CHAPTER 4

MONTANA IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

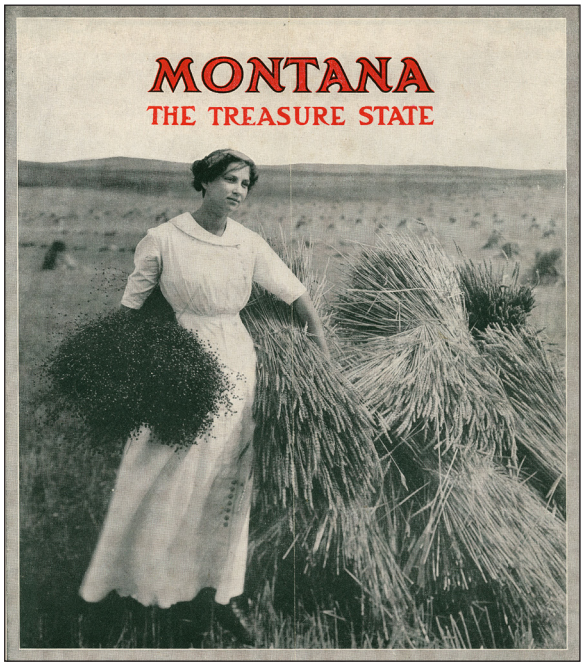
- Why did homesteaders come to Montana?
- What is assimilation and how did the push for assimilation affect Montana Indians?
- Who immigrated to Montana after 1920?

Machines like this steam-powered thresher helped farmers harvest wheat faster than they had been able to with horse-drawn machinery.

When people think of settlers moving west, they mostly imagine families crossing the **plains** (flat land) in covered wagons. Most Montanans, though, came to the state in the twentieth century. They came by train, car, or even airplane.

HOMESTEADING

No single movement affected Montana history more than homesteading. Between 1909 and 1917, thousands of people from all over the world rushed to Montana to fulfill the dream of owning their own farm.



Advertisements like this one from 1915 made it seem easy to farm in Montana.

In 1862, the government wanted to fill the United States up with farmers, so it passed a law that gave people 160 acres of land if they would live on their farms and grow crops. At first, **homesteaders** (people who received land from the U.S. government in exchange for farming that land) went to the rich farmlands of the Midwest, where there was enough rain and good soil. When that land was all taken, they started looking farther west. Most homesteaders came to Montana after 1909 when the Homestead Act was changed to allow settlers to **claim** (take for their own) more land (320 acres, or the size of 242 football fields).

Some homesteaders found out about **opportunities** (a chance for something better) in Montana from friends and

family members who were already here. Most learned about opportunities from advertisements. Railroad companies **published** (printed) many of these ads. The railroads wanted farmers to move to Montana, so they could have more customers. To get people to come to Montana, they published advertisements in many different languages. They also hired speakers to travel across Europe to encourage people to **immigrate** (move from one country to another).

Push factors (things that make people want to leave their homes) played a role, too. War, **poverty** (being poor), and **discrimination** (treating a group of people unfairly) led many

Many homesteaders lived in small "homestead shacks" until they had the time and money to build something bigger.

Swedes, Norwegians, and Germans to leave their homes and take out homesteads in Montana. By the end of the homestead **boom** (time of great prosperity or rapid growth), newcomers had claimed almost twenty-five million acres of land in Montana under the Homestead Act.

HARD TIMES

Farmers need rain to grow crops. When homesteaders first started coming to Montana, the weather was unusually wet. **Drought** (lack of rain) hit Montana in 1917, and the next few years were even worse. **Prairie** (grassland) fires burned houses, barns, and fields. Insects ate everything green in sight. Topsoil blew off the fields, creating giant dust storms. By 1925, many of the **immigrants** (people who move to a new country) who had come to Montana to homestead had left the state.

Hordes of crickets invaded eastern Montana between 1936 and 1941. Farmers defended their crops by building "cricket traps" like this one.

The drought taught farmers and ranchers that they needed much more than 320 acres to make a living. Farmers and ranchers who stayed bought the land **abandoned** (left) by their neighbors.

By 1950, the average Montana farm was 1,689 acres. In 2019, the average size of a Montana farm or ranch was 2,156 acres. How much bigger is that than a 320-acre homestead?

EVEN HARDER TIMES FOR MONTANA INDIANS

The immigrants who came to Montana were looking for better lives for themselves and their families. Unfortunately, their arrival made life worse for the people who were already here.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were horrible times for Montana Indians. The federal government pushed tribes to give up most of their land. Buffalo had been hunted almost to **extinction** (death of a species). To survive, Indian people began to farm and raise cattle. The land on many **reservations** (lands tribes **reserved**—kept—for their own use) was not very good for farming. Many people went hungry.

The federal government wanted Indians to give up their own **cultures** (languages, customs, and ideas) and adopt European ways. This is called **assimilation.** Even though the **Indian agents** (non-Indians the government put in charge of

Indian agents encouraged tribal members to adopt non-Indian methods of survival, including growing and canning fruits and vegetables.

reservations) made it hard, Indians worked to keep their cultures alive. They continued to speak their own languages and practice many of their **traditional** (old) ways. They also continued to educate their children. Before Europeans came, Indian children did not go to school. Instead, their families taught them about the natural world (science) as well as about their history and how they should behave (social studies). They learned to make art. They also learned how to hunt, gather food and medicine, and make tools as well as other skills they needed to help themselves and their families once they grew up.

To force Indians to **assimilate** (become absorbed into the majority culture), the government funded boarding schools. At these schools, children as young as six lived apart from their families. The government wanted to separate the children from their families so they could control everything they learned and

destroy the connections children had to their own cultures. Parents were punished if they refused to send their children to boarding schools. At boarding schools, children were punished if they spoke their native languages or tried to practice any of their traditional ways.

