

# North Dakota's Agricultural History

Agriculture is an essential part of North Dakota's history.



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## *Native Americans:* North Dakota's First Agriculturists

Native Americans were in the area many years before it was called Dakota Territory. The Dakota, Nakota and Lakota people of the Sioux Nation were nomadic (wandering) and hunted, gathered or traded for food. The Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara farmed, raising food to eat and trade. The arrival of horses in the late 1700s gave Native Americans more options for finding and trading food.

Meriwether Lewis, William Clark and the Corps of Discovery men met the Mandan in 1804 near present-day Washburn, N.D. The Mandan helped the men hunt elk, deer and bison. They also traded their crops for the explorers' goods.

The word **Dakota** means **friend** in the Dakota language.

# Abraham Lincoln's Impact on North Dakota

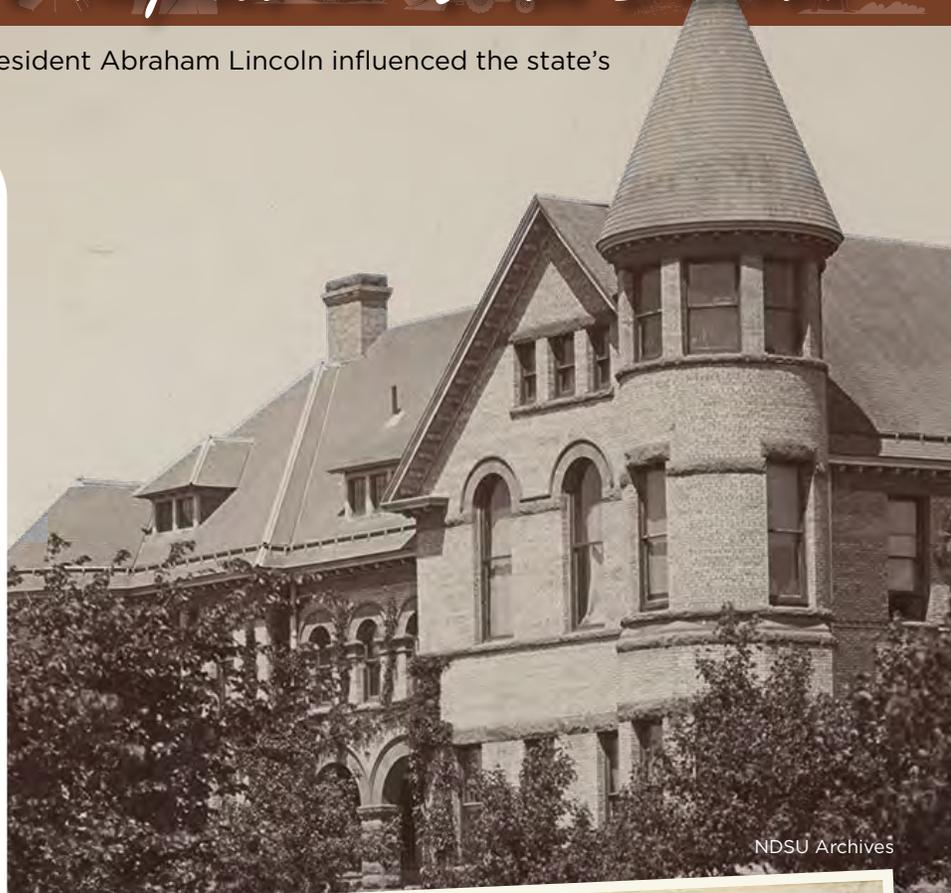
Although he never visited North Dakota, President Abraham Lincoln influenced the state's history with several pieces of legislation.

## Lincoln's Legislation

Write the letter from the list of legislations to the correct description.

