What problems did the Homesteaders face?

Building materials

For the vast majority, the only material available for house-building was earth. Blocks of earth (sods) were cut out by hand or with a special plough. These were used as building bricks to construct the house walls. Windows and doors were fitted. The house was roofed with boards, grass and more sods. The outside walls were plastered with clay-like mud. Very cheap to build, and could be warm in the winter, cool in the summer. However, it was difficult to stop them leaking.

Dirt and disease

Sod houses with earth floors, walls and roofs were very difficult to clean. They harboured all sorts of pests – bed bugs, fleas, mice and snakes. It was difficult for people to keep clean, especially as there was a water problem. Diseases and illnesses were common, especially amongst the children.

Extremes of weather

The weather was extreme – hot in the summer, cold in the winter, which made life uncomfortable. The Indians had moved with the seasons, but the homesteaders remained rooted on one spot.

For farming, the drought in the summer and cold winter could damage or destroy crops. In Kansas between January 1859 and November 1860, not one drop of rain fell.

Water shortages

In many places on the Great Plains water was scarce. In such places it was difficult for people to keep themselves or their clothing clean.

For farming, the shortage of water was a major problem as it could lead to the total failure of crops, which could lead to bankruptcy or starvation.

Ploughing

The Great Plains had never been farmed before, so the first task was to plough the land – the grasses had dense, tangled roots. Ploughing was a long and back-breaking task.

Fuel

There was no wood to burn for heating and cooking on the Plains. Instead, homesteaders had to rely on buffalo dung.

Natural hazards

In the summer, the grass was so dry that it was possible for fires to start. If they were too big for the people to fight then their crops would be destroyed.



Protecting and growing crops

There was nothing to protect crops from buffalo or straying cattle. It was not possible to mark land boundaries clearly, which could lead to disputes. The homesteaders planted crops they had always grown, which were not suited to the weather conditions on the Plains.