

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK EVALUATION: EDGAR AND ALICE BROWN HOMESTEAD (PRAIRIE HOMESTEAD)

PREPARED FOR SOUTH DAKOTA HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE

Prepared by



May 2015

National Historic Landmark Evaluation: Edgar and Alice Brown Homestead (Prairie Homestead)

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1.0 Introduction

In September 2014, Stark Preservation Planning LLC (Stark) conducted an evaluation for National Historic Landmark (NHL) designation eligibility for the Edgar and Alice Brown Homestead (Prairie Homestead) in Philip Township, Jackson County, South Dakota. The study was completed on behalf of the South Dakota State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), which seeks to expand the state's NHL collection to better reflect South Dakota's role in national historical themes and to preserve places of great significance. The property was selected by the SHPO for its potential to represent national history. Three other South Dakota sites were also evaluated as part of this project and submitted under separate cover: Fort Sisseton in Marshall County, the Mobridge Auditorium in Mobridge, Walworth County, and the Spearfish Hatchery in Spearfish, Lawrence County.

The investigation entailed initial contact with the property owner representatives to inform them of the study, to provide information on the NHL program, and to ascertain their willingness to participate in the study. Preliminary research was conducted at the South Dakota State Historical Society and field investigation took place in September 2014. Other resources available from the Prairie Homestead archives informed the history of the property. Additional research into comparative properties and historical contexts were completed, as needed. The National Park Service's bulletin *How to Prepare National Historic Landmark Nominations* was used to provide guidance on how properties may become eligible for NHL designation. The NHL program uses six criteria to assess the national significance of a property.

1. Properties that are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to, and are identified with, or that outstandingly represent, the broad national patterns of United States history and from which an understanding and appreciation of those patterns may be gained.
2. Properties that are associated importantly with the lives of persons nationally significant in the history of the United States.
3. Properties that represent some great idea or ideal of the American people.
4. Properties that embody the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type specimen exceptionally valuable for a study of a period, style, or method of construction, or that represent a significant, distinctive and exceptional entity whose components may lack individual distinction.
5. Properties that are composed of integral parts of the environment not sufficiently significant by reason of historical association or artistic merit to warrant individual recognition but collectively compose an entity of exceptional historical or artistic significance, or outstandingly commemorate or illustrate a way of life or culture.
6. Properties that have yielded or may be likely to yield information of major scientific importance by revealing new cultures, or by shedding light upon periods of occupation over large areas of the United States. Such sites are those which have yielded, or which may reasonably be expected to yield, data affecting theories, concepts and ideas to a major degree.

In addition to establishing national significance, a NHL-eligible property must also retain a “high degree of integrity” as expressed by the seven aspects of historical integrity: location, setting, design, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association.

The findings and recommendation of the Prairie Homestead evaluation of NHL eligibility are presented in this report. In addition, property information was entered into the SHPO historic sites survey database.

2.0 Property Data

Location:	21070 SD Hwy 240 Philip, Jackson County, South Dakota 57567 Exit 131 south of I-90 2 ½ miles; ½ mile north of Badlands National Park
Owners:	Grady Crew and Casey Blum
Contact Information:	www.prairiehomestead.com info@prairiehomestead.com 21221 SD Hwy 248 Phillips SD 57567
Ownership Category:	Private
NRHP Status:	Listed (1973)
Property Type:	District

3.0 Summary Description

The Edgar and Alice Brown Homestead (Brown Homestead), also known as Prairie Homestead,¹ is located approximately eight miles north of Interior, South Dakota, near the entrance to the Badlands National Park and about three miles south of exit 131 of Interstate Highway 90. Its current approach is on the west side of South Dakota Highway 240, where a U-shaped driveway offers access to the farmstead complex and visitor center (Figure 1). The property is set within a sparsely populated rural area of rugged ranch lands. The historic farmstead is composed of a dwelling, root cellar, privy, chicken coop and barn (Figure 2). A large, modern visitor center and gift shop with adjacent gravel parking area is located east of the farmstead setting, near the highway. Asphalt walking paths link the various farm buildings.

¹ “Prairie Homestead” is the name used for the National Register nomination and for the current museum operation. The name “Edgar and Alice Brown Homestead” or just the “Brown Homestead” has been used for this study to reflect the owners, builders and occupants of the property during historic period.



Figure 1. Current visitor center, gravel parking area at entrance from Highway 240 (left of view), facing Southwest

