

What plains and how did



When many people decided to go West to the Great Plains in 1865 those who were farmers faced many problems. Living in America and Europe, they had been used to a very different climate, which was very unlike the desert land of the Plains with its unusual soil and lack of water.

Settlers set up their own homes but with no woodland and bricks to use they settle for sodbricks. The houses were built half way under the ground and the roof was made out of turf and eaveboards with a chimney. A kerosene lamp provided light but this was not very efficient and the farmers had to work and live in semi darkness.

Wind and rain seeping through the walls would make the mud run and make their possessions dirty and the water would get into the food. As you would imagine, the houses were always dirty and floors always had to be swept. Insects and locusts were a particular problem as they would get into the in house through the walls.

A small stove powered by dried up cow and buffalo dung, which they used for fuel, was used to cook boring and monotonous meals day after day. For breakfast they would have corn bread, salt pork and black coffee and for dinner they would have wild greens, boiled pork and cold corn bread washed down with a drink of vinegar, brown sugar and warm creek water.

Another problem that the farmers had to face was that as it was very unhygienic, disease was common. In an attempt to solve this problem, they had to wash their hands all the time, and invent their own remedies for illnesses, for example if they had a snake bite they would put warm manure on it or if they had an ear that ached they would put urine into it.

On the Plains homes were very spaced out and there was not much company for people therefore people could be very lonely.

Living on desert land it was difficult to grow crops because of the dry soil and a different climate to what the farmers were used to. They used trial and error methods to grow crops such as maize and wheat but this took a long time. Hot summers and cold winters did not help this situation as they needed more water.

Ploughing and sowing was also a problem for the farmers as the Plains had never been ploughed before and the grass roots were at least 10 cms thick and very dense. Whilst trying to plough the cast iron ploughs broke under the strain. This was a slow and back breaking job for the men. Eventually they started to use mechanical equipment such as reapers, binders and threshers which became inexpensive due to mass production.

Another problem the climate brought on the Great Plains there was not enough rainfall in the year and when it did rain it was in the summer and which would dry it up very quickly. Droughts were frequent and as there were no lakes or rivers there was no regular supply of water. Although the farmers could dig wells this was uncertain and expensive. Their solution was to drill for water and use windpumps however water was still precious to the farmers and had to be shared.

Another problem for the farmers was that the 160 acres of land that they were allocated by the Government was not big enough for the homesteader and his family to work and live. A solution did not arrive until 1862 when the Home Steaders Act was implemented. This meant that the farmers were

allocated more land from the government. By 1883 the settlers could have another 160 acres of land if agreed to plant trees.

To stop cattle escaping and to mark their holding, farmers needed fencing as boundaries but as there was no timber for miles and hedges took a long time to grow they needed another solution. In 1873 that solution came. This was barbed wire invented by Joseph Glidden which was cheap and easy to put up and ended the open range.

I think one of the biggest problems was the natural disasters. The Great Plains were so dry that the slightest spark could set the land on fire. Grass hoppers and locust were all around and they would eat through everything in their sight.

If the settlers were to survive they would have to find new ways of farming. They began to use chemicals to kill the locust and grasshoppers.

One of the best solutions to the farmer's problems was the railroads which provided them with many things. The railways allowed better and faster communications and quick and easy trade with the East. The railroads encouraged the spread of cattle onto the Plains. Settlers now had access to raw materials as the railroads would allow them to bring across things such as wood, food, seeds and machinery.

As I have said in this essay the farmers faced many problems when they moved to the Great Plains but they managed to find some sort of solution for most of these. I would suggest that the railroads were probably one of the best solutions to their problems. This is because before the railroads came

along life on the Plains was very difficult and they did not have easy access to the things that would make their life easier.