

# Modern Day Homesteading in Wyoming

Larry Jones

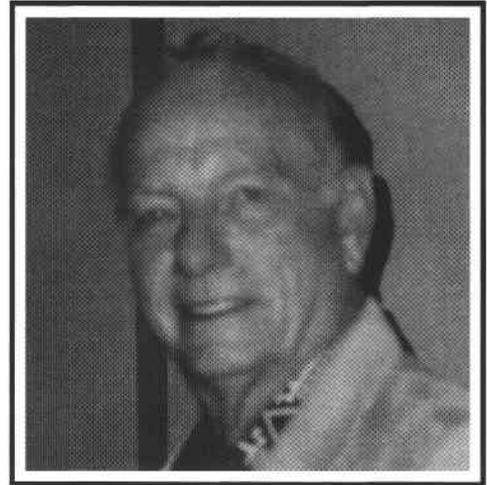
I'm sure many of you remember Joe McCracken and the thumbnail sketches and anecdotes he used to tell about the various places we held our ASAC meetings. I always enjoyed these talks very much and thought you might enjoy some first-hand information regarding the homesteading that occurred around this area in this century.

Those who drove to this meeting had the opportunity to observe the local terrain—miles of sagebrush, hills, sagebrush, and more sagebrush. Then you cross over one more hill and before your eyes is an area of productive farmland, green and lush in season with alfalfa, beans, corn, sugarbeets, potatoes, and various other crops. How can this be—the great difference between barren sagebrush land and productive farmland? The answer is water. Without it, this country isn't very productive, if you don't consider tourism and oil.

We are holding the meeting in the Big Horn Basin, a large flat valley surrounded by mountains. The lower portion of the basin was homesteaded after World War I on lands watered by the Garland Irrigation District. The valley has several sweet corn and garden pea canneries. A sugar beet processing plant was in operation and several elevator operators contracted with farmers for seed peas and sweet corn seed. Believe it or not, this Big Horn Basin is quite a garden spot wherever water reaches the land.

In January 1939, work began on the Heart Mountain Irrigation Division. Water used to irrigate the Heart Mountain lands comes directly from the Buffalo Bill Reservoir about 1 mile outside Cody. An outstanding feature of this system is an inverted siphon that is 8'8" in diameter and 3,494 feet long. It carries the water over the rough terrain to smoother terrain where the large canal moves the water down the valley. If you drive toward Yellowstone Park just outside Cody, you will drive by this outstanding marvel. The Pearl Harbor bombing and World War II halted work on the Heart Mountain canal and distributing system. Attention was focused on building the Heart Mountain Relocation Camp for west coast Japanese evacuees who were interned in camps of this type for the duration of the war. This camp opened on August 12, 1942 and the last train out was on November 9, 1945. Four hundred sixty-eight barracks housing 11,000 Japanese were built at this location. This was 1 of 10 relocation camps built throughout the west for this purpose.

After the war on September 23, 1946, a drawing was



held by the Bureau of Reclamation for people interested in homesteading this area. The final 104 farm units were awarded to the winners . . . or losers! This area lies between Cody and Powell, Wyoming. The homesteads were no longer the standard 160 acres that we read about through the land rush days, but the acreage was determined by the land area where water could be run. Large gullies and draws would govern the size and shape of each homestead. Now the fun began, there was raw land and plenty of sagebrush, but not much else. The first order of business was to setup housekeeping in the old internment camp the Japanese had recently vacated. It was home for several months while we cleared the raw land of sagebrush—cut, raked, piled, and burned sagebrush—cut, raked, and burned more sagebrush. Contour canals were dug to move water and distribute it across future fields since the Bureau of Reclamation canal system only delivered water to 1 head gate location at each homestead.

