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Moses Stocking

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MOSES STOCKING.

MOSES STOCKING, of Saunders county, Nebraska, died at his residence, Friday, Sept. 30th, 1881, of paralysis. His wife, all his sons and daughters, except Mrs. White, Oregon, and Mrs. Bosworth, Colorado, were at his bedside.

The following autobiography was written by him, at the request of Geo. S. Harris, Land Commissioner B. & M. R. R.:

To Geo. S. Harris, Esq., Land Agent of the B. & M. R. R. Neb.:

SIR—In complying with your request to furnish you a short autobiography of myself, I am aware that I shall lay myself open to the charge of vanity and a desire to become conspicuous on very small capital.

I have no knowledge of the family name or history further back than my grandfather, who was a small farmer and also a tanner and shoemaker in Chatham, and later at Middletown, in the state of Connecticut. His family consisted of three sons and a daughter—my father, born in Feb., 1775, being the youngest. The oldest son, Moses, entered the marine service at the age of sixteen, in the war for independence and fought under the command of the heroic Paul Jones. Every member of the family, so far as I am able to learn, were whigs of the revolution, and gave their aid and sympathy to the party that defied the British throne. This was also true of my mother's family, the Ishams, of Colchester, Connecticut.

In 1809, my father, Reuben Stocking, emigrated to the state of New York, and settled among the hemlocks of the town of New Berlin and county of Chenango, where I was born in April, 1813. After spending in that locality ten years of the very prime of his life, in Feb., 1819, a bankrupt in purse and with a family of ten living children—the three oldest of which were girls, he moved to Monroe county and for three years was a renter. In the spring of 1822, he pushed on to the county of Genessee, and settled upon a tract of wet timbered land. Here commenced such a struggle for life as few families on these fertile and beautiful prairies will at the present day appreciate. In debt for 110 acres of wild land, one-third of which was swamp, no capital, wheat worth 25 cents per bushel, the Erie canal unfin-

ished, merchandise to be hauled in wagons from Albany, everybody poor, few schools and those of a low order. Poor as they were I was only enabled to attend them a month or two, snatched from the labor of the woods during the snowiest portion of the winter—no public libraries or newspapers from which to glean knowledge, nor time to read except the short period between a hard day's labor and much needed sleep, nor other light than a tallow dip or the kitchen fire; it is no marvel that when in my 17th year and I had finished my last day's attendance upon a school, I had only acquired the plainest rudiments of an English education.

At this age I was active and robust in constitution, possessed of a retentive memory, and ambitious to excel:

At this time Dr. L. B. Coates, of Batavia, offered me a situation in his drug store with the privilege of studying medicine under his direction. This offer I appreciated and ardently desired to accept, but poverty's stern form interposed between me and my ambition. My father had become broken in constitution, his family was still large, a heavy debt hung over his farm and I was his main dependence in the labors of the field. The doctor's offer had to be declined. This I considered as the turning point in my life; and changed it from a career of letters and scholarly attainments, to the rough realm of the frontiersman.

Continuing with my father, except when working out as a hireling, until my 23d year, I then determined to push into the western country and explore it for myself. Consequently the evening of the 3d of November, 1835, found me a passenger on the unlucky steamer North America, Capt. Appleby, bound for Detroit.

The day had been beautiful, but as we steamed out of the port of Buffalo a cloud black as Erebus lay beneath the fast declining sun. Before we could reach the bay of Erie, one of the most fearful storms of that stormy lake broke upon our staunch craft, in all its fury. Added to the other dangers was the hull of Commodore Perry's old war ship Superior, aground in the channel of the bay; in attempting to pass which the North America ran aground. We shipped her rudder, lost her anchors and drifted against the piers, where we lay until the afternoon of the second day before we got off.

