

Women Homesteaders of Northeastern Washington: Orcharding in the Okanogan Highlands

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Abstract

Homesteading in Washington's Okanogan Highlands occurred later than in other parts of the State, with very few Americans claiming Homestead Act lands here until the 1890s. American settlement and land claims began to peak in the Okanogan Highlands in the early 1900s, shortly after surveyors mapped out available government lands. Railroads expanded in the area at this time, and small Okanogan communities were promoted as emerging boom towns. New irrigation districts encouraged orcharding and farming in a region that had previously supported transient mining. Does the history of homesteading in the Okanogan Highlands reflect this change in the economy? This poster presents summary data of women's homesteading history in Washington's Okanogan, Ferry, Stevens, and Pend Oreille counties and explores connections between homesteading and orcharding histories in this region.

Goals

The Washington Women Homesteaders project aims to develop a historical context for Washington homestead history that includes female homesteaders. Previous studies (Mathews 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023) have established that the homesteading history of Washington has unique variations that are influenced by local settlement histories and economies. The Okanogan Highlands region was selected as a study area because of this region's unique mining, agricultural, and irrigation histories. The goal of the present study was to summarize statistics for women homesteaders in Washington's Okanogan Highlands to explore 1) when homesteading peaked in the region; 2) if spatial or temporal patterns are evident in women's homesteading; and 3) how the history of homesteading in the region relates to local settlement and economic patterns.

Methods

Summary statistics for this research were collected by browsing Homestead Act (12 Stat. 392) records in the [glorecords.blm.gov](https://www.glorecords.blm.gov) land patents database (Bureau of Land Management 2022). Records were browsed by county and tallied by gender by year. In cases where the gender of the homesteader was unclear, additional research into homesteaders' gender was done through primary sources such as census or marriage records. For this study, homesteaders were classified as women homesteaders if they were apparently legally *femes sole* not listed with a male patentee or if they were identified by their family surname and their husband was later included on the patent.

Okanogan Highlands Homesteaders, 1869-1941

The Homestead Act permitted American settlers, including legally independent women (*femes sole*), to claim up to 160 acres of unappropriated public lands by settling on and cultivating their claim.

Washington homesteading began to peak in the 1880s and had declined by the early 1920s (Figure 1). Within this statewide trend are peaks and valleys that represent local trends best analyzed at the county and region level. While homestead patents decline briefly across Washington State in the early 1900s, patents begin to rise sharply in the Okanogan Highlands (Figures 2-3). Very few people patented lands under the Oregon Donation Land Claim Act in this region, suggesting it was difficult or unappealing for Americans to successfully establish sustainable farms in the Okanogan Highlands prior to the 1900s (Table 1). Why does homesteading peak so much later in this part of Washington?

Women were issued 8% of the Homestead Act patents in the Okanogan Highlands (Table 2). By county, the rate of women homesteading ranges from 6.1% to 10.1%. The proportion of women homesteaders parallels all homesteading in this region year to year and decade by decade, but the proportion of female homesteaders is highest in the 1910s, when women patented up to 12% of homesteads every year. The proportion of women homesteaders remains high throughout the 1910s suggesting that the regional settlement boom may have influenced female heads of household to settle in the region, rather than the proportion being high due to death of male heads of household in World War I (1914–1918) or the Spanish Flu (1918–1920).

