

## Deadwood discussion:

on  
Speeches 2  
dusk

Some of this is  
on my website -  
as well as a  
picture of the  
Doig homestead -  
(anybody have a  
laptop to bring that  
up?) .com - Rdr's 50th -  
WSmbrynd notes

By one of those strokes of luck that was entirely  
time, I happened to go to high school in a western town  
particularly dreamy boast. / SLOW "Aridity is insurance against  
was what the turn-of-the-twentieth-century advertisements trumpeted for  
land around Valier, an indeed arid spot on the Montana prairie chosen  
for a gargantuan irrigation project, a manmade lake three miles long, and  
the exuberant plat of a town to hold ten thousand people.

But by the time I put in my four years of school there just after mid-  
century, Valier had peaked at a population of only a thousand, and,  
having waned to half of that since, it is ending up as a slow-motion ghost



town. The irrigation project, however, continues to make the prairie bloom, and that ungainly small-town school, with its sprinkling of idiosyncratic scintillating teachers, gave me some roots as a wordsmith who looks back at boom-and-bust places such as Valier.

I saw a natural work of fiction waiting there in the story of the steamshovels coming to the prairie (people sometimes would walk half a day to watch these mammoth earth-eaters at work) and the pell-mell land rush which drew in people by the boxcar-load (they would pile all their belongings and themselves into Great Northern Railway boxcars in the Midwest and be delivered to sidings on the naked earth of the West, where they would climb off and try to turn themselves into homesteaders)--a storyline of dreamers galore told by a narrator who



views it all for us through one of the most versatile lenses of the imagination, a one-room school.

You may not be surprised to hear, considering who is up here saying it, that Montana turned out to be the foremost homestead state. Settlers took up more than thirty-two million acres of homesteads there--more land than is to be found in, say, the entire states of New York or ~~Pennsylvania~~ <sup>OHIO</sup>.

/ Translate those dry numbers into flesh and blood, and into my home state in roughly the first twenty years of the twentieth century came a quarter of a million landseekers, homesteading tooth and nail. The state's population tripled in eighteen years, a population explosion of a magnitude that it takes a Las Vegas to produce today.



To me, that flood of people onto western acres, in the years just before and during World War One, is a great overlooked frontier. It doesn't fit readily with our other western sagas--the gold rushes, the Santa Fe Trail, the Oregon Trail, the spike-by-spike drama of the building of the transcontinental railroads--because it is a twentieth century story. Yet I believe it qualifies as the last great American frontier, because the restless settlement pattern it brought hasn't ended yet.

"Frontier" is a word that for some time now has fallen out of favor with my western historian friends, focused as they rightly are on the long processes that have made the American West what it is. But in some seminar room long ago, <sup>IN GRADUATE SCHOOL</sup> I made an internal veer from any kind of a future as a historian to a way of life as a word wrangler, and "frontier" is not



professionally off-limits to me. In the case of the great homestead boom, I very much subscribe to the geographer Isaiah Bowman's definition of frontier: **QUOTE:**

"It is one of the outstanding characteristics of a frontier or pioneering people that they live a life of experiment. Instead of doing the same thing in much the same way from year to year and stabilizing its life to correspond with a settled agricultural practice, the frontier community is in a state of unsettlement. With unending change in strongly accented climatic and economic conditions an entire region may not be able to cease experimentation. The pioneering type of life then becomes not a stage of development but an ultimate result."



That frontier of "unending change" that Bowman talks about, ~~the~~ is thus one of the fallouts of the great homestead boom--one that I would think has echoes here in South Dakota, which might be explored in your book discussion groups. Certainly change of that sort, unforeseen as it was unending, was the case for my land-taking Doig forebears.