From Erie I made my way to Ashtabula, Ohio, on foot; thence by stage to Willsville, on the Ohio river; thence on foot to Wheeling,

West Virginia, where I stopped three weeks with a brother there located and engaged in the jewelry business. Leaving Wheeling somewhat sooner than I contemplated I fortunately avoided a little hand to hand encounter that had been planned (without consulting me) by a highway robber, who expiated his crimes upon the gallows the next year.

With a heavy pack, pursuing my way on foot on the national pike to Dayton, Ohio; thence up the Miami valley to Fort Wayne; thence down the the Wabash to Huntingdon; thence north by section lines much of the way, fording rivers and taking the chances of finding food or lodging, tracing my way slowly through the dark forests, often marching to the tune of howling wolves, I reached, on the 8th day of Jan., 1836, in St. Joe county, Michigan, the home of an aunt, a twin sister of my mother's, whom I had been especially charged to find. Resting for one week, I had arranged my pack for a start on the next day to continue my tramp to the Mississippi, when a sudden attack of inflammatory rheumatism put me under the doctor's care instead of on the road. I remained here about sixteen months. The financial crash of 1837 having stagnated all business rendered the sale of land impossible, and being dead on my feet with ague, I returned to New York in the fall of that year. The next summer I worked for an old neighbor, married in the fall of 1838, and with my wife and father's family returned to St. Joe county, Michigan, determined if we could not sell our lands to make a living by improving them, but as events have proven, this was a mistake— we had better have given them away and searched for a healthier climate, for after fourteen years more of hard labor, sickness, and suffering, we were compelled to get away from that living graveyard, and sold a splendid farm of 186 acres for the paltry sum of \$2,000, on seven years time.

Leaving my family in Michigan, the 16th day of March, 1853, found me at Glenwood, Mills county, Iowa, with a span of horses and \$700 in cash. Having long been accustomed to a level country the hills about Glenwood appeared mountains to me, which, with a wrong impression of the climate together with ignorance of a prairie country, combined to make an unfavorable impression upon my mind and I continued undecided till about May, when an offer from the late J. M. Cooledge, of Glenwood, induced me to start for California with a drove of cattle. Notifying my family of my intended move-

ments, the 19th of May found us on the west side of the "Big Muddy" and our first camp in the Indian country was pitched on what is now Main street, in the city of Plattsmouth. On the 28th day of September, after four months of severest toil and never ceasing watchfulness; we reached the banks of the far famed Sacramento river, worn out, exhausted, and alkali'd.

The following September I bade adieu to that wonderful land of sunshine and fruits, and took passage on an ocean steamer for my home in Michigan, via the Isthmus and New York. Looking around among old scenes and friends for a few days I determined to leave that sickly locality as soon as possible. Closing up all affairs, the 22d day of November found my family on board of a wagon and on the road for Glenwood, Iowa, where, after a cold, tedious journey, we arrived December 25th.

Being more desirous of schooling my children than acquiring wealth induced me to locate near that sheltered town, but the experience of fifty-five years discovered to me that I had made a mistake on that point—that there was but little educational spirit in the place; further, that in a commercial point of view, I was on the wrong side of the "Big Muddy." Consequently I crossed the river and located a claim on Four Mile creek, in Cass county, Neb., where I moved my family in the spring of 1856, rented ten acres of poor breaking for wheat and corn, upon which a good crop was raised. I erected a double cabin and broke about forty-five acres on my claim, upon which I raised about thirty acres of very good sod corn, but had the misfortune to lose it by a prairie fire. While attending the death-bed of a sister at Glenwood, the Pawnees stole my best ox and both of my cows. The death of my sister and her husband, within two weeks, left upon my hands their small children to provide for and educate, increasing my family to twelve persons at the commencement of the terrible winter of '56 and '57. Speculation being rife through the country, and town sites almost as numerous as the population, I was induced to take an interest in the Cedar Island town site, which, after much trouble, turned up a blank.