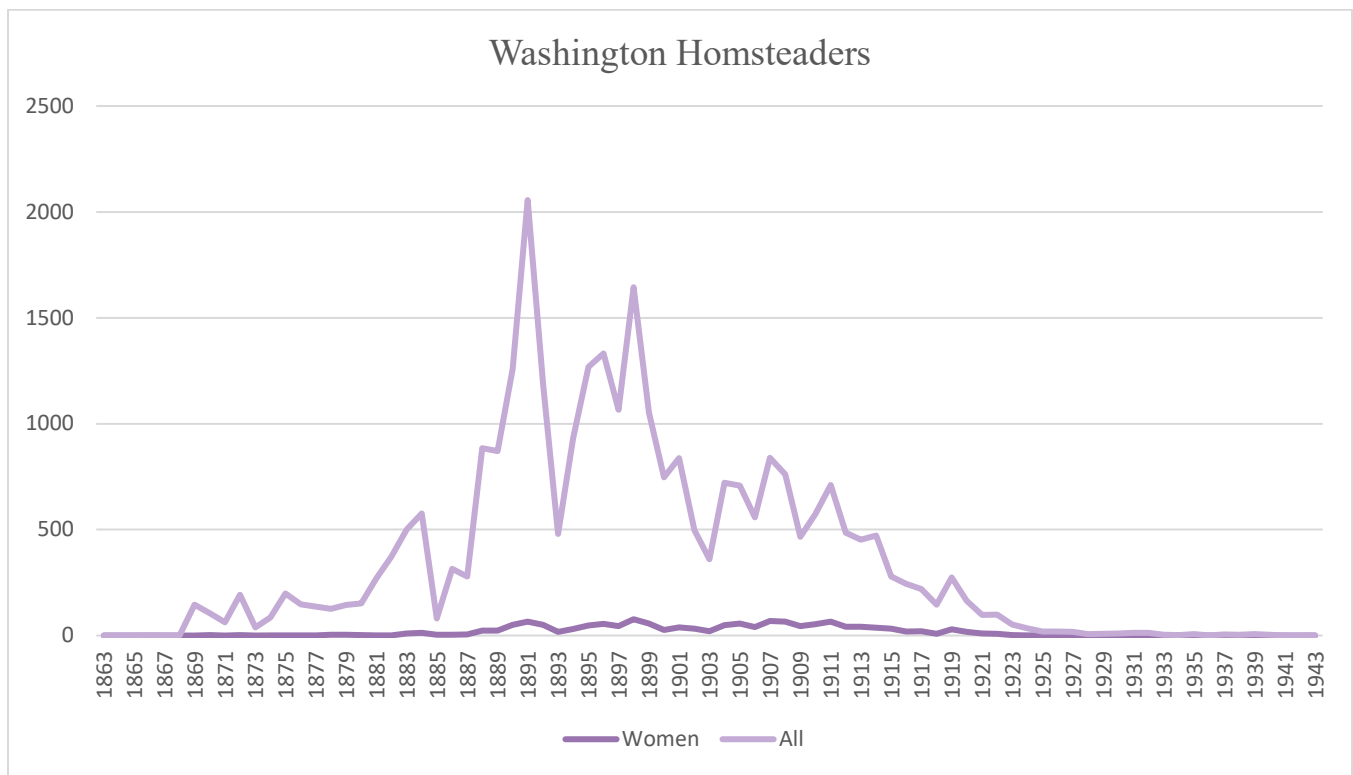


Figure 1. Washington Homesteaders by Year, including Western Washington and the Channeled Scablands.