For a moment think of that prairie, of only about nine or ten decades ago, as a vast tabletop, with these tiny figurines scattered on it by the tens of thousands--sodbusters, honyockers, pilgrims, dreamers, cranks, Jeffersonian yeoman agriculturists, greenhorns, most of them new to the land, perhaps as many as one in ten of them single women (schoolmarms, unmarried sisters or aunts or daughters), out there with their shanties, their breaking plows, their flax seeds, their Sears Roebuck

in the homestead states of the West--Montana, the Dakotas, Kansas, Nebraska, all that plains country where farmers and ranchers and towns struggle to hold on.



catalogues, their buckboards and their Model ~~A~~<sup>T</sup> Fords. There they all are, around roughly the time of World War I, on that thirty-million-acre table of earth, and a great many of them, we know now, sooner or later teeter at the edge of that weather-whipped and economically-tilted table: some will jump, some will fall, some are pushed. It is all, I am here to tell you, blood-ink for the writer.

My grandfather's land claim, in the Big Belt mountains of south-central Montana, is where my Scottish grandparents seeded the Doig family into America. My father and four of his five brothers, and his sister, all were born on that homestead--the last of them in 1910--and being careful, slow-marrying Scots, most of them were around there, off and on, through the late 1920s and even on into the 1930s, the decade I



was born at the end of. Part of my own boyhood  
a few miles of that original Doig homestead.

So, in my growing up, what history the family  
place. By now, nobody has lived there for sixty  
perseveres in me--as my family's first step on the

That homesteading experience, which did for the rural West what the  
tenements of the immigrant ghettos did for city America--provided  
landing sites, quarters to hold people until they were able to scramble  
away to somewhere else --that particular American saga, shared by my  
family and hundreds of thousands of others in the West, have given me  
impetus for much of my writing.



To me, this is the story in the bloodline--the accumulating power of detail and speculation and wondering and questioning that pulsed in me from knowing of my own homesteading ancestors' hard work and harder knocks and those of that ghost population, all those other empty homesteads where families hung their names on the wind of time.

Well, where did it all lead, those homestead years? In my father's case, over the hill from that homestead where he was born, to a ranch where my newly-married parents in the 1930s began their years as the western equivalent of sharecroppers--we even called the arrangement by which my father would take charge of a herd of cattle or a band of sheep from their owner and graze them until shipping time for a portion of the profit, we called that doing it "on shares."



17  
It was there that the homestead past first hit home to me, when I was about eight years old. My father was ~~in his haymaker role, hiring those~~ ~~piquantly named crews,~~ putting up the wild hay and alfalfa on ~~this~~<sup>AT</sup> ranch, and I have two distinct memories of all that.

One is of the day a hay rake broke down, and my dad remembered there was a similar rake back at the Doig homestead where he could get the part he needed to fix it, in that backyard scatter of old equipment that used to accumulate on so many western ranches and farms for precisely that purpose--rustyparts.com, out there behind the barn.

Off we went, my father and I, to the old Doig place for our rake part, and to this day, I remember my shock at what happened when we set foot into the weedy yard of that empty homestead. My father broke down.



Broke down and wept. His tears, that day, must have come from the flood of memories. The stories, still powerful to him, of all those lives around him in his younger years, in that mountain basin where his and mine were now the only human eyes, and the sockets of windowframes of the abandoned houses stared blind, all around us.

--My other homestead memory is luckily more cheerful. On the ranch where my dad was putting up the hay was another abandoned homestead, the Keith place, near enough for me to go and play in the old buildings. For whatever reason, among the delightful trash of the Keith place was that long-gone family's bank statements, which of course included canceled checks; sheafs of them, a Fort Knox of them. My imagination had just come into a fortune! OF COURSE I pretended they were money, I



riffled them as I'd seen the guy do who ran the roulette wheel in ~~one of~~  
~~these nine taverns of our~~ town, I fanned them out like playing cards,  
millionaire-like I made paper airplanes of them... The currency of  
history, waving in my ignorant eight-year-old hands, is my personal  
homestead portrait, I suppose.

Well, onward to the novel that came out of all that, with Kent's  
questions now ~~and your own~~.



