

2017

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**Success and failure in the Dakota Territory: Individuals and their unique definitions
during the homesteading era**

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: History

Program of Study Committee:
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The student author and the program of study committee are solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2017

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis has been a long time in the making and would not have been possible without the assistance and support of a number of people. Dr. Julie Courtwright helped me with countless and seemingly endless problems I had with organizing ideas, clearly stating the argument, and dealing with secondary sources. I have no doubt I would still be grappling with an incoherent set of paragraphs without her guidance. Dr. Pamela Riney-Kehrberg and Dr. Matthew Silvis provided me with invaluable advice for this manuscript as well as future work that will surely come out of this. This thesis would not have been possible without the helpful folks at the South Dakota State Historical Society or the Center for Western Studies at Augustana University. They provided what I originally asked for and then turned me on to even more useful records. The accounts in this thesis come entirely from their suggestions. Jennifer Rivera patiently answered all of my questions about requirements, paperwork, and scheduling. High blood pressure due to frustration with bureaucracy was not an issue because of her. My colleagues in the graduate department challenged me to become a better historian by setting a high bar with their first-rate work. I have learned a lot from them and each day strive to follow their example. My “graduate assistant,” Rocky, made sure I got outside for my twice-a-day walks and the occasional run. The fresh air let me take a break from the computer screen, collect my thoughts, and relax. Finally, my lovely girlfriend, Kathryn, has been a saint through this entire process. From start to finish, she realized when I needed support and when I needed pushed. I’ll never know how she put up with my anxiousness, stress, and frustration associated with this but she got me to the finish and I am forever grateful.

ABSTRACT

The definitions of success and failure historians use to describe the goals of homesteaders during the late nineteenth century often revolve around arbitrary measures of land and wealth accumulation and persistence. The method allows historians to easily study large populations by dividing them into categories. Doing so reduces complex individuals to a single characteristic – rich, poor, immigrant, native-born, male, female – and removes the agency each person has to create their own definitions of success and failure. Three men – Wesley Hunt, Gunder Olson, and Adam Royhl – of different backgrounds and economic statuses found themselves owning land in the Dakota Territory between 1870 and 1890. Based on past experiences, they brought with them varying ideas of what success meant to them and strategies to realize that success. Studying each individual’s motivations to move, expectations of their new environment, and experiences in that environment allows historians to insert human agency into the process of westward expansion.

INTRODUCTION

On March 12, 1883, Wesley Abel Hunt joined thousands of settlers migrating to the Dakota Territory. His decision to try his luck at farming on a western homestead started at an early age. While not attending boarding school near North Charlestown, New Hampshire, he helped his father on the family farm, growing crops and raising livestock. After completing school and leaving a series of short-term jobs, he became North Charlestown's railroad station agent. He also served as an agent for the American Express Company and as the town's postmaster, receiving a cumulative annual salary of nearly \$500.¹ In 1880, he rented out an old shoe factory and converted it to a general store in which he sold groceries, hardware, clothing, and dry goods.² The store added to his already substantial income, allowing him to provide comfortable living conditions for his second wife, Rosie, and their newborn child. A family man who was experienced in agriculture and business, Hunt became a well-established member of his community.

Despite his good financial and social standing, Hunt experienced a number of tragedies. He and his first wife, Ida, lost a child at birth. Her father passed away unexpectedly soon after,

¹ Adjusted for inflation, the historic standard of living of Hunt's \$500 annual salary is equivalent to just \$12,200 in 2015. Samuel H. Williamson uses the historic standard of living to measure the purchasing power of an income in its ability to purchase services such as food, shelter, and clothing. He argues, however, that historic standard of living is a simple measurement that does not adequately adjust for numerous factors, instead adjusting for a fixed bundle of goods and services. For a more accurate adjustment, Williamson uses labor earnings which measures the amount of income relative to the wage of that average worker. Doing so puts Hunt's income equivalent to \$72,600 in 2015 dollars. For Hunt to walk away from such an income in hopes of succeeding in the Dakota Territory is truly amazing. Samuel H. Williamson, "Seven Ways to Compute the Relative Value of a U.S. Dollar Amount, 1774 to Present," *MeasuringWorth*, 2017.

² Emma A. Hunt, Erling Hunt, and Virginia Moulton, *Roots and Branches of the Hunt-Fifield-Bailey Family and The Times in Which They Lived, 1630-1980* (Claremont, NH: Claremont Print Shoppe, 1980), 66.

and she committed suicide.³ Five years later, an arsonist burned Hunt's general store to the ground.⁴ Despite recouping much of the loss through insurance payments, he was badly shaken by the incident.⁵ Soon after, Rosie's sister passed away. Badly shaken themselves, Hunt's brother-in-law and nephew, Frank and George Ayer, made plans to move west. Hunt decided to join them. One month after the fire, he travelled to Huron, Dakota Territory. After a brief stay, he moved forty-five miles further west where he found five quarter sections of land. He filed the necessary paperwork to gain ownership of one parcel, holding two for Frank and George, and the other two in hopes his father and Rosie would follow him west.⁶

During his first months in the Dakota Territory, Hunt improved his land by constructing a house and planting crops. He also devised plans to establish a large cattle and hog farm, an operation he believed would produce immediate returns on his investment.⁷ To fulfill his plan, Hunt needed to convince his father and Rosie to claim the land he was holding for them, which would provide him with enough acres for growing crops and raising cattle. Although Rosie and Hunt's father reluctantly supported his decision to homestead, they refused to move west with him.⁸ His scheme quickly fell apart. Despite successfully harvesting crops and making major improvements to his land in just a few months, something most settlers did not achieve for many years, if at all, Hunt's ambitious plans failed to develop as quickly as he had hoped. After

³ Ibid, 40.

⁴ Wesley Abel Hunt, *Diary*, February 17, 1883. Emma A. Hunt Collection, Center for Western Studies, Augustana University, Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

⁵ Ibid, March 6, 1883.

⁶ Ibid, April 16, 1883.

⁷ Wesley Abel Hunt to Abel Hunt, April 26, 1883 and June 23, 1883, Emma A. Hunt Collection, Center for Western Studies, Augustana University, Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

⁸ Ibid, June 23, 1883.

spending only seven months on his homestead, he commuted his claim and returned to New Hampshire a failure, even if only in his own mind.⁹

SUCCESS AND FAILURE

Wesley Hunt's decision to homestead in the Dakota Territory and his brief experience there both support and challenge historical arguments about homesteading and western expansion. Likely not fully conscious of the social, technological, and political changes occurring around him, Hunt was nevertheless a complex and rational individual making his own decisions in the midst of them. However, historians often remove individual agency and complexity from their analysis by assigning a specific label - immigrant, rich, male, farmer - to individuals in order to study them as groups. Doing so has its advantages. The method allows scholars to identify broad trends within a complex era. Unable to study every individual, historians can apply this method to determine if specific examples are ordinary or irregular as compared to the general trends already established. Viewing the individual as simply part of a larger group, however, also allows historians to dismiss individuals that do not support those trends, brushing them off as outliers. Once created, historians continue to assign labels back to individuals, which support the broader trends already identified. The cycle leads to the creation of and continued emphasis on simplified generalizations.¹⁰

Acknowledging that Wesley Hunt and other settlers were rational actors and complex individuals - not just part of a larger group - can help historians avoid common oversights and

⁹ Wesley Abel Hunt, *Diary*, December 1, 1883.