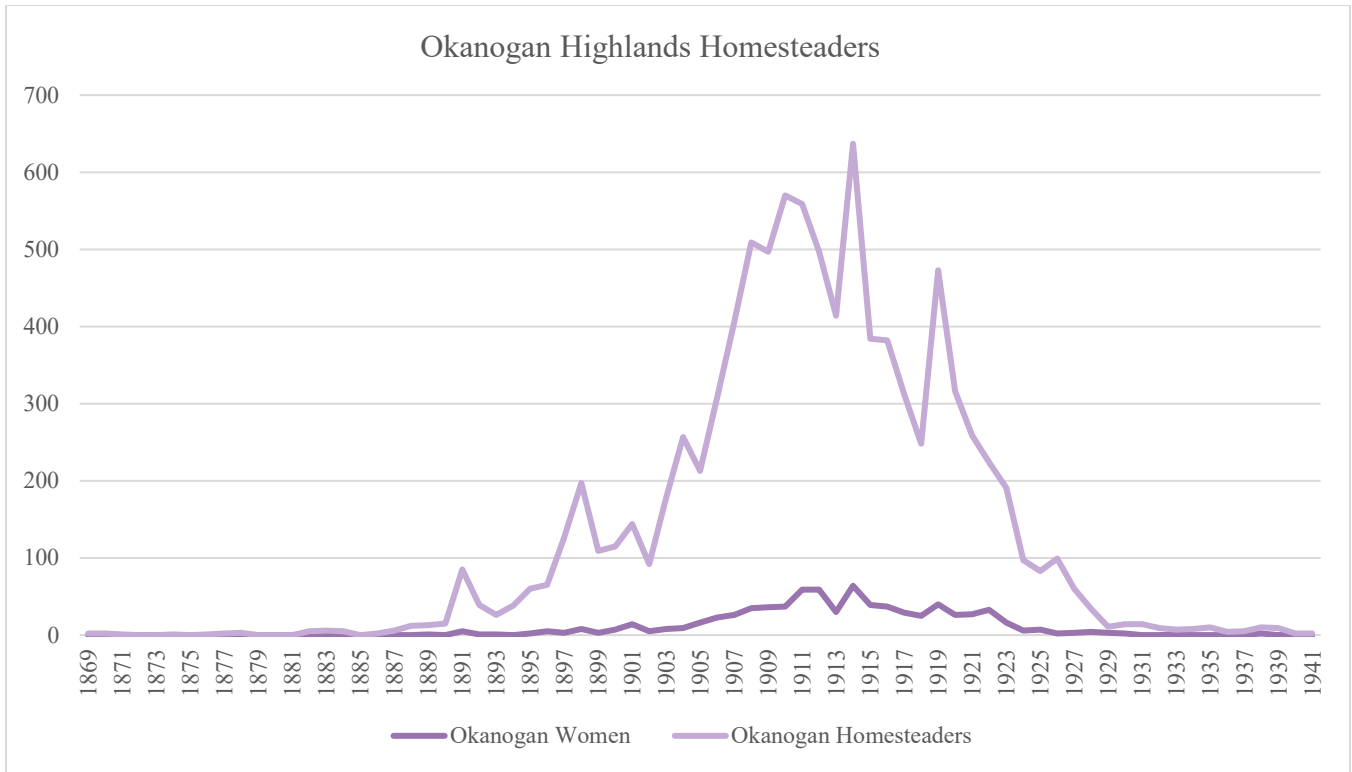


Figure 2. Okanogan Highlands Homesteaders.