# Station Wagons Ho! For Money, Cities Bring Back Homesteading

---

By MONICA DAVEY

BEATRICE, Neb. — Give away land to make money?

It hardly sounds like a prudent scheme. But in a bit of *déjà vu*, that is exactly what this small Nebraska city aims to do.

Beatrice was a starting point for the Homestead Act of 1862, the federal law that handed land to pioneering farmers. Back then, the goal was to settle the West. The goal of Beatrice's "Homestead Act of 2010," is, in part, to replenish city coffers.

The calculus is simple, if counterintuitive: hand out city land now to ensure property tax revenues in the future.

"There are only so many ball fields a place can build," Tobias J. Tempelmeyer, the city attorney, said the other day as he stared out at grassy lots, planted with lonely mailboxes, that the city is

working to get rid of. "It really hurts having all this stuff off the tax rolls."

Around the nation, cities and towns facing grim budget circumstances are grasping at unlikely — some would say desperate — means to bolster their shrunken tax bases. Like Beatrice, places like Dayton, Ohio, and Grafton, Ill., are giving away land for nominal fees or for nothing in the hope that it will boost the tax rolls and cut the lawn-mowing bills.

In Boca Raton, Fla., which faces a budget gap of more than \$7 million, leaders are thinking about expanding the city's size and annexing neighborhoods as an antidote. Sure, more residents would cost more in services, but officials hope the added tax reve-

*Continued on Page A14*



# Cities View Homesteads As a Source Of Income

From Page A1

nues will more than make up for it.

And leaders in Manchester, N.H., and Concord, Mass., are taking an approach that might have once seemed politically unthinkable. They are re-examining whether their communities' non-profit organizations really deserve to be tax-free.

"The stress of the past couple years is causing us to look absolutely everywhere," said Anthony Logalbo, the finance director in Concord, where officials realized that 15 percent of the town's property value had become tax exempt and sent letters to non-profit groups asking whether they would consider paying something to the town.

"Private schools and nonprofit museums and community organizations benefit the town in lots of ways," Mr. Logalbo said, "except that they don't contribute to the cost of running the town."

Analysts say that this year and next, city budgets will reach their most dismal points of the recession, largely because of lag time inherent in the way taxes are collected and distributed.

Despite signs of a recovery, if a slow one, in other elements of the economy, it may be years away for many municipalities. Between now and 2012, America's cities are likely to experience shortfalls totaling \$55 billion to \$85 billion, according to a survey by the National League of Cities, because of slumping revenues from property taxes and sales taxes and reduced support from state governments.

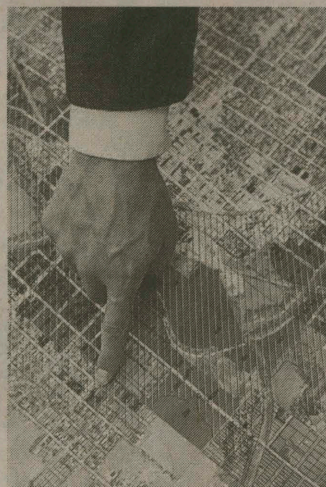
And even in places like Concord and Beatrice, where officials say budget strains are not severe enough to lead to layoffs or major cuts, a slow chafing has still taken a toll.

Beatrice (pronounced bee-AT-russ), which sits about 40 miles south of Lincoln down a highway called the Homestead Expressway, is recognized as home to the first Homestead Act application nearly 150 years ago. That law ultimately granted 270 million acres of land in 30 states to nearly anyone who could survive on it and pay a minimal fee.

Daniel Freeman, who came from Ohio, is said to have filed his claim for 160 acres near Beatrice just after midnight on Jan. 1, 1863, the day the law took effect. There were others who filed claims in other places on the same day (some say they were actually first), but Mr. Freeman captured a place in history. The government paid to take back his Nebraska homestead decades later to turn it into a national monument that honors the Homestead Act and how it transformed the nation's population.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY KEVIN MOLONEY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



Where it all began: a cabin at the Homestead National Monument of America, top, near Beatrice, Neb. Lots, marked on a map, are available in Beatrice, where officials hope people will build.



