

# South Dakota

**(Historical Essay on Agriculture and  
Rural Life)**

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## **SOUTH DAKOTA**

Agriculture is fundamental to the history of South Dakota. Farming and ranching form the bedrock of the state's economy, and the land and climate are integral to its experience.

The Missouri River splits South Dakota geographically, with the central lowlands or east river region suited to crop production and the Missouri plateau or west river region, with a shorter growing season and less rainfall, acclimated to ranching. The Black Hills define the western edge of South Dakota.

South Dakota's history is characterized by cultural diversity, environmental challenges, and periods of agricultural prosperity and depression. Prior to European American settlement, the agrarian Arikara and the itinerant Sioux (Dakota) inhabited the land that is now South Dakota. White westward expansion brought dispossession and exploitation of the native peoples, irrevocably disrupting their cultures and livelihood.

In 1803, the land was acquired by the United States government as part of the Louisiana Purchase, and in 1861, it was organized into Dakota Territory. The Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 consigned native populations to the Great Sioux Reservation, which comprised the western half of present-day South Dakota. Even with the Homestead Act of 1862, the settlement of eastern Dakota at first progressed slowly and was essentially confined to the southeast corner of the territory. Then the arrival of the railroads, aggressive advertising, and favorable weather patterns gave rise to the Great Dakota Boom. From 1878 to 1887, the rush for land spurred phenomenal growth in the eastern half of Dakota Territory. The discovery of gold in the Black Hills and the opening of the hills to white settlement also stimulated development. The boom brought Scandinavian, German, German-Russian, Bohemian, Irish, and Dutch immigrants. The 1900 census identified over 60% of South Dakota's total population as foreign born or of foreign stock, primarily of northwest European origins.

In 1889, the year of South Dakota's statehood, the Great Sioux Reservation was broken up into six smaller reservations, and in February 1890, some nine million acres of land were opened to settlement. The lack of railroads west of the river, and the availability of good land in eastern South Dakota limited western agricultural settlement, however. Until the turn of the twentieth century, the cattle industry reigned supreme in western South Dakota. Then from 1902 to 1915, with the expansion of the railroads, the state sustained a second agricultural boom, which tripled South Dakota's population in the west. Over four million acres of Indian land went on sale, allocated by lottery. Many of the new settlers were of American stock, recruited from Southern Plains states and eastern cities.

Boom times in South Dakota alternated with periods of drought, crop failure, and economic depression, as experienced in the 1890s, 1920s, and, most profoundly, in the 1930s. The Great Depression inflicted extreme agricultural devastation on South Dakota, forcing farm foreclosures and mass migration from the state. Many families were able to remain on their land only with the help of federal relief programs and payments.

The 1940s and World War II brought increased agricultural production and better economic times. Heightened demand due to war needs, clement weather conditions, and improved farming methods were all contributing factors. Subsequent years saw accelerated mechanization, a steady decline in farm population, and increases in farm size. Despite changing practices and diversifying industry, agriculture remained central to South Dakota's economy.

During the second half of the twentieth century, trends already visible began to accelerate. Mechanization of farm production was carried to new levels and average farm size greatly expanded. Increased use of herbicides and fertilizers helped stimulate crop yields. As involvement in global markets expanded, the drive for new export markets became more intense.

Agricultural subsidies, introduced under the New Deal in the 1930s, became a progressively more important part of farm income. Efforts by the Eisenhower administration, under Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson, to cut back on support payments were so unpopular that George McGovern parleyed the issue into a seat in the House of Representatives in 1956 and used the situation to build up the Democratic party in the state into a competitive position. Since then, South Dakota and other farm state politicians have successfully fought efforts to eliminate or substantially reduce farm subsidies, but urban spokesmen and representatives increasingly see the farm program as an unnecessary expense to support a special interest group that does not really need or deserve such aid.

In recent years, the introduction of hog and cattle confinement facilities and large dairies has raised the specter of concentrated agriculture and made it a hot issue in the state. New methods of genetic engineering and other advanced scientific approaches to production likewise have interjected controversial issues into the political arena. The whole field of agriculture is closely tied to the economic health of the towns that provide services for farmers, and questions about town survival, economic development, and rural revitalization are all of great concern.