¹⁰ Jack E. Eblen, "An Analysis of Nineteenth-Century Frontier Populations," *Demography* 2 (1965), 399.

generalizations. Doing so will lead to a more accurate, nuanced understanding of settlers during the homestead era. Wesley Hunt and two other migrants to the Dakota Territory, Gunder Olson and Adam Royhl, were more than just examples to support larger trends. They were logical and weighed the pros and cons of moving to the west versus staying where they were. They created unique, personal guidelines to determine if they were achieving success, or if they were failing and therefore should seek out success somewhere else. Discussing the motivations behind migrants' decisions to move, their expectations regarding the new environment they encountered, their definitions of success and failure, and how they responded to threats to those definitions will provide a more comprehensive interpretation of their individual decision-making processes. Each settler boasted multiple different labels, the combination of which made each person unique in his or her own way. Historians' insistence on simplifying them into groups of similar occupation, economic status, gender, or nationality only reveals a basic understanding of the complexity of the era. Studying how individual historical actors viewed and responded to the multiple changes and influences they encountered in their everyday lives will reveal ways in which their examples support certain historical assumptions while, at the same time, challenge others.

For most settlers, the decision to migrate west required a careful consideration of the pros and cons of leaving their homes for perceived opportunities elsewhere. Scholars have since labelled those pros and cons as push and pull factors. Pull factors - the opportunities perceived in potential places of migration - lured would-be settlers to the Dakota Territory.¹¹ Land opened up

¹¹ Aidan McQuillan, "The Mobility of Immigrants and Americans: A Comparison of Farmers on the Kansas Frontier," *Agricultural History* 53, no. 3 (1979); Other authors who discuss opportunities that awaited settlers in the American West include: Michael J. Piore, *Birds of Passage: Migrant Labor and Industrial Societies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Robert C. Ostergren, *A Community Transplanted: The Trans-Atlantic Experience of a Swedish Immigrant Settlement in the Upper Middle West, 1835-1915* (Madison: University of

for settlement under the Homestead Act of 1862 served to attract many settlers to the American West, especially individuals who wanted to take up some form of agriculture.¹² For a small filing fee, migrants could settle on 160 acres of public land. After they lived on the land for five years, they gained ownership of it without additional payments. Many affluent individuals chose to commute their claims, paying \$1.25 per acre to purchase the land before their five years ended.¹³ The cheap and easily accessible public land, along with the expansion of railroads, provided settlers an opportunity to move west.

As soon as settlers went into the Dakota Territory, accounts of the land came out of it. Created by town boosters, land agents, government officials, and settlers themselves, advertisements and positive descriptions designed to lure readers west appeared in newspapers and agricultural publications throughout the nation. Wesley Hunt likely read articles such as “FARMS and HOMES: The best in the world, are easily obtained in Dakota... First come, best served.”¹⁴ Not only did these accounts make eastern settlers aware of the opportunities in the American West, they also sparked individuals’ imaginations of what could be awaiting them there. For some settlers, such as Wesley Hunt, the thought of individual success was sufficient justification to move to the Dakota Territory.¹⁵ Likely influenced by the positive reports, he believed he would get rich quick and made plans to achieve those dreams. After establishing his homestead, Hunt wrote to his father, explaining that he intended to purchase fifty cows from a

Wisconsin Press (1988); David J. Wishart more recently discussed push and pull factors of migration in *The Last Days of the Rainbelt*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013).

¹² Frederick C. Luebke, “Ethnic Group Settlement on the Great Plains,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (1977), 407.

¹³ Richard Edwards, “Changing Perceptions of Homesteading as a Policy of Public Domain Disposal,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (2009), 182.

¹⁴ “Farms and Homes,” *The Fitchburg (Massachusetts) Sentinel*, March 20, 1883.

¹⁵ Ostergren, *A Community Transplanted*, 21.

man in Iowa, keep them for four years, and then return one hundred head to Iowa as payment.¹⁶ He also described the land as “some as fine land as lies in Dakota or the world either for that matter, and... there is no shadow of a contest about it.”¹⁷ If he succeeded in his plans he would have “2 or 3 hundred of young cattle besides what butter” they produced.¹⁸ For Hunt, the dream of a large profit made over a short period of time was the goal and the “pull” that lured him west.

For other settlers, however, acquiring land, not riches, was the foremost goal.¹⁹ Gunder Olson of Norway sought out his own piece of the vast public lands in the Dakota Territory. Olson’s situation was much different than Wesley Hunt’s. He was part of a long line of farmers in eastern Norway. Traditionally, the male heads of households transferred land ownership to their sons. Over the generations, the sons received fewer and fewer acres. This no doubt worried Olson, who had six children, three of whom were boys. As a result, articles advertising the availability of western lands would have intrigued him. In one such advertisement in the *Billed-Magazin* - a short-lived, Norwegian-language magazine published in Madison, Wisconsin and distributed throughout Norway - J.A. Johnson Skibsnaes wrote about what would-be immigrants could expect in the Dakota Territory. Describing the attributes of the American West, he wrote that “...the west offers the best opportunities... out here, more easily than anywhere else, they [Norwegian immigrants] can win economic independence and a bright future. With a bit of

¹⁶ Wesley Abel Hunt to Abel Hunt, April 26, 1883, Emma A. Hunt Collection, Center for Western Studies, Augustana University, Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ James I. Stewart, “Economic Opportunity or Hardship?: The Causes of Geographic Mobility on the Agricultural Frontier,” *The Journal of Economic History* 69, no. 1 (2009), 239; Luebke, “Ethnic Group Settlement,” 409.

capital as a starter and some business instinct, a person will generally succeed in building a small fortune - assuming that the efforts in this direction are furthered by frugality and prudence.”²⁰

Even more enticing to Olson would have been the benefits of family life in the Dakota Territory. Skibsnaes assured prospective immigrants that “if the father has a couple children who are willing to help him for a while,” he need not fear for the future.²¹ While Olson may not have read this particular article, the encouraging rhetoric it contained was commonplace throughout Norway in the last half of the nineteenth century. Paul Wallace Gates noted that newspaper editors printed stories of profits which “fueled the speculation craze.”²² Becoming convinced that he could claim enough land to pass on to his children, plus the added chance to accumulate a small fortune, was enough to pull Olson west. Along with his wife and six children, he emigrated from Norway in 1871 and filed a timber culture claim, which promoted the growth of trees in the western United States, in southeastern Dakota Territory.²³

Unencumbered by children, Adam Royhl viewed the opening of public land to settlement as a way to gain individual independence.²⁴ In 1872, at age fifteen, Royhl emigrated from Germany with his parents. For seven years he called Columbia County, Wisconsin home. There he attended public school and helped his father on the family farm. Living near Portage and Milwaukee, popular stopping points for migrants, brought him into contact with a number of individuals making their way west. An 1878 article in *The Daily Milwaukee News* reported that

²⁰ J.A. Johnson Skibsnaes, “Concerning Emigration,” *Billed-Magazin* Vol. 33 (1869), online access http://www.naha.stolaf.edu/pubs/nas/volume33/vol33_07.htm.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Paul W. Gates, “The Role of the Land Speculator in Western Development,” in *The Jeffersonian Dream: Studies in the History of American Land Policy and Development*, ed. Allan G. and Margaret Beattie Bogue (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1966), 9.