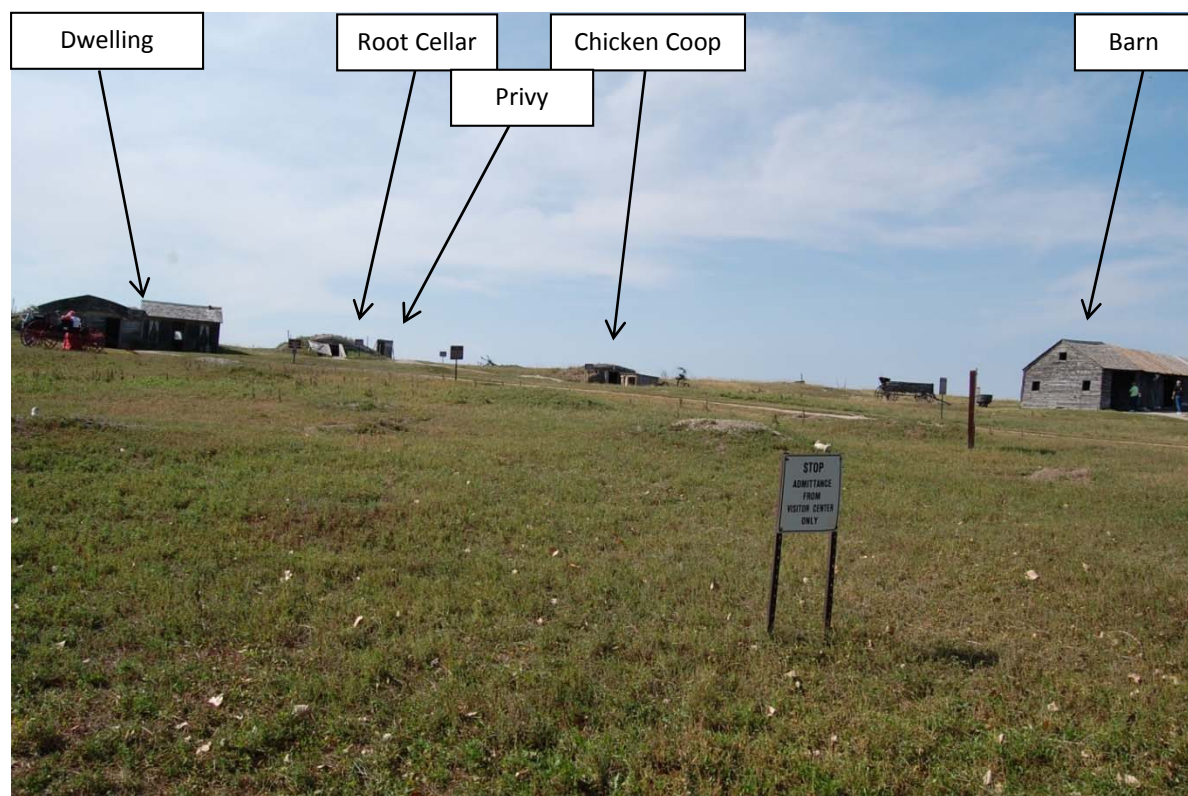


Figure 2. Prairie Homestead site with principal structures, Facing Northwest

The dwelling is the focal point of the farmstead's historical significance. The first portion was constructed in 1909 by carving out a portion of the east-facing slope to form a dugout. The dugout's interior walls are faced with sod blocks. The east wall is constructed of wood logs laid horizontally and clad on the exterior with weatherboard siding. A single door and a single four-over-four double-hung sash window are inserted within this wall. A broad, segmental arch cornice made of wide unpainted boards covers the upper portion of the wall. The roof is made of earth planted with native vegetation and pierced by a metal stovepipe. The roof is supported by wood planks resting on three unhewn cottonwood purlins. Cross beams support the purlins, which in turn stand on wood posts imbedded within the earthen walls; another post in the center supports a center beam. The interior of the space has a dirt floor, and the wood plank and beam ceiling is exposed. The lower half of the wall is covered with wood planks, while the sod is exposed on the upper portion. Small top-hinged windows are placed within the earthen wall on the south and north sides. A brown paper screen serves as a room-divider between the bedroom (rear) and the kitchen (front) of this space (Figures 3 through 6).



Figure 3. Façade of Dugout (left) and Claim Shack (right), Facing West



Figure 4. Dugout, Facing Northwest (left) and Southwest (right)



Figure 5. Dugout, Facing Northeast (left) and Southeast (right)



Figure 6. Dugout Interior, Southeast Corner of Front Room (left) and Rear (west) Wall of Back Room (right)

In 1913 the dugout was expanded by the addition of a frame structure to the north, an abandoned claim shack. This one-room structure is accessed by a door opening on the north wall of the dugout's kitchen area. The frame structure is partially cut into the slope and has a side-gabled roof covered with wood shingles. A center door in the east wall is flanked by single four-over-four double-hung sash wooden windows. A four-light window is placed on the west wall. The walls are clad with wood weatherboard. The interior, comprising one room, has walls covered with wallpaper and a wood floor (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Claim Shack, Facing Southeast (left) and Northwest (right)

The root cellar north of the dwelling was restored in the 1960s following the collapse of the original structure. It is accessed by a wood bulkhead door and three steps leading onto the dirt floor. Its walls are covered with stucco and the reconstructed earthen roof is supported by unhewn log rafters resting on log top plates (Figure 8). North of the root cellar is a wood plank privy, reconstructed on the location of the original privy (Figure 9).



Figure 8. Restored Root Cellar, Exterior, Facing West (left) and Interior (right)



Figure 9. Reconstructed Privy, Facing Southwest

The chicken coop, mostly reconstructed in its original location, is also built into the hill using sod blocks. A heavy log ridge beam is supported by the earthen wall and a cross beam over the wood door on the east end. The roof is earthen (Figure 10).



Figure 10. Reconstructed Chicken Coop, Facing Northwest (left) and Interior (right)

Northeast of the other buildings is the barn, a one-story side-gabled structure with vertical plank siding and plank roofing. The northern two bays provided stalls for livestock. A shed-roof shelter extends from the northern end, adjacent to a corral enclosure. A third bay, clad with drop siding and a wood shingle roof, was added c. 1920 to the south end for an automobile garage (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Barn, Facing Southwest (left) and Southeast (right)

The visitor center, constructed in 1992, serves as the gateway access point to the farmstead. It has a rectangular plan with a shed roof and wood siding (Figure 12).

