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Historical Recollections In and About Otoe County

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HISTORICAL RECOLLECTIONS IN AND ABOUT OTOE COUNTY.

To James Fitch, of Nebraska City, the Society is indebted for the following recollections, reminiscences, and records. A portion are papers read before the Otoe county Old Settlers' Association, and others as furnished and published in the local newspapers.

The following is a paper read by Mr. Fitch, at an Old Settlers' meeting:

On the 19th of May, 1855, I left Muscatine, Iowa, in company with Mr. John Hays, Mr. Raymer, and Mr. Gates, together with their families, bound for Nebraska. When about half way across the state of Iowa we met families returning, who assured us if we went into the territory we would not get out alive.

Our small party paused to hold a council and the majority were inclined to recede. I was consulted as the senior. My reply was, "On, Stanley, on, we are this far, let us see the elephant." Had my family been along, my decision might have been different.

I have always looked on that moment as one upon which hinged our weal or woe; especially when I look around upon the numbers it brought into this place, you would scarcely believe, were it possible for me to enumerate, and all due to my "elephant speech" on the bleak prairies of Iowa.

On the 6th of June, '55, I first put foot on Nebraska soil, guiding the near-ox by the horn off the ferry boat at Florence. Oh, how warm, and the river so muddy; it seemed thick enough to make slapjacks. I asked the pilot what made the water so dirty. He said 'twas the last river in creation, and when the Almighty finished all the rest he gathered up all the slops and made the Missouri.

We camped in a ravine where now stands the beautiful and wealthy city of Omaha.

LOOKING FOR SHELTER.

The next day, in company with Mr. Hays, I started for Tekama.

The first night out we experienced a terrible thunder storm, and not a vestige of shelter; not even a glimmer from a shanty to cheer the lonely night. The second day the heat was excessive, and doubly oppressive for want of water. Toward evening we struck a trail leading to timber which we followed, thinking to find water, but not a drop to moisten our parched lips. Upon entering the timber we saw a large tree with a chip taken out, and on close inspection noticed an arrow or finger pointing the direction we came, under which was written, "Four miles to Tekama." To the heart and hand that placed that small though potent inscription there we might attribute the preservation of our lives. It is needless to say we took courage and retraced our steps. About 12 o'clock at night we reached the city, consisting of one tent and two small cabins covered with bark. Here we found Mr. John Young, an old acquaintance, who gave us tea and refreshments which revived us greatly. After a sound sleep and hearty breakfast we each laid claim to a section of land, after which we returned to camp, feeling so rich. Go away with your small eastern lots. I would not take one as a gift. We have never since viewed our possession; for aught we know they have been sold for taxes.

We again hitched up "Buck" and "Berry," and our party recrossed the Muddy, traveled down the Iowa side, and pitched our tents opposite this place. Mr. Hays and myself crossed in a flat-boat. Was kindly received by Mr. John McMecham and family, at whose house good square meals were dished up by a young boy who grew up to be the good man Edward Henry.

AT NEBRASKA CITY.

Wending our way up, not Main street, but a ravine where now stands Pinney & Thorp's mill; the hot sun scorching us suggested something to take, and had we known that Wallace Pearman could have slaked our thirst, gladly would we have patronized him, for we were "orful dry."

After viewing for several days the beautiful limpid streams skirted with timber, the undulating prairies dotted all over with choice flowers, and comparing all with the country surrounding Omaha, we concluded to make this our future home. Accordingly, on the first of August I started back to Muscatine, Iowa, for my family, on foot, a distance of over three hundred miles, with a little "grub," a quart canteen, and

two and one-half dollars in my pocket. On one occasion I traveled six miles out of my way to get a canteen full of water. Two nights, being unable to reach a house, I lay on the prairie with no covering but the starry decked canopy of heaven, with nothing to break the monotony save the buzz of the mosquito, who, like a hungry creditor, insisted on presenting his bill. I made the night short for fear Mr. Wolf would find lawful prey. The only weapon I had was a one bladed knife to sharpen my pencil—the only dangerous weapon I ever carried was when, in our country's need, Col. Ivers, some others, and myself, in order to show the blood of our forefathers and the ambition of our mothers, carried an old rusty musket and drove the Indians into the Rocky Mountains, where Col. Chunington put his foot on them. If my own gun was ever loaded some other person fired it off, or the load is in her yet.

Please excuse the divergence. To resume, I arrived home after about three months' absence, and when nearing my house two little boys seeing me ran in trembling with fright, and said to their mother, "here comes a crazy man."

TO JOHN BOULWARE'S MEMORY.