²³ US Census Bureau, 1910, Census Place: *Lyon, Lyon, Iowa*, Roll T624_406, Page 17A, Enumeration District 0065, FHL microfilm 1374419.

²⁴ Richard R. Beeman, *The Evolution of the Southern Backcountry: A Case Study of Lunenburg County, Virginia 1746-1832* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 30.

many settlers in Dakota were “nearly all Americans, with a considerable Germanan [sic] element, a great many having emigrated from Wisconsin.”²⁵ With so many settlers in the Dakota Territory passing through, Royhl likely heard reports of the newly-opened lands. After graduating from school, he began searching for an opportunity to set out on his own. Whether through word of mouth, newspapers, or both, Royhl got the western fever in the spring of 1879 and decided to pursue the opportunities that awaited him further west.²⁶

Wesley Hunt, Gunder Olson, and Adam Royhl were all lured to the west because of the availability of public land, the positive accounts they read in newspapers, and the stories they heard from other migrants. These pull factors, however, were only part of the settlers’ reasoning. Individuals first compared the risks and advantages of pursuing the opportunities that they identified in the west against staying where they were. Pull factors were only worth acting on if potential immigrants believed the chances of success in the Dakota Territory were better than their current circumstances offered them. If the push factors - the negative conditions in a region or country of origin that cause concern or instability in the daily lives of residents - were bad enough, the lure of the pull factors became stronger.²⁷ But many people moved because they had to - because they were outsiders within an impersonal economic system, and were pushed out.²⁸

²⁵ “More Light. Result of an Interview with the Yankton Delegation. Why Milwaukee Wants a Direct Connection With Dakota Territory and Why Yankton Wants One With Us,” *The Daily Milwaukee News* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin), December 7, 1878.

²⁶ Doane Robinson, *History of South Dakota* (Indianapolis(?): B.F. Bowen & Co., 1904), 1854.

²⁷ Russell King, “Theories and Typologies of Migration: An Overview and A Primer,” *Willy Brandt Series of Working Papers in International Migration and Ethnic Relations* 3/12, Malmö University, Malmö Institute for Studies of Migration, Diversity and Welfare (2012), 13, 19. Migration studies such as King’s are largely inspired and influenced by E.G. Ravenstein’s “The Laws of Migration,” *Journal of the Statistical Society of London* 48, no. 2 (1885), pp. 167-235. While Ravenstein focused on migration within England, the insights he provided have led to numerous studies on domestic and international migration patterns.

²⁸ Robert Doherty, *Society and Power: Five New England Towns, 1800-1860* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977), 40-41.

As a result, push factors are just as important as pull factors when considering why people moved.

At the same time opportunities became available in the west, many residents of Europe and the eastern states experienced declining social and living conditions. As western boosters began to pull residents from the eastern United States and Europe toward the Dakota Territory, urban residents faced low pay, long working hours, and unsafe working conditions while rural residents were met with both decreasing soil productivity and farm size.²⁹ In some European countries, national laws and the ruling classes denied land ownership to the lower classes, which naturally created a craving for it. This became a motivating force for settling the West, first to create a home, then to assure wealth and a social position.³⁰ Adverse conditions left many eastern and European residents poor, destitute, and in a desperate search for new opportunities. For many, push factors were present in abundance.

Gunder Olson likely experienced those very conditions on his Norwegian farm. Although a description of his life prior to immigrating to the United States is absent from Olson's letters, J.A. Skibsnaes mentioned the conditions many Norwegians faced in their home country during the second half of the nineteenth century. He woefully wrote that the Norwegian experienced "a humble form of existence and wages which barely suffice to provide the most modest demands for clothing... the future seldom offers him any other prospect than entry into the cotter's or the day laborer's unenviable form of life."³¹ Skibsnaes's pessimistic tone reflected the sentiment felt by many in Norway at the time. The country was in the midst of a severe economic downturn,

²⁹ James C. Malin, "The Turnover of Farm Population in Kansas," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (1935), 343.

³⁰ Gates, "The Role of the Land Speculator," 7.

³¹ Skibsnaes, "Concerning Emigrations."

taxes were high, crop failures were widespread, and crippling debt was on the rise.³² To many poor Europeans, the opportunity to claim 160 acres of land on the American frontier was too good an offer to pass up.³³ With little to look forward to in Norway, the vast opportunities open to Olson and his family in America appealed to him.

Prospects for Adam Royhl were equally grim. After school, he began splitting his time between working in the timber industry of northern Wisconsin and the family farm.³⁴ While he worked hard, he never accumulated much wealth. His salary allowed him to purchase the bare essentials for survival. By 1879, he had only been in the United States for seven years, he was not married, nor did he have children. He also was not tied to any occupation, moving between jobs in the northern woods of Wisconsin and his father's farm. A man of some education, little money, and few prospects, Royhl never felt settled in Columbia County. Swept up in the flood of immigrants moving west through the state, he chose to search for better opportunities in the Dakota Territory.

Unlike Olson and Royhl, Hunt was more established in his community and better equipped to cope with the larger economic and social changes occurring around him. His push factors were of a more personal nature and began at an early age. When he was five years old, his father moved to a farm in North Charlestown, New Hampshire, giving Wesley some experience raising livestock and growing crops. From ages fifteen to eighteen, Wesley attended different schools, two local and, for a brief time, the Newbury Academy located eighty miles

³² George T. Flom, *History of Norwegian Immigration to the United States from the Earliest Beginning Down to the Year 1848* (Iowa City: Privately Printed, 1909), 64. See also Odd S. Lovoll's *Promise of America: A History of the Norwegian-American People* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) for an overview of economic, social, and political hardships Norwegians faced between 1850 and 1900.

³³ Luebke, "Ethnic Group Settlement," 409.

³⁴ Frank Crisler, "Adam Royhl," Biography of Adam Royhl found online at <http://www.findagrave.com> (retrieved January 16, 2017).

north of Charlestown.³⁵ When he was home from school, he helped his father raise sheep and cattle, plow land, and cut wood. After graduation, Hunt showed an unwillingness to stay in one place for too long. In 1870, he worked for both his father and another farmer, while also intermittently employed in a sawmill, picking hops, as a section hand for the railroad, and teaching school at a nearby town.³⁶ In September 1872, Hunt became the station agent for the Vermont Central Railroad where he received a monthly salary of \$22.50 along with rent-free living quarters above the station. Hunt also served as an agent for the American Express Company for which he earned \$3 every month, and as North Charlestown's postmaster, which came with an annual salary of \$180.³⁷

With a yearly salary of nearly \$500, Hunt was more prosperous than many individuals seeking to take advantage of the Homestead Act, which Congress enacted to primarily benefit the landless and poor residents of the east. The act played a great part in allowing over one million people to acquire cheap land, much of which settlers developed to provide themselves and their family with social and his economic stability.³⁸ Hunt was unusual in that he chose to step away from steady employment and family to take advantage of the Homestead Act and other opportunities he identified in the west. Why Hunt chose to risk his prominent role and salary in the North Charlestown community to pursue a small chance of success in the unknown world of the American West complicates the traditional understanding of homesteading and westward expansion.