The homesteaders were allowed to purchase 2 of the internment camp barracks from the government for one dollar each. These wood and tarpaper buildings were shells measuring 120' by 20' so most of us cut them in sections and hauled them to our home sites. The old surplus army trucks got a good workout at this time. Some of these building sections formed the nucleus of our future houses and barns. We demolished the remainder of our barracks to use as salvage lumber to convert into other buildings, sheds, barns, outhouses, and corrals as we thought necessary. This was a great time in our lives to learn teamwork and cooperation. We had to do this in order to survive. However, it was easy

since everyone was young, a recent veteran, and everyone had very little money but lots of ambition. Everyone had great expectations and great hopes; we were all chasing the proverbial rainbow. Farm equipment was hard to obtain after the war so we did a great deal of joint-buying and cooperative loaning back and forth with the equipment we had. We lit kerosene lamps and hauled drinking water for quite some time. The youth of today have no idea how easy and good their lives are.

The winters in this area were not too severe. We had very little snowfall but a great deal of cold wind. Everyone still had the problem of heating tarpaper-covered homes and we looked forward to installing propane bottled gas stoves to replace the old potbelly wood heating stoves. Looking back on those times, the winters weren't all bad. That was when we worked on building and improving the homestead—building kitchen cabinets to replace the orange crate cabinets we were using, trying to insulate the walls, in general doing everything to improve living conditions, and building the barns and sheds we needed. Wintertime was also the time for socializing. Potluck dinners and dances were held in the old internment recreation center on Saturday nights. There was a tremendous amount of comradery and cooperation among homesteaders. That is something really missing in today's society and probably explains a lot of the modern-day problems with school discipline, youth drug abuse, and family values. Winters were also when many of us worked jobs in town to supplement the meager bank accounts. Forty-hour-work weeks and welfare programs were unknown in those days but good or bad, we all managed to survive.

One amusing anecdote should be mentioned at this time. One day I was working on the barn and Gil had just come back from town with some groceries. She carried in the first armload, set them down, and started back to the car for the rest. I heard a blood curdling scream and then my name called in a loud, distressed voice. I jumped from the barn and ran to the house. "Larry, Larry, there is a snake on the front step." Boy was she right—a large rattlesnake lay coiled on the step, just sunning himself. Had she just stepped over it with the groceries or did he crawl and curl up that quickly? We will never know. "Kill it," she called to me! I reminded her that the pistol was in the house with her. "Oh no, I'll hand the pistol out the window to you and you shoot it," she exclaimed. She did and I did. So much for just another calm, peaceful day on the homestead.

As with any endeavor of this type, a few of the original

homesteaders did quite well, more did fair, and many of the rest of us headed for greener pastures. Why did we leave? I've been asked that many times. The third year we had a good crop of seed peas coming along. One morning when I went out to change the water setting I saw an area about the size of a city block where the ground had settled and dropped about 2 feet. I needed to let the ground dry enough in order to move equipment in to dig a new ditch around the sinkhole. This was the first of many sinkholes that developed, until we finally lost our crop. The settling was caused when the water compacted the loose soil in the valley, similar to compacting the backfill to your house. One night we were awakened by a loud cracking in the house—another sinkhole was being formed—this time it was under the corner of our house. At that point, my wife made a very profound statement and I quote—"We are going back to Denver" and we began packing.

A footnote is necessary here about the old Heart Mountain Relocation Center. Only one chimney from the hospital heating plant and a barracks are all that remain today of the camp. In 1977, a memorial plaque was dedicated to permanently mark the location of the camp. On June 21, 1986, another plaque was dedicated to honor the more than 600 Japanese internees who left the Heart Mountain Camp to serve in World War II in the armed services and to the 22 Heart Mountaineers who gave their lives for our country. They asked for the right to serve and felt that somehow they needed to prove their loyalty to our country. In 1987 the site was included in the National Registry of Historic Places.

Two people were very instrumental in preserving the historical significance of the Heart Mountain Internment Camp and for its inclusion in the National Registry. Chester and Mary Blackburn made public awareness about Heart Mountain their retirement project and were chosen as "Heroes of Our Times." They appeared in the July 6, 1986 issue of Newsweek Magazine in recognition of their dedication to this effort. They were homesteaders, neighbors, and good friends of ours over many long years. Gil and I are proud to have known them. Chester passed on to his reward last spring and Mary still lives in Ralston, Wyoming.

Looking back through time, it was an experience my wife and I will always remember; I'd like to think we are better people because of it. Did we learn a lot from it—YES. Would we want to go through that experience again—NO WAY.