Beatrice's new Homestead Act is not the first to revive the land giveaway. Some tiny towns, particularly in the Great Plains, have made such offers before, mainly as a way to increase dwindling populations. But disappearing is not the fear in Beatrice, which is home to several lawn-mowing equipment manufacturers and where the population has held steady at around 12,000 for decades.

Instead, city officials are hoping to return some of the many

lots the city has accumulated, because of unpaid taxes or flooding risks from the Big Blue River, and return them to the tax rolls. The city has not suffered gaping budget shortfalls or the property tax declines seen in some larger cities, but some large purchases and road reconstruction are on hold, waiting for a return to flusher times.

If the city were to give away just a few lots — and if people were to, as required by the law, build homes on them and stay for

at least three years — Beatrice would secure annual real estate taxes on them, collect money for water, electric and sewer use, and no longer pay to mow the lawns.

The arrival of new, improved homes might also have an infectious effect on existing neighborhoods, said Neal Neidfeldt, the city administrator. The plan has its critics; at least one candidate for mayor here wonders what right the city has to give out public land to any non-taxpaying

outsider who asks.

Officials acknowledge that the benefits sound modest, in the thousands of dollars annually, but say the revenue is needed.

"What is the value of a lot to us if it's empty?" said Tom Thompson, the mayor of Grafton, where an offer of 32 city-owned lots, promoted with a television advertising campaign, has quickly led to eight takers so far. "This is strictly financial — a way to go upstream from the trend."

In Dayton, officials are offering

thousands of vacant, foreclosed or abandoned properties under certain conditions for nominal fees — \$500, in many cases, to cover the cost of recording fees or \$1,200 if the city must initiate tax foreclosure proceedings. The prospect of city savings on mowing fees alone is enormous: each year, Dayton spends \$2 million to cut grass on the properties.

Back in Beatrice, though, the effort is only creeping along. Since the Homestead Act took effect in May, many people have called with inquiries, but no one has moved onto the lots along a gravel-covered road called Grace. Two families filled out an application — which seeks only a name, address and telephone number — but both have since put off plans.

One applicant, William Hendrix, 47, said the city's law requiring him to secure permits for a new home on the property within six months, then build within a year after that, was too daunting. What if he could not get loans? What if he could not pay for the construction? What if he built a home but could never sell it?

"Right now, giving away the land isn't going to be doing anybody favors," Mr. Hendrix said. "I realized that Beatrice will get the taxes they want, but it won't do me any good in this market."

For their part, people in Beatrice sound patient. The peak of homesteading acres claimed under the federal act, they point out, came in 1913, some 50 years after the act's passage.



Jane Mack 425 778-4365

- in front of stage; triple circle, us in open end  
1st 30 min: throw out gas to audience  
2nd 1/2 - gas for me

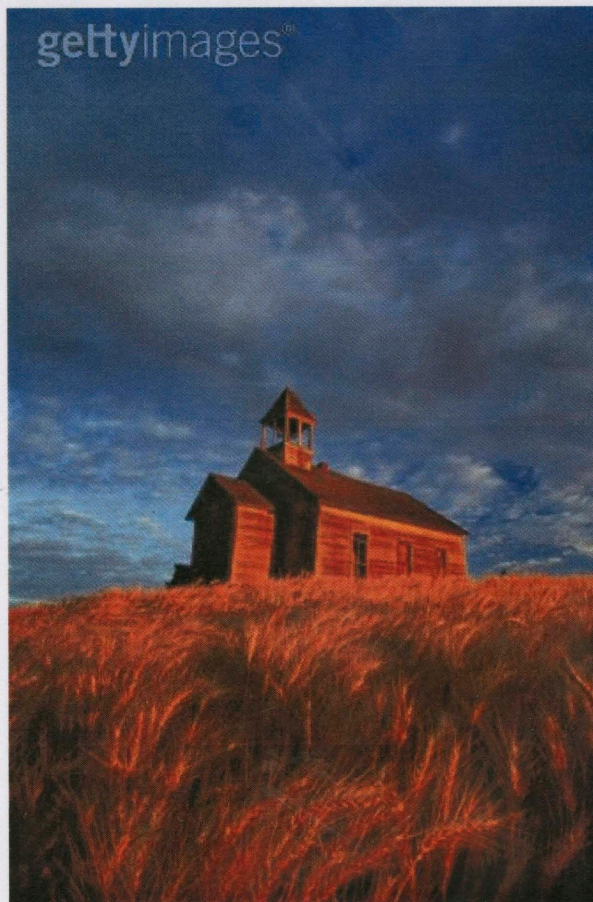
↓ my presentation 1st - 10-15 min, from podium

