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*The William Erickson
children, ready to ride.*
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NANCY PLAIN

Light on the Prairie

Solomon D. Butcher,
Photographer of Nebraska's
Pioneer Days

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS • LINCOLN & LONDON

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Set in Galliard.

For my mother, Belva Plain, my inspiration in everything

We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it—for a little while.—WILLA CATHER, *O Pioneers!*

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A Note on Terminology

The terms Native American, American Indian, and Indian are used interchangeably throughout this book to denote the Native people who lived in North America for thousands of years before the Europeans arrived.

Light on the Prairie

Introduction

A Tenderfoot Goes West

In the springtime of 1880, two white-topped wagons traveled, creaking and swaying, across the Nebraska prairie. “Prairie schooners,” the wagons were called. They were like boats on a rolling sea—a sea made of earth and waves of grass. Solomon Devoe Butcher and his father, brother, and brother-in-law had left their old home in Illinois and were heading west. They were pioneers, looking to start a new life as farmers on the frontier, and they would fetch the rest of the family as soon as they got settled. Their journey had been long and rough. Especially for Solomon, who called himself a “tenderfoot.”¹ He was twenty-four years old but had never slept out under the stars before, and he claimed not to have done a hard day’s work in the past twelve years.

After seven weeks and seven hundred miles, the Butcher party

reached its destination—Custer County, Nebraska. The men were now in the center of the state, which is itself in the center of the country, in the vast and beautiful region called the Great Plains. The plains run north from Texas all the way into southern Canada, and they stretch westward from the Missouri River, rising gradually until they meet the Rocky Mountains. Where the Butchers stopped their wagons there was only one small farmhouse, like an island on the land. All around it, as far as they could see, was just sky and pure prairie. Not a tree or a bush in sight, and the only sound was the *whooosh* of wind in the grass.

Solomon and his family were part of the great migration of settlers who came to the Great Plains after the Civil War—between 1865 and 1890, more than one million to Nebraska alone. Most came because the U.S. government was giving away land. In 1862 President Abraham Lincoln had signed the Homestead Act, which provided 160 acres of free land for anyone with the will to live on it and farm it—to “prove it up”—for five years. Men and women at least twenty-one years old, citizens and even citizens-to-be, were eligible, and there were millions of acres available on the plains.

A far-flung mix of people came to try their luck. They sailed by steamship from Europe. They came from all over America. Civil War veterans claimed land, and so did African Americans, recently freed from slavery. Many of these emigrants arrived with only a couple of dollars in their pockets. They had never owned much of anything before, let alone 160 acres of farmland. On the plains, they would face an extreme climate and many other hardships in their struggle to make a new life. Yet Solomon Butcher echoed the thoughts of thousands of newcomers when he wrote, “I considered this the finest country I had seen since leaving the East, for a poor man seeking a home.”²

Solomon and his father each claimed land in Custer County.



Then they set about building a house. Because timber was scarce, they did what others on the prairie were doing: they made a house out of the earth itself, plowing up strips of sod and laying them like bricks to form the walls and roof. After their sod house, or “soddy,” was finished came the work of planting corn—breaking more tough sod and tramping up and down the field under the prairie sun.

It did not take long for Solomon to realize that the farmer’s life was not for him. As a teenager back in Illinois, he had learned the art of photography and had been drawn to it ever since. He established the first photography studio in his county, and soon he was mixing farmwork with photography, dashing off to take pictures of other settlers. In 1886 he had his eureka moment, the biggest

Immigrants arriving in Custer County.

(NSHS ID: 12377.)



The Sylvester Rawding family's sod house.
(NSHS ID: 10600.)

idea of his life. He would compile a book, a photographic history of the pioneers of Custer County. Along with pictures, he would include in the book his neighbors' biographies and recollections. He called the plan his "history scheme," and from the moment he had the idea, he wrote, "I was so elated that I lost all desire for rest . . ."³

With his camera and portable darkroom stowed in the back of a horse-drawn wagon, Solomon began to roam. In the clear prairie light, he posed the people of Custer County with the things that were important to them. In his photographs, farm families stand in their fields or in front of their soddies, flanked by their household possessions, their horses, and usually a dog or two. Ranchers are pictured on horseback with their cattle or



flocks of sheep. Butcher's lens focused on cowboys and cowgirls, schoolteachers and storekeepers. He loved to photograph children, whether milking cows, eating watermelon, or clutching their favorite toys. His subjects were everyone and everything that was part of life on the plains. And always, behind Solomon's people is the wide land itself, reaching far into the distance.

Some of his friends thought that he was wasting his time. Others thought he was just lazy and waited for him to face up to the real work of farming. "Some called me a fool, others a crank, but I was too much interested in my work to pay any attention to such people," he wrote.⁴ He continued to crisscross the prairie for years, taking pictures and gathering stories. He saw the wild

A cornfield on the prairie.

(NSHS ID: 10343.)



The Newbecker family's homestead.

(NSHS ID: 10169.)

grasslands of America being transformed into farms and towns, and he was passionate about documenting the pioneer days before they vanished forever. He succeeded. Solomon's photograph collection—more than three thousand extraordinary images in all—forms the most complete record of the sod-house era ever made.

He understood the plainsmen he photographed because he was one of them. He had lived through Nebraska's furious blizzards, its burning summer heat, its droughts and dust storms and prairie fires. He had celebrated the Fourth of July with his neighbors and welcomed along with them the song of the meadowlark in the spring. In Butcher's pictures, the pioneers' faces reveal the



*Solomon D. Butcher
with his camera.
(NSHS ID: 16311.)*

pride and determination they needed to survive in their strange new land. He himself had the same type of grit, even though he held a camera more often than a plow.