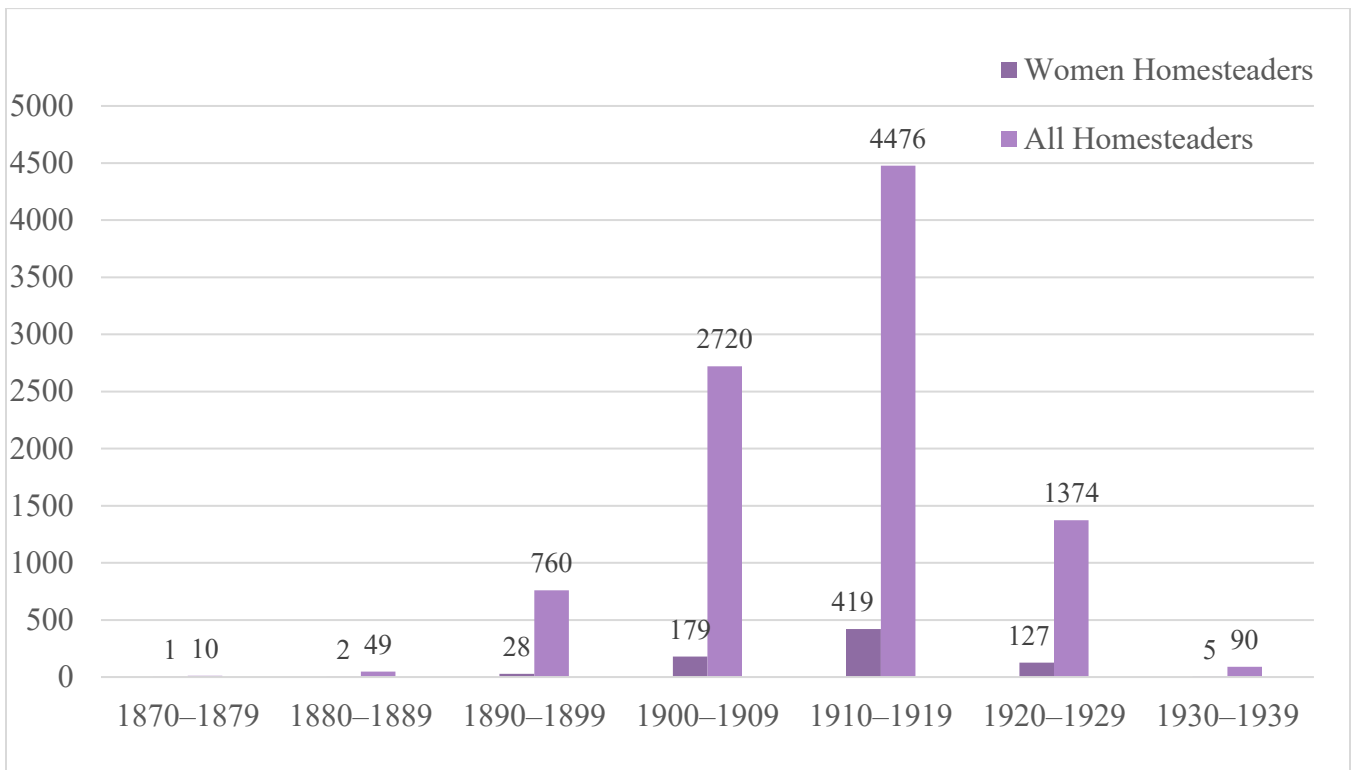


Figure 3. Okanogan Highlands Women's Homestead Patents by Decade.

Table 1. Okanogan Highlands Oregon Donation Land Claim Act Patents by County.

| County | Couple Patents | All | % Couple |
|--------------------|----------------|-----|----------|
| Okanogan Highlands | 5 | 7 | 71% |
| Okanogan | 0 | 0 | - |
| Ferry | 0 | 0 | - |
| Stevens | 3 | 3 | 100% |
| Pend Oreille | 2 | 4 | 50% |

Table 2. Okanogan Highlands Women Homesteader Patents by County.

| County | County square miles | Women Homestead Patents | All Homestead Patents | % Women Homesteaders | Homesteader per square mile |
|--------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| Okanogan Highlands | 11,350 | 762 | 9,426 | 8.1% | 0.83 |
| Okanogan | 5,268 | 413 | 4056 | 10.1% | 0.77 |
| Ferry | 2,204 | 76 | 1087 | 7.0% | 0.49 |
| Stevens | 2,478 | 200 | 3290 | 6.1% | 1.33 |
| Pend Oreille | 1,400 | 73 | 993 | 7.4% | 0.71 |

Women Homesteaders by County

Because the typical homestead patent process could take anywhere from six months to seven years it is difficult to correlate brief historic events with homesteading trends at a regional level but exploring county patterns provides better insight into local homesteading history. Homesteading in the Okanogan Highlands region generally occurred between the late 1890s and 1920s.

Okanogan County, which encompasses nearly half of the study area, exhibits the same trend with homesteading beginning in the 1890s and declining in the 1920s (Figure 4). This county has the highest proportion of female homesteaders in the region, and over half (54%) of the Okanogan Highlands women homesteaders were located here.

Ferry County was entirely within the Colville Reservation from 1872 to 1892. In 1900 the United States opened the north half of the county to homesteading, followed by the south half in 1916. This explains the late homesteading trend here and may also be the cause of a bimodal trend (Figure 5).

Stevens County is remarkable in the region for having the longest trend, which begins in the 1870s, much earlier than the rest of the region (Figure 6). The county also had several Donation Land Claim Act patents which is rare for the region. Stevens County, the site of Hudson Bay Company's Fort Colville, was the site of Euro-American interest from the 1820s.