The dry season of 1857 gave but an indifferent crop off my forty-five acres of but partially rotted sod, excepting in potatoes and pumpkins, the yield of which was truly astonishing, but the sudden change in the weather late in October, accompanied with high wind and snow,

spoiled nearly all of the potatoes. In 1858 I put the same ground (which had now become well rotted) in wheat, oats, barley, corn, and potatoes, all of which presented a most promising appearance up to July. In fact, I had cut and shocked the barley, and cut one day on the wheat, when near sunset, a rain of twelve hours duration set in causing a most unprecedented flood on Four Mile creek. I barely saved enough of damaged barley for the next year's seed. The news of the discovery of gold on Cherry creek, in Colorado, reached the river in September. I with a party of a dozen from Plattsmouth, Pacific City, and Glenwood, on the 18th, started for the newly reported discovery, determined to prospect and discover if possible the existence of the precious metals in that then unknown land. Spending some six weeks of the most beautiful weather in prospecting along Cherry creek, the Platte river, and several of its tributaries, also among the foot hills of the mountains, and finding float gold in almost every hole we dug, the conclusion was forced upon us that when the season should favor penetrating the recesses of those grave old mountains, we should be enabled to open the vast storehouses of their hidden treasures. Therefore, when winter set in upon us, about the 1st of December, we turned our attention to the location and building of a town, as a base of future supplies. This idea gave to the world the present city of Denver. I had already seen enough of the country to be convinced that for stock growing it was second to California only in the greater severity of its winters; also that on trial a large portion would prove to be a fine agricultural region. At that time this idea was generally scouted.

The above views determined me to return to the Missouri, dispose of my farm, and arrange affairs so as to return to Denver in early spring. About December 14th, a party of two Plattsmouth men and three Laramie men, three wagons, and half a dozen yokes of cattle, took up our line of march for Plattsmouth, arriving home January 8th, 1859. At Plum Creek, on the trip, a lucky shot from my rifle brought down a buffalo cow, which saved our party from starvation. On looking into the market after my arrival home, I found the whole community struck dumb with a commercial panic. To sell a farm was an impossibility, cattle suitable for the plains very high, and could be purchased only with gold. I could make no shift that would not bankrupt me, and again I turned my attention to farming,

raised good crops, and extended the area of broken ground. In the spring of 1860, not having yet been able to make a desirable shift so as to return to the mountains, I determined to push the farming to the extent of my ability, and put in fifty-five acres of wheat, thirty acres of corn, with some minor crops. I next hitched up a pair of cows, and some two-year old steers with my oxen, started a breaking plow and the planting of a crop of sod corn. Each day's work was leveled smoothly and dragged with brush and harrow. The corn came up finely. By the first week in June, some forty-acres had been broken and planted. The wheat was headed out beautifully, the thirty acres of corn had been plowed once and second plowing commenced, and the ground clean and corn growing finely. A better prospect for a good crop could not be desired, when, presto, a change came over the spirit of my dream. About 4 P.M., June 10th, a cloud dark as Erebus came wheeling up from the horizon with the speed of a locomotive—wind blowing by turns north-west, west, and south-west. Instantly dropping chains, I started the teams towards their pasture, but before proceeding two hundred yards the storm burst upon us in all its fury. I tried to get off the yokes but found it impossible; the cattle ran for shelter at the top of their speed. The only armor between my skin and the hail and rain was a cotton shirt. Thoroughly drenched in a moment, smarting from the driving hail, I siezed a grain sack, and drawing it across my shoulders as a partial protection, hurried towards Four Mile creek as fast as I was able, and on reaching it jumped in, and got under a bridge for shelter, standing in water knee deep until the storm was over, by which time I was pretty thoroughly chilled. A more complete wreck of bright prospects than my farm presented after the storm was over could scarcely be imagined. The corn field that looked so fine two hours before was now as bare as fresh-ploughed fallow; not a hill not a plant was left to show that it had been occupied. The wheat field was no better, nothing left but pelted and broken fragments of what had been wheat plants. But, thanks to the recuperative vigor of the plants and fertility of Nebraska's soil, the corn pushed rapidly up in sight again and made a tolerable crop. The wheat stubble sprouted up and headed out with small heads, making about five bushels to the acre, and ripened but little later than the regular harvest. Having lost by fire, flood, and storm the greater portion of three out of five crops,

