

## Homesteaders and Pioneers on the Olympic Peninsula



## HOMESTEADING

In the 1850s settlers began moving to the Olympic Peninsula and claiming land. Though beautiful, this northwest corner of America was isolated and difficult to homestead due to inhospitable weather and overwhelming forests. Under the Homestead Act of 1862, an individual could claim 160 acres of public land for a small fee. The homesteader received a title to the land if they lived on the land continuously and made certain improvements within 5 years, known as “proving up.” The Homestead Act required that applicants farm the land – a way of life which was better suited to the American plains than to the Olympic Peninsula, due to its soil conditions, rainy climate, and topography. Yet the fact that homesteaders came and often succeeded in proving up is a testament to the hope and determination of early emigrants.

Newspapers, the government, and other groups such as railroad companies and land speculators were interested in encouraging emigration. They praised the far west as a land of vast natural resources and opportunities. With its mild temperatures and plentiful rainfall, Washington was showcased in World’s Fairs as a farmer’s paradise. What early arrivals from the east actually found, however, was unsurveyed lands filled with immense trees and rugged mountains which lacked in roads, urban centers, and critical development in the form of schools, post offices, hospitals, or stores. The climate was indeed temperate, but obstacles to farming were many: clearing land of immense timber, poor soil drainage, rivers prone to flooding, difficulty in ripening of grain crops, and no marketplace to sell the crops which would grow.

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### CLAIMS

Homesteaders would begin their claim by building a small cabin. A small garden was created for the residents to grow food. Settlers then set about clearing land to grow crops, which might include grasses, clovers, timothy, root crops such as potatoes, hops, apples, wheat, and strawberries.

Removing stumps was difficult. Most homesteaders kept a few animals. Barns and outbuildings were built in varying numbers and sizes, depending on the tenacity of the homesteader.

Native tribes of the region, though frustrated by the treaty experience and U.S. land policy, were generally friendly and cooperative, providing help to settlers with transportation and labor.

A rather small proportion of the homesteaders succeeded in proving up, and an even smaller proportion stayed on their land for long afterwards. "Besieged by dense woods to clear, difficult terrain, heavy rainfall that limited crops, "no markets, no roads, no trail," and a diet of "spuds, elk, and sauerkraut," few succeeded as the self-sufficient farmer.

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### DAILY LIFE

Daily life on a homestead was centered on hard work. In addition to raising children and the maintenance of the hearth and home, the work of farming and expanding the claim was ever-present. Modernization was late in coming to the Olympic Peninsula, but eventually washing machines, telephones, and electricity were installed. Children went to primary and secondary schools if one was available, and most settlements were able to provide them. Holidays, dances, sporting contests, and other community events provided the opportunity to socialize and come together with people who shared the challenge of living in this remote corner of the country. Travel between settlements was by

trail and/or canoe, with small ferries operating on Lake Crescent.

People needed to get together occasionally to help each other, have some fun, and build community. Sporting events, dances, political meetings, and holidays gave the homesteaders a chance to relax and an excuse to socialize. Hunting and fishing served the dual purpose of recreation and providing meat for subsistence. It was sometimes a long walk to get to participate in social gatherings, but settlers readily made such trips to alleviate their isolation.

Many, if not most, homesteaders needed to spend some amount of time away from their claim so that they could earn the cash needed to buy necessities. Jobs taken were varied – loggers, U.S. Forest Rangers, mail carriers, miners, fishermen, packers, guides, bounty hunters, hired hands – whatever jobs were available in the area.

Often homesteaders would leave their wives and children on the claim to continue farming and return at the end of the working season, because the law required continuous residency. However it was hard to prove whether residency requirements were strictly obeyed.