

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Transactions and Reports, Nebraska State Historical
Society

Nebraska State Historical Society

1885

Otoe County in Early Days

E. H. Cowles

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nebhisttrans>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Cowles, E. H., "Otoe County in Early Days" (1885). *Transactions and Reports, Nebraska State Historical Society*. 38.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nebhisttrans/38>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Nebraska State Historical Society at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
It has been accepted for inclusion in Transactions and Reports, Nebraska State Historical Society by an authorized administrator of
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

in which we will make the test will be in the position in which we are now associated. We are here in our rough costumes, we have the ox yoke, the huge wagon and log chain, and our situation is one that gives us nothing to bolster up or restrain us, but the manhood and remembrance of our good mothers and their advice. Now, young gentlemen, I will say to those who assert that they cannot help swearing I will cease speaking for two minutes, so as to give time for any man who is now present who says that he cannot refrain from swearing to deliver himself from some of those huge oaths. [A pause.]

So now, not one of you seems burdened with a desire to swear. I thank you, young gentlemen, for standing the test, and pray that you may always maintain true integrity and refrain from profane practices. If perchance I meet one of your mothers I pray that she will not say to me that while you were in our employ you lost your good name, and my aim shall be to send you back to your homes with your habits and business qualifications bettered instead of lowered. Now, young gentlemen, in time of peril remember your fathers and mothers who raised you, and the God who sustains you.

And now, Old Settlers,
Farewell. I will omit no opportunity
That may convey my greetings, love to thee.

F. S. NUCKOLLS.

OTOE COUNTY IN EARLY DAYS

By E. H. COWLES, One of the Oldest Settlers.

Thinking a sketch of the early history of good old Otoe county would be a readable article in your columns and at the same time be appropriate to the times, I will give a few items of the many incidents that fell under my observation at an early day in the organization, settlement, and progress of the territory; more particularly that which refers to the then Pearce, but now Otoe county.

As my books and papers referring to transactions which happened in those days were all burned when my house was burned, I can only speak from memory and approximate as to dates. It should be remembered that this whole country bordering on the Missouri river, including Kansas, was called Nebraska territory, or the Great American Desert, supposed to be an uninhabitable waste; not until about from '50 to '54, during the great California emigration, which passed over nearly every portion of this wild country, was the fact generally known that this vast country possessed agricultural qualities unsurpassed by any portion of our wide-spread country. Stimulated by these facts a few adventurous individuals put a practical test to the productiveness of the soil by planting different kinds of grain and

vegetable seeds, with the happiest results. Conspicuous among these is the name of General Southerland, an exile leader of the Canadian rebellion. His writings and lectures, fortified by his experimental knowledge, contributed no little in kindling the fire of excitement which soon after swept along the other side of the river, until even the women seemed to excel the men in enthusiasm, even the very chickens as they crowed seemed to hurrah for Nebraska.

During the summer of 1853 communications with Indians disclosed the fact that the Kickapoos, half-breed Missouris, Otoes, and Omahas were not only willing but anxious to sell their lands to the government. In order to facilitate business we determined to call a convention to meet at St. Joseph, Mo., during the winters of '53 and '54, for the purpose of memorializing the President and Congress in regard to the necessity of taking early steps to treat with the Indians, organize the territory, and open it up for settlement.

The convention was called, the delegates from this part of the country were: H. P. Bennett, from Glenwood, Iowa; A. A. Bradford and W. McEwen, from Sidney, Iowa; H. P. Downs, from old Fort Kearney, Nebraska; S. F. Nuckolls and C. H. Cowles, from Linden, Mo.

In starting from Linden nothing unusual occurred to disturb our happiness until near Savannah, Mo. Mr. Nuckolls and myself being in a buggy behind the rest, in hurrying up we drove astride a stump which proved a little too high for our buggy tongue, breaking it in several pieces, compelling us to switch off for repairs. But it is better to be born lucky than rich; Mr. Nuckolls having a lumber wagon a short distance behind, which soon came to our relief, taking us in tow for St. Joe, where we landed all right.