which I had planted in Nebraska, and fallen short of reaching expenses of the farm about \$700, I determined, in September of that year, to turn over my farm to the management of my wife and three sons, the youngest yet in his teens, and for myself endeavor to strike something that would enable me to pay off my debts. Notifying my creditors of my intended course, they each readily assented. Accordingly making a careful estimate of the quantity of wheat required for seed and one year's board, I soon had the small balance in Hersel's mill, and in due time removed therefrom forty-two sacks of flour. Putting forty of them in a wagon, and hitching thereto one pair of grown and two pairs of two-year old steers, the same cattle that had already plowed and harrowed seventy-five acres of prairie that season, about noon of the 10th of October, set out for Denver.

At Wahoo Ranche I overtook the train of C. L. Cooper, and traveled with it. At Plum Creek we were caught in a severe storm of rain, hail, and high wind, so cold that their work stock froze in the corrals. At ——— creek met a snow storm that fell six inches deep; very cold weather followed the storm. At other times on the trip had very pleasant weather. Arriving at Denver, found the market glutted, left a portion of our load to be sold on commission, with the balance we started for Faryal at the foot of the Snowy range, arriving on the 14th of December, but was compelled to store our load for want of purchasers. Before reaching Faryal our cattle took the sore tongue disease, then prevalent, which reduced their flesh very much, so that when we reached winter quarters on the plains near Colorado City, they presented a sorry appearance. In February took charge of Mr. Cooper's train of seven wagons at a salary of \$400.00 a year, including the privilege of my own wagon in the train and also of looking after my farm when at the Missouri river. Under this arrangement performed the business of freighting till the close of 1863, traveling each year from 3,000 to 3,500 miles, and subsisting the stock exclusively upon the grass that grew on the routes traveled. In the meantime my family had made more than a living from the farm.

In the spring of 1864 I sold my teams, and found myself in possession of \$2,000, and out of debt. The Indian hostilities having rendered freighting a precarious business, I determined to try droving. Accordingly, in company with Jacob Penny, I went to Kansas for a drove of cattle. Collecting about 300 head on the Verdigris,

we made our way back to Nebraska, arriving at Wyoming about the first of July, where we sold the greater part of our herd to the Mormons, who were outfitting at that point for Salt Lake City. This venture paid us a fair profit.

Having had some experience in wool growing, I now determined to procure a flock of sheep—a class of stock that would require less help to manage, and also allow me to stay at home. For this purpose, I started in October for Wisconsin; but finding prices high and holders unwilling to sell, did not buy in Wisconsin. Returning via the Chicago & Northwestern railroad, heard of a flock of merinos at Marshalltown, Iowa, just arrived from N. Y. From this flock I purchased 100 ewes and 100 lambs, and in Story county, Iowa, I bought 90 coarse wooled sheep. In July, 1865, I started for Michigan for more sheep. Bought 500 head in Jackson county, mainly ewes and lambs. Started them on the 22d day of August, from the town of Concord; arrived at Plattsmouth the 22d day of November, after one of the most tedious journeys ever performed by sheep. Rain, rain, rain, and but two mud holes between Laporte, Indiana, and Chariton, Iowa; the Mississippi river making the division. Previous to leaving for Michigan, I had selected a location in Saunders county, and within the railroad land grant, for a sheep farm, and directing that a quantity of hay be put up for wintering. For this point, on Christmas day, I started with a flock of above 500 sheep; leaving the remainder—stock, farm, and family—in charge of our three sons. That farm of 240 acres we still own. My family moved from the Cass county farm in the spring of 1870, to our lands in Saunders county, being located on both Wahoo and Sand creeks, near where the waters of the two creeks unite.