³⁵ Emma A. Hunt, *Roots and Branches*, 21.

³⁶ Emma A. Hunt, *Roots and Branches*, 36-37.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

³⁸ Paul W. Gates, "The Homestead Act Free Land Policy in Operation, 1862-1935," in *The Jeffersonian Dream: Studies in the History of American Land Policy and Development*, ed. Allan G. and Margaret Beattie Bogue (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1966), 52.

Hunt experienced a series of unfortunate and traumatic events between 1875 and 1883 that served to push him to the west. After losing his first daughter and wife, Hunt married Rosie Bailey. She gave birth to their first and only child in October 1880. To increase his income to better support his expanded family, Hunt rented out an old shoe factory for \$50 per year and stocked it with groceries, hardware, clothing, and dry goods. Business went well for two years until the arsonist targeted Hunt's store.³⁹

The deaths of close family members and the loss of his store forced Hunt to reconsider where he was most likely to find success, as he defined it. Haunted by the negative experiences of his recent past, the thought of escaping them appealed to him. The effort needed to rebuild his store was daunting, rebuilding his life seemed impossible. Already unsettled, another tragedy struck the family. Susan Bailey, Rosie's older sister, passed away in early 1883. Soon after, Susan's husband and son, Frank and George Ayer, decided to take their chances at homesteading in the Dakota Territory. They were not the first of Hunt's family to consider the move. Nearly fifteen years prior, Hunt's father contemplated a move west before deciding against it. Hunt's cousin, Nathan Reed, had already made the journey west and settled in Huron, Dakota Territory. With family already located there and more on their way, Hunt decided that that was his best chance to escape the negative experiences of his recent past. Rosie, his father, and his managers at the railroad company reluctantly agreed to his decision. They allowed him to leave for the summer with the stipulation that he return in the fall.⁴⁰ On March 10, only three weeks after the

³⁹ Ibid., 66.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 66.

fire, Hunt began making plans for the journey. His mood immediately improved as he imagined the success he was about to find in the Dakota Territory.⁴¹

Despite their diverse backgrounds, Hunt, Olson, and Royhl were similar in that forces beyond their control influenced their decisions to migrate. Push factors such as unstable economies, landlessness, low wages, and personal tragedy influenced individuals to search for new opportunities. These three men, among many others, found hope in the Dakota Territory. The chance to own land and to be free of the suffocating social problems of the east lured them to the west. Push factors were equally important as pull factors. The pushes forced individuals to realize the negative aspects of their current living and social situations, and to do something about them. The pulls allowed them to imagine the opportunities of success that awaited them elsewhere.

Giving equal weight to push and pull factors does not go far enough, however, to fully understand the complexity of the era. Focusing solely on the push-pull model lessens the importance of - and oftentimes removes completely - the human reasoning responsible for the decisions to migrate west. As a result, in many historical narratives, the factors that influence individuals appear to have more agency than the individuals themselves. But people are distinct in how they internalize external pressures. Given the same set of broad circumstances, individuals took into consideration their own unique economic status, personality, past

⁴¹ Wesley Abel Hunt, *Diary*, March 9-25, 1883. Prior to March 9, Hunt filled his diary with the negative events that consumed his life. March 9 was the first time he mentioned the Dakota Territory. For the next two weeks, Hunt wrote about the idea of homesteading in the Dakota Territory until he finally committed to doing so on March 25. His diary entries became more optimistic as he discussed his plans and expectations for his migration west.

experiences, and life-stage when planning for their futures.⁴² Each person weighed those factors to determine where they were most likely to find the success they desired.

Twentieth and twenty-first century historians have created many definitions of nineteenth century success. The common definition is in terms of persistence. If settlers moved west and stayed long enough for their names to appear on two separate census rolls, historians considered them a success. John Mack Faragher suggested that settlers who did not persist in one area tended to move further west in search of success or returned east in defeat.⁴³ Closely associated with persistence is the accumulation of land and wealth. Robert Ostergren argued that “most migrants came to better their prospects and placed pecuniary advantage above all else.”⁴⁴ Those who persisted tended to establish profitable farms or businesses. As they continued to accumulate land, farm size became another indicator of success for historians. D. Aidan McQuillan argued that the larger the farm, the more successful the farmer.⁴⁵ While these definitions of success are useful, they are also limiting. Farm size as the measure for success, for example, assumes that all settlers intended to become large landowners. Persistence assumes that settlers intended to stay in an area for at least ten years. As Allan Bogue pointed out, the prosperous were the most likely to stay, but some of them also left after a short period of residence.⁴⁶ Individual intent of the migrants, however, is excluded from these definitions.

While many homesteaders would have certainly considered persisting on their homestead, accumulating land and wealth, owning a large farm, or any combination of them a

⁴² Everett S. Lee, “A Theory of Migration,” *Demography* 3, no. 1 (1966), 51; Douglas S. Massey et al., “Theories of International Migration: A Review and Appraisal,” *Population and Development Review* 19, no. 3 (1966), 434.

⁴³ John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 50-51.

⁴⁴ Ostergren, *A Community Transplanted*, 21; McQuillan, “The Mobility of Immigrants,” 576.

⁴⁵ D. Aidan McQuillan, “Farm Size and Work Ethic: Measuring Success of Immigrant Farmers on the American Grasslands, 1875-1925,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 4, no. 1 (1978), 57.

⁴⁶ Allan G. Bogue, “Farming the Prairie Peninsula, 1830-1890,” *The Journal of Economic History* 23, no. 1 (1963), 4.

success, many others like Gunder Olson and Adam Royhl were happy to own any land at all. The definitions historians use downplay the role culture, family, preconceived notions, and expectations played in the individual's own conceptions of success and failure.⁴⁷ Both are relative terms, unique to each individual. They are also fluid. Once settlers met certain goals or deemed them unattainable, they set new goals and, as a result, redefined what success and failure meant to them. The arbitrary definitions are broad and meant to describe the majority of settler experiences. In doing so, historians place unique settlers into predetermined boxes in order to study just one or two characteristics of their diverse personalities, backgrounds, and experiences. Taking into account how each settler defined success and failure for him or herself can reveal the true complexity of the homesteading era.

Wesley Hunt, Gunder Olson, and Adam Royhl began forming their own definitions of success as they contemplated their push and pull factors, as well as their personal goals and desires. Adam Royhl's goal of owning land was a modest one. He was already used to moving, having emigrated from Germany with his parents in 1872. Just seven years later, he felt stuck between working in the northern Wisconsin timber industry and on his father's farm. Unable to save money and exposed to many settlers moving west, Royhl decided his best chance of success was to join in the rush. Success to him was gaining ownership of cheap land which he could develop as slowly or quickly as he could invest in it. To Royhl, independence from the poor wages and working conditions was success in itself.