- A. Northern Pacific Railway
- B. Morrill Land-Grant Colleges Act
- C. Dakota Territory
- D. Homestead Act
- E. U.S. Department of Agriculture

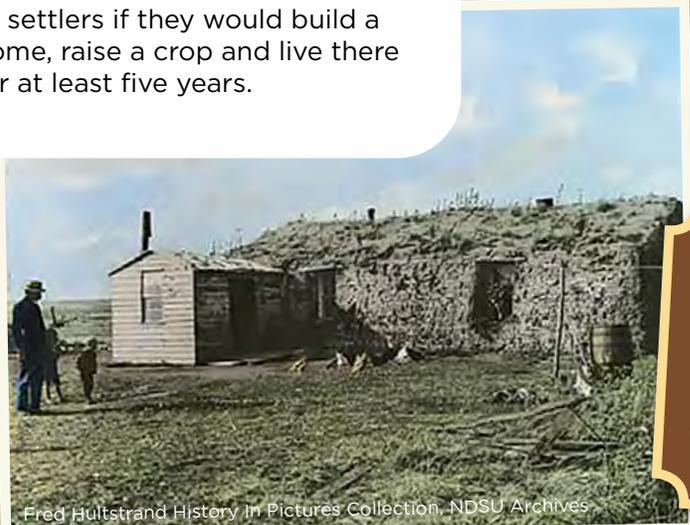
- Was organized in 1861 and then divided in 1889 to become the two states of North Dakota and South Dakota.
- Provided public lands for colleges specializing in agriculture and the mechanical arts so rural people could have an opportunity for higher education.
- This federal agency provides information and education, leads food safety efforts, markets ag products, provides nutrition programs and much more.
- A government charter made this the first train to lay tracks in Dakota Territory. Rail then became the primary transportation for settlers.
- Provided 160 acres of free land to settlers if they would build a home, raise a crop and live there for at least five years.



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Fred Hultstrand History In Pictures Collection, NDSU Archives

**Fun Fact**  
When people were deciding what to call the states created from Dakota Territory, there was discussion about naming our state after Abraham Lincoln. If that had happened, we would be living in the state of Lincoln instead of North Dakota.

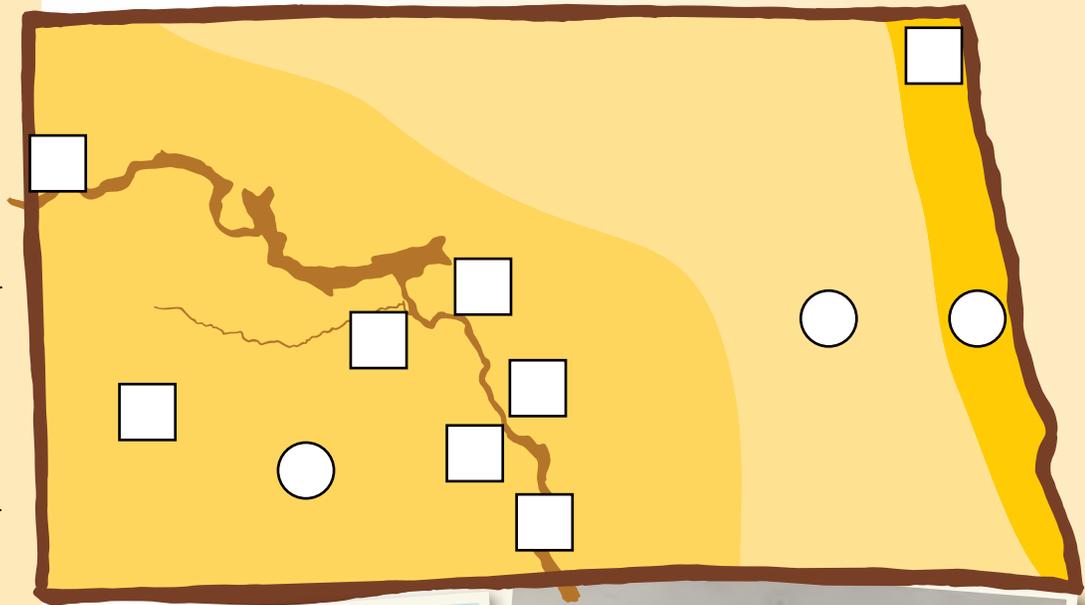
## North Dakota's Roots are in Agriculture

North Dakota's land is ideal for farming and ranching, despite a short growing season and relative lack of moisture.

