
SESSION 2.2: ACTIVITY: THE HOMESTEAD ACT - 60 minutes

Reader's Theater (historical fiction)

Create a little drama inspired by the 3 homesteader murals by James Penney.

This Land is Our Land

11 parts: 4 female and 7 male roles

Marie is narrator roles so if 12 roles are needed, suggest splitting Marie's role.

Opening:

Marie: The Homestead Act of 1862 gave people 160 acres of free land to get them to move west. When people came to Nebraska, they were looking for flat land that had trees and water, where they could plant crops and keep livestock.

Jerry: I saw this poster at the post office. Grace, let's go west and claim free land. We can start a new life.

Grace: What do we have to do to get this free land?

Daniel: It says here you have to find a claim of 160 acres and begin the process with a filing. I heard it costs money to open the file, and more money later to prove your claim to complete the file.

Annie: You might need someone to help you locate an open claim. There will be a lot of people trying to get this free land.

Jerry: A locator will be a good idea because they will know where the best piece of land is.

Grace: That could cost too. But maybe there would be neighbors that way.

Emma: How do you prove your claim?

Jerry: You have to live on the land for 5 years and build a home, plant crops or improve the land, and bring 2 witnesses with you to a claim office to file for the 160 acres to be yours, free and clear. So in five years we could own 160 acres.

John: It is called "proving up." I think we should do it.

Grace: How will we find 2 witnesses when no one lives there? Where will we get the money?

Jerry: That is why a locator will be a good idea. We could be a witness to our neighbor and they could be our witness. We could work together.

Daniel: I heard it will cost \$12. The land agent gets \$2 and it takes \$10 to file. You will have five years to get more money to finish filing your claim.

Grace: That will take much of our savings.

1. Show the James Penney Mural: The Homesteaders' Campfire

Marie: So after many months of planning, the family leaves and heads west to Nebraska territory. They find a locator - someone to help them locate land.

Locator: I can assist you in finding unclaimed land. I know of several claims near my own homestead.

Jerry: Grace, you will like knowing there is someone else near by. And we can help each other.

Marie: The family begins with hopes and dreams and as many supplies as they can get together. It takes them many days to get there and to locate their 160 acres. They are not able to get exactly what they wanted because the land near the river had either been given to the railroads or someone beat them to it. But their locator assures them they can dig a well for water and the hill on the land will help them in building the first home for their family. They file their claim with the land office for \$12. With application and receipt in hand, the homesteaders begin the process of building a home and farming the land, both requirements for "proving up."

Grace: Dinner will be ready soon. Are you going to try to work the land again tomorrow?

Jerry: Yes. I had no idea how hard this would be, the roots of this prairie grass are so dense and deep.



The Homesteaders' Campfire

Location: Vestibule

http://nebraskavirtualcapitol.org/panos/23?hotspot_name=hotspot1416854678712

2. Show the James Penney Mural: The First Furrow

John: I am glad you spent the money on a new plow. They were right about how hard this prairie would be.

Emma: Will you have to change how many acres you plant this year?

Jerry: We have five years so we will plant what we can this year, then get to work on digging a well.

Grace: I'm glad our locator is also our neighbor and that they have a well already. The water is sweet and we will do fine here. It just takes hard work from all of us.

Jerry: I heard that another family went back east because the work is so hard. Our locator thinks it is because they didn't come prepared to take care of themselves.

Emma: Well, hopefully we have thought of everything we will need because there aren't any stores yet. It is surprising how we got so much in our wagon.

John: Good thing we were all strong enough to walk the journey. It was good that we could bring the supplies and tools we need to build our home, break the land to farm it, and take care of ourselves with food and clothing.

Marie: The family had help digging a well. They helped others dig their wells. When visiting one of the neighbors they saw how the family had dug out of a hill a home and then finished it with sod in the front. It was one room but it was their home. The family decided that would be their best way to endure the first winter on the prairie. They chose to build a dugout for their home.



The First Furrow

Location: Vestibule

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3. Show the James Penney Mural: The House Raising

Jerry: Today is the day we help our neighbor's raise their house. Building a house with everyone's help should make it go faster.

Grace: I have the food almost ready to take with us. I wonder if I made enough?

Emma: I am looking forward to seeing how this works. A house made of wood instead of sod. Imagine!

John: I'll get the team hitched so we can head out.

Emma: Do you think we will build a wood house some day? Our dugout works well. It keeps us cool in the summer and warm in the winter, but I do get tired of the snakes and bugs.

Grace: We are blessed to have a home and that your father and brothers have been able to work 25 acres of land and planted corn and wheat crops in the five years we have been here.

Jerry: While we are at the house raising, I thought I would see which of our neighbors could go to the land office with me to file our claim. Next week is five years!

Marie: The house raising was hard work but the neighbors enjoyed the time together and father was able to find two who honestly knew him the whole five



The House Raising

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3. James Penney Mural: The House Raising (continued)

years and would witness for him. They made arrangements to do this the following week. So a week after the house raising Joe, Thomas, and Jerry went by horseback 12 miles to the Land Office.

Land Agent: Have both of you men known this man for five years?

Joe: Yes.

Thomas: Yes.

Land Agent: Is he head of his household?

Joe and Thomas: Yes.

Land Agent: Has he built a home on the land and proved it up?

Joe: He has built a dug out. Using the finest Nebraska marble or sod to finish it off.

Thomas: He has a well on the land that we both helped dig.

Joe: And he has 25 acres of land in corn and wheat.

Thomas: That is more than both of us. His land is easier to till than ours.

Jerry: No, I just have a better plow and sons who can help.

Land Agent: So, you have proved up the land, you are head of your household; you have a home on the property. Are you a citizen of the United States?

Jerry: Yes.

Land Agent: Do you have the \$6 filing fee with you?

Jerry: Yes.

Land Agent: Then if you will all sign this document I will sign it and file it for you. You will receive a final certificate or patent to the land, as you have met all the conditions.

Marie: So after five years of hard work the family proudly owns 160 acres of land in the great state of Nebraska. When the homesteader received the patent for the land it was signed with the name of the current President of the United States. This paper was proudly displayed on the wall of their home because it represented the culmination of hard work and determination. Over the years they helped others prove up their land and Jerry goes with many of his neighbors to the land office to help them “prove up” their claim.

The End.