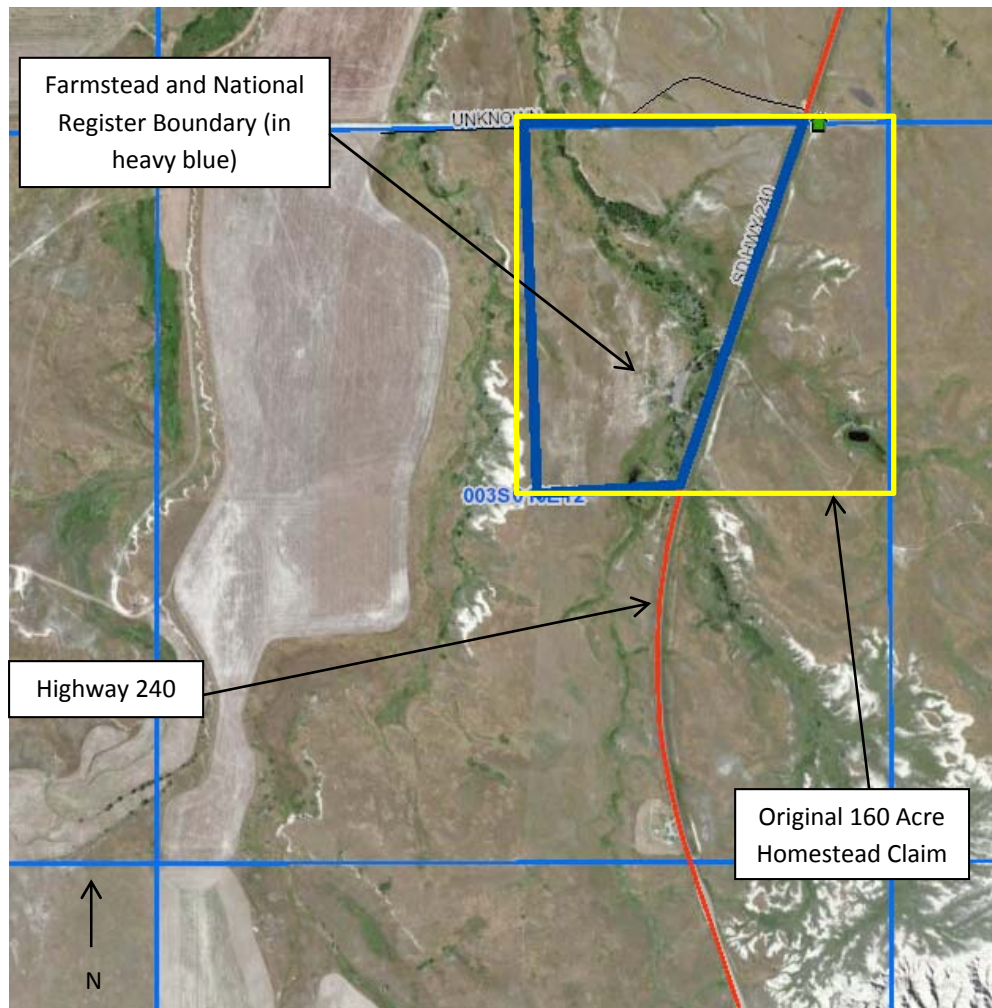


Figure 12. Visitor's Center and Parking Area, Facing Northwest

4.0 Historical Summary

The 160-acre homestead parcel upon which the farmstead is located was settled in 1909 by Edgar Irwin and Alice Alberta Brown, along with their adult son, Charles Brown. Born in New York State of Canadian ancestry in about 1855, Edgar Brown moved to Iowa as a small boy. He married Alice Alberta Story in 1876, and the couple moved with their children to Nebraska ten years later. By then in their fifties, Edgar and Alice, moved with Charles, age 30, from Nebraska to settle the new Dakota Territory in 1909. Edgar Brown filed for his 160-acre claim on land owned by the federal government in the northeast quarter of Section 12 in Township 3 South, Range 18 E of the Black Hills Meridian in Stanley County (now Jackson County) (Figure 13). The family began their new life by clearing out a dugout to live in, using sod for walls and local cottonwood trees to support the roof and one wall. Milled lumber for the roof and side walls came from a sawmill on the White River, about 15 miles south. The structure, approximately 13' wide and 24' deep, provided the family with a bedroom and kitchen/living area.² In 1910, Brown paid 50 cents per acre for the right to own and homestead the property, which was granted to him from President Taft in 1911 (Patent Number 192937).

² "Edger Irwin Brown" obituary, *Interior [South Dakota] Index*, April 8, 1920 (copy on file at the Prairie Homestead Museum); Keith Crew and Douglas Heck, *Prairie Homestead: Meet the Browns and Their Neighbors* (Philip, South Dakota: Prairie Homestead Creations, 1996).



Annotated from original source: CRGRID South Dakota State Historic Preservation Office.

Figure 13. Overview Map of Brown Homestead Property

Brown mortgaged the property for \$500 in 1911, due in five years' time. This substantial mortgage suggests an expansion of his farming operation, perhaps an investment in cattle or other livestock. Investments in other structures on the farmstead would have been relatively inexpensive. By 1913, the family had four outbuildings to support their modest lifestyle and farming operation. An "outhouse" or privy was placed north of the house, and would likely have been an early necessity. A root cellar, sometime referred to as the "cave," was dug into the ground and constructed in a similar fashion as the house. Its purpose was to store food in the temperate earthen shelter. A chicken coop was also built into the hillside. The fourth structure, a barn made with poles, straw and wire, was placed farther north, and is no longer extant³ (Figure 14).

³ Crew and Heck, *Prairie Homestead*, 1996; baled hay construction was a method used for claim era resources in the north central region of Nebraska. The extent of its use in South Dakota is relatively unknown (Brooks and Jacon 1994).



Figure 14. The 1913 photograph is believed to show the “straw barn,” west of the existing barn, no longer extant

By 1913, the Browns acquired an abandoned frame homestead shack, which was moved on skids onto the property and attached to the dugout. The additional structure offered the expanded conveniences of a parlor (Figures 15 through 18). Two years later, a new wood barn was erected, and in 1920 it was amended with another section to house Charles Brown’s Model T Ford. Ed Brown died in the dugout house in 1920, leaving his wife and son to tend the homestead. Alice continued to live there until 1934, when she moved to Long Beach, California to live with her daughter and son-in-law, Candace and Grundy McDonald. Charles remained on the homestead only two more years, selling the household and farm equipment in the summer of 1936, and moving to California to be with his mother and sister.⁴



Figure 15. Dugout and Claim Shack, c. 1913

⁴ Crew and Heck, *Prairie Homestead*, 1996.