Pend Oreille County was the last county to form in Washington, splitting from Stevens County in 1911. The homesteading history of Pend Oreille County appears to be connected to the development of the new county as well as new railroads connecting the county to the rest of the country (Figure 7). Homesteading in Pend Oreille County began in 1893, after the Great Northern Railroad line was completed through the area, connecting Seattle to St Louis via Newport in 1892. The spike of homesteads in 1907–1908 may be the result of the Idaho & Washington Northern Railroad reaching Newport in 1907.

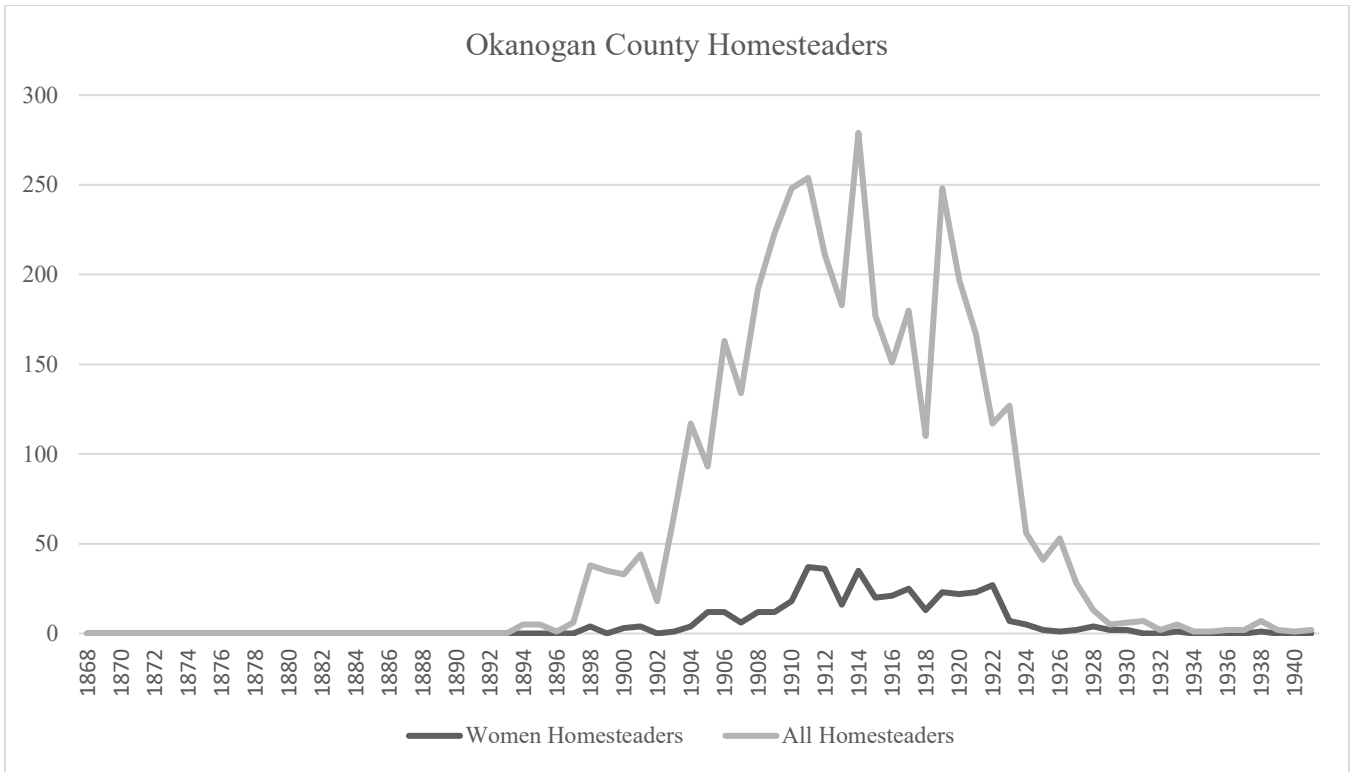


Figure 4. Okanogan County Homesteaders.