**On the North Dakota map, label:** (Hint: the first three are circles)

1. Red River Valley region — fertile black soil for crops
2. Drift prairie region — rolling prairie for crops and livestock plus wetlands for wildlife
3. Missouri plateau region — drier for livestock and some crops
4. Missouri River
5. Missouri and Knife Rivers — where North Dakota's first farmers, the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara, raised crops
6. Pembina — the state's first white settlement in 1801 as a Northwest Company fur trading post
7. Fort Mandan — where the Corps of Discovery spent the winter of 1804-05
8. Fort Union — where the American Fur Company controlled the region's trading
9. Fort Lincoln — where General George Armstrong Custer left for the Little Big Horn
10. Medora — where Theodore Roosevelt ranched and Marquis de Morès built a beef packing plant
11. North Dakota's capital city

# North Dakota

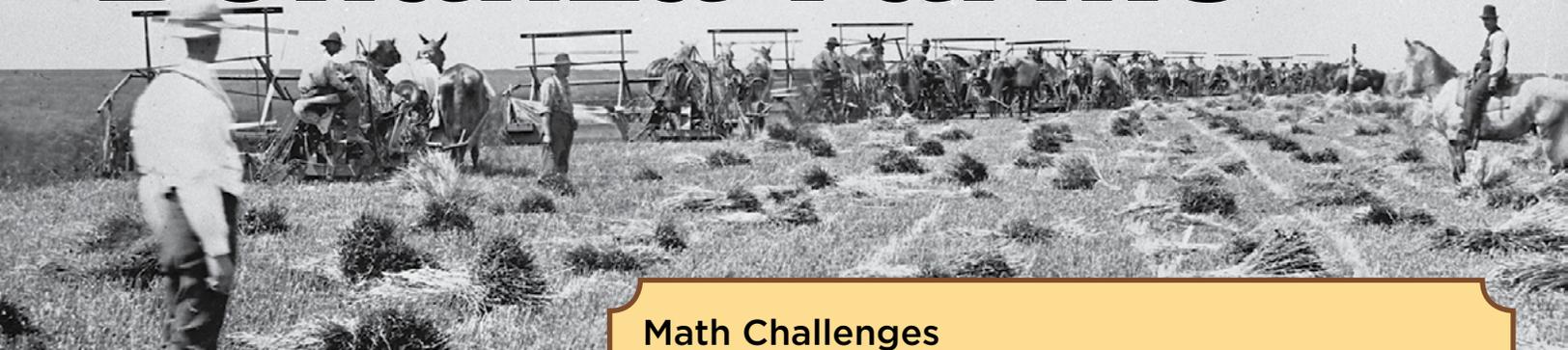


## Life on the Early Farms

Check the box of the correctly spelled word to complete each sentence.

1. Homesteaders could get up to 160 ( acres or  akers) of land from the government with their promise to live and work on the land.
2. Other ( settelers or  settlers) chose to purchase inexpensive land sold by railroads, government or other landowners.
3. As new ( sitizens or  citizens) moved to Dakota Territory, railroads were built and towns were begun across the state.
4. Homes in the late 1800s and early 1900s were sometimes built by cutting strips from the thick ( prayrie or  prairie) sod.
5. The sod strips were stacked like the logs for a log ( cabbin or  cabin).
6. Later, frame houses replaced the sod houses or tar paper ( shacks or  shaks). These often were bought ready-to-assemble from Sears or Wards.

# Bonanza Farms



## *The Largest Farms in the World*

Northern Pacific Railway land agent James Power realized the region's soil was perfect for growing wheat. The railroad advertised across the U.S. and around the world to encourage people to settle in Dakota Territory to live and raise crops. People came from Canada, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Russia and other countries.

In the 1870s, Power urged men to become landowners of giant new farms that could produce huge fields of wheat. He called them bonanza farms because **bonanza** means a source of great wealth.