The convention being organized the next thing that occurred to interfere with our harmonious action was in the committee room of the committee on resolutions, Charles F. Holley, chairman. We played mock-congress from "dusky eve until early morn," the committee being nearly equally divided on a resolution substantially as follows:

Resolved, That the emigrants in the territory ought to receive the same protection to property that they enjoyed in the states from which they emigrated.

Of course property, in the resolution, meant slaves. We finally *compromised* by agreeing to report nothing on the subject, little dreaming that we were making a small ripple in the tidal wave which was

so soon to sweep over the bloody plains of historic Kansas and finally culminating in a national wide-spread fratricidal strife, forming an epoch in our history both humiliating and degrading to the morality and intelligence of a people possessing all the advantages of a high state of civilization in the nineteenth century. But the convention closed harmoniously with the best feeling over a champagne supper provided by the wide-awake and enterprising citizens of the then village, but now the city of St. Joe. Next morning we all took our leave, McEwen and myself in a buggy, Downs on horseback, (Bradford and Nuckolls going another road on business). Here again I was doomed to more bad luck; just as we were entering a long unsettled prairie we not only broke our buggy-tongue, but an iron axle. Here again we were compelled to switch off for repairs. Downs, seeing our misfortune, said he never forsook a friend in trouble, stuck by and assisted us like a brother until we were fully repaired and on the track again. We could only make headway against the drifting snow and wind by letting down our buggy-top and taking the full benefit of the storm, with the thermometer from 18° to 20° below zero. We stood it however, until we arrived at my home in Lincoln, Mo., a little frost-bitten, otherwise all right. Here we rested a little and partook of such refreshments as the landladies (my wife and her sister, then a young girl, now the widow Jasen) had provided. Excitement being on tip-toe, a goodly number of our friends visited us to hear our report, which we proceeded to give that night over a box of cigars, etc. For the condition of the room and the amount of manual labor necessarily expended on it next day I will refer you to the landladies aforesaid.

The early settlement of Nebraska seemed to be a fixed fact, treaty or no treaty. The objective points for town sites and towns was the first thing to be taken into consideration. In order to get ahead of any one else, one Green, Johnson, and myself agreed to locate forthwith at Table Creek, or old Fort Kearney, as it was then called, but we agreed to call it *Nebraska City*, and to build and to take a stock of goods there as soon as navigation opened in the spring, provided we could get the consent of H. P. Downs, a sergeant in the regular army detailed to take care of the military reservation and government property at old Fort Kearney, the fort having been moved to where it now is.

Next morning after the arrangement I started for the purpose of seeing Downs and getting his permission; this was about the first of February 1854. Not being very well posted in such matters I concluded to go by Sidney, Iowa, and let A. A. Bradford know about the enterprise, for the purpose of getting his advice as to the safety of the movement. So far as the B mile reservation was concerned, Downs was supposed to be monarch of all he surveyed, except the ferry, of which Boulware had enjoyed the exclusive right for many years. Bradford went over with me to see Downs, who cordially received us on our arrival; I think we found Charley Pearce and Charley Bearwagner there. We soon let Downs know our business. He, Downs, proposed that if I would take him in as partner in place of Mr. Johnson, that we would proceed at once to make a show for a town; that seemed to be the only safe course, I agreed to it at once. I went to work forthwith to build a store-house and a dwelling for myself. We were to buy a stock of goods to be shipped as soon as navigation opened. As Mr. Nuckolls was soon to start for St. Louis to buy goods, we agreed to see him for the purpose of getting him to buy our goods for us. For this we agreed to go to Linden the next day; as I had to go by Sidney with Bradford, we were to meet at Austin for dinner. While there we saw Mr. Nuckolls passing, so we all went to Linden together; we told Nuckolls our plans and asked him to buy our goods, which he readily agreed to do without any extra charges, saying that he thought it would pan out well and proposed to make it a third larger and go in with us, which we readily agreed to while at Linden. Nuckolls bought of Downs an undivided half interest in the prospective town site, paying Downs enough to enable him to furnish his quota in buying the goods. This much being arranged the paramount object now was to provide ourselves with customers; for this purpose an early treaty with the Indians became a necessity.

