



NEBRASKA HUMANITIES COUNCIL

215 Centennial Mall South, Suite 330
Lincoln, NE 68508
Phone: (402) 474-2131 Fax: (402) 474-4852
E-mail: nhc@nebraskahumanities.org
Website: www.nebraskahumanities.org

N E W S R E L E A S E

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Contact: Kristi Hayek, (402) 474-2131, ext. 108

“Free Land” Chautauqua comes to Beatrice in 2012

The community of Beatrice and Homestead National Monument will host the “Free Land? 1862 and the Shaping of Modern America” Chautauqua the week of May 20-25, in conjunction with the kick-off of a year of events commemorating the 150th anniversary of the signing of the Homestead Act.

Continuing the Nebraska Humanities Council’s tradition of more than 25 years of sponsoring educational and entertaining Chautauquas throughout the state, the “Free Land” Chautauqua will address the collective impact of the Homestead Act, the Pacific Railway Act, and the Morrill Act on Nebraska, the Great Plains and the nation. The influences of these three pieces of legislation, all passed within six weeks of each other in 1862, will be explored through scholar portrayals of six prominent historical figures: Union general and railroad builder Grenville Dodge, author Willa Cather, Ponca chief Standing Bear, author and homesteader Laura Ingalls Wilder, homesteader and inventor George Washington Carver, and humorist Mark Twain as moderator.

Nebraska audiences will have an opportunity to examine five themes that were set in motion by the catalyst of the 1862 legislation and that remain relevant: The unfolding of the “free soil, free labor” ideal for America held by Republican policy-makers of the time; the rapid economic development of the West and the nation, especially through the building of railroads; the accelerated displacement of Native Americans; a broader access to public education that resulted in more opportunities for people of the West; and an increasingly landed and educated populace—both emigrants and immigrants—who had more potential for social mobility in a developing American West.

Homestead National Monument will observe the actual 150th anniversary of the signing of the Homestead Act on May 20, with an evening program featuring a variety of special guests, including the historical figures of the Chautauqua. The Chautauqua events will then continue Monday through Friday (May 21-25) with a different scholar portraying his or her character each evening under the Chautauqua tent. Each will give a 40-minute, first-person presentation as the historical character, then answer questions. Workshops for children and adults along with other activities will be held during the day throughout Chautauqua week.

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