The bonanza farms needed many workers. In 1875, the average U.S. farm was 144 acres of land. Bonanza farms were at least 3,000 acres, and some were as large as 65,000 acres. Bonanza farms provided work for up to 500 men and women. They planted and harvested crops, tended horses and mules that pulled the farm equipment, gardened, prepared food and much more.

Oliver Dalrymple managed and then owned the first bonanza farm. His great grandson, Jack Dalrymple, served as North Dakota's governor 2010-2016.

By the 1890s, many bonanza farms had been broken up into smaller farms. These farms continued to grow wheat but also other crops and livestock.

## Math Challenges

Figure the answers for these math problems.

1. One section of land is one square mile. There are 640 acres in a section. How many acres are in  $\frac{1}{4}$  section?

2. In the 1880s, North Dakota wheat produced about 12 bushels of grain per acre. Today production is about 40 bushels per acre. How many more bushels of wheat would be raised today than in 1880 on a 750-acre farm?

3. In 1900, an average farmer with a team of horses could produce enough food for about 7 people. Today, an average farmer can produce enough food for about 155 people. How many more people can one farmer now feed?

4. The Fargo division of the Northern Pacific Railway had a total of 1,167 route miles between Fargo and Mandan. The main line had 216 miles. How many miles of route were branch lines?

5. In 1900, about 239,250 people worked on North Dakota farms and ranches. That was 75% of the state's population of 319,000. Today about 39,200 North Dakotans farm and ranch, which is just 5% of the state's population of 784,000. How many more people worked on North Dakota farms and ranches in 1900 than do today?

6. If a farmer planted 5 acres per hour with a horse-drawn planter in 1900, how many acres did he plant in an 11-hour day?

7. Today's farmer can plant 50 acres per hour with a tractor and seeder. How many acres can she plant in an 11-hour day?

8. How many more acres can a farmer plant in an 11-hour day now compared with 1900?

# King Wheat

Wheat was Dakota Territory's first successful crop. Millions of bushels of spring wheat were planted, harvested and sent to mills. There the wheat was ground into flour to be sent across the nation and beyond. The popularity of the good flour created a nickname for the region because of all the countries using flour made from Dakota wheat. The area was the Breadbasket of the World.

North Dakota's economy depended on wheat, so the crop was called King Wheat. By the early 1900s, North Dakota farmers started growing new crops. Oats, durum, barley, flax, sugarbeets, corn, sunflowers, forage crops and potatoes were important crops. Livestock businesses grew as well, especially beef cattle.

The North Dakota Mill and Elevator Association began operating Oct. 22, 1922, in Grand Forks to add value to the state's wheat. It's still the only state-owned flour mill in the U.S.



**What other nicknames can you think of for North Dakota besides Breadbasket of the World?**

**Horse-drawn wagons loaded with wheat bundles line up at a threshing machine at the Dalrymple farm in Traill County in the early 1900s.**



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# Dakota Ranching

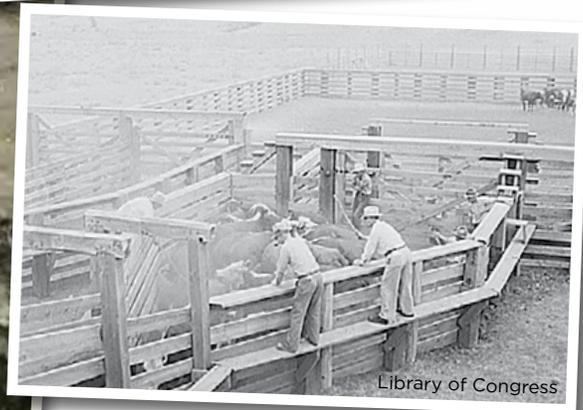
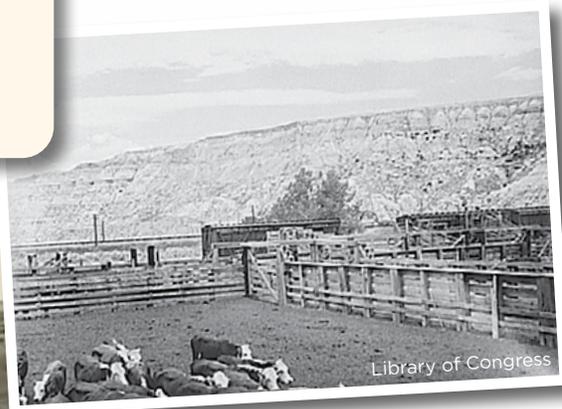
Use these words to fill in the blanks: refrigerated, ranches, coldest, range, Roosevelt, cattle, President