Soon again I turned westward with my family, and on the 10th day of October, 1855, again set foot in Nebraska, taking up our abode in a most dilapidated shanty situated on Kearney Heights, and known as Christy's college, where we were visited soon after by Mr. John B. Boulware, and on casting his eye around he said, "This will not do, I have a better house near the landing, move into it." And gladly we accepted the proffered kindness. Moving was easy, a few wheelbarrow loads and we were comfortably situated in the new quarters. The next day Mrs. Boulware called, and in her we found a friend indeed, only equaled by her husband. The memory of all their kind deeds will ever be cherished by our family, and so far as dollars and cents could repay them, John was remunerated with both principal and interest in after years when he visited us at Camp Creek.

ONLY A PORTION.

Mr. President, these are but the outlines of the initiatory steps over the threshold of Nebraska. I suppose every one here remembers too well their own checkered path. In those days I considered myself a

pretty good carpenter, but unfortunately my tool chest, together with some other things shipped from Muscatine, did not arrive until the following spring. Then the all important question arose as to how I was to support my family, with cruel winter staring me in the face, no tools to work with and no acquaintance with the only firm that kept them. One morning I plucked up courage—did I say courage, not I, for I had none. However, I got to the store by the ground not complying with my foolish wishes to open and swallow me up. What a task for me to ask an entire stranger to trust me for a set of tools. One of the proprietors was pointed out to me, who proved to be Mr. Nuckols, of the firm of Nuckols, Hail & Vandorn. I approached him with a bow and the salutation of the morning, and commenced to tell my story; that I was a carpenter with a large family; then come the tug of war; he surveyed me a moment from head to foot, then said, "do you intend to remain here?" "Yes." It was easily answered for we could not get away. He turned and said, John, let this man have what he wants. That sounded good, and after selecting such things as I stood most in need of, John said, is there anything else? That sounded still better. I have always thought John was the nearest "white" of any man I ever knew, when gathering up my tools. Mr. Nuckolls asked me if I could do a job for Judge Bradford. It was a small one, for which he paid me a five dollar gold piece. Oh! how large it looked. And just here I claim to have made the first window sash by hand that was ever made in this city.

THE FIRST MARRIAGE.

But, Mr. President, I find neither time nor space will permit giving in detail the vicissitudes of our early days in Nebraska. A trip to Sidney for a little salt, thence to Sonora with a grist of corn, making the trip with oxen, taking several days. Our daughter's marriage to S. B. Davis, being the first wedding in Kearney; the cake being a sad affair—no eggs to be had and flour scarce. Our moving to the claim in mid-winter, with the thermometer 30 degrees below zero, the poverty stricken oxen sticking in a snow bank, two children shivering in the sled, and my hazardous tramp several miles for Mr. F. Simms to help with his team. Then our cabin with its dirt roof leaking for several days after a rain, the occupants sitting up in bed with a bucket

or pan to catch the drops, and after the sleepy holder was drenched with the contents, dozing off, perhaps to dream of shingle roofs and board floors. The trial of having a grist ground at Jamison's mill, which only made six revolutions a week, as the old logs lying around will testify to this day. Necessity being the mother of invention, I made a grater of enormous size, on which we ground our corn, often at the expense of skinning our knuckles; the marks I now carry.

THE WAY TO GET RID OF MINISTERS.

Once a minister came, and after addressing the few settlers, all dispersed without inviting him to dine. Perhaps they all felt like ourselves, too poor and proud to offer the man of God what would hold soul and body together. At all events, I invited him home, all the while pondering over in my mind what we could set before him; the clouds were somewhat removed when I thought of the plate of butter in the root house, which was a great luxury those days. I felt easy until the table was being set, when, alas! vain hopes. Our dog "Trusty," so untrue to his title, had stolen the butter, and sorrowfully we watched the preacher wash down the dry corn bread with the familiar beverage, corn coffee; and that was the last Camp Creek ever saw of Mr. Preacher.

THE OLD COW GONE.

Then the cattle died, the loved cow was long on the lift, and, like a funeral procession, every morning the family gathered around the prostrate form, lifting, steadying, and caressing her, fully impressed that a cow was a good thing in a family where milk was scarce.

In conclusion, Mr. President, you may think, to contrast eighteen years ago with the present, I am going to tell you that I am rich; but I cannot say that. but if we could have been half as comfortable then as now, would have felt rich. I have occupied too much of your time and the half is not told.

SUMMARY.

Well, it gives me pleasure to look around on not only our own children but our grandchildren. I do not like to be profane, but I could live in this healthy Nebraska until I saw the third and fourth generation, for this is my place, here will I stay, for I do love it well.