucy Clark

⁴⁹ Hansen, *Encounter on the Great Plains*, 49-50.

⁵⁰ Cass Barns, *The Sod House* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1930), 7.

⁵¹ Torrey, *Early Days in Dakota*, 154.

⁵² The Corps of Discovery Expedition led by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark was one of the first attempts by the US Government under Thomas Jefferson to find an inland water route to the Pacific Ocean. Along the way, the Corps interacted with dozens of tribal people groups. Most notably was their 1804 winter stay with the Mandan Nation in North Dakota. Through the Mandans’ assistance as well as that of Sakagawea, the Lewis and Clark Expedition was able to survive that brutal winter at Fort Mandan and continue on to the Pacific.

Allen, once fearful of nearby Indians, even traded for bison meat with groups of Crow people when they ran low on supplies as they headed west.⁵³ The Norwegian immigrant Nels Arntzen recounted how mutual trading networks for wood and food with Santee Dakota people on the Sisseton Reservation ensured the homesteaders' survival through their first brutal winters.⁵⁴ While fears and racism may have still existed on the plains during this time, survival led to cooperation on the plains between groups which have not been reflected in the writings on the period.

Even the US government and US Army, which has long been seen as an oppressive force in Native history, had the occasional positive interaction which strengthened certain relationships on the Dakota prairies during the reservation period. Private Edward D. Barker among other soldiers noted that Fort Buford and Fort Yates became constant places of trade and interaction between native peoples and members of the fort's garrison as soldiers and Lakota people traded to make life more bearable on the plains.⁵⁵ Several army units stationed in North Dakota were also instrumental in the protection of reservations from raiding by other indigenous groups in Canada.

Prior to the Canadian border being fully surveyed, hundreds of Lakota people fled north into Canada with Sitting Bull in the aftermath of the Battle of the Little Big Horn in 1876. Catholic priests worked as emissaries between the United States government, Sitting Bull's band, and those still on the Great Sioux Reservation⁵⁶ as they tried to reach a settlement for peace and issues on the reservations. According to the account of Amos Two Bulls, the help they received

⁵³ Allen, "Minnesota to Montana, 1881," in *Covered Wagon Women*, 155.

⁵⁴ Arntzen, "Trouble with an Irishman," in *The Way It Was*, 14.

⁵⁵ Douglas C. McChristian, "Regular Army O: Soldiering on the Western Frontier 1865-1891" (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017), 498 & 504.

⁵⁶ The Great Sioux Reservation would later be broken up into several smaller reservations. Many of Sitting Bull's Lakota would eventually settle on what would become the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation along the North Dakota-South Dakota border.

from clergy when moving back across the Canadian border spurred many Lakota and Dakota people to convert to Catholicism.⁵⁷ Contact and cooperation between Euro-American settlers and the Native Indian inhabitants was a common occurrence on the Dakota plains, despite the perceptions of some historical narratives.

Larger-scale cooperation and interaction between Native populations and Euro-American settlers also occurred in more recognizable ways on the plains. Historian Karen Hansen has been one of the only writers to take an in-depth look at the relationships between Euro-Americans and Native Dakota peoples in her 2013 book *Encounter on the Great Plains: Scandinavian Settlers and the Dispossession of Dakota Indians, 1890-1930*. As the amount of open, arable farmland began to shrink by the turn of the century in the state, Hansen explored how the Spirit Lake Reservation became a complicated mixing place for Dakota and Norwegian people as “extra” reservation land was sold or allotted to incoming settlers.⁵⁸ On and around that reservation, Europeans and native American Indian would interact and cooperate in ways that have not been reflected in any of the historical or literary writings on the settling period.

These interactions would largely be integrated into the beginnings of communal and structural formations as lines between Europeans, namely Scandinavians, began to mesh with the Dakota people. As both public and religious boarding schools began to be established around the Spirit Lake Reservation, Dakota and immigrant children found common ground. In these largely racially-integrated schools, both groups used their own cultures and languages taught at home to reinforce their own cultural heritage which they felt were threatened by the American system and the English language.⁵⁹ Throughout the years of interaction and geographical

⁵⁷ Amos Two Bulls, “Fighting Custer, Fleeing to Canada,” in *The Way It Was: Native People*, ed. Everett Albers & Tweton, Jerome (Fessenden: The Grass Roots Press, 2002), 79.

