

States of the Union

RETURN OF THE HOMESTEAD

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



LIKE SO MANY civic stories nowadays, this one begins with an itch to overhaul a discarded American dream. It happened in the northern woods of Minnesota, a few miles south of the Canadian border, where economic temperatures seldom rise above zero.

Abraham Lincoln was one of those who first voiced the dream. "I am in favor of settling the wild lands into small parcels," he said, "so that every poor man may have a home." Thomas Hart Benton, Lincoln's friend from Missouri, was another. On the floor of the U.S. Senate he declared, "It should be the policy of republics to multiply their freeholders as it is the policy of monarchies

to multiply their tenants." He urged his colleagues to "Pass the public lands cheaply and easily into the hands of the people."

In 1862, a radicalized all-North Congress aimed to give freeholders a break with passage of the Homestead Act, which offered 160 acres of public land to anyone who would live on it for five years. The measure was generous but anything but rascal-proof. As so often happens with antipoverty spigots, the rich quickly found ways to tap in. Land sharks acquired vast western holdings; so did lumber and mining interests, not to mention the railroads. In consequence, the incidence of farm tenancy during the first 40 years of homesteading actually increased. By the turn of the century, it had reached 35 per cent.

On balance, however, the Homestead Act did considerably more good than harm. In a nation of widening class separations, homesteading became a wonderful equalizer. It redistributed a total of 250 million acres—"a free gift to the American people," notes A. Whitney Griswold in *Farming and Democracy* (1948), "of more land than existed within the combined frontiers of Great Britain and France."

Consider now the situation a few years ago in Indus, Minnesota, when a hand-

ful of citizens formed a committee to save their school. They worked hard at defining the problem. "We started out by thinking up ways to raise money," recalls Lee Hervey, an appliance repairman and a past member of the school board. "Then someone said, 'Hey, we don't need money; what we need is kids. Our real problem here is that nobody's here anymore.'"

That's when Hervey got his brainstorm. How about a homestead program, he said, to attract new settlers? After all, the original Homestead Act was what brought people to Minnesota in the first place.

As it happened, Dawn Knoll, who taught American history at the high school, was also a committee member, and she assured her fellow residents they were on historically solid ground. In the first five years that the Homestead law was in effect, she said, settlers rushed into Minnesota faster than into any other state; they accounted for two-thirds of the nation's initial 15,000 homesteads. By 1880, 62,000 homesteaders had settled in Minnesota.

Could history be coaxed to repeat itself? Certainly there was plenty of land lying vacant right there in Koochiching County, an area three times the size of Rhode Island. The county's population, never famous for its density, had dipped to 16,000 by the mid-'80s, a 14 per cent decline in less than a decade.

In part the slippage was due to the Boise Cascade Corporation's closing of its lumber mill in 1984; 500 workers had lost their jobs. But some of the attrition could simply be chalked up to "progress." New timber technology, for instance, seemed to have made human labor all but obsolete. Where the rule of thumb for work and output was said to have been one logger per day for each cord of wood, now a single logger and his machinery could produce 100 cords a day.

As if that weren't trouble enough, the farmers, too, were becoming an endangered species. When Wayne Hasbargen, a committee member with four children in the Indus school, set up a veterinary practice in 1977, half his "patients" were farm animals. These days,

he says, “I mostly treat people’s pets. Livestock makes up less than a fifth of my practice, because there’s just a few old farmers left.”

Within the county’s snowbound borders only eight towns remained alive. The biggest was International Falls, the county seat, and it had fewer than 5,500 residents. Everything else was woods, wilderness or abandoned farms. Benton’s dictum, moreover, was being stood on its head. Now the people’s lands were passing cheaply into the hands of public agencies. The county itself owned some 50,000 idle acres, much of it acquired through tax defaults, while various arms of the state and Federal government retained hundreds of thousands more. Why couldn’t some of these acres be put to work on behalf of economic development? Why not convert them into homesteads?

It was a proposition no one on the committee had the heart to refute. Too much was at stake. The town had already lost its post office and its general store. About all that remained was the school—a sleek kindergarten-through-12th grade facility that the residents had erected only a decade ago, perhaps with more hope than realism. It was built to hold 540 students; its actual enrollment last year fell below 120.