South Dakota boasts a rich body of literature recording its agricultural heritage. Since territorial times, farm journals and newspapers were vital in examining the issues of importance to farmers and ranchers. The *Dakota Farmer* and other local and regional publications regularly discussed the subjects of drought and depression, crops, farming methods, and politics. Popular topics of debate in the early years of the twentieth century included artesian wells, the Belle Fourche Irrigation project (a government effort to promote permanent agriculture based settlement in western South Dakota) and dry farming techniques, as widely promoted by South Dakota farmer, author, and lecturer Hardy Webster Campbell.

Promotion played a major role in South Dakota's agricultural story. Among the prime boosters of the region were newspapers, railroads, and the territorial government. The papers were enthusiastic promulgators for the region, often printing weekly columns and special advertising editions. The railroads were at the forefront of promotional activity, widely publicizing the region's agricultural productivity and abundance of free and cheap land. With the establishment of the territorial Bureau of Immigration in 1871, the railroads and the Bureau forged a cooperative relationship, sharing and disseminating large quantities of advertising literature.

Representative promotional titles published by the Bureau (later the Department) of Immigration included *Behold, I Show You a Delightful Land*, published in 1885 as a souvenir for visitors to the Dakota exhibit at the New Orleans World's Fair, *South Dakota, the Empire of Opportunity*, and *Corn is King in South Dakota*. In a later version of the latter title, alfalfa attained the status of queen.

During the 1910s and 1920s, promotional trains with agricultural exhibits toured the state extolling the benefits of alfalfa and other legumes and of diversified farming. Supplementing the exhibits were promotional publications such as the *Dakota Farmer's* "Alfalfa-Sweet Clover News." Despite the optimistic message of boosters, agricultural success was never guaranteed. Environment, geography, and politics all factored into the mix.

South Dakota's sense of its vulnerable economic status led to a tradition of political activism and the creation of agricultural political organizations. Incentives for protest included low crop and livestock prices and resentment against the railroads and industrial monopolies. The Farmers Alliance formed in the late 1880s, evolving into the Populist Party in the 1890s. The politically opposite Farmers Union and Farm Bureau each organized in the 1910s, and the South Dakota Stock Growers Association was first established in 1892. These groups generated a variety of publications, including the *Dakota Ruralist* and the *South Dakota Union Farmer*.

Also providing a published record of its activities was the state's Department of Agriculture, established in 1885. Among its initial responsibilities were territorial fairs, livestock shows, and farmers' institutes in conjunction with the agricultural college.

The founding of Dakota Agricultural College, later South Dakota State University, as the region's land-grant institution in 1881 and the establishment of the Agricultural Experiment Station in 1887 were instrumental in furthering agricultural education and research. Aiming to add something of value to the knowledge of the state's resources and possibilities, the station produced a rich assortment of bulletins and reports, describing the results of agricultural experiments adapted to local climate and soil conditions. The 1894 report estimated that more than 200,000 copies of the bulletins had been distributed. In 1896, the college established the nation's first dry-land farming experiment site at Highmore, testing and developing grasses and forage crops.

A notable figure at the Experiment Station was horticulture professor Niels Ebbesen Hansen. Commissioned as the nation's first plant explorer by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, he undertook eight trips to Europe and Asia seeking hardy plant strains that would flourish in the rigorous climate of the Northern Great Plains. Hansen is credited with introducing over three hundred new varieties of plants to the region, including Cossack alfalfa from Siberia, crested wheat grass, and brome grass.

The passage of the Smith-Lever Act in 1914 and the consequent establishment of the Cooperative Extension Service greatly boosted agricultural education opportunities at the land-grant college, allowing agents to make direct contact with the men and women on South Dakota farms. The extension service's numerous circulars, written in popular style, contained information of practical value to the state's rural families, focusing on crops, livestock, home economics, and 4-H topics.

The wealth of information contained in South Dakota's agricultural literature and its essential role in documenting the social, political, and economic history of the state speak to the critical importance of its preservation. Allowing the deterioration of these resources which define South Dakota's character and rural way of life would constitute an immense cultural loss.