⁵⁸ All of the reservations in North Dakota shrunk significantly during the decades surrounding the turn of the century due to laws like the Dawes Act (1887), as well as the sale of unallotted reservation lands to new settlers. Hansen’s work specifically puts a lens on the Spirit Lake Reservation on the shores of Devils Lake.

⁵⁹ Hansen, *Encounter on the Great Plains*, 116-117.

closeness, inter-marriage also began to increase among native Dakotas and Europeans. While not found in incredibly high numbers, Karen Hansen argues that these inter-marriages still led to increased intimacy among these two diverse groups as they, along with thousands of others in the state, began to overcome fear and misunderstanding. These facts of homesteading cooperation have not been promoted in the earliest conflictual-telling of the settling story of North Dakota.⁶⁰

Reconsidering Euro-American Cooperation

The early historical writing on the settlement of the plains by European settlers has also largely been void of any signs of cooperation and community across those immigrant groups. The scholarship which surfaced in the wake of the ending of the settling period has put emphasis on the conflict between European immigrants on ethnic or economic bases. Author Edna LaMoore Waldo, sister of the famed Western writer Louis L'Amour, claimed that, “[North] Dakotans of the period did not know each other, and not knowing, disliked” one other. For her, she saw the immense distance and lack of communal services on the plains as driving the wedge “further and further” between people to a point where they were helpless to their situation in turning to animosity.⁶¹ She also emphasized certain amounts of violence between settlers. As available homesteading land became more and more scarce in the arable part of the state, Waldo claims that certain settlers were willing to go to extremes including shooting squatters and forming posses to protect land claims. In order to fight pre-emptive squatters and instill a level of fear among new settlers into the state, Waldo also claims that lynchings and mob violence were “fairly prevalent at that time”.⁶² Cass Barns also looked at issues resulting from the melting pot that North Dakota had become during the settling and homesteading period. Using anecdotal

⁶⁰ Ibid., 147.

⁶¹ Edna LaMoore Waldo, *Dakota: An Informal Study of Territorial Days* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers, 1936), 411.

⁶² Ibid., 330-332.

evidence at best, he singled out the Irish settlers of the plains as being particularly pugnacious and ones who rarely worked well with other Euro-Americans homesteading on the plains.⁶³

While violence certainly occurred and criminality was present on the plains during the homesteading period, shootings and lynchings were nowhere near as prevalent during the “Second Dakota Boom” as some historians had claimed.⁶⁴ A study done by the Tuskegee Institute and the University of Missouri-Kansas City found that North Dakota only experienced 16 lynchings in their window of study from 1882 to 1968 although the last actually occurred in 1931. These numbers actually put North Dakota as the least likely state in the area to have a lynching or any other form of violence during the population boom from 1889 to 1910.⁶⁵

Waldo and Barns typify the views of some early historical writers who have either overemphasized the conflict between Euro-Americans due to isolation and competition or, who like Edwin Torrey, have largely glanced over the experience of Europeans specifically. Torrey’s own work, *Early Days in Dakota*, briefly mentions immigrants from across the ocean and actually states that their new experiences in North Dakota were a “far simpler process” than they had expected drawing from earlier romantic marketing ploys. Throughout his work, Torrey put his main emphasis on the American migrants who arrived from other states such as Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Iowa, etc. and their political impact in the area.⁶⁶ Prior to the 1980s and 1990s, very little had been written on the specific experience of European immigrants on the plains or the interactions that existed between the many different people groups that called North Dakota home. For years, Historians only gave lip service to the experiences of the thousands of

⁶³ Barns, *Sod House*, 187-191.

⁶⁴ Waldo, *Dakota*, 332.

⁶⁵ Douglas Linder. “Lynchings: By State and Race, 1882-1968”, University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law, 1995, <https://famous-trials.com/sheriffshipp/1083-lynchingsstate>.

⁶⁶ Torrey, *Early Days in Dakota*, 12.

Scandinavians, Germans, Russians, etc. in favor of the political story of the founding and shaping of the state by American-born migrants.