Western Dakota Territory had grasslands and hills better for raising 1.  than crops. In the 1870s, herds of cattle were driven from the Southwest, and soon cattle 2.  were established. Cattle roamed on the 3.  throughout the year.

Dakota ranching attracted men such as Theodore 4.  from New York. Roosevelt had two cattle ranches in the Medora area. He said, "I have always said I would not have been 5.  had it not been for my experience in North Dakota."

Frenchman Marquis de Morès tried to revolutionize the ranching industry by shipping 6.  meat to Chicago by railroad instead of herding live cattle to the stockyards. He built a meat-packing plant in Medora, the town he founded in 1883 and named for his wife.

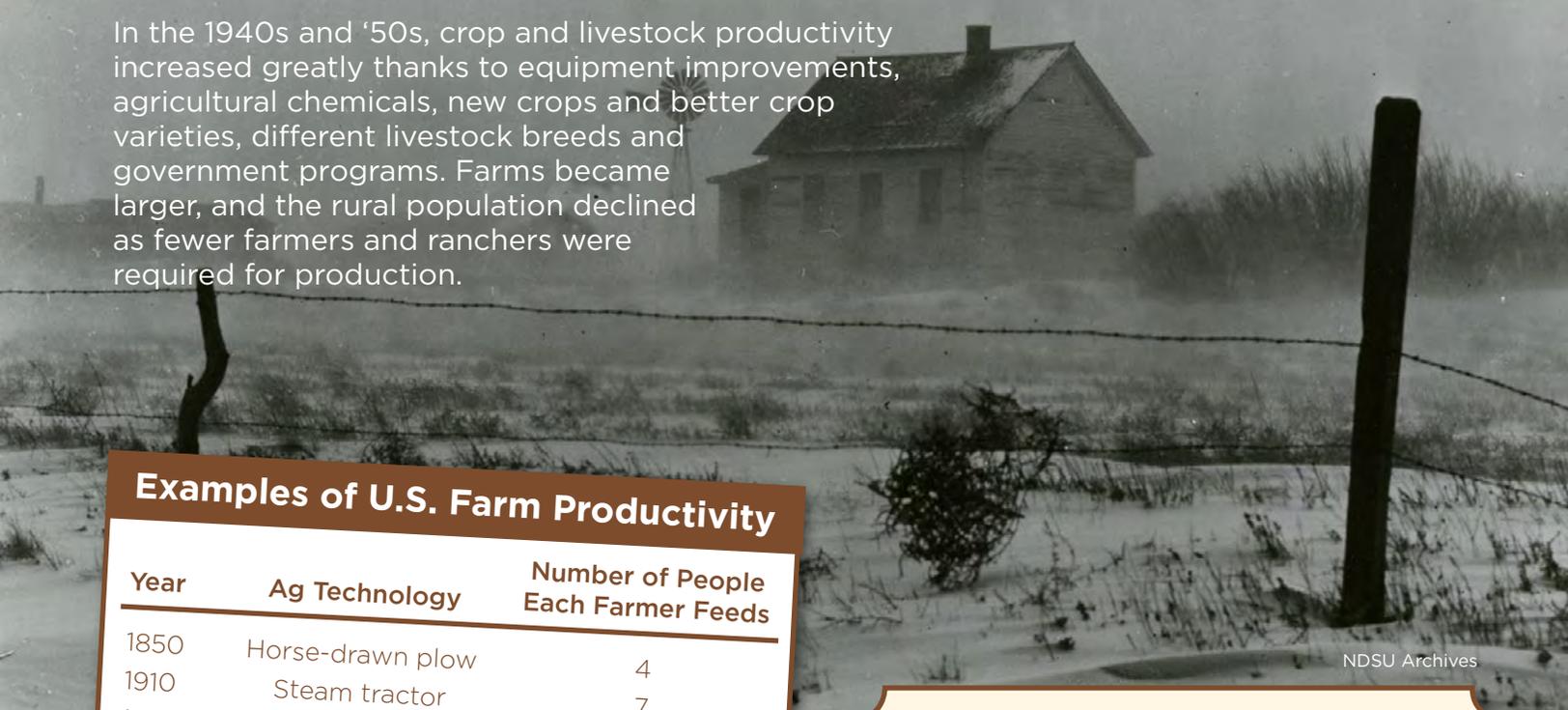
However, 1886 was one of the 7.  and snowiest winters in North Dakota's history. Up to 90% of the livestock on many ranches died. Now cattle graze or eat grasses off the land in the summer and fall but are fed during winter and spring.



