

Message from HOME

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New Film and Exhibits Improve Visitor Experience at Homestead National Monument of America

Todd Arrington, Historian, Homestead National Monument of America

Since opening on May 20, 2007, Homestead National Monument of America's new Homestead Heritage Center has increased visitation to the monument by more than 30 percent. Visitors have come from all 50 states and dozens of foreign nations to marvel at the building's unique architecture and, more importantly, learn about the many great and lasting impacts of the Homestead Act of 1862. Just when you thought the visitor experience at the monument couldn't get any better, however, it does! Two major new projects for 2008 will further explain and interpret the Homestead Act and the many ways in which it influenced American history and helped shape our modern nation.

The first of these projects is already complete, and visitors to the monument are enjoying it right now. *Land of Dreams: Homesteading America* is the park's new interpretive film that premiered on April 5, 2008, and has since been seen by thousands. The film offers a sweeping, multi-perspective view of homesteading. Living homesteaders and homesteader descendants in several different states speak about their own experiences or those of their ancestors. American Indians of several different nations also share their views of the Homestead Act. Historians place the Act in context with other events of the era and provide additional factual information.

Director/producer Chuck Dunkerly of the National Park Service's Harpers Ferry Center traveled to more than a dozen states and conducted over forty interviews for the film, which took over two years to make. Dunkerly also made several visits to the monument to show park staff, friends, and partners his progress. The film features beautiful scenery and has no

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narrator; rather, those interviewed speak for themselves, their ancestors, or their tribes. "What we've accomplished with this film is simply incredible," said Mark Engler, Superintendent of Homestead National Monument of America. "It provides a great mix of straight facts and personal views of the Homestead Act. The perspectives of both homesteaders and American Indians really create a balanced, honest, unembellished view of the entire homesteading experience." *Land of Dreams: Homesteading America* would not have been possible without the generous support of Nebraska Public Power, Pinnacle Bank, and First National Beatrice Bank. The 21-minute film is available to see every day at the Homestead Heritage Center.

The monument's second major project for 2008 is the design, fabrication, and placement of 16 new interpretive "wayside" exhibits along the prairie walking trails and at the Freeman School. These new exhibits will speak to a number of different subjects relating to both the Daniel Freeman homestead on which the monument is located and homesteading in other parts of the country. The new wayside exhibits will be in place by mid-July.

These types of exhibits are perfect for providing contextual information about a specific place, so each new wayside will address issues associated with the spot on which they are standing. These subjects will include: homesteaders' erection of fences; encounters with wildlife; how homesteaders chose their settlement locations; the freight road that once ran through Daniel Freeman homestead; soil degradation and the resulting Dust Bowl; different types of pioneer houses; the tallgrass prairie ecosystem; early farmers' needs for timber and water; the role of

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NEW FILM AND EXHIBITS IMPROVE VISITOR EXPERIENCE AT HOMESTEAD NATIONAL MONUMENT OF AMERICA . . . CONTINUED

one-room schools in homesteader communities; and many more.

“Outdoor wayside exhibits add a lot to what visitors can learn about homesteading when they come to the monument,” said Engler. “They provide interpretive, site-specific information that helps people make connections to various places, and they encourage visitors to explore the restored tallgrass prairie and the Freeman School sites at Homestead National Monument of America.

The wayside exhibit project has been underway since December 2006, five months before the opening of the Homestead Heritage Center. The new exhibits are being designed by Roberta Wendel, an interpretive media specialist with the National Park Service’s Midwest Regional Office in Omaha. Monument staff members have provided critical information and assistance throughout the process to ensure that the new exhibits are accurate and properly incorporate the monument’s interpretive themes. The new outdoor wayside exhibit project is being funded through a generous grant from the Toro Giving Program and Exmark Manufacturing.

These two exciting projects will greatly increase visitor understanding and enjoyment of Homestead National Monument of America and the impacts of the Homestead Act of 1862. They are also outstanding examples of public support for the monument and the great things that can be accomplished through partnerships. The staff of Homestead National Monument of America invites everyone to visit and to enjoy Land of Dreams: Homesteading America today and the new interpretive wayside exhibits by mid-summer 2008. We look forward to hosting you!

THE EXCITEMENT JUST HASN’T QUIT

There are many definitions of aging. One involves the sense that time is speeding by and a year just isn’t as long as it used to be. That is certainly the feeling of people associated with the new Homestead Heritage Center. How is it possible that the amazing Dedication of the facility happened over a year ago? At least one of the reasons that time has just zipped by has nothing to do with personal ages. (This is my version, and I’m sticking to it.) The reason is that the excitement just hasn’t quit! The most recent Big Event was the premier of the film Land of Dreams: Homesteading America in April. The voice of our favorite Homestead National Monument historian is featured throughout the film in just the right places. This fascinating film does not rely on the “talking head” style of documentation. If it did, Todd Arrington would definitely be a star. Chuck Dunkerly, the producer/director, chose to show images of what Todd (as well as the other people interviewed) describes. For those of us privileged to preview various versions of the film, the final version of definitely the best one. I thought this was version five, but Mr. Dunkerly assured me it was actually version twenty-five! However you count, this is a film worth seeing. It is not just the local version of “Welcome to this National Park Site” although you certainly will be welcome at Homestead National Monument of America. This film is much more. When you see this film, I guarantee you will learn at least one fact you didn’t know about homesteading, and you will enjoy the experience.

Happy viewing!

– Laureen Riedesel, President,
Friends of Homestead National
Monument of America

COMMUNICATION EXCHANGE

The Friends of Homestead National Monument of America have been brought together to assist the Homestead National Monument of America in telling the story of the Homestead Act of 1862 in various ways. The entire mission of the “Friends” is described in the Homestead National Monument web pages and in the new Blog. These addresses are listed below.

A large focus of the Friends at this time is communication with you. We want to help facilitate an exchange of information in three ways. 1. The Homestead Monument Web Site has frequent changes to inform you of the great influence the Homestead Act of 1862 had on the development of our country since that time and the stories of those persons contributing to that progress. 2. By registering your e-mail address at homesteadcongress@gmail.com you will receive our newsletter and special homestead stories of persons living as the pioneers of the national history that we read about.

3. We do appreciate your comments. Our Blog offers opportunity for your response. We have heard from many states and welcome our teacher friend in France and her students who indicated interest in learning more about Women Homesteaders. Let us hear from you. The web addresses are listed below.

– Jerry Davison, Newsletter Editor &
Homestead Congress Facilitator

Please visit our websites:

Friends of Homestead National Monument of America
<http://www.nps.gov/home/supportyourpark/joinourfriends.htm>

Homestead National Monument of America
<http://www.nps.gov/home>

Homestead Congress blog
<http://homesteadcongress.blogspot.com/>

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