Despite these attitudes from the historical literature, cooperation was just as important and just as common among European immigrants and Yankee migrants as it was among Euro-Americans and their native American-Indian neighbors. It would also be this cooperation, which often crossed linguistic, ethnic, and religious lines which often separated people in Europe or American cities. Instead of conflict between settlers, this cooperation would be incredibly important for the survival on the plains as settlers faced the internal and external hardships which grew from their experiences in North Dakota.

As explored previously, isolation, fear, and stress was incredibly common among Euro-American settlers (especially immigrant males) as they wrestled with their new lives in North Dakota contrary to state marketing tall-tales, cultural literature, and the early history. These harsh realities of life on the plains often had to come to a breaking point just before real connections could be formed across cultural and ethnic lines. The immigrant Emelia Gripenotrog found herself so distraught and crying so much after the death of her new son that her husband refused to leave her alone in their now then house. This, of course, meant that little work was being done around their Wahpeton homestead. Their situation had found family tragedy turned into internal distress and economic fragility. The family was only able to get through the winter after their neighbors, immigrants from across Europe, came to their rescue. The Hoefs, Bohms, and Redemskys took turns as they pitched in to visit and provide comfort to Emelia and her husband, work their fields, tend to their animals, and finally donate a pig.⁶⁷ In order to help feed their communal and spiritual needs, the new inhabitants of North Dakota would take matters into

⁶⁷ Emelia Gripenotrog, "To Dakota- Against Her Will," in *The Way It Was: Sodbusters*, ed. Everett Albers & Tweton, Jerome (Fessenden: The Grass Roots Press, 1996), 41-42.

their own hands. Eva Bigelow Ely from Rugby, North Dakota recounted how rural, diverse neighbors “sitting up” with each other during sickness created lifelong bonds. Despite certain ethnic barriers, families were able to overcome sickness, birthing, and deaths because those around them, often complete strangers, were willing to pitch in and keep families fed, babies nursed, and fields taken care of.⁶⁸

Many of these original positive interactions not only crossed ethnic lines, but religious and linguistic ones as well. As the “Second Dakota Boom” went into full swing, a serious shortage of religious figures and churches that reflected the diverse needs of the settlers were noted by many. The Lutheran Swiss immigrant Ludger Berard was married in 1887 by the nearest Catholic priest who had to travel all the way from Emerson, Manitoba once every two weeks to preach to the communities near Pembina regardless of their Christian denomination.⁶⁹ However, even when religions did align there could still be stumbling blocks that could have prevented cooperative relationships from forming. While lost on the prairie looking for his family’s homestead claim in 1889, Franz Baumgartner sought help from one of his new neighbors. Baumgartner spoke German and Russian while his neighbor kept trying to communicate with him in English. The problem was eventually solved with a mutual Catholic understanding; directions written in Latin which both men could understand. Both families apparently continued to communicate in the ancient written language for at least a few more years until English became more prevalent.⁷⁰

These language barriers could often have hilarious results such as when the German speaking Christian Maier tried to buy a rooster from an English immigrant woman. After

⁶⁸ Eva Bigelow Ely, “Rugby: A Shocking Place?” in *The Way It Was: The Townspeople*, ed. Everett Albers & Tweton, Jerome (Fessenden: The Grass Roots Press, 2004), 3.

⁶⁹ Ludger Berard, “The Quebec Love Birds,” in *The Way It Was: Sodbusters*, ed. Everett Albers & Tweton, Jerome (Fessenden: The Grass Roots Press, 1996), 11.

⁷⁰ Franz Baumgartner “Finding an International Language,” in *The Way It Was: Germans from Russia Settlers*, ed. Everett Albers & Tweton, Jerome (Fessenden: The Grass Roots Press, 1999), 1-2.

minutes of linguistic chaos, the message that Maier wanted a “chicken’s man” was finally understood after he stood on a rock flapping his “wings” and crowed for the English woman.⁷¹ When survival and success was on the line, it was these types of interactions, crossing ethnic, religious, and linguistic lines, that brought people closer together, not further away, on the North Dakota prairie.

Even if they did not know each other, they did not fear one another and actively sought cooperation and relationships that helped to deter the internal and external hardships of settling and homesteading. While popular culture and history has largely focused on the conflictual aspect of the native story and immigrant story in North Dakota, or ignored it out right, it seems that the prairies were more of a place of mutual understanding and relationships than past narratives have conveyed up to this point.