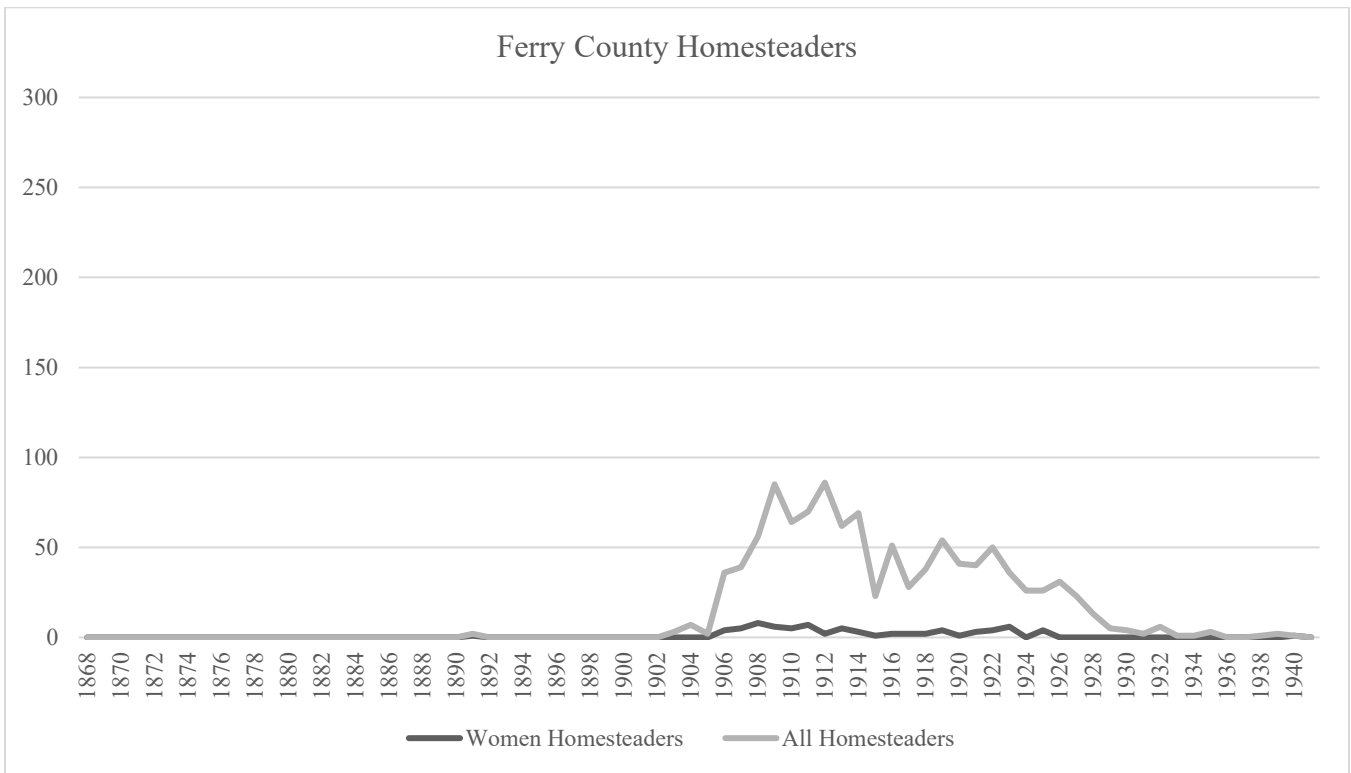


Figure 5. Ferry County Homesteaders.