“Experts from the city keep telling us that any high school with less than 100 kids isn’t worth saving,” says Hervey, whose son is in the ninth grade at Indus. “Well, our high school’s got just 50 kids—and everyone here thinks it’s worth saving.”

Still, when Hervey and Hasbargen went around town talking up their homesteading idea, they encountered a good deal of skepticism. It wasn’t the first promising scheme for deliverance the citizens had ever heard. After years of blowing hot and cold, they had learned how to keep their hopes lukewarm. Besides, it seemed possible that some of the residents had given up on themselves. Maybe there was some perverse law of modern life that declared small-town-ers *deserving* of their backwater fate. In Koochiching County, one way to compliment a man’s intelligence was to point out that he didn’t have to live

there: “If he wanted to live in a big city, he could.”

But the two homestead missionaries were not discouraged. From Indus they branched out to the rest of the county. “We talked to officials in every town,” Hervey recalls. “Eventually they all went along with the plan.” Then the two men took their idea to the state capital in St. Paul. The lawmaking process proved smoother than they’d expected. As Hasbargen tells it, “We got a bill written up by some big-city lawyers, and we took it to some friendly legislators. That was about the size of it.” Last year, to the surprise of nearly everyone in Koochiching County, the State Legislature passed the measure without debate.

“The only real objections,” Hasbargen says, “came from the DNR [the state’s Department of Natural Resources]. They didn’t want any public lands turned over to private parties. Their idea of a policy is to save that land for city vacationers. All those DNR people live in the cities themselves. They want to make it one big park up here.”

THE LAW THAT Hervey and Hasbargen successfully lobbied through the Legislature was aimed exclusively at Koochiching County. It authorized the establishment of the state’s first county-wide Economic Development Authority to oversee the homestead program.

In some respects the rules for modern Minnesota homesteading turn out to be less generous than those President Lincoln signed into law during the Civil War. Instead of 160 free acres they offer only 40; new settlers, moreover, have to live on the land for 10 consecutive years before earning title to it. In addition, they are required to start building a house within one year and to complete it by the end of two.

Equalization among classes is not exactly what the Koochiching folks have in mind. The whole idea, says Hasbargen, is to attract “the right kind of homesteaders. We have to be convinced that they can earn a living up here. We don’t want people just coming in on welfare.”

To get the program moving, the coun-

ty hired Robert Schwiderski, who had been in charge of economic development in International Falls. At first Schwiderski had his hands full trying to win agreement among county officials on exact rules and procedures. The program, in fact, quickly got bogged down in a bureaucracy of the county’s own making. As Schwiderski puts it, “It took us quite awhile to get organized.”

The breakthrough came when a Minneapolis reporter for the Associated Press got wind of the story and sent it around. It ran in scores of newspapers, including the *New York Times* and the *Christian Science Monitor*. That led to some television publicity in the Twin Cities and to Schwiderski’s national appearance on ABC-TV’s *Good Morning America*.

“After that,” Schwiderski says, “we went nuts. People started calling us from all over the country. They wanted to quit the rat race and move up here.” To date, however, the program has attracted just three firm prospects, and all are from the area.

Tom Johnson Jr., a 23-year-old logger born and raised in the county, seems typical. After graduating from his local high school in Northome he was unable to find a job near home, so he moved to Titusville, Florida, and got work as a treetop trimmer. “I did okay,” he says, “but the work was a little bit dangerous. Anyway, I didn’t want to be climbing trees the rest of my life.”

Johnson lived in Titusville four years. Then he heard about the homesteader program in Koochiching County and immediately mailed in his application. He’s back in the county now, waiting for final approval of the 40-acre parcel he’s picked out—“a nice hill facing south, right next to my folks’ land. I’m going to use passive solar heat.”

Johnson is delighted to be the first of a new generation of homesteaders—to once again be “settling the wild lands into small parcels.” As he says, “I’m the Lewis and Clark of this program. In Florida there was no privacy; I got tired of the neighbors. In Northome you can see the deer in the field. You can go hunting in your backyard. I can’t believe how much I missed it here.”