Reconsidering North Dakota’s Communal Structures and Origins

Just as internal and external hardships led to varied and complex forms of cooperation and interactions on the plains, those different examples of cooperation would be the building blocks for the beginning of the formation of communities and a common way of life within North Dakota. As Euro-Americans settlers and native American-Indians began to cooperate, they also began to set up the structures needed for further survival and flourishing on the plains.

As the state of North Dakota began to grow during the “Second Dakota Boom”, advertising and new marketing schemes were devised to reflect the state as it grew and built up more infrastructure in railroads and the few “urban” areas it possessed. By the end of the period being examined up until around 1913, more and more emphasis was being put on the ease of life which had been created around the success of the state’s agriculture. Advertisements claimed

⁷¹ Christian Maier “Not All Homestead Life was Drab and Humorless,” in *The Way It Was: Germans from Russia Settlers*, ed. Everett Albers & Tweton, Jerome (Fessenden: The Grass Roots Press, 1999), 67-68.

“Material grain” and agricultural abundance had allowed for new investments in schools, churches, parades, sports, and other amusements and relaxation.⁷² North Dakota’s marketing was telling interested people that agricultural splendor had built a base for community and success to flourish within the state in order to sell more people on the state.

However, it was not agricultural success and increased economic development that then allowed for North Dakotans to create a sense of community and common way of life. Instead the internal and external hardships of settling had given way to cooperation across various barriers as men and women coped with natural setbacks and the resulting issues of loneliness, depression, and homesickness prior to any success with farming. It was this cooperation and the closeness of the settlers of various backgrounds which tended to create the structural means of community, but also the shared way of life that was growing on the plains.

To begin, the flourishing agricultural Eden that had been marketed by the state government was simply a fantasy in many parts of the state until the middle of the 1900 decade. As previously shown, the unpredictability of North Dakota’s weather often meant that years of crops and harvests were not profitable. Drought, fires, frosts, and hail destroyed thousands of acres each year in North Dakota and devastated the livelihoods of settlers.⁷³ The Scandanavian Amble family remembered that their first harvests from 1888-1892 were complete disasters. Attempts were made to break more arable land on their property, but this only resulted in drought becoming more prevalent on their land. As stated earlier, the first profitable crop the Ambles were able to harvest did not come until 1905.⁷⁴

This trend could be seen throughout the state, as many European immigrants were not accustomed to the style of farming needed in producing acres of wheat on the vast prairies.

⁷² Henke, “Imagery, Immigration, and the Myth of North Dakota”, 412.

⁷³ Arms, “From Switzerland to Dakota,” in *The Way It Was: Sodbusters*, 3.

⁷⁴ Amble, “When a Norwegian Marries a Swede,” in *The Way It Was*, 8.

Instead, they often only knew how to produce potatoes in Ireland, how to subsistence farm in Norway's rocky soil or even Lebanon's coastlines. North Dakota's agriculture did not begin to truly take off until the turn of the century as more immigrants poured into the state. Prices and demand for agricultural goods in the US did not see a significant increase until 1902 as urban populations across the country began to skyrocket. Before this, North Dakota farmers stood a distinct disadvantage to get proper rates for their crops as they vied for pricing with less demand across the US and with other farmers in Europe.⁷⁵ As prices and demand increased throughout the 1900s, only then were North Dakota farmers able to achieve the agricultural Eden through soil and toil they had been promised years prior when they first arrived in the state.

Instead of individual determination and agricultural flourishing triumphing over adversity and then creating community, the reality of the primary sources show that communal success had existed prior to any agricultural flourishing. In fact, migration from Europe to the United States and North Dakota was largely a community affair to begin with. The period between 1888 and 1910 experienced North Dakota's second population boom and also the strongest growth in "chain migration" from Europe to the United States. This period saw waves of young men supporting families across the ocean, working families looking to relocate, and then entire communities immigrate to the United States largely recreating villages, congregations, and other institutions in both rural and urban settings across the United States but also in North Dakota. This trend can also be seen as modern immigrants from Asia and Central American come to the United States.⁷⁶ The prospects of immigration had also been a community discussion for many in Europe. When North Dakota's marketing pamphlets and other materials

⁷⁵ Tweten, "The Golden Age of Agriculture" *North Dakota History*, 53-54.