keep it to an hour

she works in store



gettyimages®



Title: Old schoolhouse in autumn, wheat field in fore, Washington, USA

Caption: Location: near Kamiak Butte Country Park.

Creative image #: AK2668-009

License type: Royalty-free

Photographer: [Darrell Gulin](#)

Collection: [Photodisc](#)

Credit: Darrell Gulin

Max file size/dimensions/dpi: 48.7 MB - 3354 x 5076 px (11.18 x 16.92 in.) - 300 dpi - RGB

Release information: This image has a signed property release. This image is available for commercial use.

Keywords: Run-Down, Past, History, Decline, Agriculture, Education, Travel Destinations, Vertical, Outdoors, Colonial Style, Low Angle View, School, Clapboard, Old, Wood, Cultivated, Crop, Sky, Cloud, Autumn, Small, Wheat, Day, Washington State, Color Image, Abandoned, Kamiak Butte Country Park, Remote, Schoolhouse, Series, No People, Building Exterior, Photography, Four Seasons. [Find similar images](#)

Availability: Availability for this image cannot be guaranteed until time of purchase.

**Pricing:**



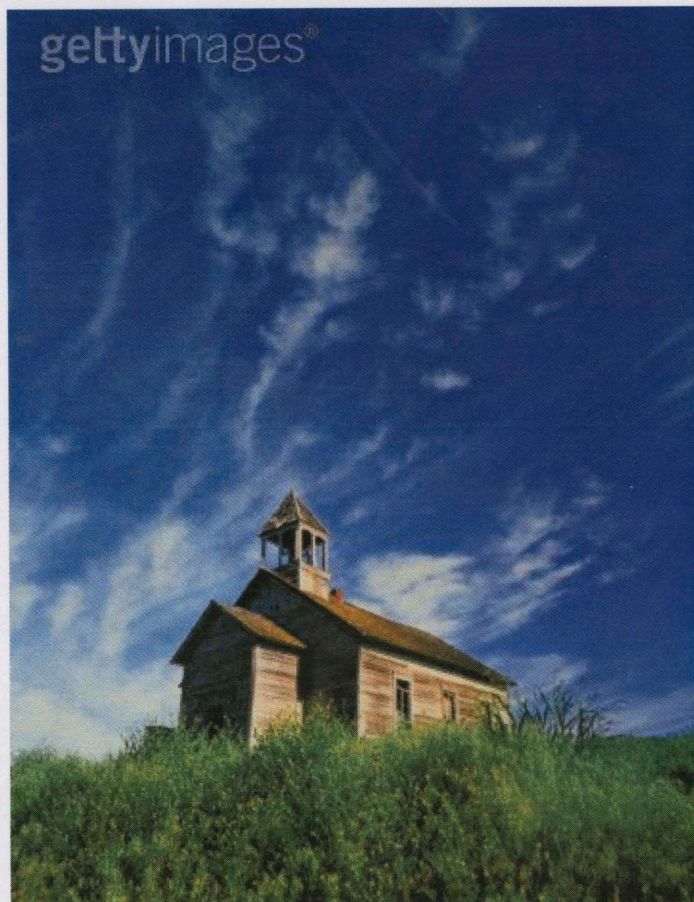
<b>56 KB</b>	<b>\$ 5.00</b>
112 x 170 px (1.56 x 2.36 in.) - 72 dpi - RGB	
<b>152 KB</b>	<b>\$ 15.00</b>
185 x 280 px (2.57 x 3.89 in.) - 72 dpi - RGB	
<b>499 KB</b>	<b>\$ 35.00</b>
335 x 508 px (4.65 x 7.06 in.) - 72 dpi - RGB	
<b>1022 KB</b>	<b>\$ 100.00</b>
480 x 727 px (6.67 x 10.10 in.) - 72 dpi - RGB	
<b>10.0 MB</b>	<b>\$ 250.00</b>
1520 x 2300 px (5.07 x 7.67 in.) - 300 dpi - RGB	
<b>28.5 MB</b>	<b>\$ 300.00</b>
2566 x 3883 px (8.55 x 12.94 in.) - 300 dpi - RGB	
<b>48.7 MB</b>	<b>\$ 350.00</b>
3354 x 5076 px (11.18 x 16.92 in.) - 300 dpi - RGB	