Figure 16. Dugout and Claim Shack, c. 1913

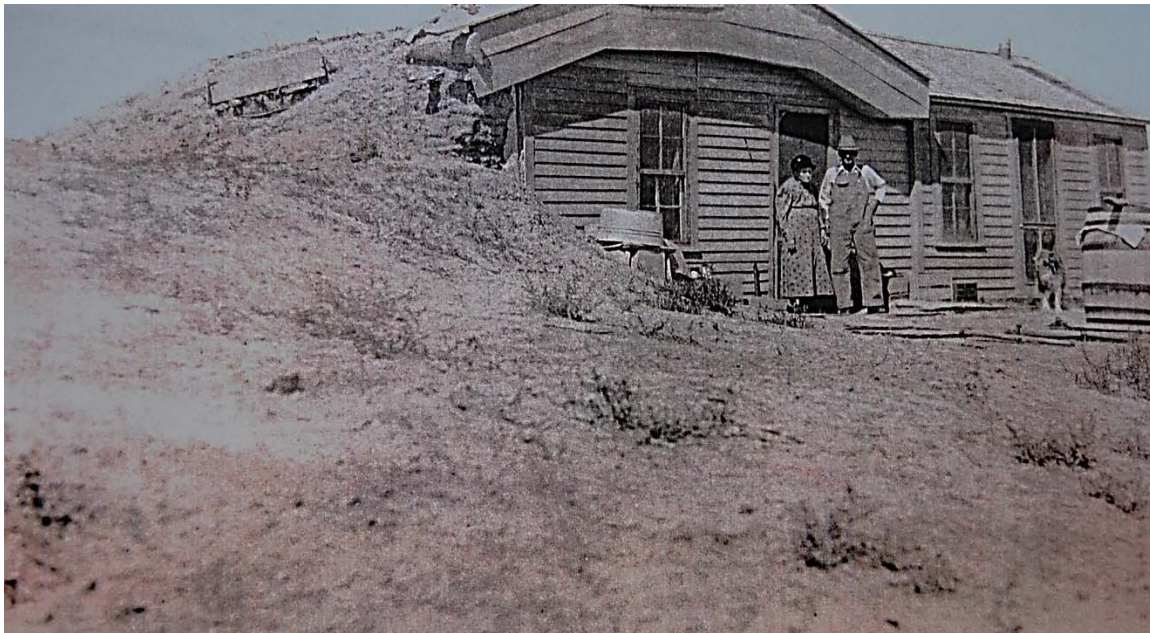


Figure 17. Alice and Edgar Brown at their Home in 1910s



Figure 18. Brown Homestead, c. 1913

The agricultural enterprise that the Browns pursued has not been documented in any detail. Photographs taken during their occupation by their daughter, Candace McDonald, who was visiting from California in 1913 and again a few years later with her daughter Marcelline, offer some insights into the extent of the Browns' operation. The chicken coop clearly indicates that the Browns maintained poultry, a job typically managed by women, which offered opportunity not just for eggs and meat, but occasional cash. A photograph of Marcelline with pigs suggests some diversity on the Browns' farm (Figure 19). The Browns built a stock dam dug in the low area north of the barn, where cattle could get water. A circa 1913 photograph shows the cattle at the pond, numbering at least 20 (Figure 20). Later owner and neighbor, Keith Crew, remarks that the cattle were likely Shorthorns for milking. The cream offered some cash income after it was taken to Cottonwood and then shipped by train to Huron, South Dakota for butter processing. Crew also believes that the Browns probably attempted to raise barley, spelt, wheat, oats and alfalfa, along with a vegetable garden.⁵

⁵ Ibid., 16.



Figure 19. Feeding Chickens and Playing with Pigs on the Brown Homestead, c. 1913



Figure 20. Cattle at the Stock Pond, c. 1913

When Charles Brown left the property in 1936, George Carr became a tenant farmer, residing in the Browns' home. In 1948, Charles Brown sold the 160-acre property to neighbors, Leslie and Jessie Crew. George Carr continued to live on the property until 1949 at the age of 81. It was the last time anyone lived in the homestead, which was never modernized with indoor plumbing or electricity.⁶

Access to the farmstead had previously been from the section road on the north side of the 160-acre parcel. Traces of this road may be visible in aerial views. In 1950, the state acquired a 150-foot wide strip of land cutting diagonally northeast to southwest through the quarter section which would become State Highway 240. The current road runs about 500 feet east of the dugout dwelling (Figure 21).

⁶ Ibid.