Gunder Olson likely feared for the future of his children in Norway. The declining economic, social, and environmental conditions made him uneasy. The American West, he

⁴⁷ C. Barron McIntosh, "One Man's Sequential Land Alienation on the Great Plains," *Geographical Review* 71, no. 4 (1981), 445.

decided, offered opportunities that were not available to him in his home country. Access to larger tracts of land would improve the living conditions of his family and ensure that his children could inherit the land he would homestead himself. They would even have the option to eventually purchase their own. Accumulation of land was Olson's primary goal. While monetary gain was certainly on his mind, acquiring a homestead was his most important objective. His early expectations of life in the Dakota Territory revolved around a self-sufficient lifestyle and a slow accumulation of wealth.⁴⁸

Although financially secure, Wesley Hunt believed the loss of his general store threatened his ability to provide for his family. Even though he recouped his losses through insurance payments, the incident devastated him. Motivated by tragedy, Hunt was ready to seek out a change of fortune. Influenced by the positive reports of life in the West, as well as some family members already pursuing opportunities there, he decided to take the chance. An ambitious, spontaneous man, Hunt set high expectations for his Dakota Territory expedition. Anything less than earning a fortune would, in his mind, be a failure. Royhl, Olson, and Hunt all came from different backgrounds, lived through different experiences, and created different definitions of success for themselves in their new environments.

The ways in which they pursued success also differed. Money was the biggest challenge to pioneers, as they not only needed to support themselves and their families (if they also made the journey) until their land became productive, but also had to pay for travel to the west, build a

⁴⁸ Gunder Olson to Family in Norway, February 13, 1873,; Thore Gunderson to Family in Norway, November 18, 1873; February 27, 1864; February 22, 1875; May 20, 1878; Gunder Olson to Brother-in-Law and Family, November 28, 1878; Thore Gunderson to Mr. C. Odegaarden and Family, May 26, 1883, *Mabel Brodland Papers*, Center for Western Studies, Augustana College, Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Gunder Olson and his son, Thore, mentioned the slow progress they made toward accumulating livestock and tilling the land. For nearly a decade, Olson family relied on subsistence agriculture, growing only enough crops they were able to consume and, eventually, enough to feed livestock during the long Dakota winters. After five years on the homestead, they were aware of the market prices for crops and livestock. After ten years, they were participating on the market.

shelter, fence their property, and purchase tools and seed.⁴⁹ Most settlers developed a farming system which required the smallest number of expenses.⁵⁰ While true for Royhl, Olson and many other settlers, limited funds were not an issue for Wesley Hunt. With more capital available to invest in his homestead, he left for the Dakota Territory on April 3, 1883. As he boarded a train in Chicago, he commented that the train was heavy with people all seeking land in the west.⁵¹ Caught up in the rush for cheap land, the train's passengers arrived safely in Iroquois, Dakota Territory on April 6, 1883. Hunt explored the area and found "a good deal of good soil... the finest land in the world," but did not find any open land for purchase.⁵² He travelled ten miles west to Huron and, after just one day there, he purchased two mules for \$325 with the help of a \$225 loan from the bank. He also began working for his cousin, Nathan Reed, for four dollars per day.⁵³

Hunt did not travel all the way from New Hampshire just to earn four dollars a day, however. Anxious to find his own land and get started creating his fortune, Hunt only stayed in Huron for six days before moving forty-five miles further west to Miller. Once there, he found what he had dreamed of: five quarter sections, on which he secured pre-emption claims. He selected one parcel for himself, held one each for Frank and George Ayer, who planned to meet him there, and two more quarter sections for other family members who he believed would follow him to the Dakota Territory.⁵⁴ Over the next few days, Hunt made multiple purchases

⁴⁹ Greg Bradsher, "How the West was Settled: The 150-Year-Old Homestead Act Lured Americans for a New Life and New Opportunities," *Prologue* 44, no. 4 (2012), 32.

⁵⁰ Bogue, "Farming in the Prairie Peninsula," 24.

⁵¹ Wesley Abel Hunt, *Diary*, April 6, 1883.

⁵² *Ibid*, April 7, 1883.

⁵³ *Ibid*, April 9-11, 1883.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, April 16, 1883. A pre-emption claim refers to property someone intended to purchase at a set price determined by the government, generally \$1.25/acre. Similar to homesteading, owners were required to live on the

including a pair of horses, a stove, and coal. He also paid seven dollars to have lumber delivered to his homestead to construct his shelter.⁵⁵ Having the funds readily available, Hunt acquired the necessary supplies for his homestead much quicker than many other settlers in Dakota. He was well on his way to success, as later historians would define it.

Adam Royhl, however, acquired his land and supplies much slower than Hunt. In May 1879, Royhl and a friend, Martin Seipp, took what little money they had and travelled to the Dakota Territory to look for open land. They rode the train until the track ended at the Minnesota-Dakota Territory border. From there, they walked in search of a suitable homestead. They found the land “all staked out” due to the Northwestern Railroad’s land grant, which entitled the company to every other parcel of land on either side of the right-of-way.⁵⁶ Land speculators generally gained access to the desirable sections nearby, forcing subsequent settlers to pay high prices or to homestead further away from established transportation routes and markets.⁵⁷ Those who lacked the capital necessary to purchase farms and equipment had few options open to them. They could continue searching for cheaper land, become tenant farmers, or find employment within town.⁵⁸ Royhl’s personal definition of success depended on him finding a piece of land to call his own. He chose to continue west.

Finding much of the land near the railroad terminus covered with frost, Royhl and Seipp chose to move south, where the ground was less likely to be semi-frozen in May. The men walked, carrying only their bedrolls and guns, to Elkton, Dakota Territory before making their

land and make improvements to it before the government allowed them to purchase it. Because there are only minor differences between preemption claims and homesteads, the two terms will be used interchangeably.

⁵⁵ Ibid, April 17-18, 1883.

⁵⁶ Adam Royhl, *Memoir*, H2011-053, Box 3654C, Adam Royhl Collection 1879-1916, South Dakota State Archives, Pierre, South Dakota, 1.

⁵⁷ Paul Wallace Gates, “The Homestead Act in an Incongruous Land System,” *The American Historical Review* 41, no. 4 (1936), 662.

⁵⁸ Gates, “The Homestead Law,” 670.

way into less settled lands.⁵⁹ After walking for two days, with little to eat and drink, Royhl and Seipp found land in east central Dakota Territory. They each claimed 320 acres and completed the necessary paperwork in nearby Oakwood. With no capital to begin improving their claims, Royhl stayed in the Dakota Territory while Seipp went back to Wisconsin to collect money that was owed to them.⁶⁰ Seipp forwarded the funds to Royhl, who immediately used it to purchase lumber for the homestead. Just six weeks later, having made the necessary improvements to legally keep the land, he returned to Wisconsin in the latter part of June, where he signed on to work another season for the timber company. He traveled back to his homestead the following spring with enough money to purchase a team of horses and a few tools.⁶¹ That summer, he produced a good crop but only sold enough of it to return to Wisconsin, where he again signed another contract with the timber company.⁶² Royhl's willingness to work in the Wisconsin woods allowed him to earn enough money to survive on while improving his homestead and growing his first crops in the Dakota Territory.⁶³ For Royhl, slow, calculated growth, not immediate economic gains, were a success.

