

Reliving the past

643 words

Not everyone believes the Homestead Act of 1862 worth celebrating. If I were Native American, I wouldn't be thrilled to know the government gave away land they considered vacant.

Lighting candles for the Homestead Act is like making Columbus Day a holiday: isn't it wonderful that Columbus "discovered" the Americas?"—as if nothing was here before the Nina, Pinta, and the Sante Maria beached.

On the other hand, millions of white Americans got a start in this new country by way of the Homestead Act, tracts of land that were sheer opportunity for Euro-American faces (here and there a black one too).

In the 1870s people here likely had more foreign neighbors than Switzerland. Great-great grandchildren of those pioneers have reason to celebrate because making a life out here was tough and no picnic.

Just a bit south of Lincoln, the Homestead National Monument sits on the first such chunk of American soil given away. A man named Daniel Freeman, Civil War vet, filed a claim within minutes after midnight, January 1, 1863.

Mr. Freeman may be a hero here, the vanguard of a march to unify an America of the two coasts, an dream far more spiritual than moral, something we still call "Manifest Destiny."

Meanwhile, in recent weeks Native tribes halted the construction of an pipeline through reservation land. If you don't think that protest has no connection to the Homestead Act and Manifest Destiny, you're dreaming.

As for Daniel Freeman, people say he never saw a fight he didn't like. When he picked a fight with the local school board, he made history once again.

The first museum guest I spoke to when I was there took a look at the sign on my desk and told me he too was a writer. "No kidding?" I said. He was maybe 85.

He'd been writing congressmen and women all over the nation to tell them about humanism and Karl Marx and America's hellbent direction. He reached in his pocket for a quarter-folded piece of paper, then handed it to me as if to authenticate his claim.

We've turned our backs on the gospel truth--that was gist of it--in schools especially.

I didn't tell him that once upon a time Daniel Freeman had walked to his children's school and discovered the teacher using the Bible to teach English. He told her that was wrong. The teacher told him she wasn't about to turn her back on the Lord. Freeman told her it non-English speaking kids would be better off learning the language from McGuffey than the King James. He was serious; he took the school board to court.

And lost.

So he argued the case before the Nebraska Supreme Court, who ruled in his favor, a ruling the U. S. Supreme Court used in a series of decisions creating a defined line between church and state in schools.

When the wife of the that passionate letter-writer came around again, I told her to tell her husband I'd read his letter. "He's not a bad writer," I told her. "You can tell him that the writer here says he knows how to wield a pen."

"You read it?" she arched her eyebrows. "He's quite a conservative," she said, not as if to excuse him, only to say he was, for better or for worse. "He'll like it that you said so," she told me.

There I sat in the museum, staring at a life-sized image of the bearded Daniel Freeman, who likely would have picked a copy of that man's letter from his mail 150 years ago. And not long ago, hundreds of wild Indians held back a dozen massive caterpillars trying to lay an oil pipeline through sacred land.

"The past isn't history," as Mister Faulkner used to say. "It's not even the past."