Getty Images reserves the right to pursue unauthorized users of this image or clip. If you violate our intellectual property you may be liable for: actual damages, loss of income, and profits you derive from the use of this image or clip, and, where appropriate, the costs of collection and/or statutory damages up to \$150,000 (USD).

All contents © copyright 1999-2009 Getty Images, Inc. All rights reserved.



gettyimages®



Title: Old schoolhouse on prairie in spring, Washington, USA

Caption: Location: near Kamiak Butte Country Park, Washington, USA.

Creative image #: AK2668-008

License type: Royalty-free

Photographer: [Darrell Gulin](#)

Collection: [Photodisc](#)

Credit: Darrell Gulin

Max file size/dimensions/dpi: 49.4 MB - 3650 x 4734 px (12.17 x 15.78 in.) - 300 dpi - RGB

Release information: This image has a signed property release. This image is available for commercial use.

Keywords: Run-Down, History, Memories, Decline, Education, Travel Destinations, Vertical, Full Length, Outdoors, Colonial Style, Low Angle View, School, Blue, Wood, American Culture, Sky, Spring, Summer, Cirrus, Day, Prairie, Washington State, Color Image, Abandoned, Kamiak Butte Country Park, Remote, Schoolhouse, Series, No People, Building Exterior, Photography. [Find similar images](#)

Availability: Availability for this image cannot be guaranteed until time of purchase.

**Pricing:**



<b>65 KB</b>	<b>\$ 5.00</b>
131 x 170 px (1.82 x 2.36 in.) - 72 dpi - RGB	
<b>177 KB</b>	<b>\$ 15.00</b>
216 x 280 px (3.00 x 3.89 in.) - 72 dpi - RGB	
<b>498 KB</b>	<b>\$ 35.00</b>
362 x 470 px (5.03 x 6.53 in.) - 72 dpi - RGB	
<b>1023 KB</b>	<b>\$ 100.00</b>
519 x 673 px (7.21 x 9.35 in.) - 72 dpi - RGB	
<b>10.00 MB</b>	<b>\$ 250.00</b>
1641 x 2129 px (5.47 x 7.10 in.) - 300 dpi - RGB	
<b>28.5 MB</b>	<b>\$ 300.00</b>
2771 x 3594 px (9.24 x 11.98 in.) - 300 dpi - RGB	
<b>49.4 MB</b>	<b>\$ 350.00</b>
3650 x 4734 px (12.17 x 15.78 in.) - 300 dpi - RGB	

Getty Images reserves the right to pursue unauthorized users of this image or clip. If you violate our intellectual property you may be liable for: actual damages, loss of income, and profits you derive from the use of this image or clip, and, where appropriate, the costs of collection and/or statutory damages up to \$150,000 (USD).

All contents © copyright 1999-2009 Getty Images, Inc. All rights reserved.