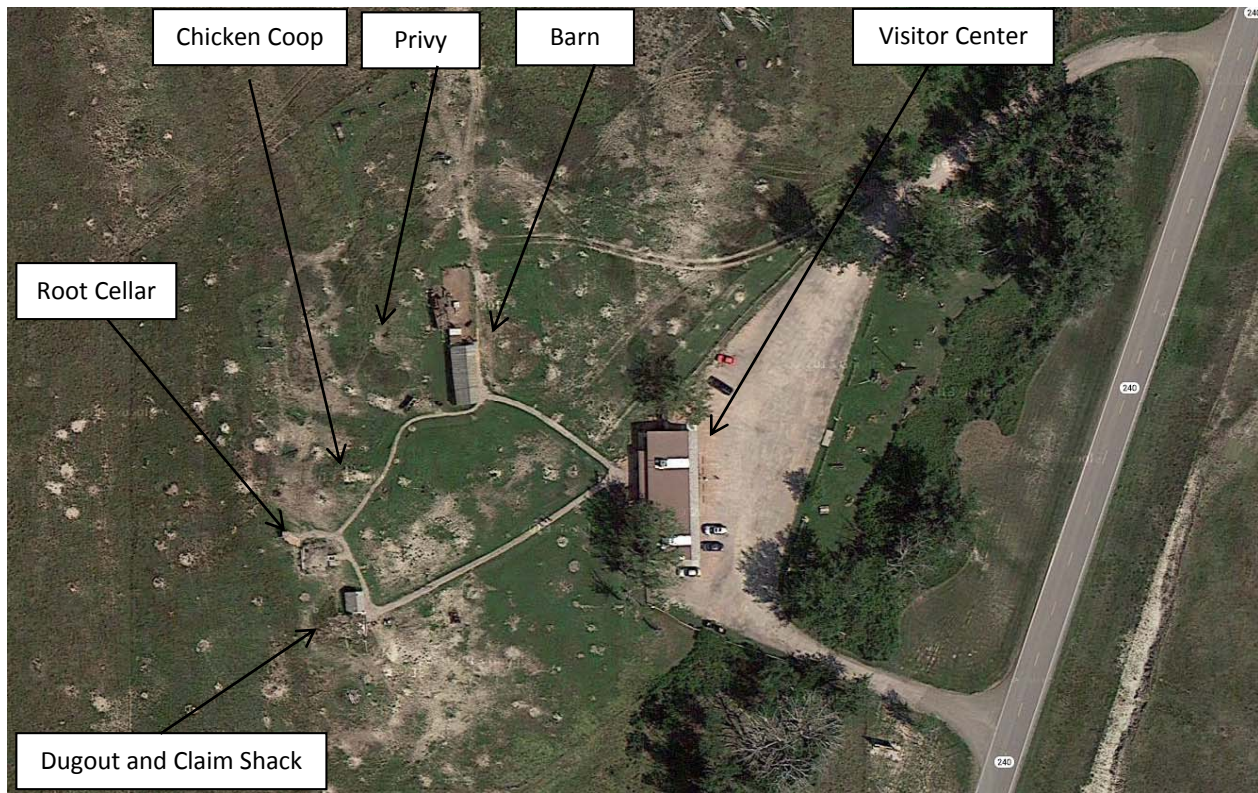


Figure 21. Current Aerial View of Prairie Homestead

Unoccupied, the homestead fell into disrepair and became dilapidated (Figures 22 through 26). The north room of the house – the old claim shack – had been used to store oats, and most of the distinctive arched façade of the dugout shelter had fallen down. Eventually, the property came under the ownership of Keith and Dorothy Crew, the son and daughter-in-law of Leslie and Jessie Crew. In 1962, the Crews undertook a restoration effort to open the property as a tourist attraction (Figure 27). Several of the sod blocks that had eroded were re-created and replaced, “just enough to make them look presentable,” wrote Keith Crew.⁷ The Browns’ original stove, dining table and washstand remained intact, and were supplemented with other period furnishings. The root cellar had collapsed, and so its roof was reconstructed to its original appearance. In time, the privy was replaced with a replica. The chicken coop was also in disrepair and later reconstructed on its site. A new approach from the highway was constructed and an 8’ x 10’ entrance booth was erected. Success of the operation warranted the expansion of the entrance booth in 1966. In 1974, Prairie Homestead, as it was called, was listed in the National Register of Historic Places. In 1992, the visitor center was replaced with the current facility.

⁷ Ibid., 23.



Figure 22. Dugout/Claim Shack, Root Cellar and Privy, c. 1962



Figure 23. Dwelling, c. 1962



Figure 24. Chicken Coop, c. 1962



Figure 25. Chicken Coop (foreground) and Barn (background), c. 1962



Figure 26. Barn, c. 1962



Figure 27. The Crew Family and the Newly Restored Dwelling, c. 1966

5.0 Significance

Euro-American settlement of the United States' west-central region followed a series of legislative acts. The Preemption Act of 1841 offered rights to squatters already on government lands by allowing them to buy up to 160 acres at \$1.25 per acre after the land was surveyed. The Homestead Act of 1862 created a more systematic approach to western migration. Under this act, quarter sections of land were made available to any head of family or person over 21 who was a U.S. citizen or had filed a declaration to become one. The land could be purchased after one year for \$1.25 per acre, or would be granted free after living and working the land for five years. The Timber Culture Act of 1873 encouraged the planting of trees in the arid west. Settlers who planted 40 acres of timber and fostered their growth over 10 years were entitled to that quarter section. In Dakota Territory, settlement began in the 1860s starting at the southeast corner, and dramatically increased in the late 1870s. Spurred by the building of railroads, from 1880 to 1885, Dakota Territory took the lead in the amount of land entered under the Preemption, Homestead and Timber Culture Acts.⁸ In 1889, South Dakota's statehood affirmed its viability, although much of its land remained open for settlement.

Although relatively late compared to much of the homesteading activity under the federal acts, the Brown family nevertheless was a product of, and benefited from, the U.S. policies of western settlement. Their initial contract certifies that their land was acquired from the United States through patent number 192837 under the provisions of an 1820 Act of Congress and "acts supplemental thereto." His payment of \$80 for the land, less than a year later, is perhaps more unusual. This could be attributable to the fact that the Browns were an atypical family, having already settled and raised a family in Nebraska. They perhaps sold their previous farm, giving them more means than those who were just starting out. Regardless of these variables, the Browns established their homestead along the lines of many others in the Dakotas and Great Plains by forming a simple shelter from local materials, which would be later amended by the addition of a small shack and other modest outbuildings. What is remarkable about this property is that it was both scarcely improved from its claim era arrangement, and that it has been preserved largely intact. Both aspects make this property a rare existing example of the type.

The Brown Homestead property consists of a dugout dwelling with an appended frame claim shack, a barn, and reconstructed privy, root cellar, and chicken coop, all within the original homestead setting and 160-acre parcel. Of these units, the dwelling is of greatest historic interest. Sometimes described as a "sod house," the dwelling is more accurately classified as a dugout using sod and log construction. The claim shack, moved from another site and joined to the dugout in 1913, is also an important part of the historic dwelling.

Dugouts are characterized by their construction within the side of a hill or ravine, whenever possible on the east slope, away from the prevailing winds. The wall opposite the hillside was built of sod or if available, log. This wall contained the single door, and sometimes a window. The single room within

⁸ Allyson Brooks and Steph Jacon, "Homesteading and Agricultural Development Context" (On file at the South Dakota State Historic Preservation Office, Pierre, 1994), 8-12.

would typically measure 8 to 9 feet deep, and 12 feet wide, although some accounts report dugouts that are excavated 14 to 16 feet into the hillside. Floors would remain as packed, swept dirt. Typically using a cut-and-cover building technique, rather than burrowing, a roof needed to be constructed. Typically, a ridge pole would be supported by the earthen slope and the façade wall, to form a gable. Single sloped shed roofs were also used. Poles or logs formed the roof deck, upon which were layered brush, prairie grass, and then dirt. Grasses and wild flowers would grow on the roof, making it nearly indiscernible from the surrounding landscape were it not for the protruding stovepipe.⁹ Although also made of earth, sod houses are differentiated from dugouts by having all exterior walls constructed of sod and standing above ground, or only partially depressed.

Cass Barns, a physician who wrote a book about his experiences on the Nebraska frontier called *The Sod House*, described his encounter with a dugout thusly:

I have had the experience while making my rounds as a physician, to discover a stove pipe protruding from the ground surrounded by prairie grass. An inspection would reveal a door on the side of the ravine.¹⁰

Nebraska photographer Solomon Butcher offers a detailed account of his surprise discovery of a dugout published in his 1892 volume *Pioneer History of Custer County, Nebraska*.