Gunder Olson found himself in a similar situation as Royhl. Having spent much of his savings on travel for himself and his family, he had little capital to immediately invest in crops. One key difference between Olson and Royhl, however, was that Royhl could return home. Olson and his six dependents could not afford the return trip to Norway and so they lived full-time on their homestead. As soon as Olson succeeded in obtaining a homestead, he quickly realized subsistence agriculture would be necessary for his family to survive. He managed to

⁵⁹ Adam Royhl, *Memoir*, 2.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 5.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 6.

⁶² *Ibid*, 6.

⁶³ Wishart, *The Last Days*, 89.

plow seven acres of land his first year on the southeastern Dakota homestead, but did not plant crops. He planned to plant oats the following spring and plow more land for corn. In the meantime, the family fished in the nearby river and hunted the grey geese and prairie hens that settled in the small lakes near his homestead. What they could not produce they purchased with the little money they had left after emigrating from Norway. In 1873, Olson wrote to family members in Norway that he had not “harvested anything yet, but have never been in want since we came to America even though we must buy all we need for a living.”⁶⁴

The Olson family immigrated to the United States with little to their name. Unlike Hunt, they were unable to immediately invest in livestock or machinery. Since Olson’s immediate goal was to find land for his family, he did not consider getting a loan from the bank like Hunt. Instead, they simply subsisted off the land until they could start producing enough crops to feed both themselves and livestock, as well as sell any surplus on the market. If Olson defined success as merely being free of the poor living and social conditions in Norway and owning land in America, he succeeded immediately. Having the security of land ownership compensated for the lack of production.⁶⁵ He then redefined success as simply surviving from year to year until his family could produce enough surplus crops to sell on the market and increase their social and economic standing in their new home. Having moved away from the economic depression in Norway, Olson was aware of the dangers of going into debt. As a result, he chose to produce only enough to keep his family alive until he felt secure enough to sell surplus crops and livestock on the market.

⁶⁴ Gunder Olson to Family in Norway, February 13, 1873, *Mabel Brodland Papers*, Center for Western Studies, Augustana College, Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

⁶⁵ Luebke, “Ethnic Group Settlement,” 409.

Both Adam Royhl and Gunder Olson were hopeful that with each passing year they would steadily improve their economic circumstances. Donald Worster argued that this type of attitude was “an optimism at heart fatalistic, a stubborn and naive belief that next year would be better.”⁶⁶ Having invested so much time and money in their homesteads, both men would have considered abandoning their homesteads to move on or retreat home as a failure. Neither was an option. Having succeeded already in owning land, both Royhl and Olson were hopeful that they could slowly continue working their way into harvesting enough crops and livestock to increase their economic standing. For Wesley Hunt, however, a better next year was not good enough. For him, success depended on a better tomorrow.

In a letter to his father, Hunt clarified his intentions and expectations for his life in the Dakota Territory. He planned to purchase fifty cows from a man in Iowa, keep them for four years, and then return one hundred head to Iowa as payment.⁶⁷ Hunt’s plan was an optimistic and ambitious one. If he were to succeed in raising fifty head of livestock, he needed to grow crops his first year while finding enough grassland in the nearby hills to graze his cattle in the summer, and to cut for hay to feed them during the winter. The plan could only work if he maintained control of the two quarter sections he was holding for his family members.

As a result, Hunt desperately attempted to convince his father to follow him to the Dakota Territory. After reiterating that the land was among the best in the world, he went on to predict that in four years he would have “2 or 3 hundred young cattle besides what butter” they produced. He continued, “of course I am very anxious to go in to [sic] it, it will give me such a

⁶⁶ Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 26.

⁶⁷ Wesley Abel Hunt to Abel Hunt, April 26, 1883, Emma A. Hunt Collection, Center for Western Studies, Augustana University, Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

boom in 3 or 4 years as you can easily figure.”⁶⁸ All Hunt needed was the money to purchase the machinery, tools, and feed he required. He figured he had enough to get started but he wanted to build barns and fences, and purchase plows and horses, immediately. The quicker he could get the cattle and begin raising them on his homestead, the quicker he would experience his “boom.” In purchasing everything he thought he needed, he quickly ran out of money and asked his father for “4 or 5 hundred dollars” to further his plans.⁶⁹ He ended his letter by explaining that his immediate success in the Dakota Territory depended on his father’s help. He wrote that if he did not receive the money that he would “try and pull through somehow, only it will take longer.”⁷⁰ For Hunt, a substantial and immediate profit was the goal.

Historians commonly argue that settlers adopted an attitude of mind centered on short-term profit rather than focusing on long-term sustainability.⁷¹ While this held true for many migrants, men such as Olson, Royhl, and others, provide counterexamples to the argument. Olson’s initial dependence on subsistence agriculture evolved into a plan for long-term sustainability. In 1875, two years after arriving in the Dakota Territory, a poor harvest combined with the decision to ease into expanding their farm saw the Olsons still living the subsistence lifestyle. Olson’s son, Thore, wrote to his family in Norway that “the crops were poor last summer. From spring and on we had no rain so it became very dry. Then the grasshoppers came and caused much damage. I had five acres in wheat which yielded 42 bushels, but that will not be

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Wishart, *The Last Days*, 153.

enough for both seed and food. I also harvested about 60 bushels of corn plus a small amount of potatoes.”⁷²

Over the years, Olson got to know his land. He realized, for example, that crops grew differently after the moisture and nutrients in the soil that had built up over centuries were depleted during the first few years of planting.⁷³ Slow growth saved Olson from ruin. Had he been more ambitious, he could have purchased more seed and planted more acres. He could have also found his time and money lost to adverse growing conditions he did not fully understand. Instead, he ignored the pressures of buying and selling on the market, opting for the slow, incremental improvement of his homestead. By ignoring the markets during the initial years and focusing merely on survival, he grew to understand the limitations of the soils and climate, which allowed him to alter his farming methods accordingly.⁷⁴

Again, Olson’s experience challenges two assumptions made by historians about how immigrants succeeded in the American West. The first traditional argument is that immigrant farmers made progress because they assimilated to commercial agriculture by producing surpluses and competing in national markets. The second argument is that immigrant farmers progressed because they actively subverted the markets by being subsistence farmers.⁷⁵ Neither argument fully captures the ways in which immigrants approached farming in the Dakota Territory. Olson did not consciously subvert the market when he chose to focus on subsistence agriculture. He did so out of necessity. Participation in the market assumed the ability of settlers to purchase enough seed and tools to produce the surpluses needed to sell after the harvest. With

⁷² Thore Gunderson to Relatives in Norway, February 22, 1875.

⁷³ Wishart, *The Last Days*, 68.

⁷⁴ Royden Loewen, “Beyond the Monolith of Modernity: New Trends in Immigrant and Ethnic Rural History,” *Agricultural History* 81, no. 2 (2007), 213.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

little capital to immediately invest in the necessary supplies, the only options many farmers had were to grow slowly into market involvement or participate immediately in it by taking out loans and going into debt purchasing the seeds, tools, and livestock. Olson chose to avoid debt and to instead subsist on his land until he could produce enough surplus goods to sell on the market.