⁷⁶ John MacDonald and Leatrice D. MacDonald, "Chain Migration Ethnic Neighborhood Formation and Social Networks" *The Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (1964): 84-85.

had been dispersed in his German village in Russia, C.C. Becker recounted that the whole population had turned out to discuss the idea of immigrating to the United States.⁷⁷

Historian Jon Gjerde even examined how several villages in Norway were largely transplanted into several Minnesota and North Dakota counties during this time in his work *From Peasants to Farmers: The Migration from Balestrand, Norway to the Upper Middle West* (1985). From cultural practices, to street layouts, architecture, and power hierarchies within settlements, many facets of Norwegian life were recreated with unique American aspects in order to bring comfort and normalcy to the immigrants who found themselves in a vastly different environment.⁷⁸ Remarking on the importance of these connections to survival, one son of Norwegian immigrants remembered: “They figured they had to go somewheres where someone would know ‘em, or they’d probably starve to death.”⁷⁹

Many European immigrants and American migrants entering the plains settled miles apart from one another—even though in their previous lives they had known only known villages, towns or urban sprawls. Within a few short months of an area being settled, however, signs of intentionally organized communities such as churches and schools began to pop up around rural North Dakota in the 1890s and 1900s. The Rugby native Eva Bigelow Ely remembered how important cooperation among rural neighbors was in creating a sense of community among a diverse population in Rugby when disease came through the area. By her estimation, these base levels of cooperation among these settlers was an important “medium that developed democracy” on the plains. This “democracy” in Rugby manifested in a joint school house/ church building which held multi-denominational services for Methodists, Presbyterians,

⁷⁷ Iseminger, “C.C. Becker” *North Dakota History*, 4-5.

⁷⁸ Jon Gjerde, *From Peasants to Farmers: The Migration from Balestrand, Norway to the Upper Middle West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

⁷⁹ Hansen, *Encounter on the Great Plains*, 71.

Catholics and Lutherans.⁸⁰ A recognizable need for these signposts of community was obvious as within months of settlement of an area physical structures were built before any use of them could be properly made. According to John Bagstad, Norwegian immigrants in northeastern North Dakota pitched in together to build log cabin school houses months before a school teacher had even been hired and brought from the east.⁸¹

Many of the state's schools were rural and the teachers (mostly women) were imported from states like Iowa and Minnesota. These teachers would play an important role in the relationships and growing community among a diverse set of new North Dakotans. These teachers, despite most only knowing the English language, would have to balance the different cultures and languages of the community they were arriving in and learn to rely on them as well. One teacher remembered having to help a group of Icelandic immigrant families navigate their new homeland as they tried to navigate the legal systems of setting up a township and new school.⁸² Oftentimes, young women teachers were often the only link of communication between families that spoke little English or different languages entirely from one another. During her first year of teaching in 1906, Johanna Miller lodged with several different families who spoke different languages. Through Miller and the English she taught their children, they were able to stay in better communication. It was these connections that she relied on when she needed work done on the school building or her own homestead.⁸³

The German-Russian immigrant C.C. Becker and his small band of German-Russian settlers arrived in McIntosh County during the late summer and early fall of 1885. Becker

⁸⁰ Ely, "Rugby: A Shocking Place?" *The Way it Was*, 3.

⁸¹ John Bagstad, "Kaldor Settlement on the Goose River" in *The Way It Was: Norwegian Homesteaders*, ed. Everett Albers & Tweton, Jerome (Fessenden: The Grass Roots Press, 1998), 19.

⁸² Wardwell, "Teaching in the 1870s" in *The Way It Was: The Townspeople*, ed. Everett Albers & Tweton, Jerome (Fessenden: The Grass Roots Press, 2004), 26.

⁸³ Vito Perrone, *Johanna Knudsen Miller: Pioneer Teacher* (Bismarck: North Dakota Heritage Center, 1986), 15-17.

established a school board within a year and had hired a young married girl from an eastern teaching college for the 1886-1887 school year. The German-Russians had hired a teacher and established a community school board before they had harvested their first crops. Becker was also instrumental in organizing Lutheran parishes in German-Russian North Dakota already by 1889 and 1890. Following in the pattern seen across the state, the priest was brought in from Leola, South Dakota and was paid in gifts, shelter, transportation, and what little money they could scratch together until more formal arrangements were made in 1904.⁸⁴ In both of these instances, Becker and the pre-established German-Russian communities built further community ties even before agricultural and economic benefits began to roll in. Thus largely dismissing the marketing claims which supposed the opposite which the state government had made. It seems that the perception of homesteading and settling as a largely individualistic affair or one that did not become communal until agricultural superiority was achieved is one that does not entirely fit within the primary sources and reality of the Second Dakota Boom.