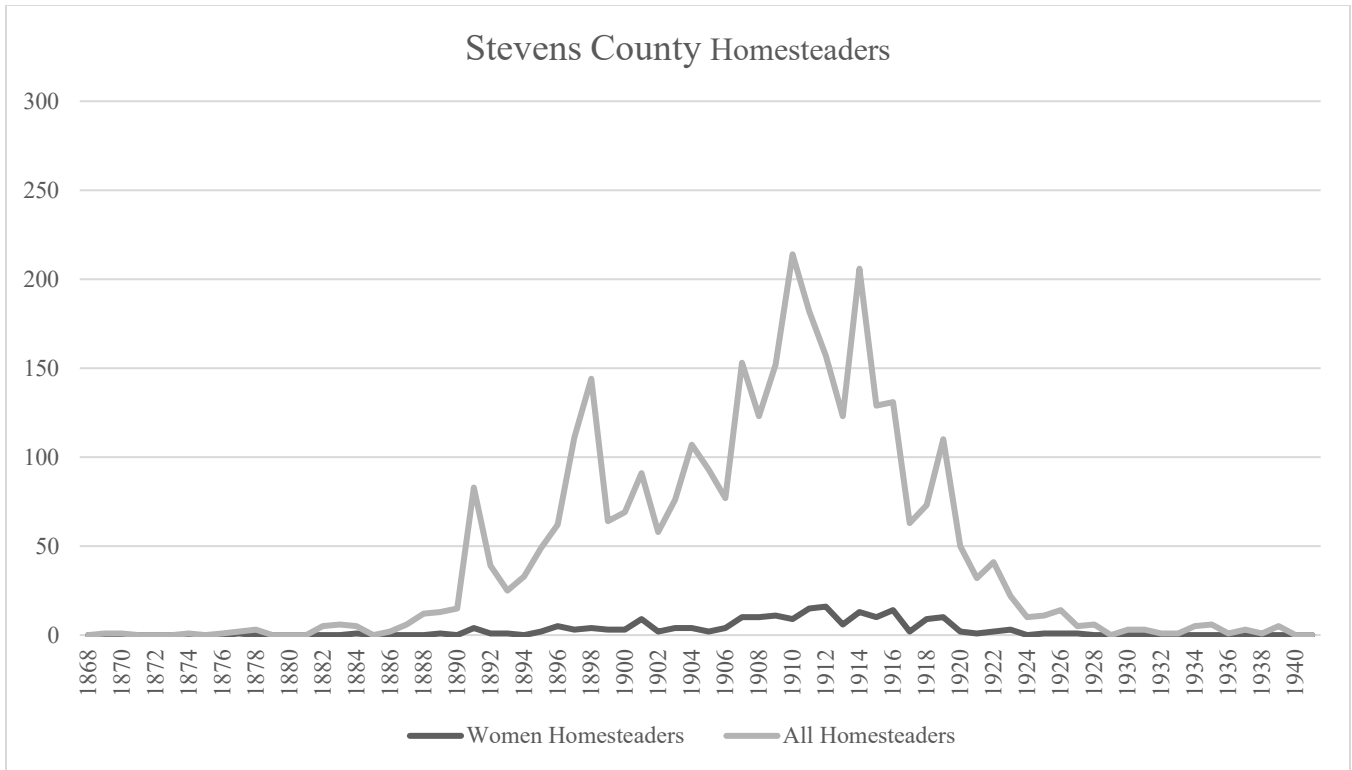


Figure 6. Stevens County Homesteaders.

