

The Homestead Act of 1862 will celebrate its one-hundred fiftieth anniversary in 2012 but plans are already being considered. It will have to be quite a celebration to top the one-hundredth anniversary in 1962. The Centennial celebration featured the dedication of a new Visitor Center, a commemorative stamp, the crowning of Miss Nebraska, and not one, but three parades.

The celebration got started on May 20, 1962, with the issuance of the Homestead Act commemorative stamp. A special postal station was set up in the Visitor Center, where Homestead Act Commemorative covers received a special cancellation: "Mailed at Homestead National Monument" in the new Visitor Center (now the Education Center). Charlie Harmon, a Beatrice businessman and stamp collector, was responsible for convincing the committee in Washington, D.C. to issue the commemorative stamp. The Chamber of Commerce was swamped with more than 500 last minute requests for first day issuance of the stamp, according to the May 18, 1962, issue of the *Beatrice Daily Sun*. The first day cover set a new record with 150,000 requests.

Leigh Coffin was postmaster at the time and was responsible for making sure all 150,000 requests were filled. Postmaster General J. Edward Day spoke at a ceremony in Chautauqua Park and it was the only time a cabinet level official has been to Beatrice, according to Coffin. Coffin continues to be a friend to the Monument.

The Visitor Center made its informal debut on May 20, 1961, under the leadership of Superintendent Warren Hotchkiss but was not dedicated until June 10, 1962, when all work was complete according to the same article. Week-long festivities celebrating the centennial of the Homestead Act of 1862 began on June 10, 1862, with the dedication of the new Visitor Center. The *Beatrice Daily Sun* described the event attended by 4,000:

The sun shone brightly during the hot, muggy afternoon, and the benches set up on the Homestead parking lot were far from filled as many visitors sought the shade of the trees during the dedication. After the ribbon-cutting ceremony, following the dedication, the Visitor Center was jammed.

The celebration had an international touch as 23 visitors from around the globe attended the dedication. They were agricultural specialists from nine countries who were attending the Homestead Centennial Symposium on Land Use at the Nebraska Center for Continuing Studies in Lincoln.

The first of three performances by the "noted and top variety troupe," the Gas Lite Review, according to the *Sun*, was held at the Fairgrounds. The Centennial celebration continued on Monday with the first in a series of whisker contest judging events taking place at the Fairgrounds. Concessions and rides were also open as well as many exhibits in the three large buildings.

On Tuesday at 10:30 a.m. the Historical Eras Parade was held in downtown Beatrice followed by a program at Chautauqua Park. The *Sun* described the event.

Tuesday afternoon's Pioneer recognition program has been broadened a great deal since earlier announcements. A long list of dignitaries will be present, including: Gov. and Mrs. Frank B. Morrison and ex-governors Robert Crosby and Val Peterson. The complete program, which will be held at 1 p.m. at Chautauqua Park, follows: First off will be the old fiddlers contest and a band concert with Lou Burkel directing, scheduled at 1:30. Invocation will be by Rev. Leo Miller and the address of welcome by Mayor W.W. Cook, Sr. Miss Lucile Reilly, Beatrice High School vocal music instructor, will be a featured vocalist.

The day ended with the Koshare Indian Dancers performing at Athletic Park and beard judging, the Gas Lite Follies Review and fireworks at the Fairgrounds. Parades were also held on Thursday and Saturday of Centennial Week. The parade on Thursday featured several saddle clubs and on Saturday the big attraction was the Miss Nebraska Pageant contestants. An article in the *Sun* explained the contest:

Officials of the pageant much prefer classifying the search for Miss Nebraska as a goal of finding the "typical American girl." Contestants will appear in formals, street dress and bathing suits, all of which are part of the basis for judging one as Miss Nebraska. Also, according to Chairman John Davis, talent can be as important as other phases of the judging.

In conjunction with the Homestead Centennial, Mayor Chris E. Blaser, issued the following proclamation on April 1 according to *The Sun*:

That inasmuch as the Good Men of Beatrice have so nobly sprouted busy hair out-growths in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the First United States Homestead. And that heretofore the feminine citizenry has been permitted to enjoy absolute restraint, I hereby proclaim: That in memory of their Pioneer great-grandmother of yore, any and all members of the female sex working or residing within the confines of the City of Beatrice. Shall hereafter from this date refrain from appearing in public without the proper adornment of the beautiful Centennial Badge and Centennial dress on such days prescribed by the Centennial Committee. It is further decreed that this mandate shall be enforced by a special female police force. Evaders of this mandate shall be turned over to Ye Female Keystone Kops and Ye Awful Judges of Ye Kangaroo Kourt there to be sentenced and punished in accordance with the magnitude of their offenses.

The week long celebration of the centennial of the Homestead Act of 1862 concluded with the crowning of Mary Lee Jepsen, as Miss Nebraska for 1962.

With 2012 approaching how do you think Beatrice and Homestead National Monument of America should celebrate the one hundred fiftieth anniversary of the Homestead Act of 1862? If you have ideas please contact Homestead National Monument of America at 402-223-3514.