Life at many of the boarding schools was very hard. Students studied for half the day and worked the other half. Students did the school's laundry. They worked in the school's dairies or fields to produce their own food. They worked in the school kitchen, and they sewed most of their own clothing.

Look at the faces of the boys in this 1910 picture from the St. Labre boarding school on the Northern Cheyenne reservation. How do you think they felt about their short haircuts, scratchy wool suits, and giant bow ties?

There was not enough money for good food, and children lived in very crowded dormitories. Many students got sick at boarding school and some died. Sometimes, when children returned to their reservations after attending school, they discovered that they had forgotten their native languages and only knew how to speak English. Sometimes that meant they could no longer talk with their parents or grandparents.

Montana Indian parents and tribal leaders knew that their children needed to learn new skills. They did not like the boarding schools, but they did like some of the things (like math, reading, and writing) that students learned there. They fought for the right to send their children to day schools, so they could learn while living with their own families. Tribal leaders knew that education was important. They believed that, at day schools, young people could learn the things they needed to be successful in the changing world while keeping their connections to their own cultures.

IMMIGRATION AFTER 1920

Large-scale immigration to Montana ended with the end of the homestead boom, but the state has continued to attract some new immigrants. The Mexican Revolution was a push factor that sent many people from Mexico north looking for work. Farmers needed people to work in the sugar beet fields in eastern

Montana, and many Mexicans found jobs there.

German-speaking Hutterites came from Europe seeking religious freedom. Hutterites live on large farms called colonies. The first colony in Montana was established in 1911, but most Hutterites came to Montana after World War II (1939–1945).

Mining and logging attracted many immigrants during the nineteenth century because ther were a big part of Montana's **economy** (businesses and jobs). However, after the 1920s, these **industries** (types of businesses) no longer drew many newcomers. Big machines did much of the work originally done by people; people still worked as miners and loggers in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s , but the industries did not need as many workers as they did before World War II.

In the late 1970s, many Hmongs settled in Montana, particularly in the Missoula area. The Hmong, or "hill people" of Southeast Asia, fought on the same side as U.S. troops during the Vietnam War. After the war, they were chased from their homes in Laos and Vietnam. Now many make Montana their home.

Nou Yang, a Hmong refugee who moved to Missoula in 1985, made this embroidered "story cloth." It shows scenes from village life in her native country of Laos.

GLOSSARY

Abandon leave

Adapted changed to fit new conditions

Allies friends

Allotment portion

Allotment policy dividing Indian reservations into separate farms for each family

Amber yellow

Ancestors family members who lived long ago

Ancient very old

Archaeologists scientists who study the past by analyzing objects people have left behind

Artifacts objects created by people

Assimilate/assimilation to be absorbed into the majority culture, in this case, the white American culture

Atlatl a spear thrower

Bacteriology the study of bacteria

Badlands an area of rocks and hills with little vegetation created by erosion

Band group

Belongings things

Bison buffalo

Capotes coats made from thick wool blankets

Chaps leather leggings worn on top of pants

Chinook a warm wind that blows down the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains

Claim take for their own

Climate typical weather condition

Communal group

Constitution document that sets the rules for government

Continent one of the main areas of land on earth

Continental Divide a mountain ridge that separates North America and determines whether water flows east to the Atlantic Ocean or west to the Pacific Ocean

Culture a shared system of behavior, attitudes, and understandings; language, customs, and ideas

Descendants a person's children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, etc.

Discrimination treating a group of people unfairly

Disease sickness

Distinct separate

Diversity variety

Drought lack of rain

Economy businesses and jobs

Environment land, water, climate

Epidemic rapid spread of disease

Erosion the process by which rock or soil is gradually taken away by wind, rain, or water

Essential most important

Ethnicity place besides the U.S. people or their parents were born

Extinct gone

Extinction death of a species

Fell cut down trees

Fertile good for growing things foothills: hills at the edge of a mountain range

Geography where things are, the study of particular places

Geologists scientists who study the earth

Geology minerals, rocks, and soil and the study of these things

Great Plains the flat land region west of the Mississippi River and east of the Rocky Mountains

Homesteader someone who received land from the U.S. government in exchange for farming that land

Immigrant someone who moves to a new country to live

Immigrate move from one country to another

Indian agent a non-Indian that the government put in charge of the reservation

Industries types of businesses

Leased rented

Lumber wood for building

Mechanization using machines to replace work that people once did

Natural resources things found in nature and used by people

Negotiate discuss to come to an agreement

Opportunities chances or a chance for something better

Oral histories important stories people pass down

Pacifist someone who believes that problems cannot be solved by fighting

Pelts skins

Plains flat land

Prairies flat grasslands

Poultry birds raised on farms, like chickens and turkeys

Poverty being poor

Precipitation rain and snow

Predate come before

Prospectors people looking for gold or other precious metals

Published printed

Pull factors good things that make people want to move to a new place

Push factors things that make people want to leave their homes

Push-pull factors things that influence immigration (that push you out of your home country and pull you to another place)

Reserved kept

Reservation an area of land that a tribe or tribes reserved (kept) for their own use

Residents people who live in a place

Resilience strength

Resources useful things

Resourceful (good at figuring things out)

Sovereign self-governing

Sovereignty self-rule

Spacious large

Specific exact

Strike gold discover

Suffrage activist someone working to win women the right to vote

Suffrage vote

Surplus extra

Taxes money people pay the government so the government can provide services

Timber wood for building

Time immemorial as long as anyone can remember

Toxic poisonous

Traditional old

Transcontinental all the way across the continent

Transport move

Treasurer the person who keeps track of an organization's money

Treaty agreement between nations

Unique not the same as any other

IMAGE CREDITS

To Come