After a time I saw something in the darkness that I took for a post, and believing we had come to a fence, I walked up to it and felt on both sides for the wires, but finding none, I put my hand on top of the supposed post and discovered to my dismay that it was a stovepipe, and still warm. By the time my investigations had resulted in this warm discovery, Morrison had driven the team up quite close to me and demanded a reason for my stop. I explained the nature of my find, and suggested a careful backing up of the team for fear of a tumble through the roof, which would be likely to disturb the sleepers below. I had seen enough of 'dugouts' to know that we had discovered one, but just how to get inside I did not know.¹¹

The typical pattern for many newly arriving settlers to the Great Plains was to spend the first several weeks on their claim in the temporary shelter of a wagon bed or a tent as they worked to build more permanent living quarters, often a dugout. Dugout dwellings (as opposed to those originally built for non-human habitation purposes, such as root cellars) were among the most common housing types chosen within the context of the time period, geography and economic circumstances. The largely treeless prairies of central United States necessitated the construction of dugouts as a first and most expedient form of dwelling for homesteaders unable to afford or without access to milled lumber or other local materials. Often considered a temporary shelter until another could be constructed of sod or

⁹ Allen G. Noble, *Wood, Brick, and Stone The North American Settlement Landscape* (Amherst University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 72; Cass G. Barns, *The Sod House Reminiscent Historical and Biographical Sketches Featuring Nebraska Pioneers, 1867-1897* (Madison, Nebraska, 1930), 58; Everett Newfon Dick, *The Sod House Frontier, 1854-1890: A Social History of the Northern Plains from the Creation of Kansas and Nebraska to the Admission of the Dakotas* (New York: Appleton Century Company, 1937), 111.

¹⁰ Barns, *The Sod House*, 1930.

¹¹ As quoted in Noble, *Wood, Brick and Stone*, 1985, 72.

wood, dugouts were once nearly ubiquitous in the region. Establishing this first shelter was critical to the survival of the early settlers of the prairies, and their later success in cultivating the land.

For most dugout dwellers, the limitations of space, inherently small due to the labor required to excavate, poor illumination and ventilation, and constant difficulty in keeping the interior dry led them to build an alternative dwelling as soon as was feasibly possible.¹² The example of the Brown Homestead proves that was not always the case, as their dugout and adjoining claim shanty housed two successive families for 40 years. Indeed, the Browns' home was relatively accommodating, addressing many of the shortcomings of the type. Not only was it expanded with the addition of the claim shack, but windows placed into each side wall offered greater light and ventilation. The semi-arid conditions of the region also diminished concerns about moisture and leaking.

Most commonly, the dugout was supplanted by a sod house. When a new house was completed, the dugout was often converted into a root cellar or simply filled in. It is impossible to know how many dugout dwellings were ever constructed in the plains states, although Noble writes that "they were built by the thousands." Without doubt, dugouts were common and critical solutions to the dwelling needs of early settlers. Despite their regional ubiquity in the nineteenth century, "dugouts are a very rare find" in the twenty-first century, writes sod house scholar Andrea Kampinen. "Not only are they difficult to locate, but most do not exist anymore."¹³ The rarity of extant examples makes further study of this important building type challenging. Dugout structures of Euroamerican settlers have received little attention from architectural historians, perhaps because of the rudimentary building techniques, or because of their ephemeral nature.

Although it can be difficult to search for dugout buildings documented in the National Register or state inventories, it appears that few such structures remain with sufficient integrity to convey their use as an independent dwelling. Using the search word "dugout" in the property name returned five hits: one in Nebraska, two in Texas and two in Utah. Most did not have electronic National Register forms available. Of the two nominations available, they illustrated very different conditions from the Brown Homestead. The Fugal Dugout House in Pleasant Grove, Utah is constructed of an 1869 stone dugout, on top of which stands an 1882 house, extensively modified in the 1930s; the dugout now serves as a cellar to the later house. The Hanks Dugouts property in Torrey, Utah, is classified as a *site* composed of three collapsed dugout dwellings, the only surviving resources of an 1880s Mormon settlement. Of course it is possible that more dugouts are listed in the National Register that do not have "dugout" in their names, as is the case with Prairie Homestead.

The Kansas SHPO inventory offers a greater variety of search options. Searching under "earth" as a building material revealed three properties classified as cellars, none of which were described as historic dugout dwellings. A search for "dugout" in the name came up with three other sites. One was a late-19th

¹² Noble, *Wood, Brick and Stone*, 1985, 73.

¹³ Andrea Kampinen, "The Sod Houses of Custer County, Nebraska" (Master's thesis, University of Georgia, 2008), 110.

century frame house with associated dugout, another was a dugout “site” and the other an abandoned stone dugout with a sod roof.

The broader category of “sod houses” offers some insight into the rarity of earthen house types, such as dugouts. In South Dakota’s historic property inventory, only 13 sites were recorded with extant sod houses. Of these, seven are listed in the National Register, although many have been very much altered from their original form by the application of clapboard or stone siding, or now stand as a historical vestige on a modernized farmstead. Others appear to be in very poor condition as of their listing in the 1970s or 1980s, such as the Joseph Baker House in Meade County and the Anna Carr Homestead in Perkins County, which is now enclosed by a metal pole barn. A field investigation of South Dakota’s recorded sod houses would likely reveal that many are no longer standing.

An estimated 8,000 sod houses once stood in Custer County, Nebraska, the most of any place in the country, or even the world, according to local historian Philip Gardner. While this unverified number may be high, the dramatic loss of sod houses is undeniable. Surveys of sod houses conducted in 1976 could find only 12 sod houses. An updated survey by Mead & Hunt in 2005 found three additional houses, but confirmed the existence of only eight extant sod houses in the Custer County. Kampinen conducted an intensive survey in 2007, scouring the county for sod houses and issuing press releases to solicit information to identify additional sites. According to her standards, a sod house site must have least one partial sod wall still standing, including those covered in concrete or stucco. Through this exhaustive process, she was able to inventory 22 extant sod house sites in the “sod house capital of the world.” Of these, only one is classified as a dugout, and only one is listed in the National Register.¹⁴

In 1913, the Brown Homestead was amended by the addition of a wood framed “claim shack” placed on the north side of the dugout. Often intended to serve the temporary needs of claim settlers, typical claim shacks were frame structures clad in board and/or tar paper, with gabled, shed or curved roofs, placed on stone footers. To prove a claim, settlers were required to erect a dwelling with minimum measurements of 12 by 14 feet, and many conformed to this minimum standard. Relatively small and without permanent foundations, claim shacks were easily and frequently moved and can be found attached to other dwellings, including those constructed of sod or banked earth.¹⁵

The claim shack on the Brown Homestead fits closely with the pattern of claim shack development. Reported to be moved from an abandoned claim nearby (site unknown), the frame, one-room structure measures 13’ 6” by 11’ 2”, slightly smaller than the minimum standard. For the Browns, the addition of the shack offered an economical way to increase the size of their earthen home by half, and offered a light-filled parlor with three windows and only partially banked into the slope. Early photographs reveal that the shack lacks a foundation, and is placed on blocks or skids. The interior connection is made by a deep doorway cut into the sod wall.