# The '30s to Today

During the 1930s, North Dakota suffered from both a **depression and a drought**. The economy was very poor, and the extreme lack of rainfall meant crop failures. But the '30s also brought electricity to much of rural North Dakota.

In the 1940s and '50s, crop and livestock productivity increased greatly thanks to equipment improvements, agricultural chemicals, new crops and better crop varieties, different livestock breeds and government programs. Farms became larger, and the rural population declined as fewer farmers and ranchers were required for production.



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## Examples of U.S. Farm Productivity

Year	Ag Technology	Number of People Each Farmer Feeds
1850	Horse-drawn plow	4
1910	Steam tractor	7
1986	Combine	77
2024	Precision agriculture	155

Number these tools in order from earliest (1) to present (6).

- small tractor
- horse-drawn plow
- drones, satellites and computer software
- walking cultivator
- scapula hoes and antler rakes
- autosteer four-wheel-drive tractor

## North Dakota's Machines of Agriculture

Bobcat skid-steer loaders were invented in North Dakota in 1958. Cyril and Louis Keller had developed a three-wheeled loader that could turn sharply. A farmer stopped by their blacksmith shop to grumble about the difficulty in cleaning out turkey barns. The Kellers solved his problem. The Melroe brothers saw the machine, and today skid-steer loaders made in Gwinner, N.D., are used around the world.

The Steiger brothers of Red Lake Falls, Minn., built a powerful four-wheel-drive tractor in their barn in 1957. Other farmers asked them to build tractors for them, too. In 1969, Steiger Tractor Incorporated was formed and located in Fargo. In 1986, the company was purchased by Case IH, and today the powerful red tractors continue to be built in Fargo.

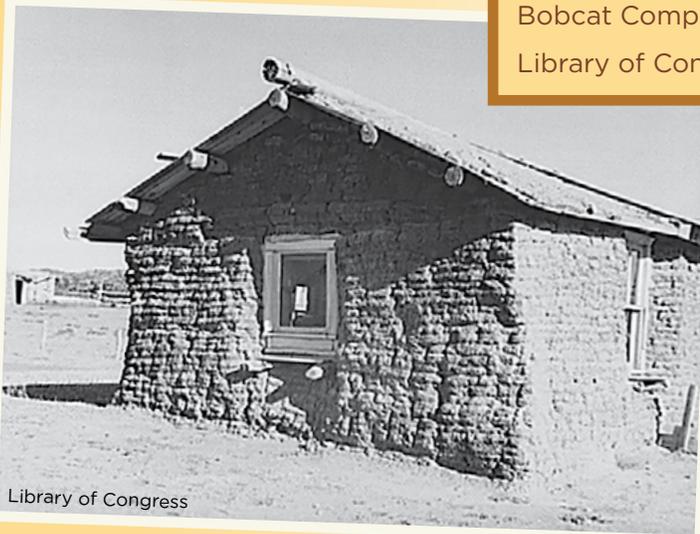
What are some examples of machines that solve problems for you?



Bobcat Co.



**Share what you've learned about North Dakota's agricultural history.**



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Find the answers to the activities in this Ag Mag at [www.ndda.nd.gov/agmag](http://www.ndda.nd.gov/agmag).

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