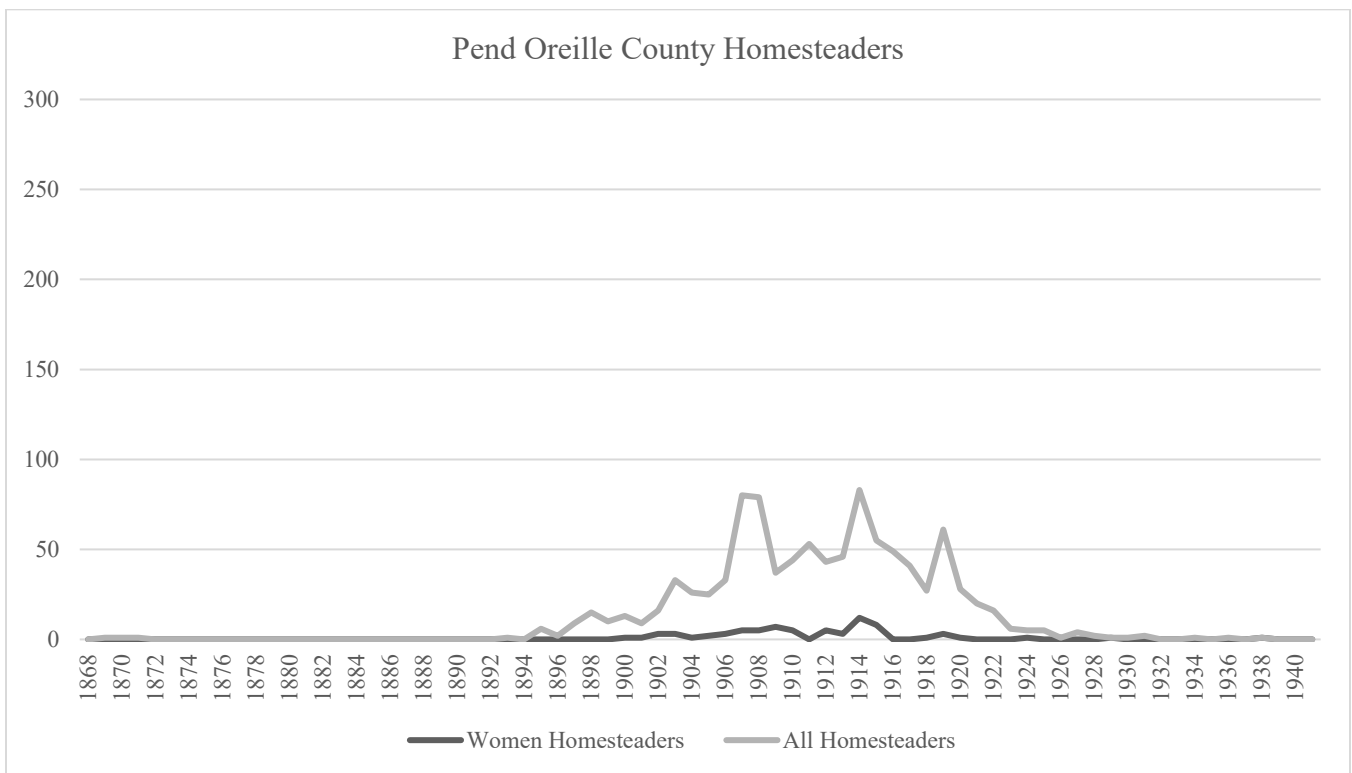


Figure 7. Pend Oreille County Homesteaders.

Okanogan Highlands Homesteading Families

A previous study on homesteading in the Channeled Scablands (Mathews 2022) found that in peak homesteading years between one-third to one-half of women homesteaders had family nearby who were also in the process of proving up their Homestead Act patents. This suggests that family support was an important aspect of homesteading and that there was an economic and social motivation for families to cooperate to claim large tracts of land. In the Okanogan Highlands the peak homesteading year was 1914, which is also the year with the greatest number (63) of women homesteaders. Statistics were collected by searching the GLO database for women's family surnames to determine whether any family had patented lands within one Township and within five years of women's 1914 patents (Table 3). This review determined that between one-third to three-fourths of women homesteaders in the Okanogan Highlands had family homesteading nearby. This may be an important theme of homesteading across Washington and the West.

Table 3. Okanogan Highlands Women Homesteaders with Family Homesteaders in Area, 1914.

| County | Women Homesteaders | Women w/ Family Nearby | % Women Homesteaders w/ Family Nearby |
|--------------|--------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Okanogan | 35 | 26 | 74% |
| Ferry | 3 | 1 | 33% |
| Stevens | 13 | 6 | 46% |
| Pend Oreille | 12 | 8 | 67% |

Feme Sole Homesteaders & the Okanogan Orchard Boom

Although the Okanogan Highland region was difficult to farm because of the steep topography and narrow river valleys, orcharding boomed in the region following the development of irrigation systems in the early 1900s, at the same time that homesteading was beginning to boom. Across Washington, fruit orchard production increased 511% from 1909 to 1919, which was the greatest statewide increase in the nation at the time. Additional research is necessary to connect homesteading to the orcharding industry.

More papers available: www.AntiquityConsulting.com

References Cited

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National Park Service

2017 Homesteading by the Numbers. Homestead National Park.
<<https://www.nps.gov/home/learn/historyculture/bynumbers.htm>>.