

Where Is That Margin?

Westward the pioneers pressed, seeking virgin land, new and free land to which they might apply their labor, and thus produce the wherewithal they needed to satisfy their needs and their desires. It was the 19th Century, and the Federal Homestead Act of 1862 aided them greatly in their quest, by providing a means to occupy, use, and enjoy such acreage as they could claim, at little or no cost.

The history of America's western migration is too well known to require repeating. Every schoolboy has learned that as the movement west grew, the country grew, attaining development and prosperity theretofore unknown.

Not too long ago, however, there occurred a rebirth of the old pioneering spirit, engendered by the awakening of a previously rather dormant Alaska, now become a new star in the national flag. "Free Land" again became a cry, and hundreds of letters began to pour into the Bureau of Land Development. This agency still exists, keeping track of the 762 million acres of land currently publicly owned. The letters ask one question: how to acquire free government land. Alas, the BLD answers them all in most discouraging tones.

In fact, the Bureau bluntly states there is really no such thing as "free land from the government," though it is possible even nowadays to get a tract free or for \$1.25 an acre. The "catch" is that most of the available land is in remote Alaska, reachable only by foot after flying to the nearest airport. While the homesteader pays only a \$10 fee to settle on the land, the law requires him to develop it, and to live on it not less than seven months a year for three years. Moreover, the cost of erecting a house and outfitting a farm can reach many thousands of dollars.

In 1972, about 22,000 acres of public land were turned over to 182 homesteaders, of whom only 68 actually "moved in." So the pioneers of the 1970's, who hoped to find a new and fertile "margin of cultivation," were disappointed. But all hope should not yet be abandoned. The Government Printing Office still publishes, at \$2 a year, a quarterly called "Our Public Lands." Who knows where the margin is now?

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