¹⁴ Kampinen, “Sod Houses of Custer County, Nebraska,” 2008, 99-104.

¹⁵ SWCA Environmental Consultants, “The History of Agriculture in South Dakota Components for a Fully Developed Historic Context,” (on file at the South Dakota State Historic Preservation Office, Pierre, 2013), 13.

The dugout and claim shack exemplify ingenuity and living conditions of early settlers to the central plains states. The historic and reconstructed buildings of the farmstead support the property's setting and convey how the property was used. The one-story barn with a low-pitched roof fits the style of a typical horse shed, which was sometimes used in combination with cattle. The south bay was added in the 1920s to store an automobile. The privy, chicken coop and root cellar were reconstructed since the 1960s based on extant evidence and historic photographs, and compliment the setting. Together, this farmstead stands as a rare existing example of a claim-era farmstead, and of the particularly rare extant example of the dugout.

The Browns' homestead, established in 1909, is relatively late in the period of settlement on public lands, which in South Dakota began in the 1850s and ended in the 1930s.¹⁶ The property is, however, authentically from this period and was created and used by the initial land claimants. The property is also distinguished by having few intrusions typical of most farmsteads, such as a more modern house, barns related to later farming developments and agricultural techniques, and other significant adaptations.

6.0 Integrity

Each of the seven aspects of integrity were assessed for the key features of the Brown Homestead, which include the dugout-claim shack dwelling, the broader farmstead group of buildings and structures, and the entirety of the original 160-acre claim parcel.

Location. Location is an important aspect of integrity for this property because of its associations with homesteading. The structures within the farmstead retain their locations from the period of significance. The recycling of the claim shack, a property moved by the Browns to this site to expand their dwelling accommodations within four years of their initial settlement, is an important feature that conveys the frugal nature and modest growth of this claim-era settlement and within this context should not be construed to be a "moved" property extracted from its original location.

Design. The key design aspects of the dugout dwelling, specifically the embankment into the hill, wooden roof supports covered with soil, and log and lap board façade, remain intact and serve to convey its historical origins. The unusual, arched cornice, documented in photographs dating from c. 1913 and lost by the mid-twentieth century, has been carefully reconstructed to replicate the original style and character. Other missing details on the dwelling, such as some windows, doors and siding, have been selectively replaced to maintain its design. The barn remains intact much as it was appeared in the 1960s, with only minor repairs and replacement. In 1920, the barn received an addition to house an automobile. Although sized to the same proportions as the existing gabled barn, the builder distinguished the addition by using horizontal, rather than vertical siding, and shingle roofing, rather than planks. These distinctive vernacular design elements remain intact.

¹⁶ Brooks and Jacon, "Homesteading and Agricultural Development Context," 1994, 8-9.

Looking at the farmstead, the key buildings in place during the period of significance either remain or have been reconstructed to maintain the important spatial relationships among the buildings of a working farmstead, including animal pens. The modern visitor center, parking area, and walking paths erected to accommodate museum visitors, changes the original design of the farmstead and alters the connections between farmstead structures (Figure 28). More broadly, the entirety of the 160-acre parcel has been diminished by the construction of the two-lane highway that extracts about nine acres from the site and divides the property into two halves. The highway, along with the placement of the visitor center, alters the orientation, views and circulatory patterns of the original farmstead. The original approach to the farmstead was from the north.

Setting. The setting for the Brown Homestead remains very rural and rugged. Stands of cottonwood trees in the nearby slough contrast with the surrounding terrain of rolling, treeless plains and vividly evoke the reasons why and how the original dwelling was built the way it was. The aforementioned highway and visitor center are among the few modern encroachments into the setting that would significantly alter the perspectives once held by the original residents (Figure 29). Although now separated by the highway, the eastern portion of the 160-acre land parcel remains used as ranch land. At a narrower scale, the setting surrounding the dugout dwelling is enhanced by the thoughtful reconstruction of secondary outbuildings restored or rebuilt on their original locations, and designed based on early photographic documentation.



Figure 28. View to visitor center from west side of dwelling seen on right and root cellar seen on left



Figure 29. View to the southeast of Highway 240 from south side of farmstead

Material. The state of deterioration of the dwelling by the 1960s has required the selective replacement of some materials, including wood roof supports, some wall cladding, some windows and doors, sod bricks, and soil that forms the protective roof. Photographs taken circa 1962 help to illustrate the state of material preservation of the dugout and claim shack, as well as the outbuildings. The soil mound and sod roof of the dugout had almost entirely eroded, a weathering pattern typical for unattended earthen structures. Log roof supports were replaced as necessary, and the soil was replaced over the roof to replicate the original design. This pattern of material replacement would not be unlike the common replacement of shingled roofing material. While material replacement was necessary, photographs document that the simple dwelling was substantially intact. The barn also maintains much of its original material.

Workmanship. For the dugout structure, workmanship is an important aspect of integrity that demonstrates the vernacular building techniques of the original homesteaders. The sod blocks (many of them original), wood roof supports and log walls remain substantially preserved and visible to convey the story of the Brown family settlement period and the vernacular methods used to erect their original dwelling. Most of these materials not only remain preserved, but also exposed in their original state, making such construction techniques visible. For buildings using sod materials, this is a rare find.

Feeling. The Brown Homestead strongly suggests its period, and provides the visitors with an accurate and evocative sense of history during the settlement period. With the broad landscape remaining rural,

the sense of the historical context is palpable. Intrusions such as the two-lane highway and visitor center detract from the character, although vegetative screening helps to mitigate their effects.