The economic pressures inherent to the settling of North Dakota alongside these newly formed communal structures and relationships also led the way to more political involvement among Euro-American farmers in the latter years of the “Second Dakota Boom” and into the 1910s and 1920s. The fragility of the agricultural economy was doubled by isolation of the area when it came to bringing harvests to market. Rates to transport grain from Fargo to Duluth were twice as high as the busiest railroads in the nation, many settlers in North Dakota had purchased land and fallen into debt with speculators whose names still grace towns like Napoleon, Wishek, and McKenzie.⁸⁵ The German-Russian Hillius family had to sell their original land claim which they had spent two years building up their property after John Hillius lost his left arm in a

⁸⁴ Iseminger, “C.C. Becker” *North Dakota History*, 9-10.

⁸⁵ Tweton, “The Golden Age of Agriculture: 1897-1917” *North Dakota History*, 43.

threshing machine. With no way to make a reliable income and with John no longer able to provide, the family moved into town owing John Wishek \$250.⁸⁶

While the first years of a settlers life on the plains was about forming connections based on religious, communal, and cultural needs, many were also beginning to look at relationships on political grounds by the 1900s. Movements like the Grange, the Populists, and later the Nonpartisan League were the direct reaction to settlers and homesteaders who felt that they had been taken advantage of by banks, railroads, and land speculators. While there had been original skepticism for organized labor among some farmers in the Upper Plains, organizations like the Industrial Workers of the World (also known as the Wobblies and often associated with industrial labor in the Eastern United States) did have a presence in North Dakota prior to the establishment of farmers' movements.⁸⁷ It is quite plausible that these later movements which argued for the economic freedom of farmers would not have been possible if not for the multitude of diverse relationships that existed on the North Dakota prairie that brought these people in closer community regardless of language, cultural, and linguistic differences.

Implications and Conclusion

The story of the settling of North Dakota by Euro-Americans during the turn of the last century has been one built from ideas of romantic individualism and idyllic versions of nature and work which stemmed from marketing and propaganda material put out by the state government. The early history and popular culture surrounding the period then greatly emphasised those themes, as well as, romantic notions of gender roles, conflict, and Euro-American civilization-founding on the Great Plains. However, a dichotomy exists between these written narratives and the reality of those that experienced the homesteading and settling

⁸⁶ Gordon Iseminger, *The Americanization of Christina Hillius* (Bismarck: State Historical Society of North Dakota, 1986), 10-11.

⁸⁷ Hansen, *Encounter on the Great Plains*, 173-174.

period. It would seem that the romantic marketing and propaganda which brought many Euro-Americans to North Dakota gave many a rose-colored view of the external hardships which came hand-in-hand with settling and homesteading. The resulting frustration then exacerbated internal hardships such as fear and loneliness which forced North Dakotans to create relationships and cooperation across lines where none had existed prior. As people began to build up these relationships, the resulting structures of community and common way of life played a larger role during the “Second Dakota Boom” than has been previously written. Through furthering our understanding and reconsidering the realities of the settling of North Dakota, we can see that the limited narratives of conflict and romanticization do not do the history of the state and the lives of those who experienced settling justice and actually often leave out interesting and important facets of that history.

The newest literature on the subject of the homesteading period has hoped to fill in these gaps left in the historiography and to also challenge some of the base assumptions of the last 100 years of popular and historical writing. The 2017 book *Homesteading the Plains* by Edwards, Friefeld, Wingo points out a goal of their work as to is get historians to reexamine the preconceived notions and “facts” that have been taken for granted for so long in the hopes that a new set of literature will arise in order to tell new and interesting histories about the settling of the American West.⁸⁸ It is this discrepancy between the written history focused on notions of romanization and conflict and the sources that we must reconsider to better understand the homesteading period in North Dakota and by extension our own period in the history of the state.

⁸⁸ Edwards & Friefeld & Wingo, *Homesteading the Plain*, 203.

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