Here in Saunders county we have plodded along slowly, adding something each year to our improvements and steadily increasing our stock. Our sheep farm at this time consists of 1040 acres of deeded and homestead land, on which we have comfortable buildings, 400 apple trees, 320 acres under cultivation, 400 acres enclosed in pasture with 1,200 rods of fence, 20 acres seeded to timothy, about five acres planted to forest timber. Besides which we occupy one section of railroad land of which 120 acres are under the plow, 400 acres of meadow, 160 rods of hedge planted, and on the same land there are 400 feet of shedding 16 feet wide, 14 inclosures fenced with

pine fencing, and three corn cribs made with pine lumber. Our stock consists of 1,500 sheep, four head of neat cattle, 25 head of horses and mules, and about 45 head of hogs.

MOSES STOCKING.

Mr. Stocking served Saunders county two years as county commissioner, and a more faithful, intelligent officer Saunders county has never before or since had. He was the first man to introduce blooded cattle in the center of the county. His first purchase was from the celebrated Daniels herd, of Sarpy county, consisting of a cow and bull. The cow cost \$225, and is still owned by his son George H., and the bull, a yearling, cost \$150. From this small beginning there is now a large herd of fine grade and pure blood cattle.

Mr. Stocking was for years a prominent member of the State Board of Agriculture, and at the time of his death was one of three men in this state that were elected life members of the board. In 1875 he delivered the address at the State Fair, in Omaha, which was a production worthy of the man and the occasion. He was always an active member of the board, and was also a prominent member of the State Horticultural Society.

January 16th, 1878, he was elected president of the Wool and Sheep Grower's Association. He was an original member of the society and drafted the constitution and by-laws which were adopted. He was appointed a committee of one to draft additional by-laws, providing for the regular meetings of the same.

He was an active member of the Fine Stock Breeder's Association, and was elected a vice president at its first organization.

He was a member of the State Historical Society, and one of the charter members of the same.

He was a member of a committee of awards on wool at the great Centennial Exposition at Philadelphia in 1876, and also received an award on fine wool there exhibited.

He wrote an exhaustive history of Saunders county, which was published in pamphlet form in 1875. Being an early settler here, familiar with all prominent incidents connected with the early settlement of the county, and personally acquainted with all the early settlers, made him peculiarly qualified for the task. This little book in years yet to come, will often be referred to by the future historian of Nebraska, and particularly of Saunders county.

In the fall of 1871, he was employed by the B. & M. R. R. Co. in Nebraska to examine their lands. He made a personal examination of the entire belt, and made his report of the same which is now on file in the B. & M. land office at Lincoln. About this time he contracted a severe cold which settled on his lungs, and from that day to the end his lungs were never sound. He was subject to frequent hemorrhages of the lungs, often bleeding two quarts at a single time. These spells greatly prostrated him; but he was possessed of a remarkably strong constitution, and his rapid recovery from his great prostrations was often remarked by those intimate with him. But the terrible disease was continually gnawing at his life and exhausting the great vitality with which he seemed to be invested. Though diseased in body, his mind was clear up to the last sickness. His mental faculties were always sound, and under his greatest prostration he was always cheerful and hopeful.

He was no politician, though once, in the republican convention at Lincoln, his friends run him for the office of governor. He received a very handsome vote, but failed to get the nomination.

He spent much of his time and talent in the interest of the public. He labored hard to advance the farming interests of the country and at the same time left sufficient to provide for the few that were dependent upon him for support. He was a true lover of his country and her institutions. He delighted in the substantial progress of the state of Nebraska, where he lived for more than twenty-five years. A marble monument, erected on the first ground broken by him in Saunders county, in the burying ground of the Knights of Honor, points the spot where the mortal remains of our honored and much lamented citizen repose.

NOTE BY THE EDITOR.

I very much regret inability to obtain more full biographies of the following deceased early settlers. I made efforts by correspondence with friends and relatives, but without success. It is hoped hereafter they can yet be made more complete.