The strategy worked for him. By 1878, Olson had increased the production on his farm. He owned “18 head of livestock: 5 cows, 10 oxen, and 2 heifers soon to calf.”⁷⁶ Also, along with the assistance of others, he had purchased “a mower which cost \$200.00 and a fanning mill costing \$26.00.”⁷⁷ The investments allowed Olson and his neighbors to improve their homesteads more quickly. Just five years later, Olson owned 24 head of cattle and had added four hogs and eight small pigs to their operation.⁷⁸

Beginning with subsistence agriculture and slowly moving into the commercial sphere allowed him to better understand the environment in which he lived and how best to use the soil.⁷⁹ Olson had an advantage over many settlers. He arrived early, allowing him to settle on some of the more fertile land in a preferred location.⁸⁰ Olson also had little capital to immediately invest in his homestead, forcing him to develop at a slower rate than more affluent settlers. He also relied heavily on his wife and six children for farm labor. Doing so allowed him to save money for future investments in technology and machinery, rather than paying day laborers to work for him. Slow growth, unpaid farm labor, limitations on how fast he could grow, and subsistence agriculture allowed Olson to diversify his farm. Raising both cattle and hogs as

⁷⁶ Thore Gunderson to brother-in-law and family, May 26, 1883.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Thore Gunderson to Mr. C. Odegaarden and Family, May 26, 1883.

⁷⁹ Mary Eschelbach Gregson, “Wealth Accumulation and Distribution in the Midwest in the Late Nineteenth Century,” *Explorations in Economic History* 33 (1996), 524.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

well as harvesting wheat, corn, and potatoes provided him security from insecure markets or unforeseen natural disasters.⁸¹

Like Hunt and Olson, Adam Royhl set out to the Dakota Territory with the intentions of farming. He continued to spend the summers on his homestead and the winters working in the Wisconsin woods. He invested the little money he made into his farm and, for a time, was content doing so. But Royhl's situation soon changed. In 1882 he got married. Soon after his boss at the timber company fired him, compensating Royhl with lumber.⁸² He was pleased with the arrangement. "Think of it," he wrote, "a carload of lumber for thirty days of work! That lumber built my original house and quite a long shed" on his land in Dakota, where he and his wife moved permanently.⁸³ Royhl remained on the homestead for another eight years. In 1890, wanting to send his three children to school, he sold the farm and moved to Arlington, South Dakota. When he left the homestead he had "\$3000 in cash and good bunch of machinery" and credited his success to good conditions, fair prices, and a fair crop each year.⁸⁴

With his focus on the welfare of his family rather than himself, Royhl altered his definition of success. He had exceeded his expectations of farming in the Dakota Territory and chose to pursue new opportunities that would allow him to set his children up to succeed as well. In Arlington, he operated a meat market and purchased another farm just outside of town, both of which made him money.⁸⁵ At the request of his wife, Royhl sold the meat market and constructed a grain elevator in Arlington. Then, without applying for the position and insisting

⁸¹ Kenneth M. Sylvester, "Ecological Frontiers on the Grasslands of Kansas: Changes in Farm Scale and Crop Diversity," *The Journal of Economic History* 69, no. 4 (2009), 1056.

⁸² Royhl, *Memoir*, 9.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

that he only work two hours per day, the city appointed him postmaster, a position he held for four years. By 1892, Royhl and a partner had founded Royhl Elevator Company and owned “quite a few elevator sites in various towns.”⁸⁶ He went on to serve two terms as a state senator, spent fifteen years as president of the Arlington school board, served on the town banking and insurance committees, and was the co-founder of the Arlington State Bank.⁸⁷ Royhl’s definition of success was fluid. He constantly altered it as he met his goals or his circumstances changed. By the twentieth century, he was a prominent member of his small community and secure in his economic and social situation.

Wesley Hunt’s definition of success was more rigid: get rich or fail. Still plowing and planting more quickly than most newly-arrived settlers to the Dakota Territory, he had broken and planted nearly six acres of corn and potatoes within two months of his arrival.⁸⁸ But immediate profit in the cattle business eluded him. He failed to convince his father and wife to join him and therefore altered his plan. He still intended to succeed in his farming venture but decided cattle was no longer the appropriate means to do so. Hunt instead chose to become a hog producer. He wrote that he planned to “sow a lot of turnip seed to raise for feeding hogs. If our crops turn out well we intend to buy a lot of sows... There is money in hogs.”⁸⁹

That was not enough to convince his father to join him. The elder Hunt remained adamant that he would stay in New Hampshire, which dampened Hunt’s optimism. Even though Hunt planted crops, his ranching dreams - whether hogs or cattle - never materialized. He also began to realize he was overly ambitious and should have worked more slowly toward achieving

⁸⁶ Royhl, *Memoir*, 11-12.

⁸⁷ “Adam Royhl, 86, Dies After 8-Week Illness,” *Argus Leader*, April 18, 1944.

⁸⁸ Wesley Abel Hunt, *Diary*, May 16-22, 1883.

⁸⁹ Wesley Abel Hunt to Abel Hunt, May 27, 1883.

his goals. He wrote to his father in July that his cousin, Nathan Reed, was raising hogs but that “he has to buy a good deal of feed for them. It pays better to work into stock slowly as one can handle them.”⁹⁰ Rather than adapting his goals to this realization, he viewed his time in the Dakota Territory as a failure. Plan after ill-devised plan, he failed to gain the support of his family. He dreamed too big and often overlooked the reality of his situation. Even though he plowed more land and produced more crops than most settlers could hope for during their first year in the Dakota Territory, he failed to achieve the goals he set for himself. He never purchased a hundred head of cattle, he never owned a passel of hogs, he never convinced his wife or father to join him on the homestead. Hunt forced himself to reevaluate his goals and decide where he was most likely to find success. A prominent career and his loved ones awaited him in the east, while only dreams that continually failed to materialize kept him in the west.

Even though he had put himself in a position to thrive by November, just seven months after he arrived, Hunt realized that his optimistic, ambitious dreams would not come to fruition. His father mailed him a check for sixty dollars, which allowed him to pay off the initial loan he took out when he moved to the Territory.⁹¹ On December 1, Hunt proved up on his claim and then took the train to Huron where he paid for his land and received the ownership papers.⁹² Once again, Hunt found himself on the move. This time, back to New Hampshire where success surely awaited him. He arrived in North Charlestown, New Hampshire on December 6 where he reunited with Rosie and his father and regained his positions as station agent and postmaster. By

⁹⁰ Wesley Abel Hunt to Abel Hunt, July 28, 1883.

⁹¹ Wesley Abel Hunt, *Diary*, November 21, 1883.

⁹² *Ibid*, December 1, 1883.

April 1885, fourteen months after he returned to New Hampshire, he “sold and deeded his property to his sister’s husband for \$900.”⁹³ Hunt never returned to the Dakota Territory.

