# East River, West River

South Dakotans seem to be always talking about East River and West River, and visitors sometimes have no idea where those places are. The names have to do with the **Missouri** River, the great water that runs through the middle of our state.

South Dakota isn’t alone in being a state split this way. In **Minnesota**, people talk about the metro area, where millions of people live in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area.

The **100th** meridian, people in the 1800s believed, was especially important.

All summer long they protected their crops by pulling weeds that could destroy their plants. All the time they knew there was no protection from other crop-killers…like **hail** or grasshoppers, and beetles. At the same time, during the hottest part of the year, farm families were cutting, tying and storing the hay in **haylofts**.

The United States government looked at the farmers’ success and decided the best thing that could happen American Indian people was to become fulltime **farmers**. It was something entirely new to these people, whose parents and grandparents had fed themselves by being fine hunters…especially bison hunters. But almost all the bison had been killed so there was little choice but to try farming.

About the same time, another people, far to the south in Texas, found something that grew well West River… **cattle**. Not dairy cows for milk, but cattle for beef. Texas cattlemen learned they got better beef if they herded their animals hundreds of miles north, to a land they called Dakota, to grasslands that once fed bison.

The first ranches had no fences. Ranchers burned marks called **brands** into their cattle. Each ranchers’ brand was different, so they’d know who owned each animal when the cattle got mixed together on the big, unfenced prairie.

West River farms that succeeded were mostly along rivers and creeks, or in areas where dams were built to supply water for crops. Or wells dug to bring water up from **aquifers**.

And while ranches…and farms are different in lots of ways, they combined to create the number-one money-maker ever for South Dakota, **agriculture**. Agriculture means growing plants or animals to sell as food…or as other products, like wool.

For more than a hundred years, the state’s agricultural products have been sold around the world. Both farms and ranches changed in the 1900s because of machines, beginning with **tractors** more powerful than horses and mules.

In the **1980s** prices for farm and ranch products were low. At the same time, banks were charging lots of money for borrowing money…and some farmers and ranchers had borrowed lots of money to pay for the latest equipment. All this added up to a sad situation where even more families, both East River and West River, had to give up on agriculture.