Association. The Brown Homestead has authentic associations with the Homestead Act, early Dakota and Great Plains settlement, and vernacular design for the dwelling and outbuildings. This aspect of integrity is strong.

Summary of Integrity:

Despite some modern intrusions and need for reconstruction of some elements, the Brown Homestead retains strong historic integrity, and its identity as a claim era settlement is substantially intact. Earthen structures are rare, subject to severe deterioration, and require routine repair and reconstruction. For these reasons, sod house scholar Andrea Kampinen recommends a significant amount of leeway when evaluating integrity of this building type. In the recommendations at the conclusion of her thesis, Kampinen recommends that earthen structure types with integrity levels much lower than that found at the Brown Homestead can still be considered eligible for the National Register:

Integrity for sod houses should be measured with a degree of lenience. According to National Park Service standards, sod houses are significant under Criterion C for their distinctive method of construction. Sod houses are important for their association with the settlement of the American West and due to the fragile nature of their earthen building material, surviving examples are extremely rare. Therefore, most remaining examples, despite their physical condition, should be considered eligible unless a great majority of the house has collapsed or the sod walls are no longer intact. Furthermore, regarding alterations, sod houses should not be penalized for integrity if their sod walls have been clad with another material. The durability of a sod house depends on the protection of its earthen material, therefore the exterior cladding is absolutely necessary. Nonetheless, these houses needed to be upgraded in order to be livable over the last century. Additions ultimately became characteristic features of sod houses in order to expand the relatively small living space for a growing family. Of course, each sod house should be evaluated on a case by case basis, but it must be remembered that it is the sod walls that are important on these structures, and they should remain eligible regardless of their exterior cladding or additions.¹⁷

Since the alterations commonly seen on other building using sod construction material is not present, and because the continued presence of associated properties concurrent with the period of significance remain on the farmstead, its integrity for this property type can be considered outstanding.

¹⁷ Kampinen, "Sod Houses of Custer County, Nebraska," 2008, 159-161.

7.0 Recommendation

Based on the current understanding of historic contexts and the property type, the Brown Homestead has potential significance under NHL Criteria 1 and 4.

Criterion 1: Associations with broad patterns of history. Constructed by the original claim holders of this property, the Brown Homestead represents the federal policies of western settlement. The U.S. policy of western expansion through its series of policies, such as the Homestead Act of 1862, utterly transformed the west, both facilitating and encouraging settlement of the western states for farming and ranching purposes. Dugouts and claim shacks were among the first and most expedient of dwelling types created by the first Euro-American settlers on plains, and are closely tied to the requirements for proving a claim. Few resources of this type remain in such relatively unaltered states as the Brown Homestead.

Criterion 4: Properties that embody the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type specimen exceptionally valuable for a study of a period, style, or method of construction. The dugout and claim shack appendage are vernacular representatives of the type and period of construction techniques and of shelter solutions on the Great Plains. Once common in the region, the dugout is now a rare extant example of the patterns in which nineteenth and early twentieth century homesteaders of the region fashioned relatively hospitable quarters. The structure retains outstanding historic integrity and retains the character-defining features of its type. This is especially true in light of comparable properties, few of which are extant.

The recommended period of significance of the Brown Homestead begins in 1909, when the family homesteaded the site, and concludes in 1936 when Charles Brown moved away. Possible associated NHL theme studies include *Westward Expansion of the National Boundaries to the Pacific, 1830-1898: The Farmer's Frontier* (1959) and *Agriculture and the Farmer's Frontier* (1963) (both theme studies are out of print or otherwise unavailable).

NHL Exception 2: Moved Structures. The NHL typically excludes properties that have been moved from their original site, unless the building or structure is of exceptional significance or association. The claim shack was moved to the Brown Homestead by the Brown family within four years of initial settlement and during the period of significance, and therefore would not need to meet this exception criterion.

NHL Exception 6: Reconstructed Buildings. Reconstructed buildings may qualify for NHL listing if the buildings are of extraordinary national significance, are accurately executed and presented in a dignified manner, and when no other buildings with the same association have survived. The Brown Homestead contains three fully or partially reconstructed structures: the chicken coop, root cellar and privy. Reconstructed based on photographic documentation, their presence makes an important contribution to the historic setting. While these structures do not meet the criteria of extraordinary national significance that would qualify for them as an NHL, further investigation of the root cellar and chicken coop may suggest that their original materials are substantially intact. Each structure's essential character is defined by its earthen walls and floors, which may remain as intact features. Portions of the

chicken coop roof may be intact, as evidenced in photographs from the 1960s. If verified as authentic sites, these “reconstructed” structures may be considered contributing properties to an NHL district.

The integrity of the dugout-claim shack dwelling is excellent within the context of this property type, and the complement of existing historic, restored and reconstructed outbuildings serve to enhance the feeling and association of the historic farmstead setting.

To our knowledge, no archaeological studies have been undertaken at the homestead to determine if sites related to the Browns’ period of occupation remain intact. If such sites do remain, then it is possible that other historical information and significance can be established. The continued use of the site – into the 1940s – and the reconstruction that has occurred in the latter half of the twentieth century may diminish the quality of the archaeological remains. Indeed, documented abandoned claim sites in South Dakota and elsewhere in the Great Plains may offer greater potential for intact archaeological resources from the early settlement period.

7.1 RECOMMENDATION FOR ADDITIONAL INVESTIGATION

Further investigation for an NHL designation study should include the following:

- Consultation with National Park Service NHL staff to discuss implications for national significance, standards for integrity, and comparative resource types;
- Field investigations of high-quality sites in the Great Plains to assess comparative qualities;
- Additional research on the agricultural practices of the Brown family and of the region;
- Further investigation of the integrity of the original materials of the root cellar and chicken coop to determine if they might be considered contributing structures;
- Further documentation of the broader landscape to document other farmstead features, such as fence lines, circulation patterns, stock ponds, and other historic details that demonstrate the broader use of the property;
- Consideration of an expanded boundary inclusive of the 160-acre homestead parcel;
- Archaeological testing of the farmstead site, including the privy site, to determine if intact deposits from the early period of occupancy remain.

8.0 References

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