Wesley Hunt, Adam Royhl, and Gunder Olson’s attempts to homestead in the Dakota Territory both support and challenge historical assumptions. If historians choose persistence as the measure of success, Royhl and Olson certainly succeeded. They both moved to the region in search of land and stability. They both found it. Gunder Olson worked on his homestead until his retirement. Even though Royhl sold his homestead and moved into town, he remained within his census boundary. Therefore, both men resided in the area long enough to be recorded on multiple census rolls. Meeting the requirements, they are considered persisters by historians who use these definitions. By the same standards, Hunt failed. Because he only stayed on his homestead for seven months in 1883, his name did not appear on a single census record, much less the two required by historians to be considered a persister. The decisions made by Hunt, Royhl, and Olson provide evidence for historians who use persistence as the definition of success. Royhl and Olson persisted and therefore succeeded; Hunt left and therefore failed.

Hunt’s story sheds light on the weaknesses of this approach. If historians only look for names that appear on two separate census rolls for the same place, Hunt would not have been noticed at all, left out of the story altogether as historians focus on those who stayed. If the late nineteenth century was defined by high mobility, however, then the individuals who do not persist play just as important a role in westward expansion as those who chose to stay. Where settlers ended up moving if they did not persist is a question that is often overlooked. Studying the individual and his or her motivations to migrate can reveal the complexity of the homesteading era. Wesley Hunt’s failure in the west, for example, had as much to do with his

⁹³ Ibid, March 28, 1884.

success in the east as it did with his ambitious goals for his Dakota farm. Just as the opportunity pulled him to the west, his family members and stable employment pulled him back to the east.

CONCLUSION

For historians who use land and wealth accumulation, Hunt would have been considered a success - or at least well on his way to owning and operating a successful homestead. He planted and harvested enough crops to sell on the market and feed livestock during his first year, something most settlers could only dream of accomplishing. Having the capital to immediately purchase tools, seed, machinery, and supplies surely gave him an advantage over his neighbors. Even though he did not make money that year, he also did not go into crippling debt. By the time he chose to move back to New Hampshire, Hunt owned 160 acres of land outright and likely had the opportunity to purchase land from Frank and George Ayer. He had set himself up for future land acquisition and wealth accumulation. Had he stayed, he may have been one of the success stories from the era. But as he “failed” in his own mind, Hunt merely broke even in terms of capital.

Olson and Royhl provide unique examples for studying success through the lens of land and wealth accumulation. Neither were able to participate in the market quickly and would have been considered initial failures by historians who use land and wealth as measures for success. While they both filed for land under the Homestead Act, the government required them to live on and improve the land for five years before they gained outright ownership of it. Neither owned their land immediately nor did they have the capital to heavily invest in their homestead like Hunt. As a result, Olson and his family lived a subsistence lifestyle for nearly a decade. Royhl,

on the other hand, improved his land during the spring and summer but returned to Wisconsin every winter to work in the timber industry and save money. After five years they officially gained ownership of their land and, under land acquisition measures, experienced success for the first time in the Dakota Territory. But still growing slowly, neither Royhl nor Olson accumulated wealth for another five years. By the time Royhl left his homestead, he had \$3000 in savings along with the value of his land and machinery. Olson never recorded his wealth but given his long tenure on the land, he likely succeeded in accumulating enough to provide a stable lifestyle for himself and his family.

Land and wealth accumulation as measures of success are problematic in that another arbitrary definition needs to be constructed concerning time spent on the homestead. If less than five years, many settlers, especially those who filed for land under the Homestead Act, would not have owned their own land and would be considered failures. Many settlers without the means to quickly improve their land would have also been slower in gaining wealth. After a decade, poor settlers who stayed such as Royhl and Olson became more established and started selling surplus crops and livestock. If historians study the course of a settler's tenure on the land, persistence and land or wealth accumulation become difficult to separate. Did they stay because they accumulated wealth? Or did they accumulate wealth because they stayed? Many farmers failed early in their tenures but became success stories later on according to these measurements of success.

A more useful method to understanding the success and failure of settlers is to look at them individually to determine how they constructed their own definitions. Wesley Hunt was a failure in Dakota only by his own standards. His previous life experiences shaped his expectations of the Territory. Already an established citizen of his New Hampshire community,

Hunt believed the opportunities in the West offered him a better chance of success than his career in North Charlestown. The death of his first wife and the loss of his store unsettled him and pushed him out. The positive accounts of government lands pulled him to the West. Weighing the pros and cons, he truly believed he could succeed quickly in raising cattle or hogs on his land. His optimistic expectations set a high bar for success. His ability to purchase anything he thought he needed to achieve success likely inflated an early illusion of success. He could see progress and it allowed him to think bigger. But the progress - construction of a shelter, digging a well, purchasing horses and supplies - never materialized into the kind of monetary gain that Hunt desired. The realization hit him hard. Deciding that he had set the bar too high, he went back to New Hampshire to pursue more stable opportunities with the support of his immediate family.

Adam Royhl set his expectations much lower than Hunt. Living in Wisconsin put him in close proximity to many other settlers moving west in search of land, wealth, and success. Tired of working long hours for little pay, he decided to join them. He set out to find land in the Dakota Territory. To him, land offered an escape from the negative conditions of the timber industry and an opportunity to provide himself a stable income. Unlike Hunt, he did not expect wealth to come immediately. He instead approached his western venture in a more calculated fashion. His immediate success was to homestead on a piece of land. Once secured, he redefined success. Each year, after saving money in northern Wisconsin, he set out to make improvements to his homestead in Dakota. Each year he maintained the rights to his homestead was another year of success. By the time he got fired from his timber job, Royhl was in a position to live full-time in the Dakota Territory. Once there, he again readjusted his definition of success. Not only did he have to continue improving his land, he had to ensure he and his family could survive

year-round. Again, every year they lived comfortably and went without starving was another year of success. Royhl continued redefining success and failure through every step of his professional career and personal life.

Gunder Olson confirms, rather than challenges, many historical assumptions and generalizations. He identified the constricting characteristics of life in Norway and feared for his family's fortune. Just like Hunt, the opportunities available in the west lured Olson there. Unlike Hunt, Olson went with a more realistic definition of success. Rather than getting rich, he sought economic stability and land for his family. His lack of capital forced him to grow slowly, only investing in improvements as he could afford them. As a result, Olson focused on subsistence agriculture and slowly expanded his cultivated acres. After nearly a decade of slow growth, he grew large enough where he produced surplus crops and livestock which he could sell on the market. Olson's definition of success appears to be the most simplistic of the three men. Land acquisition and the ability to provide better opportunities for his children were Olson's expectations in the Dakota Territory. He was not about to reject the economic growth and stability he found. But Olson surely found success as he saw his children grow up and own land of their own.

The methodology offered here is not meant to replace the traditional historical methods for studying success on the Great Plains. Instead, it is meant to identify weaknesses in those approaches and to remind historians that individuals had agency amid the external forces occurring around them. Hunt, Royhl, Olson, and every other settler moved west because they internalized those external factors. Their previous experiences and the expectations of their new home led them to create their own unique understanding of what success would look like. While historians cannot possibly study every settler who moved west, looking at individual histories

can lead us to new questions concerning the American West. Doing so will give allow historians to provide a more complex, but more correct, understanding of the homesteading era.

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