

Pathway into History

The Life of a Farmer



Water Worth More than Land

Having land was important, but having land with water was even better. The Pleasant Valley Ditch with water from the Arkansas River irrigated the homestead lands north of the river. Colorado water rights were, and continue to be, vital to agriculture. Without water, often called "white gold," in the arid land of Pleasant Valley, nothing could grow enough to produce an income.

Royal Gorge Regional Museum and History Center photo, 1916

Work Made Easier

Harvesting grain with a crew and thresher was hot, dusty work. The grain shocks in the field were gathered onto a wagon then hauled to the thresher. Each shock was fed into the thresher that separated the grain from the chaff and straw. One threshing machine traveled from farm to farm while farmers cooperated to complete the work.

Royal Gorge Regional Museum and History Center photo, 1910



Jackson's Fork lessened the work for farmers. Long, curved tongs speared hay from the wagon and lifted it up to the loft door. Horses and block and tackle pulled the fork across a roof track to the proper location where the farmer manually released the fork to drop the hay. Horses had to be taught to back up after the hay was released to be ready for the next forkful.

Photo courtesy of Carol McNew, circa 1920



Food for the Body

Apple trees grow well in the cooler temperatures of higher elevations, and most homesteaders planted fruit trees in small orchards for home use and for market. Many of these apple trees, some of which are over 100 years old, still produce some fruit. Table fresh fruits, cider, jellies, jams, pies, cobblers, sauce, and dried and canned fruits were highly prized. Cowboys and others deprived of fruit for long periods would ride long distances to obtain fresh apples. Other crops included potatoes, lettuce, peas, corn, and carrots.

Carolee Schrader photo, 1994



Pleasant Valley was settled by homesteading families and laborers.

Once land was claimed, many hands worked hard to make it productive.

The Homestead Acts

European immigrants, as well as poor U.S. citizens from the south and east, sought status and independence as landowners in Pleasant Valley. Three different Homestead Acts made this possible as settlers were encouraged to come west and claim undeveloped land. Many knew only a little English and had few personal belongings, but they possessed a rich heritage reflected in customs and religion.

Homesteading is Hard Work

Large families helped homesteaders accomplish the difficult chore of "improving" the land as required by the Homestead Acts. Improving land meant surveying, clearing and burning trees not used in construction, removing stumps and rocks, and leveling the land. Then soil was tilled, seeds planted, and pastures and fields irrigated.

As years went by, inventions lessened the work of families. This technology eased the work of ranching and farming but never eliminated it.

Farmers and ranchers often traded work and cooperated in raising animals. They shared equipment and ideas. Many worked part time in mines and other enterprises in order to have a higher standard of living.

Women's Work

Pioneer life challenged even the strongest women. Daily chores required physical strength and stamina. Women carried buckets of water from the hand-dug well or spring to the house. Meals were prepared on a wood-fired range. Canning, drying, smoking, and salting foods for next winter's use consumed a large amount of the women's time as did rearing large families.