For this purpose runners were sent out to convene the Otoe Nation at a point near the mouth of Platte river, for the purpose of signing a preliminary treaty and to make arrangements for the chiefs to go to Washington. The delegates selected to assist in drafting the preliminary articles of the treaty between the Otoe Nation and the United States of America were H. P. Downs, C. W. Pearce, with Hon. A. A. Bradford as minister plenipotentiary extraordinary, to form alli-

ances, conclude peace, and make treaties. Upon meeting, the Indians eating dog-supper, smoking the pipe of peace, they at once proceeded to business. The necessary papers were soon made out, and signed on the part of the Otoe Nation by Artakeeta, principal chief, and Big Buffalo, White Water, and Kickapoo, chiefs of bands. In order to make the thing effective at Washington the signature of Major Gate-wood, the legally appointed agent of the United States, became an imperative necessity which there was no getting over. For that purpose he was sent for (found at Glenwood, Ia.) and his services soon procured. The chiefs were to start for Washington immediately, with Maj. Downs as escort. The programme now was that Downs was to go to Washington with the Indians to assist in the final ratification of the treaty; Nuckolls to St. Louis to buy the goods, and myself to keep making a show for a town, by building my houses, etc. Here matters took a turn which were not as favorable as we desired. The excitement in Congress over the slavery question prevented the ratification of the treaty at an early day as we had expected. Downs wrote from Washington that the Secretary of War had informed him that if the whites settled over here on the Indians' land he should feel that it was his duty to order them off and to remove them by force if necessary. Under this state of facts Mr. Nuckolls very prudently thought it best not to take the risk, and came home (after having waited in St. Louis several weeks) without buying the goods, thus bringing the enterprise to an abrupt termination at least for the time being.

Notwithstanding the unfavorable news a goodly number of us had to move over during the spring of '54 and commenced a permanent settlement. Having completed my buildings, and being out of employment, I concluded to take the risk alone, and in June started for St. Louis in company with Messrs. S. F. Nuckolls, Columbus Nuckolls, and Mr. Hall, Mr. Nuckolls rendering me every needed assistance in buying and shipping my goods, which were safely landed about opposite where the elevator now stands. I soon had my goods in position to accommodate my customers, nearly all of whom were Indians. I had not been in operation long before sure enough as had been expected Major Hepner, the newly appointed agent, received instructions to order all the whites to leave this side of the river. This of course was a little trying on me, as all that I had was hourly in danger of being confiscated.

To make the situation more critical and alarming, the Indians having become in possession of the facts and taking advantage of them, they soon formed themselves into a war party and came upon us, painted in a manner most hideous to behold, frightening men, women, and children, ostensibly for the purpose of driving us from their land, but the real object was to levy a tribute upon the inhabitants. In this they were successful, as many of the old settlers can testify, to the tune of from five to forty dollars. But the order from the War Department was to go. Major Hepner requested us to call a mass meeting and pass resolutions that we would go and he would send them on with his report. This was done in order to stay proceedings, thinking that before Major Hepner could make his report, and the War Department learn the real state of facts (which were that we didn't intend to go) that the treaty would probably be ratified, and the territory opened up for settlement. Fortunately in this our hopes were well founded.

HISTORICAL LETTERS FROM FATHER DE SMET.

The following letters were written by Father De Smet, a Roman Catholic Missionary among the Northern Indians in a very early day. One was written to the St. Louis Historical Society, and the other to A. D. Jones, Secretary of the Old Settlers' Association of Omaha. They are valuable historical data:

ST. LOUIS UNIVERSITY, December 9, 1867.

Mr. N. Ranney, Secretary of the Historical Society of St. Louis:

DEAR SIR—I received your kind favor of the 5th instant. Your kind invitation of the 16th ult. I intended to answer by attending your meeting of the Historical Society of St. Louis, on the 7th; this being Saturday, I was much occupied at St. Francis Xavier's Church, and I regret I was unable to accomplish my desire on this occasion.

The question of locality which has arisen about old Fort Atkinson, or Council Bluffs, built in 1819, I think I can answer satisfactorily. During the years 1838 and 1839 I resided opposite what is now called the city of Omaha. In 1839 I stood on the bluff on which the old fort was built in 1819; some rubbish and remains of the old fort were still visible, and some remaining roots of asparagus were still growing